A Beloved Earth Community: Christian Mission in an Ecological Age

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Earth is in crisis. The planet is facing major ecological problems: global warming, loss of species diversity, loss of forests and arable land, disposal of garbage and toxic waste, pollution of air, land, and water, over-population, depletion of non-replaceable natural resources, diminution of food sources, ocean acidification and collapse of fisheries, among others. Issues of human justice—discrimination, poverty, oppression, and displacement—are related to every ecological change. The issues are many and complex. And the survival of creation as we humans have known it is at stake.

When the Protestant churches met in Edinburgh in 1910 to deliberate on evangelizing Earth before Christ returns, the eight committees paid scant attention to the impact of industrialization on nature. The global north was still intoxicated with the fruits of scientific inventions and technological progress, and they perceived mission principally as sharing the gospel to the global south, civilizing them through Christianity. At Edinburgh and for the better part of the century since then, the concept of mission has been anthropocentric, focusing almost exclusively on human beings and neglecting human responsibility to care for creation—as though nature were some neutral or benevolent stage upon which humans play out their lives. Much to the contrary, human beings are absolutely embedded in nature. We *are* nature; and we humans cannot eat, breath, sleep, act, work, or live without the rest of nature. Knowing this, we cannot now think of mission to people apart from God's mission to all creation.

A century later, the world is alarmed at the threats to the sustainability of Earth due to human activities, to human ideologies that privilege the domination over nature, and to the human-centered conception of mission. The church has always realized that it does not exist for any other reason but mission—that the church should be the sign, presence, foretaste, and witness that the reign of God is here. So if the church exists for the sake of the world, it must pay attention to what is happening to the world and cease to concentrate on an individualistic spiritual mission of personal salvation without also addressing the need to restore creation as a whole. A holistic Christian mission connects the interrelationship between human beings and the rest of creation.

Recent developments have brought the issue of environmental degradation to the forefront worldwide. Al Gore's much-acclaimed 2006 film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, raised public awareness about global warming. In 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), representing the work of over three thousand scientists and other climate experts worldwide, released a series of four reports, *Climate Change 2007*, attesting that there is ninety percent certainty that human activity since the industrial revolution has been the major cause of global warming.[2]

In this twenty-first century, an adequate human response to the ecological state of the world—especially among industrialized countries—will require a transformation as great as the transformation that occurred in the United States and other Allied societies when they rose to the challenge of war in the 1940s. In the United States, for example, the whole economy was re-directed to address the challenge of war. New industries arose overnight. Goods were rationed. People grew their own food. Cars were limited. Everyone made sacrifices. The resources of the society were marshaled to rise and meet the challenge. That is what industrial nations need now to do at national and global levels to address the challenge of the environmental crisis: embark on a transformation of industries to renewable energy, transition to eating local foods, transfer of resources to develop and share new technologies, limits on the use of pesticides, prohibitions against clearing forests, rationing of energy and water, protection of wetlands and wilderness, among many other things.[3]

1. With special thanks to Ogbu Kalu for his support and helpful suggestions in the preparation of this essay.

2. For information on the reports of the IPCC, go to www.ipcc.ch.

3. On social transformation, see David Korten. *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2006); Lester Brown, *Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008); Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007);

Father Thomas Berry has said that from an evolutionary point of view humanity is entering a new era, the Ecozoic Age—an age in which ecological issues will dominate our global life together. He argues that creating a sustainable environmental lifestyle on the planet is the "great work" of our time. It is a work in which all people can participate, a work that all must embrace if life on this planet is to be sustained.[4] This work is not easy; and it will require intention and sacrifice.

The church is called to participate in this great work and, indeed, to offer leadership. There are many reasons why Christianity in general has failed to show much significant change of attitude towards Earth. Indeed, Christian traditions and practices have contributed significantly to the problems.[5] Nevertheless, in the last two decades, world-wide ecumenical organizations of churches such as the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, and others have held many meetings to covenant member churches to design new ways of developing a relationship with all of God's creation, to understand afresh how God works in the world of the nature around us, and to build and nurture beloved Earth-communities. In the United States, for example, the National Partnership for the Environment was formed to foster care for creation among four representative groups: The National Council of Churches, the National Catholic Conference, the Evangelical Environmental Network, and the Coalition on Jewish Life and the Environment.[6] Clearly, the environment is an emergent theme in contemporary mission.

In order for the church to rise to the occasion, however, it will need to go through a thoroughgoing reformation. Worldwide, churches must transform proclamation, preaching, worship, teaching, witnessing, communal formation, action, and advocacy so as to make care for all creation foundational to missional vocation. This is a reformation that will involve deep repentance, a *metanoia*—a mind-change and a practice-change. This is a reformation for the whole church. It will take diverse shapes in different cultures and countries and economies. Church bodies and congregations will need to be in solidarity with and to be inspired by each other.[7] Christians in the global north will need to advocate for structural change that acknowledges the ecological "debt" that the north owes to the south, as well as simplify life and lifestyle in order to minimize exploitation of Earth and people. Christians in the global south will need to advocate for sustainable development practices and indigenous Earth practices such as tree planting and water conservation.

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And this is a reformation that will unite rather than divide. As such, this reformation will not only be ecumenical but also interfaith, because all religions bear salient traditions and resources that can be garnered for crafting new eco-ethics for Earth. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, indigenous religions, among others—will find together common ground (Earth!) in the collective calling to Earth-care. We have much to learn from each other.[8] Perhaps the Rainbow Covenant contracted in Assisi in 1986 is an example of how the shift can be made to a creation mystique and an orthopraxis based on reciprocity.[9] It was achieved through rituals of confession, repentance, covenant renewal, and *conscientization*. Media facilities were employed, and an ecumenical mobilization of religious leaders and scientists ensured that the message reached the core of global culture.

