

God's people in God's world

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This series of studies, and the sermon which accompanies them, is an exploration of what it means to be the people of God in the world that God made. We who believe are not individuals doing our own thing, free to live our lives in whatever way we like. Those who have been redeemed by Christ as slaves of Christ, bought with a price, whose lives are not their own. Nor are we living in a hostile world. This is God's world, and despite all that is wrong in the world, it remains God's possession and God rules over it as sovereign Lord. But what does this actually mean for us in our everyday lives? That is what we are here to discover.

1

What does it mean to be God's people?

Many Christians have little grasp of what it means to be God's people, but this is one of the central themes of the Bible. In the Old Testament God set out his plan to call a people to be his own. He chose Abraham from among the pagans to be the father of a new nation. Abraham was led to Canaan, the land in which the new nation would be based, and from his descendants came the people of Israel. This nation was called to be a nation of priests, the ones who would be the witness for God in the world of the new life that he was bringing about for those who would leave their rebellion and place their trust in God. But the priests themselves rebelled, and as a result, God chose from among the Israelites only the tribe of Levi to be his priests. But the whole nation was still commanded to be the witness of God in the world. The laws they were given were to enable them to live as God had intended all people to live, laws which would ensure that their society would be wise and just to all. Those laws provide a picture for us of what a just society would be like; in the context of the times and their geographical situation. We cannot live by those laws today, but they can teach us what a just society would be like: a society that cares for the poor and the widows, the sick and the aged, the foreigners and the workers, the land owners and the tenants, the borrowers and the lenders. We too can have a just society, if we also would study the laws that God has given to portray to us what that society would be like.

The nation of Israel eventually brought forth the great high priest, Jesus Christ the righteous, and the message of redemption and reconciliation went out to all the world. No longer was it necessary to become a member of the people of Israel in order to be one of God's people. Since the publication of the gospel, God's people incorporates all those of every tribe and nation and language and culture who will acknowledge him as sovereign over all. The dominant image changes in the New Testament from the people of God to the Body of Christ. But that does not mean a change in the plan of God. It is simply a different way of expressing the same reality, and even in the New Testament we still find the image of the believers as God's people. The essential feature is that whether in the Old or the New Testament, who we are and what we are called to do is a communal calling and a communal task. We are not simply left to go

our own way after joining with God's people. There is an agenda that God has for his people, and if we wish to belong to that people then we have to follow God's agenda.

Why is it that we are so weak and ineffectual when it comes to being God's witnesses in the world? We have chosen our own agenda, rather than following God's. We think that what God wants is more people in church, and that his goal is to build up the church with ever greater numbers. We could not be more wrong. That is not God's goal, at most it is a by-product of God's work in the world. It is important to have a strong and vibrant church, but if we set out to achieve that, then we will not reach that goal, for that is not the goal that God has set before us.

What then is the goal of God's people? It is to display before the world a totally new way of living, a new community, a new identity, which is not derived from our own concocted ideas about what life is all about. No, it is a way of life, a vision for life, which comes from God himself. That way of life is not an individual way of life, but a communal way of life. We cannot be God's people if we are not prepared to be a people, a community with a distinctive, unmistakable and unique character and identity.

We often think that the goal of being a Christian is to be saved from hell so that we will eventually go to heaven to be with God forever. We need to be saved and have our sins forgiven as the means of entry to heaven and escape from hell. But this is in fact to miss the point altogether of what it means to be a Christian. There is not one single verse of the Bible which states this, it is an idea we have put together for ourselves and foisted onto the Bible. Unless we can clear away some of the misconceptions about what it is to be a Christian, then we will not be able to see what it is that the Bible is saying to us.

What is the purpose of being a Christian? It is to be a part of God's people, the holy nation, a kingdom of priests, so that God's love and goodness can be displayed in our lives for all the world to see. It is so that we can be released from the power of sin and death which holds us in bondage, in order that God can accomplish his original purpose in us. That purpose is not for us to "get blessed" and have a wonderful time in

church. No, God's purpose is for us to care for the creation he has entrusted to us, and to develop and explore it so that in every corner of the world, God's glory can be seen in and through what he has made, and what he has enabled us to make of it. The purpose of being a Christian is that **God's glory can be seen in us**. It is not for our benefit, it is not so that we can have a good time, nor it is a means of rescuing us from hell so we can have a good time in heaven. We are Christians because God cannot achieve his purposes for us unless we repent and become once again his obedient servants, acknowledging his sovereign rule in our lives and obeying him in everything that we do. **Your rebellion is not keeping you out of heaven, it is keeping heaven out of you!** We are called to repent because the sovereign Lord, the God of heaven and earth, who made us for his own pleasure and purposes, is displeased with us because of our rebellion against him. How can we accomplish God's purposes in the world if we insist on doing our own thing? God wants to work in and through us to do amazing things, and instead we grovel around in the dust insisting that our own ideas about life are much more interesting and relevant. Not true! What God has in store for us is far more exciting, more mind-expanding than anything we can devise!

But we can't do it alone. We weren't meant to do it alone. As we will see, it is impossible to serve God in isolation. The basis of our Christian life is to be part of the community of God's people, and we cannot avoid being part of God's people if we want to be Christians. There is no such thing as a Christian in isolation. They just don't exist. We will see why as we proceed.

What does it mean to say this is God's world?

Our world belongs to God. We say this in full knowledge that the world is at present not subject to God, and that the forces of darkness are evident in many parts of the world. Warfare, famine, strife, prejudice, immorality, all these things give proof of the fact that God is not recognised by a great many of the world's people.

Many Christians also see the world not as God's possession, not as God's good creation entrusted to the care of human beings as God's stewards, but the dominion of the devil. We all too often see the world as the enemy's territory, and think that we

will not really be safe from the devil and the powers of darkness until we are in heaven. There are some who hold the idea that demonic forces lurk around every corner, waiting to trap us and take possession of us. We speak of spiritual warfare in such a way as to imply that God and the devil were fighting each other to see who could win the greatest number of people to their side, and every convert or backslider is a win or a loss for our side in the numbers game.

But that is not at all accurate if we examine the Scriptures. There we see the great battle between God and Satan developing through the ages, the struggle to win the hearts and minds of God's people, with apostasy, revival, new dedication, a loss of faith and regaining trust in God, despair at a seemingly unwinnable situation, joy at defeat of the enemy, climaxing at the point where all God's resources are poured into the conflict at one decisive point; where it becomes a win or lose situation, where there is no back-up plan, no further resources to commit. When is that decisive conflict? The rise of the Anti-Christ? At Armageddon? When Christ returns to the final battle?

No, we see all this happening in the crucial battle which took place... at Calvary. There God sent in his greatest weapon, placing all his resources on one man, trusting that this would decisively win the conflict... and guess what, it did!

So then, we can now say with confidence, this is God's world. He is in control. There is no struggle to defeat the enemy, for the enemy has been defeated at Calvary. The struggle we wage is a mopping-up operation against a defeated enemy. We know how the battle will end, with the final overthrow of Satan and all his followers.

This is God's world, it does not belong to Satan, it does not belong to us. This world has been entrusted to our care, but it is not our world. Satan has influence and power within it, but that influence and power is illegitimate. God did not give this world over to Satan as his domain; Satan has seized control from its proper rulers: human beings, you and I.

We read in Genesis 1:26 that God made humankind in his own image, to rule over the earth and all the creatures in it. The world was placed in our care, and we are to govern it on God's behalf. All that we do is for the sake of God; our work in this world is to look after God's creation for him. We were entrusted with all God made, in the confidence that we would care for it, work with it, develop and explore it, discovering what we could do with it, in such a way that God's glory would be revealed through all that we do. We were to bear the image of God, that is, to be as wise and loving in our rule over all the earth as God himself is.

But we betrayed that trust! Instead of obeying God and working as his stewards, accountable to him for all that we do, and following his commandments in everything, we have gone astray and sought to make our own rules for life. We have rejected our rightful king, and his wise and loving laws for our lives, and have set ourselves up as kings in his place, concocting our own laws which, because they are formulated in rebellion and arrogance, are not wise and loving but distorted, brutal and oppressive.

And instead of finding freedom from authority, we have found instead tyranny and oppression. We have fallen into the hands of one who is not a wise and loving Lord, but one who like ourselves is rebelling against the only True God. We have fallen into bondage to the powers of spiritual darkness, not because God is unable to protect us from them, but because we chose to reject God and his loving care for us, and having abandoned the protection of his love and goodness, we have fallen prey to the enemy.

As a result of our own bondage, the whole creation has also become enslaved. When we fell into sin, we did not only fall captive to the law of sin and death ourselves, all the creation placed under our control fell into captivity as well. As Paul says in Romans 8:19-24.

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the

whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

So then, the whole creation waits for its redemption, and in that redemption of the creation we too find redemption of our bodies. What does it mean for our bodies to be redeemed? It means that we will not longer be subject to sickness, disease, deformity, weakness, frailty, and death. We will be set free from all these things, never to suffer them any more. When will this happen? At the return of Christ when we shall be raised from the dead, then we shall be granted glory, immortality and incorruption, and the whole creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay, so that once again it will be a fit dwelling-place for us and for God himself, who is so delighted with the world that he has created that he will come down from heaven to dwell with us here forever! What a day that will be!

God has not abandoned his creation to the devil. He is not engaged in some cosmic belt-notching crusade to see how many he can win to his side. He is working to ensure that his victory over the devil, and over the powers of death, and sin, and hell, which took place through the death and resurrection of Christ, will become the power at work in all the world. This is God's world, not ours, not the devil's, but God's alone. We can have confidence then that anything we do in this world, whatever it is, can draw on a power greater than that which is at work in the world around us.

