Documentation

A Theological Basis For Earthcare

by Peter Bakken, Diane Jacobson, George L. Murphy and Paul Santmire

Christian thought about the environment begins at the cross, which shows the futility of attempts to attain God's glory on our own terms. We always know the true God as "God with us" on earth (Is.7:14; Mt.1:23). We do not ascend to be with God. As God's rescue of slaves from Egypt and presence with Israel in the wilderness already testify, God descends to be with us. Christians approach the environmental crisis, therefore, as people who have good news to proclaim about what God has done and will do for the whole world through Jesus Christ.

The Gospel begins with the Word of the Creator becoming flesh for the world's salvation (Gen.1; Jn.1:1-14; 3:16). Jesus proclaimed the dawn of the world-transforming Kingdom of God, and died and rose for the sake of the world.

Christians live in faith "between the times," hoping for the full and final dawning of the Kingdom of God, when Christ comes again in glory. We are to be faithful to this hope through works of love in the midst of a world of sin and death. The church's head is the crucified Lord who came not to be served but to serve (Mk.10:45). Ideas of lordship, dominion, and hierarchy are thus given radically new meanings.

Our crucified Lord restores us to our rightful relationships to God, one another, and all creation, even as we continue to know that we are sinners. Our risen Lord also gives us "a foretaste of the feast to come," when the new Jerusalem will come to earth from God and all things will be made new (Rev.21:1-4). Knowing Jesus Christ in this way opens our eyes to all the Scriptures (Lk.24:27, 45). We can read their witness to Christ anew, understanding the purposes of God for creation from the beginning. We can grasp afresh how we have been called to serve the whole creation in love as we await God's renewal of creation.

The theology of the cross sees the purpose of the cosmos only in the light of the cross, but it does not denigrate the cosmos. We do not learn God's ultimate purpose for us and the world by studying nature, and our lives are not fulfilled by exploiting nature. Purpose and fulfillment are found in Christ, to whom Scripture bears witness. Thus we explore Scripture and the theological tradition to see the relationships between God, nature, and humanity.

This is a condensation of a paper prepared for the ELCA Environment Task Force by its sub-group on theology: Peter Bakken, Diane Jacobsen, George Murphy, and Paul Santmire.

God's Relationship with Creation

Scripture witnesses to God as creator of the earth and all that dwells therein (Ps.24:1). This witness begins in Genesis, continues in the psalms and prophets, and stands behind all claims that Jesus Christ died and was raised for the world's salvation. Scripture proclaims not just any god as creator, but the God revealed to us as LORD (Yahweh), who brought Israel out of Egypt, spoke through the prophets and sages, exiled and brought home Israel, and sent his only Son into the world.

The Christian claim about the Creator, drawn from Scripture, is expressed in the first articles of our creeds which proclaim God, the Father of Jesus Christ, to be creator of heaven and earth. Creation is not solely the work of the First Person of the Trinity, however. Christ is the one "through whom all things were made" (Nicene Creed; cf. Jn.1:3) and the Holy Spirit is "the Lord and Giver of life" (Nicene Creed; cf. Ps.104:30) The whole cosmos is the creation of the triune God. God's relationship with the creation is marked from the beginning and throughout history by signs of God's character as upright, faithful, righteous, just, and loving (Ps.33:4-5; 89:8-14).

God continues to sustain the world which he has blessed and declared "very good" (Jn.5:17; Gen.1:31). "Creation is good" does not mean only "good for human beings." In Genesis 1, aspects of creation are declared "good" before humanity comes on the scene. Nonhuman as well as human creatures are good from a divine perspective. The goodness of creation is a judgment that the world fits together, can work in harmony, has intrinsic beauty, is pleasing to the divine eye, and is worth loving. Creation is good because of the grace of its good Creator. This grace is shown also in God's continuing care for the world —for humanity (Acts 14:17), animals (Gen.6-9), crops (Ps.147:8-9), and even deserts and wastelands (Job 38-41). Christianity recognizes the reality of sin and evil, but rejects ideas that the material world is intrinsically evil or a mistake.

God is linked to creation through covenants with all living creatures (Gen.8:10; Hos.2:18), even night and day (Jer.33:19). That is, God is linked to creation through promise. Even though we cannot know the details and specific outcome of that promise, we and all creation live in its light.

The world is good, but it is not God (Rom.1:18-23). Creation has religious significance as the work of God, but is not to be an object of worship (Job 31:26-28). God is "wholly other" than creation, the ultimate reality beyond finite and creaturely realities, and so can stand over against the world as its judge. The idea that the world is good but not divine is compatible with the scientific approach. Scientists must believe that the world is reliable enough to be worth studying but not *so* good that it would be sacrilege to analyze it.

God is intimately involved in all that happens within the world. God acts in natural processes, not dominating with absolute power but working in and through nature and history to nurture creation and lead it to fulfillment (Cf. Luther's catechetical explanations of the First Article).