What do we mean by the “world”?

We need to consider what we mean by the “world.” To talk of this earth as God's world means that the world and everything in it was created by God and is dependent on God. The world belongs to God as his possession, and it is God who keeps the world in existence by his power. But evangelical Christians have traditionally used the

term “the world” to mean activities which are ungodly, something for Christians to avoid. But looking at “the world” in this way introduces confusion into our understanding of Scripture. There are three ways in which the term “world” is used in the New Testament. It refers to

- firstly, the earth on which we live and all its creatures (Acts 17:24),
- secondly, the people who live in this earth (Luke 12:30),
- thirdly, the spiritual kingdom of darkness alienated from God (1 John 2:16).

It is this latter sense that people mean when they renounce, or more often denounce “the world” but because the Scriptures use the term “world” in three different ways this confusion leads to rejection of the first two, as well as the latter. While God loves the world which he has made - the earth and the people in it - he stands opposed to the world as the system arrayed against his righteous rule (1 John 2:15-17).

The world as God’s creation, both the earth on which we live, and the people God created to live here, is to be loved and cherished. But the world as a spiritual principle of opposition to the righteous rule of God over his kingdom is to be resisted in the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. The “world” that is condemned in Scripture, is not God’s creation, but the system of darkness which has arrogated to itself the power and authority which belong only to God. The world in this sense is the institutionalised rebellion of sinful human beings and all that pertains to them.

However, to condemn as “worldly” involvement in any area of human society, such as politics, or film-making, or pop music, is to misinterpret the Scriptures. The “world” does not mean **areas of human life** which Christians should avoid, rather it is the spirit of alienation from God which resists His rule over every area of life, and the whole of the created order. To be “worldly” in the strict Biblical sense is to submit to the spiritual powers of darkness which dominate this world’s affairs. It does not mean being involved in God’s creation, being active in human society, which is frequently taken to be the meaning of being “worldly,” because of the confusion from the different senses of the term “world” in the Scriptures. To see involvement in God’s creation as “worldly” and hence something for Christians to avoid, is to exclude many

areas of life from the Lordship of Christ, and denies the cosmic scope of God's redemption in Christ.

The Word of God guides us in our inescapable involvement in every area of life, and calls us to renew it through the redemption won by Christ. The Scriptures give us a perspective by which we are to live in every area of life. Therefore separating ourselves from some activities under the illusion that they are intrinsically "worldly" is to deny that the world God made is still his creation, and to fail to see that the redemption of Christ encompasses all that he has created. God has not abandoned his creation, and is working to redeem it through Christ; having won the victory on the cross that redemption is now being worked out in everything. The creation is God's world which is being redeemed and renewed into a Kingdom of God. The work of Christ and the Spirit is to lead all of Creation back to obedience to the Father so that his Kingdom will be the only kingdom. When the final victory is won, the rule of the kingdoms of the world is returned to its rightful king, thus transforming that kingdom into what it was meant to be: the obedient response of the creation to its Creator.

To talk of "the world and everything in it" as God's creation is to include everything that exists. We have a strong tradition in the west to think of God's creation only in terms of what can be investigated by natural science. Things like families, love for our neighbour, music, art, jokes and riddles, elections and bureaucracy, and many other features of our life, are not considered part of God's creation. But we misread the Scriptures if we imagine that creation refers only to the so-called "natural" realm, such as the earth, sun, moon and stars, minerals, plants and animals. When God spoke His Word which brought into being and structured every creature, that word established the creation order which embraces all God's creatures in an inescapable web of interrelationships. The creation order shapes not only the "physical" characteristics of creatures, but their relationships with each other, their abilities, tasks and callings.

We are created with relationships and abilities as part of who and what we are, and it is with these relationships to other creatures and the abilities that God has given us that we shape our lives, including all the things mentioned above. These things are all

part of God's creation order, they are possibilities he has provided for, and which we shape into the actual structures of daily life. Something of this is revealed in Psalm 8:

What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little less than God, and crown him with glory and honour. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands, you have put all things under his feet. (Psalm 8:4-6)

Here we see that God did not create humankind in isolation, but with a specific task and calling in relation to the rest of creation. Adam (and his descendants) were created to care for the earth and its creatures. This task was not added after he was created, but is intrinsic to his very being. When God revealed the creation mandate to Adam and Eve, he was not telling them of something they could do, but was telling them who they were: God's stewards, the ones who care for the creation. To be human is to care for God's creation, and to care for God's creation is to find fulfilment as human beings.

Even though humankind has fallen into bondage to the power of sin, we are still God's creatures, formed in relationship to the whole of creation. And even in sin we are still what God has created us to be, stewards of creation, although we are corrupted by sin. We still carry out our appointed task, although we now do this in ways disruptive of God's design.

It is important to note that God's creatures and their relationships cannot be separated. Things are created by God in relationship to each other. Relationships are not added as we go through life. Instead, God has created us in relationship with other people and with the world around us, and with himself. These relationships which already exist are shaped and developed by us, but they are not created by us, they are created by God. This applies also to our relationship with God: everyone has a relationship to God, but that relationship can be shaped by faith, by fear, by rebellion or by indifference. The preaching of the Gospel is a call to have our relationship to God

renewed by the Holy Spirit so it is a relationship of love and trust. Our responding to the Gospel does not establish this relationship: it acknowledges it.

So when we become Christians, we do not have a new relationship with God, we actually have renewed our existing relationship, so that we are no longer living in rebellion and rejection, but in faith and trust. Even when we were sinners God loved us; the relationship never ceased. We were always God's beloved creation, even when we were sinners. Our relationship with God was distorted and broken, but it was still a relationship between the Creator and his creatures. When we repent and believe, all things are made new; once again we come into communion with our creator and Lord, instead of rebelling against him and rejecting his love for us.

So then, how can we live as believing people in a secular world? We can do this only if we are prepared to acknowledge the sovereignty of God over the whole of life. All that we do, all that we are, all that we put our hands and minds to, must be submitted to the one and only rightful King, performed in his way, for his service and for his glory. There is no other possible way in which we can live and still profess to be Christian people. We cannot serve other gods, we cannot live in accordance with any other law or principle than that of Christian faith. We are called to live at all times and in all places as Christians. That means that we will be distinctive in the way we live, in the principles on which we base our lives, in the goals and purposes for which we work. We are not here to serve our own purposes, but the purposes of the one who sent us. Only in so far as we are living in submission to the one true King can we have any effect in the world, for only those who are serving the King have his blessing and power to perform their tasks.

2

What does it mean to live as a Christian in a secular society?

What do we mean by a “secular society”? The “secular” is frequently used in Christian circles as the opposite or counterpart of “sacred.” Life is divided into two compartments, one of which is of interest to God and relevant to our Christian commitment, the other of which is considered to be of no interest to God and is therefore legitimately shaped by other commitments. But this view of the “secular” is unbiblical: nothing is outside of God’s concern or control, and nothing can be separated from our faith commitment. Secularism as used in these seminars will mean “seeking to divorce ourselves from God, to throw off his rule and claims on our lives.”

The true opposite of the “sacred” is not the “secular” but the “profane” or the “polluted.” The sacred for Israel meant that which was offered to God. The profane was that which was contaminated by sin or idolatry, and hence could not be offered to God. But in the “sacred/secular” dualism used by Christians, the “secular” means activities or areas of life which are legitimate but are independent of God. In this sense, there is no secular world. Everything is created by God and is of interest to him. Thus I will be using the term “secular” to mean the desire to shut God out, to exclude him from our activities, from our perception of reality, from our decision-making and our planning. This is an illegitimate approach to life, one which arises from rebellion against God, and one which has deeply infected the Christian church.

We need to recapture the Biblical vision of the wholeness of life. Only if we see life as all of one piece can we hope to understand our task in God’s world, for the Scriptures do not divide human life up into compartments. We cannot expect to live in a “secular” way (that is, a life which is even in part divorced from God) and expect to call ourselves “Christian.” To live in accordance with Christian faith means to allow that faith to shape and direct everything that we do, not superficially, but at the very heart and root of our life. Only a life intrinsically shaped in every way by Christian faith is sufficient to guide us through life in obedience to God. To separate Christian

faith from the whole cut and thrust of ordinary daily life is sub-Christian, it is not able to bring us into obedience to Christ in everything.

Christian faith is in fact a way of being in the world, a vision of life and a vision for life, which comes not from ourselves but from God. We are called to be God's people, and therefore to live as God would have us live in everything that we do. How can there possibly be any part of life which is not subject to God? There is no basis on which we can claim that part of life is God's, and the rest belongs to us. But that is in fact how we live and work. The principles, perspectives, ideals and goals which shape our lives are often not Christian, but secular, that is, God is left right out! We find it hard to see how God can be interested in such things as agricultural practice, or voting systems, or mortgage rates, or housing policies, or a host of other things which affect our society today. But the reason we find it hard to see how these things can be of interest to God is that we start with the assumption that they are of no concern to God, then proceed to live on that basis, and develop systems and institutions and ways of doing things in which God is not considered. It then seems perfectly natural to us that Christian faith has nothing to do then with all the myriad details of ordinary life. By defining daily life as "secular," that is, lying outside of our commitment to Christ, then we live in a secular way, and fail to see that what we are doing is in fact rebelling against God. We have rejected his right to rule over us in everything that we do, right at the very start when we assume that we can go right ahead and live as if God had no interest in these things. How then, having excluded God from the beginning, can we then bring him back in later on? We can't, but we often try. We have organised life in such a way that God just doesn't fit.

The only solution to this problem is to admit that we were wrong right at the start. We cannot exclude God from our considerations and then expect him to give his blessing on our lives. The solutions we try for our problems just don't seem to work. No matter how hard we try to fix society, it just doesn't seem to make any difference. The reason for this is not that society is unable to be fixed, but that we have not diagnosed the real problem, and are not applying the right solution. The problem with our secular society is that it is secular, that is, it has illegitimately excluded God from all consideration. We do not give any credence to God's norms or standards for our lives, and refuse to

consider any “religious” ideas when discussing how we ought to live. No wonder then that we can’t find the solutions to our problems, since we refuse to address the one problem which lies at the root of all other problems: our rebellion against God and the attempt to live life without any regard for him.

What does it mean to live as a Christian?

Living as Christians in a secular society means that we are at odds with the world around us. What we believe about life, human nature, our place and task in the world, the source of direction and order for society, all these things and more, place us outside of the mainstream of contemporary society. The main difference between Christians and non-Christians in such a society is that Christians acknowledge the sovereignty of God over all things, while the rest of society does not. Christians also see their place and task in the world differently to the non-Christian, and as a result they lead a different life. What is that Christian life all about?

In order to recover a Biblical perspective on life, one which calls us to obedience in everything that we do, we must recognise that everything we do is equally important to God. We cannot undertake any activity in life lightly, for we will be held to account for it at the day of judgement. Everything we do is rooted in our basic heart commitment, either to God or to an idol, and we are serving one or the other in our tasks. Since we have failed to give recognition to God in most areas of life, excluding them from our Christian vision, we have by default been seduced into serving the idolatrous spirits of the world-system, and have been alienated from God in many of our tasks in life. It is only as we recognise our failure to submit to God in everything that we will find forgiveness and renewal. If we continue to deny that Christ has any Lordship over the so-called “secular” areas of life, then we will continue to serve false gods in addition to the true God.

We were created to serve God in the task of caring for the earth and developing it for his glory. If we will not serve the true God then we will serve false gods. But there is no escaping from the fact that human beings are created servants and must serve something. We are not in control of our lives, we are in subjection either to God or

some illegitimate spiritual power, and our commitment to them shapes what we do. Everything in life arises from the heart, and takes its direction from the commitment of the heart to God or to an idol.

So it is a serious thing to fail to develop our insights into the service of God in every area of life. It not only leaves us without true Biblical insight into life, it leaves us vulnerable to the spiritual powers of darkness, and if we will not follow God in every area of life, then we will follow false gods. We have failed to see that our sacred/secular split of life into separate compartments is not only a denial of the wholeness of life, it is also idolatry and apostasy from God.

So what is it that we are called to do? The human task is to care for and develop the earth. These two facets are very important. We are not simply to care for the earth; it is also to be explored and developed. That means that trees are not only to be valued for their beauty and environmental functions; they are also to be cut down and made into houses, furniture, artworks, paper, chemicals, and many other things. But in developing the creation which God has given us, we are also to exercise care for His creation. We are not to exploit it, nor to treat it in an idolatrous fashion, or refuse to develop it. We are to carry out our tasks in obedience before the Lord and to heed the calling and the direction he has given us as his human stewards of the creation he brought into being.

So then, we are called to care for this earth and its creatures (Genesis 1:26-2:25, Psalm 8) and to develop its riches in the service of God (Deuteronomy 10:12-11:32). In all things we are to act as stewards of God (Psalm 24).

Because God has called us to obedience in every area of life, that means that every area of life is important to him. Whatever we do all day, every day, God is interested in it and has commitment to us as we are engaged in it. While we may not think that God cares about the way we earn a living, our struggles to get to grips with education, our employment, our housework and gardening, cooking meals, fixing the car, our sports and hobby activities, all these and more are of intense concern to God. We are

his creatures, and he cares for us and about us. He cares for everything that we do, because everything we do is but the outworking of what he has created in us.

God is interested in what we do each day because what we do is what he made us for. We were created to be active in this world, seeking its secrets, exploring its hidden treasures, struggling to comprehend it and delighting in it. He made it to have fun with his world, to make it into something that will not only interest and please us but interest and please God. There are far more things of intrinsic interest in this world than we can hope to comprehend, because God made it for his interest. If it is still interesting to God then there is plenty there to interest us. God is not bored with his world. He is not bored with us, or bored with our activities. He finds what we do more interesting than we can comprehend. If he knows even the hairs which fall from our head, and the death of a sparrow, then he is obviously taking careful note of what is going on.

God is not aloof from his world. He does not have to stay at a distance from it in order to remain pure or holy. God made this world, and there is nothing intrinsic in it which requires God to distance himself from it. It is only our sin which keeps God at a distance, and that sin is a principle of rebellion which has been introduced into the good world that God has made. There is nothing in the world itself which means that God must keep his distance. God is however, rejected by the “world,” the system of rebellion against his rule, and every effort to exclude God from our consideration is a symptom of this “worldliness.” Christians as much as non-Christians have failed to submit to God in their life in society, choosing to adopt the mentality and vision which arises from rebellion instead of obedience.

A spirituality which needs to isolate itself from the world that God has made, in order to remain pure and holy, is a false and unbiblical spirituality which is alienated from God, because it is alienated from what God has made. This world is not the cause of spiritual death and destruction, sin is. And if we were more involved in God’s world, we would be less worried about sin. If we were to take pleasure in life, and enjoy the world God has made, then we will have fewer problems with sin, because the more we are involved in this world, the healthier we will be spiritually. Involvement in

God's world brings us into touch with God. Paul said that the unbelievers could have known God from the things that he has made. Is it not strange that believers find it so difficult to know God from his creation, or that people who are related to God are unable to comfortably relate to God's world?

Perhaps it is because our spirituality is so removed from the Biblical message concerning God's creation and our own creatureliness that we no longer find anything of God in his world. And by involvement in God's world I do not mean a romantic flight to the countryside, into the bush and the mountains away from people and human culture. That approach to seeing God's glory in creation is inadequate and constricted. God's creation is not restricted to majestic mountains and clear streams of water, birds in the forest and clouds in a clear blue sky. God's creation is also seen in the bridges of steel which support constant heavy traffic, in the towering buildings which are held together by forces we barely understand, the intricacies of computer technology, the sophistication of telecommunications and complex transport networks. All these things and more are evidences of the way God has ordered his world, and are possible only because of the way God has made us.

The marvels of modern medicine, the wonders of research into chemistry and physics, the subtleties and colour of art and the richness of symphony music, the vigour and expression of rock music, the humour of comedians and the sensitivity of poetry, the excitement of the theatre and the pleasure of a quiet cup of coffee with friends, all these things are created by God and given shape and colour by human beings.

Yes it is true that these things are affected by sin. Yes, we do find corruption and vice, demonic powers and depraved humanity at work here. But it is the deceitfulness of sin and the rebellion of our own human hearts which leads us to reject these things as a result. God created all things, including these products of human culture. And what he created he loves and is concerned for. Because of the devastating work of sin in every area of human life, he sent his only son to die so that all these things might be returned to obedience to the Father, and that we might live in newness of life, turning away from following idols.

We have failed to see that the problem which affects all of human life is sin. Instead we have avoided those activities which have seemed to be most affected by sin. Sin however is not located in activities of one kind or another. Sin is rooted in the human heart, and whatever a human being decides to do will be infected by sin. There is no escape: sin follows us everywhere. We cannot get away from sin by avoiding some activities in life, by isolating ourselves from other people and what they do.

The world is the system of this age which is opposed to God. It cannot be identified with cultural activities. It comes to expression in anything which isolates human life from God, and in that the church has been thoroughly worldly. It has failed to see all of human life as God's creation, and failed to uphold the Christian community in its many activities in God's world.

Christ came to set us free from sin. He did not come to isolate us from activities of various kinds. Sin is not an intrinsic part of the creation or of activities within it. Sin is rebellion against God in whatever we do. Consequently, we can be involved in any human activity and see the redemption of Christ set it free from sin, and restore it in obedience to the Father. Christ came because the creation he had brought into being was being destroyed by sin, and he came to break the power of sin and set all things free. If that is so, then we cannot believe that to be a Christian means to be isolated from any of life's activities. That is simply to hand the creation over to the power of sin and deny that Christ loves all that he has made.

The covenant with God

At the root of our existence as creatures is the bond between God and ourselves. Our most fundamental relationship in life is a religious one, one which governs and shapes everything that we do. We are created the servants of God, a relationship which is fundamentally religious. Religion is usually taken to mean a private relationship with God. But this relationship is not established when we turn to God. We are God's creatures whether we recognise it or not, and the failure to acknowledge God and serve him obediently is a religious failure. Human life, whether it is obedient or disobedient towards God, is religious, and that religion is either true religion or

rebellious religion. True religion is the turning of our intrinsic and foundational relationship with God back into the paths which it ought always to have followed. This is not a private isolated faith, but one which renews our lives, in all its relationships. The Bible defines true religion as caring for widows and orphans, and remaining uncontaminated from the defilement of the system of the world. You can't carry out that kind of religion in isolation: caring for others involves us in their lives, and keeping ourselves free from the contamination of the world does not take place by isolating ourselves from the world but by remaining pure through the Gospel while still involved in the world. True religion is not privatised religion: it is the obedient response of the heart in our covenantal relationship with God: the covenant between God and his people - a communal relationship, a community with human and divine members.

All societal structures and institutions are shaped by human activity from the complex of human relationships created by God. That is, human society is religious in character, because it reflects the religious commitment of the humans who shape it. And we have shaped our society in ways which reflect our sin, the violation of our foundational relationship with God. But the redeeming work of Christ counters sin wherever it is found: the redemption of Christ is as extensive as sin, so whatever sin has corrupted, Christ can redeem. If Christ cannot save all, he cannot save at all. If we think his saving work cannot extend to all the intimate relationships of human life, to all the creatures which we have held in bondage because of our sin, then we have a Saviour who is not the Creator, a saviour who has rejected the creation and doomed it to destruction, a heresy known as Gnosticism which has plagued the church from its earliest days.