The Incarnation and sacraments demonstrate the capacity for finite creatures to receive and carry God's infinite grace, and thus underscore the intimate relationship between God and nature in redemption as well as in creation. The eternal Word became human, lived as a part of earthly creation, and comes to

us in the material elements of bread and wine. All nature manifests God's faithfulness and lovingkindness (Is. 6:3).

Jesus' life exemplifies God's intention for human life. For him the creation was a theater of God's grace and glory. He contemplated the lilies of the field as mirrors of God's glory and saw the care of his heavenly Father displayed in the birds (Mt.6:26-30). Although he finally had no home in this world (Mt.8:20), his parables of growth show that he was at home with the land and its vitalities (Mt.13:31-32; Mk.4:26-29). Jesus stood in solidarity with God's covenant to bring peace to the creation and overcome its ambiguities, as his stilling of the waters shows (Mk.4:35-41).

Our Relationship with Nature

Humanity is part of nature, given a special role for the sake of the whole. Throughout Scripture, humanity is described as living within creation, linked to the earth and all living things. In Gen.2:7, humanity (*'adam*) is formed from the dust of the ground (*'adamah*) from which the LORD God also caused the trees to grow and formed all beasts and birds. Psalm 104 includes human beings with birds and badgers as creatures who look to God to sustain their lives.

Human beings are also assigned a dignity, authority, and responsibility which distinguish them from the rest of creation (Gen.1; 2; Ps.8; Lk.12:6-7). God's coming to earth in human form seals this special status. The distinctively human relationship to God of spiritual awareness and moral accountability is the necessary condition for human responsibility to and for the earth and for a proper appreciation of creation.

We stand as God's creatures within an orderly creation. Science speaks about the relationship between humanity and the rest of the world in terms of evolution and ecology. Something which affects one species influences all others in its ecosystem, and this applies also to the human species. We are ultimately dependent upon and responsible to God, but God gives us existence through our relationships of interdependence with other human beings and with nature. We cannot be persons without other persons or human apart from the nonhuman world. Earth and heaven and all living creatures witness to God's lordship (Dt.30:19), bless God, and sing praises to the Creator (Ps.96 & 148). In worship we "join in the hymn of all creation" (LBW, p.61).

In recognizing God as creator, we recognize ourselves as part of creation. The command to love the LORD and one's neighbor as oneself (Dt.6:5; Lev.19:18; Mt.22:37-40) can be extended to include love of all creatures. In Leviticus 25, the land is to lie fallow in order that it may have rest and renewal (Cf. Ex.20:8-11). Some laws have the welfare of wild and domestic animals and trees in mind (Ex.23:10-12; Lev.25:6-7; Dt.20:19-20; 22:6-7; 25:4). Concerns for animals, plants, and the land are frequently difficult to distinguish from concern for human benefits. The interplay of these concerns suggests that love of and service to the nonhuman world is related to love of neighbor and of self. But, the fact that God is related to creatures in ways that are unknown to and independent of us (Job 39-41) should warn against placing humanity at the center of all God's concerns.

We are urged, as a matter of life and death, to respond to the wisdom of God's creation through the just ordering of our lives and society (Prov. 8). This urging is magnified through the identification of the crucified Christ as the true wisdom of God (I Cor.1:18-31; Col.2:3). As finite, dependent, and interdependent beings, we must respect the integrity of ecological and social relationships which form the conditions for the well-being of life on earth. The interdependent structure of creation makes possible the survival, growth, and flourishing of human beings and other creatures, and therefore sets limits on what human beings can and should do.

Those who live in modern industrial democracies have a way of life far different from that of ancient Israel. While we are no less dependent on the earth and no less bound by God's demand for justice than were they, we must act in ways appropriate to our own circumstances. God has given us brains to discover and understand ways in which the earth might be cared for. Science is a modern counterpart of the wisdom tradition of Israel. Both seek to discover the underlying pattern of creation. The wisdom tradition, however, did not separate the order of nature from the moral ordering of human life.

Christianity recognizes the reality of sin and evil, but rejects ideas that the material world is evil or a mistake. The world is good, but it is not God. Creation has religious significance as the work of God, but is not to be an object of worship.

Part of our calling is found in the creation account of Genesis 2. In Verse 15, the newly created human is placed in God's fruitful garden and instructed to serve (*'abad*) and keep (*shamar*) it. These verbs, frequently translated here as "till" and "keep," are used elsewhere to describe the serving and guarding of God's tent of meeting in the wilderness (Num.3:7-8; 4:47; 16:9). The earth, like the garden, is God's gift to us. Serving and keeping the earth is a sacred task of caring for it as God's temple in response to God's serving and keeping us (Ps.121). "Stewardship" in an environmental context must mean that humans act as caretakers of the earth, not as lords over it.

God's command that humanity have dominion over the earth and subdue it (Gen.1:26-28; Ps.8) has sometimes been used

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to justify destructive behavior toward the earth and our fellow creatures. Several facts about "dominion" should be noted.