The redemption of Christ brings healing through repentance, and renewal both of the human beings who have been bound by sin, and the structures which are shaped by human activity. That is, the shaping of those structures formerly reflected our alienation from God, but now they can reflect our obedience to God. The brokenness in the relationships which are the foundation of these structures is restored in Christ, and if the foundations change, the very structures themselves can be changed. This is the promise of abundant life: everything that we do, everything we are involved in,

every form of human activity can be renewed in Christ, and the products of that human activity will show the renewal of the religious root of human life.

But this promise of the renewal of human structures in society is not automatic. Evangelicals often criticise liberals for wanting to change structures in society, and claim that if the individual hearts are changed, then the structures will change. That this is not true can be seen from the lack of structural change in spite of large numbers of conversions. The reason for this is that we have not preached a gospel for human beings in relationship to the entire creation, but a gospel which treats us as isolated from the creation, and focuses on preparing us to inhabit some entirely “spiritual” realm. It is also an individualistic gospel that has no bearing on our life together as a community, and so such a gospel has no power to effect a change in communal structures. It is not that the structures will not change if the hearts are changed, but that the change in the hearts has not been deep or radical enough, that is, our limited presentation of the gospel has obscured large parts of the Scriptural teaching on salvation. A true change of heart that recognises our task and calling before God, that brings a new vision of who we are and why we are here, will bring conscious efforts to change the structures of our society, arising from a recognition of our responsibility before God for obedience in all the relationships of our life. (Luke 19:1-10, Zacchaeus)

So then, our fundamental relationship with God is religious. That is, the first and foremost characteristic of being human is to be created by God to serve him and to respond to him in love. Everything we do is religious, since everything we do arises from our creatureliness: the fact that God created us for a specific purpose, to care for and develop the world that he made. This service of God is not some kind of drudgery, but an invitation to participate in the greatest adventure ever known: running the universe. In the ancient Babylonian myths, human beings were created by the gods because they were tired of looking after the world and wanted someone else to do it for them, and to provide them with sacrifices to feed them. This is in stark contrast to the invitation by God to join him as his co-labourers in what is the most exciting activity imaginable, and in stark contrast to the creator God who has no need

of anything. Yet often our approach to the world has more in common with Babylonian paganism than with Scripture.

So then, since we live in a world which belongs to God, what should our lives be like? We live in a secular society, and just what that means we will look at more closely in the next session. But for now, consider what it means to be believing people in God's world. What is it that we are to believe? What does it mean to believe?

The content of our faith can be summed up in one simple sentence:

The creation of the Father, fallen in sin, is being redeemed by the death of the Son of God, and recreated by the Spirit of God into the Kingdom of God.

In this simple sentence the whole of our faith is contained. Where do we find ourselves? In the creation which belongs to our heavenly Father, brought into being by him, constantly upheld and ordered by him, with all that it needs being provided by God. We were created to care for this earth, to rule it on God's behalf, to work with it and make something of it so as to display the glory of God through what he has made possible with it. But what has happened to it? It is fallen in sin because of our rebellion against our rightful ruler and legitimate Lord. The world is full of distortion and corruption, sickness, famine, warfare, abuse and neglect. What has God done in response to that? He has sent his only Son to die in our place, so that all that God has made can be restored to its proper relationship to God, and to the other creatures with whom they share God's world. We no longer need to be bound by spiritual wickedness, the law of sin and death, the powers of darkness. We can be set free in Christ so that all that God has made, all that is under our care, will no longer display the destructive effects of sin, but the renewing and redeeming power of Christ through the Holy Spirit.

That means that anything at all which is contained in the creation, anything under our care, anything which is a product of our activity, can be restored and renewed in Christ. That includes the structures of our society as well; the health system, the

education system, political structures, business enterprises, all those institutions which we have brought into being. These are not our creations, but the formation of different kinds of relationships which God himself gave to us. Nothing exists save that which God made possible. We did not invent governments, and banks, and schools, and transport systems. These are the result of human formation of God's creation; bringing to light what God himself made possible. Unless such things were grounded in the creation God made, they could not exist.

But what is it that our secular society believes? In contrast to our Christian faith, a secular society believes something quite different. It certainly does not believe that the world was brought into being and is ruled over by God. It certainly does not believe that the major problem is sin, rebellion against our rightful Lord. Nor does it believe that the solution to our problems is repentance and faith, and we are certainly not heading towards the kingdom of God when he alone will be acknowledged as the only legitimate ruler over all that exists.

So what kind of society results from such a belief? A society in which marriage is an optional way of relating to each other, with various other possibilities also open to us. After all, such relationships are entirely our own business; there are no standards which we must recognise. A society which is governed almost entirely on monetary terms, so that we know the cost of everything but the value of nothing. A society which does not help the weak and the powerless, but expects them to manage on their own. A society in which those who have are doing very nicely thank you, but do not recognise any responsibility for those who have not. After all, we are all individuals with the freedom to live as we choose. We have no responsibility to care for each other, for the concept of responsibility is based on the notion that there is someone or something to whom we are responsible. What could that be? God does not exist, the law is something of our own making, there is nothing higher than us to whom we are responsible!

That is the basis of a secular society: there is no higher authority to whom we are accountable in any way. The laws we make are entirely for our own convenience, and if they are no longer convenient, we can unmake them. The essence of the French

Revolution, which lies behind all the secular concepts of society today, was the phrase, *No God, No Master*. And the principle which flowed from that, which is the root of humanism, is: *We accept no law save that which we impose upon ourselves*. By these means, society has become what it is. There is no God who rules over us, and so we are able to do whatever we like. There is no final accounting which we must face. There are no masters appointed to govern us, that is, we appoint our own rulers, and if we don't like them, we can remove them. Political sovereignty comes not from God but from the people. Therefore, whatever the people want is what the political masters will give them, if they want to retain their hold on power. We accept no law save that which we impose on ourselves. That is, nobody else is going to tell me what to do. I will decide for myself what right and wrong are. And whatever I say is right is right. There are no outside standards, no authorities to challenge me, I am king. Of course, when you get a whole society which has no standards save those they choose to accept for their own convenience, anarchy reigns.

How can we live as Christians in a secular society?

What does it mean for us to live as Christians in a secular society? It is possible for us to survive in this alien environment only if we hold firmly to the faith that we have in God. That means, that to prevent ourselves being sucked into the secularism that dominates the society we live in, we must learn how to serve God in everything that we do. The whole framework, flavour, character of our lives must be Christian. It is not enough just to worship God on Sunday, or to be active in witnessing, or studying the Bible and praying. It is not that these things are wrong, but we often take the view that that is what Christianity is all about! That is not true! To limit our faith to such things is to have already given in to the secularism which dominates our society.

However, because of sin, and in our case that means secularism, our understanding of the creation is misinterpreted and twisted, and we need the Scriptures to correctly interpret the world to us. For example, read what God has said concerning agricultural practice in Isaiah 28:23-29.

Listen and hear my voice; pay attention and hear what I say. When a farmer ploughs for planting, does he plough continually? Does he keep breaking up and harrowing the soil? When he has levelled the surface, does he not sow caraway and scatter cummin? Does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field? His God instructs him and teaches him the right way. Caraway is not threshed with a sledge, nor is a cartwheel rolled over cummin; caraway is beaten out with a rod, and cummin with a stick. Grain must be ground to make bread; so one does not go on threshing it forever. Though he drives the wheels of his threshing-cart over it, his horses do not grind it. All this also comes from the Lord Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom. (Isaiah 28:23-29).

How do we know how to grow food, how to prepare the ground, the proper way to gather in each type of grain? Because God teaches us, not by dreams or voices from heaven, but by experience, remembering what worked previously and how to repeat that result. This does not come about because of some natural ability we have in ourselves, it happens because of the way God made us, the abilities he gave, the tasks that he has entrusted to us, the world which we are intimately related to. As a result of who we are, because of who God made us, we can discover how to plant and reap crops. Unless we acknowledge that it is God who enables us to do these things, then we are no longer living in faith but in rebellion. How else do we explain our ability to grow crops successfully? Because we are able to discover these things for ourselves. We can invent machines and methods by which to achieve these results. It is all our doing, God has nothing to do with it. To take this attitude is to be secular people, to deny the sovereignty of God and his rule over our lives. Why does Isaiah include a discussion of farming practice in his book? To remind us that it is God alone who enables all these things. We need the revelation of God to open our eyes to see in this way. Any other way of seeing this situation is blindness.

As it says in the Psalms, it is God who makes the grass to grow and the trees to bear fruit. It is not some mysterious life principle or bio-chemical arrangement within the plants, but it is God who causes them to grow and to bear fruit. In our sinfulness we

seek instead for any other interpretation. That is not to say that we cannot detect biochemical processes, or development of living things from seed to mature plant. But it is not something inherent in these plants which is at work, it is God the creator through his ordering word which brings these things to pass. A secular perspective on life leaves God right out of the picture, and therefore distorts life itself. God is the ground and root of our entire existence, and so if we deny him, we deny ourselves. We cannot recognise who we are, or why we are here, or what task we have in life, if we do not begin by centring ourselves on God. There at the very heart of our existence is the relationship we have with God. Is it a relationship of love and obedience, or one of rebellion and rejection? Whatever the answer to that question is will determine the kind of lives that we lead, for out of that relationship springs the whole of life. Whatever lies at the centre will shape and direct everything else.

3

How can we live as a distinctive community of believers?

Christian life is something more than just individual commitment. The church today has little conception of what it means to be a community, although it is communal life and not individual life which is the focus of Scripture. We will be looking at Christian living, the communal task of God's people in God's world, from the perspective of the community and not of the individual. We are not a collection of unrelated individuals, but a people moulded into one by the Holy Spirit, joined to Christ to be members of his body.

Human beings are created in relationship to each other, to God and to the world around them. They were called to care for the earth as stewards in the service of God. They are to have children and to raise them to share this task with all humankind in a community of loving relationships, encompassing other people, God and the animal world. In carrying out the diversity of tasks for which God has gifted people in various ways, human life would show the richness and splendour of the Lord throughout his creation. The community of God's people will demonstrate the renewal of all of human life in its diversity.

Community, understood in the light of Scripture, means that people are bonded together. Only out of this bonding can we engender and sustain activities which demonstrate the renewal of our society through Christ. Without this communal action, arising from the insight, wisdom and experience of many people, all our activity will come to nought. Christian involvement which seeks to manifest the redemption of Christ in every area of life can only be developed with full Biblical integrity if it arises from the commitment of a community of Christians. It can only be consistently pursued when there is a supporting community which shares a common vision and a resolute commitment. Without that commitment we can only make culturally insignificant contributions which will be swallowed up in the face of the rebellion against God which dominates our society.

Neither will we be able to develop a Christian cultural contribution which has staying power; the ability to stick it out for generations, for years and centuries, not just weeks and months. The length of time a particular development in culture stays around is among other things an indication of the depth of its spiritual roots and its ability to make sense of life in a particular period in history. Christian cultural activity at the moment is not producing any such sustained contribution, because such a sustained involvement in society depends on communal activity. Such communal activity can only arise on the basis of an integrally Christian perspective on all of life - not on only a small part of life.

The Christian community has thus far failed to grasp the all-encompassing perspective on life which is given to us in the Scriptures. This has meant that the development of the skills and abilities of individual Christians results not in diversification but in **fragmentation**. Christians who are called to work in artistic, political or scholarly tasks must virtually wrench themselves away from their fellow believers in order to do so. There is little understanding of the nature of these tasks, and we lack the supportive Christian community needed to carry out such work with Christian integrity. The kiwi attitude of “going it alone” is inappropriate here, since the tasks are so great that any one person will crumble under the load.

Only as we come to appreciate the nature of Christian community as rooted in bonded relationships with each other which come to expression in every area of life, will we see the richness and diversity of the gifts God has given us being shared with each other, being strengthened and enjoyed by all, and from being incorporated into the life of the believing community. Many Christians do not recognise the integral communal nature of Christian life, and hence can have only a peripheral commitment to the Christian community.

For many people this is because the Christian community functions in only limited ways. There is no place for many Christians to exercise their gifts, since they have been called to tasks which do not fit within the limited vision and structures of the church. The predominant Christian vision is one of a narrowly-conceived religious

life, which does not incorporate all of human existence. What we do outside church is unimportant; it is irrelevant to the Christian community.

This prevents the development of the individual members of the community, as well as of the community as a whole. Those in the community are hindered from discovering the way they are to use their various skills and abilities to contribute to the task of caring for and developing the earth as stewards together of the creation. The community then tends to become introverted and self-serving, rather than acting as a servant to all.

True Christian community is found only where the various tasks and abilities given to each person are encouraged and nurtured with suitable training and support. Thus Christian community is based on common faith and obedience to Christ in fulfilling together that calling to care for and develop all of creation. Christian community cannot exist where the church has an introverted spirituality or world-denying worship.

Christian community is the corporate life of all believers, sharing together both personal and other kinds of resources, so that together we may build up the body of Christ to fulfil its calling in developing the skills and abilities of its members, and thereby renew us for our task of caring for the earth as God's stewards.

Christian discipleship in every area of life can only be developed with full Biblical integrity if it arises from the commitment of a community of Christians to work together in obedience to God. Our activities in different fields can only be pursued in a way which is consistent with our Christian faith when there is a supporting community which shares a common vision, and a commitment which is sustained through thick and thin. If our activities in life are seen to fall outside the community, then we are on our own in the world - the hostile system of this age which is seeking to devour the people of God.

That we have little to show in the way of Christian cultural endeavour is the consequence of failure to recognise and develop our life as a community. We need

each other if we are to make any significant contributions in life. If we ask what Christians think about art, or science, or medicine, or politics, or whatever, then the answer will depend on which Christian we are talking about. We have been so seduced by the spirits of this world that we have not struggled to come to a common mind on the real issues of life. We have abandoned all these areas to the world - those who hate God - and simply believe what they tell us, even though it is rooted in unbelief and rebellion.

But because we have neglected to build community, we have no alternatives to offer. Where then is the promise of abundant life which Jesus promised? Where is the light that cannot be hidden, the city on a hill that is visible from a distance? There is no city where there are only individuals. There is no light where the word of God for all of life is ignored. There are no answers for the problems of life when we are constantly turning away from the crucial issues of life.

The human task is to care for and develop the earth. The work which we do here and now is significant and meaningful. Apart from Christ, to whom all things are subject, and to whom all things belong as the appointed head of creation, there is no meaning in our work. But seen in the light of Christ, all our activities are meaningful and significant to God: our employment, our family life, our hobbies, our sport and our music, all these things and everything else that we are involved in. And because they are significant to God he will hold us to account for what we make of the gifts he has given us.

Failure to bring all of life into subjection to God is intrinsically denying the purpose for which we were created and is a rejection of Christ. It is a denial of his lordship over all of life, as it gives pre-eminence to only part of the life we are called to lead. It is to be seduced by the secular spirit of the world-system which denies that Christ has any authority over us in every area of life. We have been persuaded that while obedience to Christ is important for a narrowly-conceived spiritual life and church activities, it is irrelevant to the “real” issues of life. So there is no heritage of Christian political reflection, artistic endeavour, educational insight or economic alternatives in this country. Former generations of New Zealanders have failed to grasp the all-

encompassing claims of Christ, and so we find ourselves struggling to come to terms with the wider issues of life from a Christian perspective. However if we do not come to terms with these issues, then the Christian community will continue to be seduced by secularism and will fail to see the full Lordship of Christ expressed in its midst. What will become of the next generation, if we neglect our task and leave them in the same vacuum of ideas and insight in which we find ourselves?

What is wrong with individualism anyway?

Individualism is a rejection of the communal character of our human life before God. Instead of the community as the basis of human life, it emphasises the abstract person outside of relationships, considered apart from the real context of human life. It is devoid of any conception of a wider reality which sustains and enables each person to do what they do.

As a consequence of seeing society primarily as individuals, individualism considers community to be only an artificial construct of real individuals. Community is something added as an afterthought, it is merely a decorative veneer laid over the individualistic foundation. As a result, communal life is frequently absent, and we are all the poorer for it.

Individualism fails to recognise the creation as context for community. It cuts us off from our roots as a community not only of human beings but as creatures, linked together and bonded to one another before God the creator. Thus by isolating us first from one another and thus from the whole of creation, the world that God has made becomes merely something apart from us that can be abused and spoiled: it does not matter what we do to the world and to each other; it is outside of us, we are independent of it, it is ultimately irrelevant to us. The consequences can be seen in the pollution of the environment, the contamination of our food supplies, the violence and crime which pervades society. All this is one consequence of being cut off from our rootedness in creation. It is a denial of the creation as the context of human life and a rejection of others as outside of us and therefore not important or significant to us.

Individualism is the curse of contemporary Western culture, which centres our attention on ourselves.

Individualism takes its motivation from an idolatrous absolutisation of the human person, divorced from the communal context in which alone that personhood has meaning. It results in the attempt to understand society as a series of relationships between individuals, rather than as a communal structure in which different persons play their part. For an individualistic view of society, communal relationships must inevitably be only artificial and ultimately unnecessary.

Those who view the origin of the state as founded in a social contract between individuals (e.g. Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau) have fallen into this error. For them, the individual is always primary; a communal relationship, where it is considered to exist, is only a convenience and not essential. Thus the body of Christ, a family, and every other communal structure in human life, is reduced to a conglomerate of individuals, lacking any true structural reality as a community of inter-related people of different callings and gifts. The freedom of the individual has been absolutised and made into an idolatrous spiritual force which distorts and deceives. We need to recapture the Biblical teaching concerning the “people of God” and to break out of the unbiblical notion that we are independent individuals.

On the other hand we need to resist also the idea that individual relationships fall within the all-embracing structure of one particular institution. Political systems, both left and right wing, which absolutise the State are typical of this direction. Such universalistic views of society arise from direct reaction against the fragmenting and divisive forces of individualism. Because both individualism and communalism are spiritual forces, they cannot be resisted with military might, as both the East and the West seek to do. There is no escape from the dialectical tension between individualism and communalism as long as we deny that human beings are created beings standing already in community from the beginning. That community relationship can be shattered by individualism, and it can be distorted and absolutised as communalism. Nevertheless, the freedom of the individual and the inescapable structure of communal relationships form the context of human life. Individualism

and communalism are two manifestations of the disharmony in society which comes about because of human sin, and a turning away from the creator and what he has revealed to us of the nature of human life. Only a Biblical understanding of the communal nature of human life as a created reality can avoid both individualism and communalism, both of which idolatrously absolutise opposing views of what it means to be a human person in God's creation.

Unfortunately the church is not free from the sin of individualism. For example, Christian faith is seen first of all as my personal relationship with God. Seeking God's will for "my life" and concentrating on our own walk with God, are ultimately the fruit of individualism infecting our spirituality, and not the fruit of God's Spirit. Any expression of Christian faith which is not rooted in a commitment at the same time both to God and to God's people is self-centred and an inadequate conception of Christian faith.