Present human numbers and technology make a *de facto* human dominance over the earth inescapable. But history shows that responsible exercise of our powers is necessary, and that we dare not forget the limits of human knowledge and control.

We must understand the biblical texts against their historical context. Ancient Israelites were more vulnerable to the powers of nature than we are, and had far less power over nature than we have. "Dominion" and "subdue" sounded very different to their ears than they do to ours. Human "dominion" is connected with humanity being created "in [God's] image, after [God's] likeness" (Gen.1:26). In cultures surrounding Israel, the designation of divine image was reserved for kings who were seen as sons of the god. But in Gen. 1:26-28, royalty is democratized and all humans, male and female, are declared royal children of God. Moreover, the myths of neighboring cultures presented human beings as created to be slaves of the gods. For Israel to say that human beings are to "have dominion over" and "subdue" the earth, then, was to affirm the dignity of *all* human beings, not to debase the nonhuman creation.

Our job is to care for the earth as God's representatives, exercising our powers with gentleness and compassion. The sovereign Lord whom we represent rules as a shepherd-king. God's sovereignty is marked by justice, loyalty, compassion, service, and love (2 Sam.23, Ps.89, Is.42:1-4, Sir.18:13a), revealed particularly in the cross (Phil.2:5-11). A dominion which looks to that pattern will serve all creatures.

Human "dominion" can be spoken of only cautiously, as power to protect and nurture the earth. We should make greater use of other scriptural images that express more clearly our responsibility to care for creation.

Sin and the Environmental Crisis

All things are obviously not "very good" today. It is not so obvious—though faith sees this—that God is doing something about the evil in the world.

Some things which we see as evil appear to be consequences of God's creation of a limited world which operates in accord with certain laws. Species were dying before humanity came on the scene, and the theory of natural selection sees that as part of the evolutionary process. Some beings live at the expense of others, and predators, too, receive their food from God (Ps. 104:21).

Destruction of resources and extinction are not human inventions. But the modern ecological crisis is a consequence of human sin, not just "natural evil." We have failed to exercise properly our divinely given vocation. The church has sometimes contributed to this failure by promoting distorted ideas of God's will for creation and the human place in nature.

Some environmental destruction is unavoidable and some results from well-intentioned ideas. Even our best efforts can fail. But when ignorance becomes invincible through denial; when misinterpretation is the result of selfserving biases; when comfort and convenience are pursued at the expense of higher values; when demands arise from greed rather than need, then sin is also at work.

Scripture affirms that human sin disrupts creation. Nature witnesses to God's covenant with Israel; as Israel acts, so nature responds (Dt.11:13-17). When Israel acts in justice, obedient to God, the earth is blessed. But when Israel forgets her part of the covenant, when injustice marks her dealings with the poor and needy and God's demands are ignored, nature cries out and curses replace blessing.

The most dramatic reaction to human injustice is Jeremiah's vision of creation reversed so that the earth appears waste and void, with no mountains or hills, humans or birds, fruitful land or cities, no light in the heavens, but only desolation (Jer.4:23-28). Our generation has the unfortunate opportunity to see, more than any previous one, the realism of biblical threats of "desolation" as a consequence of human sin. Patterns of social injustice lead to chaos in nature! The reverse is also true: environmental degradation intensifies social injustice. The poor and powerless suffer the most from pollution and resource shortages.

The Salvation of the World

Against the threat of ultimate desolation, God comes as savior of the world by personal participation, to the point of experiencing the evil and death brought about by sin. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God does not save us *from* the world, but saves us *and* the world. We therefore continue to hope and work for creation because God is at work within history and nature, overcoming our failure and bringing the universe to its intended destiny.

The crucifixion of Jesus shows that we must give up pursuit of security and well-being through domination of other creatures. God's forgiveness enables us to recognize the magnitude of what we have done to the earth and one another without being paralyzed by guilt and regret. Christ empowers us to serve creation, and the Holy Spirit works to restore broken bonds of community among people and between humanity and the earth (Ps.104:30).

Beyond healing a creation wounded by human sin, God is at work perfecting the whole creation. Although nature itself has not sinned, it too looks toward a final fulfillment. Rom.8:18-25 speaks of creation's hope for liberation and Col.1:15-20 says that "all things" will be reconciled to God through the cross of Christ. To say that Christ died for forests and fish as well as humans is surprising, but that is what Col.1:20 says. The idea is not so startling if we remember the relational character of human life. We are fully human only with our environment, and if we are to be saved, there must be a sense in which the environment is saved as well. Christian hope is not for human beings only, for the Creator of all things is also the Redeemer of all.

Our dealings with the earth and with one another must be judged in the light of God's purpose for creation, which is a loving communion between God and all creatures. Creation is placed under the cross as the sign of its salvation and of the dominion of the risen Christ. Thus we are enabled to repent of our numerous sins against the earth and all creatures, trust in the promises of God, and refrain from despair in the task which lies before us. We take the well-being of our world with the utmost seriousness, not despising or ignoring what God has brought into being, but celebrating and caring for the earth. LF