What is a community of believers?

There are no isolated autonomous individuals: there is only the community of all God's creatures, related to him and to each other. But all these relationships have been distorted and misused as a result of our rebellion against God, and it is only through renewal by Christ's redemption through the power of the Holy Spirit that our relationships are restored.

What does it mean then to be a people of God? We are communal creatures; the Bible never deals with individuals alone. Every person is inescapably integrated into the life of the community. Scripture always calls us to renewed obedience as a community. We do not stand alone, but are created as members of one another. Denial of the communal heart of our existence leads to fragmentation of our lives, and isolation and ultimately alienation from God, who sees us in terms of our relationships in community and not as independent individuals.

The principal relationship we stand in as Christians is as members of the body of Christ. The imagery used of the body (for instance in 1 Corinthians 12) makes it

abundantly clear that God sees us first of all as members of Christ. It is as we acknowledge our union with the covenant community of God's people that we find true spiritual life. God does not save individuals in isolation but calls those in the community of rebellion to repent and identify themselves with the community of obedience.

The Gospel restores not only our relationship to God, but also our relationships to each other, and to the world around us and all its creatures. It was said by one evangelist that he knows if a man has been saved if he stops kicking his dog. That is true not simply because it is morally wrong to mistreat a dog, but because the gospel restores our relationships with not only the animals, but with all of God's creatures, as much as with God himself. We cannot love God and hate our brother, because if we have truly responded to the Gospel, all our relationships will be restored, since all these relationships are part of who we are, and the gospel restores us as persons, to live a full, earthly human life in this world.

So then, the ordering word of God by which all creation is brought into being and sustained in existence also established the relationships between the variety and diversity of creatures. Human beings are created by God with a whole range of possible relationships. Marriage, friendship, trade, political structures, education, sports teams and the like are all rooted in the way God has created us and ordered our life. These structures we have shaped are the result of human responses to the Word of the Lord by which he has called us to fulfil our lives by developing the endless range of possibilities he has created.

When God created everything that exists, he did so by calling them into being by his ordering word. That word which created us is still active, it orders and sustains the creation still. That word is made known to us in everything that exists. In order to understand the relationships in which creatures live, what we need to do is to examine these creatures and discover the ways they live. The creative word of God which orders them can be seen in the order they display. How do we know this? Because the Scriptures have opened our eyes again to this. It is not something which can be known simply by going out and examining the world, because we are ensnared in sin and

rebellion against God. Only through the Scriptures can we be given new eyes to see what God has brought into being, and how all these things come about.

Therefore to respond in obedience to God and his creative ordering word, means that not only is our relationship with God restored, but our other relationships within which we find ourselves, our political, economic, artistic, sporting and work relationships are also being restored. To respond to the Gospel is to be restored to what God intended us to be. In order to be able to restore our communal relationships with each other and with all the creatures of the world we live in, we need to understand the way in which God has created all these things. God's creative word continually provides the order for our lives and sustains us in all that we do. In order to understand the relationships in which we stand to God's creatures, we need to examine the creation and discern the way God has put it together.

The task of the Christian community

The task of the Christian community in a secular society is to work together in every area of life, to show how the redemption of Christ renews all that we are and do. If we are to stimulate intrinsically Christian involvement in every area of life, two factors are necessary: a concept of an integral Christian discipleship, which encompasses every area of life, and a commitment to work together towards this goal. The achievements of many Christians in the past have often failed to continue to exercise an influence because there was no concept of all of life discipleship which took on corporate shape through the efforts of the Christian community.

Corporate Christian activity has been limited largely to the institutional church, Christian mission work, such as the various missionary societies, the Bible Societies, and evangelistic organisations. Corporate Christian discipleship in other areas has not been developed, because we lack a vision of life which is rooted in an appreciation of God's creation, and because of the individualism which has infected the church.

Human beings were created in community, and were intended to live in community with other human beings, and in harmonious relationship with the world around them.

The call to care for and develop this world involved the community of mankind working together, not isolated individuals “doing their bit.” The traditional emphasis on individual discipleship, personal piety, morality and evangelism, is still dominant in the church today. This often means that corporate Christian activity in areas such as politics, industry, the arts and scholarship, for instance, is still not considered true discipleship, but involvement in “the world.”

Since caring for the earth and developing the full scope of cultural life was not alien to the way humankind was created, neither should it be seen as alien to a redeemed community of mankind living day to day in this world - God’s world. Every aspect of human activity has the potential to be restored to wholeness and renewed in obedience to God through the redemption won by Jesus Christ. Only as we seek to realise this renewal and redemption in our own lives, laying them open to the work of the Spirit, will we see this redemption begin to take corporate expression amongst us.

Our task as a Christian community in a secular society is not to seek to impose on it our conception of what life should be, but to demonstrate through the nature of our communal life an alternative vision and way of life, a way of life which both attracts those who are seeking God, and repels those who are in revolt against him. This is a secular society, one which does not recognise God nor acknowledge his commands for our lives. That does not mean that unbelieving people “out there” somewhere refuse to recognise God, but that everyone in our society has failed to acknowledge God and live accordingly. The church is not exempt: it is an integral part of our secular society. God’s judgement falls on us all because of our failure to be a witnessing community, demonstrating by our lives together a new way of living, a new way of doing business, a new way of educating and making music, a new way of raising families and bringing reconciliation and all the other activities of life.

Christians need to be able to demonstrate the newness that Christ brings, the new vision and new community, binding us together in a way that presents both an attraction and a challenge to those who do things in accordance with a secular vision of life, one cut off from God.

To do that, we need to recover a sense of community, and to work for renewal not merely as individuals, but as a community. There are many aspects of our human life on this earth which are not individual but corporate, in fact our lives are more tied up with corporate realities than with individual realities. Our corporate lives together are however frequently shaped not by the Gospel but by secular visions of life.

We have restricted our Christian perspective to an individualistic and narrowly conceived view of life which fails to take the whole of Scripture into account, so that there is no consensus which guides Christians in their corporate life together, nor as a result any insight into the ways in which secular visions have shaped corporate life both inside and outside the church. It is only as God grants us repentance and renewal of vision that we will escape from the secularism of the system of this world and find new obedience to God.

But while we must work for, and hope for, the renewal of all of life in our midst here and now, we must also realise that the fullness of that renewal will not be seen until God reigns fully over all humanity; that is, when Christ returns to take up his rightful kingdom in the joyful company of the redeemed. Only then will the promise of renewal, which for now we can but hope and pray for, be seen in its completeness through the unhindered and thorough-going renewing work of the Spirit.

The church is the body of Christ. It is not a collection of otherwise unrelated individuals. It is a community in rightful relationship to their king, a community active together in God's world. Richness and depth of Christian life can only develop where it arises from the shared faith and experience of the people of God, where together they struggle against the power of sin in their lives and in the society they live in. Only where Christian life is a consequence of the sharing of burdens and weakness, with each one through their abilities strengthening the lack of others, will the people of God be knit together as a significant community.

The gathering of the people of God for worship is rooted in being a community. The community is the foundation and basis for our worship. The Church is the Christian community coming together to worship, Christian community is not formed by coming together to worship. Our worship as a Church is possible because we are

already a community. It is our life as a community which is foundational to the life of the church.

The community of believers provides the roots for the life we share together in society. In every sphere of activity the people of God are to bear witness to the redeeming grace of God in Christ. They are to do this not simply in words only, but by showing through their life together that the renewal of every area of life, including the structured relationships of society, has begun and will be carried through to completion at the return of Christ.

The task of Christian community is to demonstrate in every area of life the redemption and renewal of all things in Christ. The different callings and abilities given to us by God are all to be given their place in the life of the Christian community. In the Christian community we should find the renewal of all relationships and structures of life, to show forth the light of the gospel of the Kingdom of God in every aspect of human culture. Education, political life, economic life, agriculture, art and music, will all carry the stamp of the vision and goal which inspires and guides the community in carrying out its task of caring for and developing the world with which God has entrusted us.

That task is to communicate the richness and depth of the mercy and grace of God by the renewal of everything that we do through the redemption of Christ. (1 Cor 5:17-20, Col 1:15-20). That this is not always the case can be seen in the fruit of the Christian community today. What is the goal and vision that inspires much of its view of art, music, politics, education? Not the kingdom of God, sad to say, for the vision of the Christian community has been compromised through our failure to take seriously the calling to renew all things in Christ. But because it is impossible to cut out these areas of life, by default the vision which inspires us is not that of the Kingdom of God. And it is only the Biblical message of the Kingdom of God which will bring us to repent of our abdication of responsibility, and a renewed vision for all of life which will allow us to find the obedience to God in every area of life which he desires of us.

Living in the presence of the future
A Sermon for God's people in God's world

What comes to mind for you when someone speaks to you about the kingdom of God? In the Scriptures we find the kingdom of God as a central focus in a way which is often absent from our Christian faith. We have generally lost sight of what the kingdom of God is all about. When we do speak about the kingdom of God, it is usually in the context of conversion, of someone entering the kingdom, of finding salvation, and in this way we speak about “extending” the kingdom. Alternatively, we can think of the kingdom of God as the church, the body of all believers who are part of the kingdom. Or we might think of the kingdom of God as something which will not be established until the return of Christ when he comes to set up his rule on earth.

While all of these ways of thinking have something of the kingdom of God in mind, they are not really what the Scriptures speak about when the kingdom is being discussed. Let us have a look again at the Scriptures to see what we can learn about the kingdom of God, and the relevance it has for our lives here and now.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that when Jesus began to preach, his message was simple: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” What did he mean? Well, there is very little explanation given by Matthew as to what the kingdom of heaven was. For our purposes the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are the same. The Jews did not like to speak too freely about God, so they used “heaven” as a substitute.

The message of Jesus was focused on the coming of the kingdom of God, and Matthew presents Jesus not as the one who saves us from sin, not as the one who works miracles of healing, but as the King sent by God to reclaim his kingdom, and his miracles and his teaching were to proclaim and to demonstrate the kingdom. What is the kingdom of God? What was it that Jesus sought to establish?

The kingdom of God is not a new concept for the New Testament. When Jesus began to preach the good news that in him the Kingdom had arrived, he did not explain

himself at all. He assumed that those to whom he spoke would understand what the kingdom of God was all about. True, they misunderstood its character and the way in which it would be manifested, but they had no misunderstanding of what the kingdom of God meant. For example, Psalm 47 is a celebration of the kingly rule of God.

Clap your hands, all you nations, shout to God with cries of joy.
How awesome is the Lord most high, the great king over all the earth!
He subdued nations under us, peoples under our feet.
He chose our inheritance for us, the pride of Jacob, whom he loved.

God has ascended amid shouts of joy,
The Lord amid the sounding of trumpets.
Sing praises to God, sing praises;
Sing praises to our King, sing praises.

For God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise.
God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne.
The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham,
for the kings of the earth belong to God, he is greatly exalted.

It is hard to get much clearer than that! God rules over the whole earth, he is the great king seated on his throne with all the nations before him. Or again, Psalm 24:7-10.

Lift up your heads, O you gates, be lifted up, you ancient doors,
That the king of glory may come in.
Who is this king of glory?
The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle.
Lift up your heads, O you gates, lift them up, you ancient doors,
That the king of glory may come in.
Who is he, this king of glory?
The Lord almighty, he is the king of glory.

One more of the many passages from the Psalms, Psalm 145:1-2, 10-13.

I will exalt you, my God the king; I will praise your name for ever and ever.

Every day I will praise you, and extol your name for ever and ever.

* * *

All you have made will praise you, O Lord, your saints will extol you.

They will tell of the glory of your kingdom, and speak of your might,

so that all men may know of your mighty acts,

and the glorious splendour of your kingdom.

Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom

and your dominion endures throughout all generations.

We find more about the kingdom of God in the prophets, and other passages in the Old Testament. So when Jesus came preaching that the kingdom of God was at hand, the Jews didn't ask him, what is this kingdom you are talking about? They either believed and repented, or scoffed at him, not because they didn't believe in the kingdom of God, but because they could see no sign of imminence of the kingdom of God. After all, the Romans were still in control, Herod the Idumean was still on the throne, and there was no sign of a change. So what was this fellow ranting about? The signs of the coming of the kingdom are nowhere to be seen. But that is where they were wrong, not because they did not believe that there was a kingdom of God, but because they had misunderstood what that kingdom was all about, and so the signs of the kingdom did not convince them at all - they expected quite different signs than the ones Jesus gave them. But the fact remains, the kingdom of God was not a new idea to them; they simply misunderstood what it would be like.

So then, what is the kingdom of God? Simply put, the kingdom of God is the righteous and just rule of the Creator over all that he has brought into being. To understand the kingdom of God we need to be clear about the Biblical teaching concerning the creation. The Old Testament introduces the whole story of redemption by proclaiming the creation as God's handiwork. All that exists was brought into being by God, and as their creator, he has the right of absolute rule over them. There is nothing that exists that falls outside the rule of God, for there is nothing which God has not brought into being. We might think that we have invented or designed or built

many things, which we have brought into being, not God. We have wonders of technology, medical marvels, democratic political systems, prestigious educational institutions, extensive transportation networks, communications systems, computers, and many more things that human beings have devised and built. But none of these things could exist if God had not provided for the possibility, the opportunities, the very means by which they function! There is nothing that exists that God has not created, even though we have made something of that creation through our abilities and skills. But where did those abilities and skills come from? Not from ourselves - we cannot decide we are going to be gifted at anything. Not from our genes, not from our parents, not from nature. All our abilities and skills come from God, and he has enabled us to develop all these marvellous things. Why have we done this? Because God has called us and commissioned us to do so.

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. Every human being carries out the tasks they have been given not on their own account, not because other people have called them to do so, but because God calls all of us as his stewards to care for the creation, to look after it, to develop it and explore it, so that his glory may be seen in and through it and what we have made of it. None of our tasks, none of our activities, whatever they are, education, sport, the arts, housekeeping, repairing motor vehicles, horticulture, caring for the sick and the elderly, mowing the grass and weeding the vegetables, all human activities are part of our task of caring for the creation as stewards of God, receiving the calling and authority to do so from Christ, the king of all creation.

The doctrine of creation is not something that simply hangs in the background, but is the basis and context in which God is carrying out his work of redemption. Why is this? It is because redemption is introduced **for the sake of creation**. Why is God redeeming the creation? Because we who were created as the stewards of God's creation have rebelled against our sovereign Lord and chosen instead to serve ourselves and the imitation gods we invent. The consequences of this rebellion extend as far as human influence can reach. Every part of the creation we touch bears the

marring of human rebellion, and because the whole of creation lies under our power, there are no limits to the dire effects of our sin.

Whether we like it or not, we remain the stewards of God's creation. He has not replaced us with any other stewards after we broke covenant with God. But instead of caring for the creation as God intended us to do, we have gone our own way, despoiling, consuming, polluting, exhausting all that we can get our hands on. We use the powers which God gave us for caring for the creation for his glory, not as God intended, but in whatever ways our rebellious hearts devise.

But God loved his creation so much that he did not leave it victim to his rebellious and disobedient human stewards. Nor did he leave us, who spurned our very maker, to go our own way. Instead, God instituted the most costly plan of redemption that could be devised: he himself took on humanity with the express intention of dying in our place. He came who was the king of all creation to die at the hands of his subjects, put to death in mockery and derision as "the king of the Jews," even though he was not their king only, but the king of the whole world.

Having spent his years of ministry proclaiming that in him the kingdom of God was being restored, with the rightful king again being given the obedience he was due by his subjects, this king entered Jerusalem not to take the seat of government; not to receive proper respect and honour as the one who alone is entitled to rule in Israel and in every other land, but to the shouts of adulation from a crowd that was as fickle as it was enthusiastic. This crowd that greeted his arrival in Jerusalem with cries of "Hosanna," recognised in some limited way that he was a claimant to the throne of David, and John's Gospel even reports that the crowd shouted, "Blessed is the King of Israel." But it was only a short time later that the same crowd came before Pilate and insisted that they had "no king but Caesar." Such is the fickleness of humankind. What courage, what determination, what commitment can this be, which changes its kings so lightly and so often.

Yet this is the path that God chose for himself in order to win back to his allegiance the very ones who had spurned him for so long. In order to save us from death, the

cessation of fellowship with God, he came to die instead so that we, and thus all the creation under our care, might be delivered from the power of death which power comes from sin.

Jesus is the Creator God, come in the flesh to redeem his fallen creation. He came to win back we who had turned away from him, and to restore to its true character all that which has been corrupted by us and through us and because of us. Jesus did not die to save only human beings from their sin; he died so that all that had been affected by sin could be restored. The creation itself is redeemed in Christ. Nothing that God made has been abandoned so that sin could have its awful sway. The death of Christ brought renewal to the entire creation.

Christians often have the idea that after the return of Christ, the world will be destroyed by fire and all that currently exists will be burnt up. What point is there then in getting involved in caring for the environment, or preserving our historical buildings, or putting effort into politics, or research, or development of new technology? Isn't this all a waste of time if Christ is to return soon? Won't all these things which we are putting our efforts into be destroyed? The only problem is, this is not a Biblical perspective. Not only will the earth not be destroyed, it will in fact be enhanced and glorified to make it fit for God's own dwelling-place.

It can be seen that such a view is not Biblical, not only because we do not actually live that way in spite of our protestations to the contrary, but it also makes God into a wasteful God. Would you burn down the house because the children had drawn all over the wallpaper with crayons, making an awful mess? Well why expect God to be any more foolish? God has not abandoned his creation, and this earth which we have contaminated by our sin will be purified by fire, not destroyed but cleansed, so that all the dross and corruption which we have introduced into the creation will be done away with. There is nothing inherent in the creation that makes it unworthy of God, since it is God's own handiwork. Everything that has gone wrong with the creation is the fault of the creatures God has made who have rebelled against their only lawful king. What they have done to the creation will be undone, for the redemption of Christ means that all the effects of sin can be removed. But if the sin of human beings, which

has had such devastating results for the earth, is taken away, 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. The ultimate end of God's plan for redemption for us is for most people to leave this earth and to go to heaven to be with God, abandoning the earth to destruction.

If God was in fact unable to remove the effects of our sin, if we were able to so contaminate the creation that it was incapable of being purified, then our sin would be stronger than God's grace, and our rebellion of more effect than God's righteous rule. This is not the case, for when the final victory is won, we will see Jesus Christ with all his enemies placed under his feet. There will be nothing left that is not subject to him, whether or not they persist in their rebellion. Those who are found still to be in rebellion against the king at the final judgement will be punished, and the rebellion will come to an end. Those who dare to fight against God will lose. Read what the Scriptures say about this in Psalm 2:

Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth take their stand,
and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed One.
“Let us break their chains,” they say, “and throw off their fetters.”
The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
The Lord scoffs at them.
Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
“I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.”

God will have all the glory, and his enemies will be defeated. The effects of their rebellion will be done away with, when the earth, God's good creation which he loves, will be purged with fire and made new and clean. God is not a petulant father who burns down the house he has built because the children have messed it up. Instead, like a loving father, he sets about cleaning up the mess and making the house habitable again. This creation does not deserve to be destroyed, after all, what injury has the creation done to God? Would it be just of God to destroy the innocent victims of our sin, while we are redeemed at such great cost? In addition, the Scriptures

promise that the whole creation which lies in bondage will be released from its chains and set free in glorious freedom. How can that happen if it is burned up?

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. The idea that the earth will be destroyed comes not from the Scriptures but from the pagan religions of Greece and Rome, shaped by people who were alienated from God and from the creation he has made. And as a consequence of failing to grasp a truly Biblical view of life, even Christians are still also alienated from this earth, seeking to have a relationship to God, but not a relationship to the earth which he has made for us to dwell in. 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.

We might think that the Scriptures teach that the world will be burned up. After all, isn't that what it says in 2 Peter 3? But have a closer look at this passage: it speaks of the earth being destroyed and the ungodly being brought to judgement - when? At the time of Noah, when the world was deluged with water and destroyed. But don't we still live on that same earth? In the same way, at the return of Christ, the earth will be engulfed in fire and the earth and everything in it will be - what? Burned up? No, the translation should read something like, "laid bare" or "revealed." There is no basis for saying that the earth will be destroyed by fire and replaced by a new earth. Rather, it will be purified by fire, to remove all sin and corruption, and so we look forward to the new creation, the new heaven and earth, that is, the present heaven and earth purified and purged so that nothing of the rebellion and sin we have introduced remains.

God loves the world that he has made; he is not going to wantonly destroy it, any more than he is going to destroy us. He loves us, the stewards that he created to care for his world on his behalf, to explore it, to develop it, to cherish and enhance it to show forth his glory through what he made possible in his world. But we have not done that. Instead, we have cast off all allegiance to the owner and have treated this

world as though it was our personal property. We have done terrible things in this world, to each other, to the creatures God called us to care for and protect, and even to ourselves. But Christ the King came to save his rebellious subjects from the fate that awaits them when the kingdom of God is re-established in full power and might. What have we done with our rightful king, who came riding on a donkey: the servant, not the master or the conquering hero? We have spurned him, despised his claim to kingship, and have firmly given our allegiance to Caesar.

“We have no king but Caesar!” This from God’s own people Israel! But are we any better? What kings do we serve in our lives today? Are we committed solely to Christ as the one rightful sovereign over us? Or do we seek to have other kings, other lords, other gods, not necessarily instead of Christ the King, but even alongside of him. Yes, we profess to serve Christ when gathered together in Sunday worship. But whom do we serve during the week, after we leave this building?

The rule of Christ is not limited in any way. All authority in heaven and on earth is given to him. We cannot recognise anyone else as having any authority save that which Christ the king of the whole creation grants to them as his servants. And who are his servants in creation? Well for one, the government is a servant of God. Paul even goes so far as to describe the government officials as “deacons,” the same term he uses for the officers of the church. Thus he says, this is why you pay taxes, something which many of us have on our minds at this time of the year, because the government authorities are God’s “deacons,” appointed to the task of governing as God’s servants. But are they really God’s servants if they do not acknowledge God and recognise that they have their office entrusted to them by God? Yes, they are, even though they may be in rebellion against God. They remain his servants nevertheless. But because they are God’s servants, called to govern under his authority alone, they will be held accountable at that great day when Christ takes his throne and all nations are gathered before him for judgement.

Do we acknowledge and serve that King as he deserves, in those daily tasks, or do we have another king? Do we in actual fact, serve Caesar rather than Christ, being blind to the fact that all we do, all that we are, everything that we touch, is contaminated by

our sin and rebellion against our rightful Lord, but just as much redeemed and renewed by him in grace wherever we turn from our rebellion to worship him and serve him in all that we do.

What then is the kingdom of God? It is the righteous rule of God over all that he has created, his wise and generous care of his creatures whom he loves. The kingdom of God encompasses the whole of creation, all that comes from the creative hand of God. But those whom God made as his stewards, to guard and care for his creation on his behalf, have instead betrayed their trust and turned against their king. They have taken on themselves the right to decide what is right and wrong, and have set up for themselves other kings, other gods, whom they will serve instead of the true God. The kingdom of God, the whole of creation which is under the rule of its Creator, never diminishes in extent. But the extent of obedience given to God by his subjects varies greatly. It is this which the Scriptures speak about when they speak of the kingdom of God coming in our midst. It is not the establishment of God's rule over the creation, for that occurred when the creation was brought into being. Rather, it is the re-establishment of God's righteous reign over his rebellious subjects, those who were given charge of the creation as his stewards. We have not served our legitimate king, but have instead chosen to serve other kings in his place.

Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God. He proclaimed the righteous rule of the one true King, and declared that the day of judgement was coming when all who would not bow the knee to that King would be punished for their rebellion. The only way of escape from this punishment is to repent. Therefore, repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. His righteous rule, his legitimate sovereignty over all that exists, is being re-established in the face of the continued rebellion of his subjects. The signs of the kingdom, the miracles which Christ performed, all these things point towards the power of the kingdom of God breaking into the strongholds of the rebels. God is invading his own territory, where rebels are in control, in order to wrest back from them the honour which is due to his name alone.

Christ has been appointed by God as the agent of the kingdom, the one through whom redemption would be accomplished, and to whom all that exists will bow the knee.

Nothing lies outside the rule of Christ the only true and rightful king, and when the king of all creation was cruelly put to death by the appointed stewards of creation, the whole of creation was convulsed at the enormity of the crime. The earth shook, the sun was darkened, rocks split and graves were opened. What else could we expect when the creator of the world was rejected in person by his own creatures? But the death of the king of creation also brought release for the whole of creation from the power and effects of sin. Wherever human sin has wormed its perverse and rebellious way, there too the grace of God extends. No sin, no effect or consequence of sin, can escape the grace of God redeeming, renewing, restoring all that he has made so that once again he will be able to look on his handiwork and proclaim it to be “very good.” The whole of creation is redeemed in Christ, and at his return it will be manifested as it should be: the new heaven and the new earth, the eternal home of righteousness.

But until that time, even though redeemed in Christ, the rest of creation lies under bondage to rebellious stewards: the people that God created to care for, to love and to cherish what he had made. And because of that the whole creation groans, as Paul said, waiting for the sons of God to be revealed, the stewards of creation who are restored once again to their obedience to their master.

But what will become of those who continue to rebel against the King? There is coming a day when Christ will return to take his kingdom and to defeat his enemies. All the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God and his Christ. Those whose allegiance is to the false kingdoms which establish themselves in defiance of God will be cast out, never to enjoy the blessings and rewards of those whom Christ accepts into his eternal kingdom. This is the gospel of the kingdom that we are called to proclaim: the king is coming to take his throne, repent and prepare the way of the Lord, for all whom he finds in rebellion against him when he comes will be cast into the outer darkness forever.

So then, we are now living in the time in between the proclamation of the kingdom of God in Christ, and the time when that kingdom will be revealed in full power and glory at the return of Christ. What is our responsibility in this in-between time?

The Scriptures reveal that what the future holds is the triumph of God's plan of redemption. We will not see 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. 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. Without fail all things will be redeemed in Christ, and if we remain faithful we will see that redemption and share in it. We do not focus on the kingdom of darkness but on the kingdom of God, and will seek to see that kingdom worked out in every area of life. The reign of Christ the King began at his ascension to take his seat at the right hand of God. By his Spirit he has been working in the world to establish justice and peace. The forces of darkness have been active against that reign, and have on occasion seduced many into supporting them in their struggle, albeit unwittingly in some cases. However the certainty of our Christian hope is that Christ will indeed eventually reign as Lord on the earth. His kingdom will be established and the rule of darkness destroyed forever.

The return of Christ to reign 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. At the return of Christ we will see all things fully restored, and on the new earth every area of life will be subject to the Father. Then we will once again set about the task of caring for the new earth, only this time we will be carrying it out in obedience to God.

This Biblical perspective on life in the creation takes a positive view of our everyday activity. Our tasks are to be done in the light of the inauguration of the Kingdom in Jesus Christ, while recognising that Christians should expect to be a despised and persecuted minority. While we may be able to make a worthwhile contribution to our society, in many situations Christians will find themselves rejected and persecuted. The mark of the Kingdom is both the Crown and the Cross. Thus to confess Christ is

to live in the hope that human society in its fullness will be redeemed, to see every aspect of human life, every product of human activity, every relationship between God's creatures on earth, restored to what God intended. At present we still await this renewal of the whole creation, and we 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 will be blessed by the Lord and that at His appearing will be revealed for the kind of work that it is. That which is done in an through the grace of God will be seen as such, while that which is done in the power of the flesh will be discarded.

Renewal of our society will not spring into being overnight. It is only by dedicated hard work that we will see fruit come forth. We have fallen prey to the mentality which seeks quick and easy solutions, without realising that God himself has already been active in the earth, working with, and at times against, those whom he has called to be his tools. We must be willing to endure hunger and thirst in order to see the rule of Christ over all things prevail. That does not mean simply going without food and water, but that sufferings and hardship will not prevent us from pressing on to the goal we have set before us.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

If we continually fix our vision on the Biblical promise that all things will be renewed, the heavens and the earth restored so that evil and suffering will be done away, on the hope of the resurrection of the body and of new life in the new earth, then we will not

disparage our present earthly existence, but instead long for it to be set free from sin and bondage to decay, and fix our hearts on the hope that all we do will find its place in the eternal kingdom of God.

Our Father in heaven, holy is your name,

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.