So, if the church is to go through a comprehensive reformation, what principles might guide us? The following reflections will suggest five key mandates to guide such a transformation of Christian identity and mission.

1) The first mandate for mission is this: Learn about the degradation of God's creation. If the church is to respond to the ecological state of the world, the church must be conversant with the scientific perspectives on the natural world in its current degraded state.

- **Loss of species diversity.** Scientist E. O. Wilson has estimated that at the current rate of extinction by human activity, the Earth is losing about one hundred species a day and will lose

and Van Jones. *The Green Collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix Our Two Biggest Problems* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

4. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999). On the environmental movement, see Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History is Restoring Grace, Justice and Beauty to the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

5. See David Kingsley, "Christianity as Ecologically Harmful and Christianity as Ecologically Responsible" *This Sacred Earth*, Roger Gottlieb, ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996) and various articles in Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds., *Christianity and Ecology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

6. See www.nrpe.org.

7. David Hallman, *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994).

8. Michael Barnes, ed. *An Ecology of the Spirit: Religious Reflections and Ecological Consciousness* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994); David Kinsey, *Ecology and Religion: Ecospirituality in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995); and Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller, eds., *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007). For in-depth analysis of different religions, see the Religions of the World and Ecology Series edited by Evelyn Tucker and John Grim from Harvard University Press.

9. See Richard John Huggett, *Fundamentals of Biogeography* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 218.

one half of animal and plant species by the end of the century! Diversity is the condition that enables life to adapt for survival.[10]

- **Loss of forests (the lungs of the planet)** is happening annually at the rate of the size of the nation Paraguay. Each year, worldwide, arable land (the food source of the planet) is being lost to desert at the rate of the size of the country of Oman.
- **Pollution of the air, the water, and the land:** emissions in the air; industrial and agricultural runoff in aquifers, lakes, rivers, and oceans; and pesticides, herbicides, and toxic waste in the land. The US alone produces 10 million metric tons of waste each year. Fifteen years ago, a University of Michigan scientist who had studied life in Antarctica for many years share that his team had never examined a specimen of sea life or land animal that did not show traces of Styrofoam.[11]
- **Population.** The world has gone from one billion to six billion people in the last several centuries and will reach seven billion in 2012. In terms of the effect on plants and animals in many regions of the world, especially in the global north, humans can be considered an invasive species.
- **Global Warming** is the most dramatic and the most urgent ecological crisis. The IPCC has detailed the causes of global warming since the Industrial Revolution of the 1800s, including emissions from industrial stacks, cars, trucks, ships, airplanes, and houses as well as methane gases from the raising of cattle and other animals for human consumption—which turns out to be greater than emissions from all cars and trucks in the world. Before the industrial revolution, there were 275 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The number is now approaching 385. This situation is trapping heat within the atmosphere and causing the average temperature of Earth to rise progressively.

Projections about the consequences of global climate range widely. According to the IPCC, global warming is happening much faster than scientists had previously forecast. The melting of the polar ice sheet is an example of potentially irreversibly feedback loops. The more the ice melts, the less light reflects back into outer space, and the greater the warming of Earth. As the permafrost melts, huge amounts of carbon deposits underneath in the form of methane will be released into the atmosphere. Warming temperatures cause dry conditions that increase fires, which in turn decimate forested areas. Such feedback loops are increasing the rate of global warming.

The consequences of global warming outlined by the IPCC are already evident: extreme and unpredictable weather patterns; rising oceans that are covering low level islands and coastal regions; loss of fresh water reserves due in part to loss of glaciers; increased incidents of fires resulting from heat and dryness; shifting climates that change ecosystems and areas of food production; the depletion of oceanic eco-systems; the loss of plant and animals species as their natural climate conditions are lost. Every human population group on Earth is already and will be profoundly affected by these changes.[12] All of these problems are interrelated. Individually, they are alarming enough. Together they are even staggering. Unless we face the size of these problems, we will not realize the size of the solutions necessary to address the problems.

There are some promising signs, particularly in retarding ozone depletion. Ozone depletion is caused mainly by chlorofluorocarbons rising to the upper atmosphere and destabilizing ozone molecules that protect Earth's surface from deadly ultraviolet rays. Holes have appeared in the ozone layer at the poles; and there is thinning throughout. The Montreal Protocol, an international treaty forged out in 1989, has led to significant worldwide reduction in the carbon molecules that cause ozone depletion and has provided the conditions for the ozone layer to begin a process of restoration. Such cooperative efforts can serve as a model for nations to agree on ecological commitments and the sharing of appropriate technologies. Similarly, the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janiero began international efforts to lower greenhouse gases. The subsequent protocol developed in the 1997 summit in Kyoto, Japan, has now been signed, as of 2009, by one hundred and eighty-three countries. Unfortunately, the United States and some other industrialized countries have not agreed to the provisions.

Humanity needs technological advances and cooperative efforts to transform the systems that are destructive of humans and nature. Individuals, organizations, factories, and corporations need to create a grass-roots movement to diminish destructive human behavior. Religions are the largest grass-roots organizations already in existence in the world. We are called to mobilize our energies and resources. Christians must be knowledgeable about ecological conditions so that we will repent, stop negative behavior, initiate positive actions to care for creation, and serve as a model for others to follow.

2) The second mandate for mission is this: Embrace a Christian ethic that acknowledges the interrelationship between ecological conditions and issues of human justice. We have separated human justice and Earth-care to our detriment. The social justice movement and the environmental movement have been separate and sometimes at odds with each other. James Cone, the well-known US proponent of Black Theology has noted that there is a common view by environmentalists that "Blacks don't care about the environment" and, at the same time, there is a common view among social justice advocates that "White people care more about the endangered whale and the spotted owl than they do about the survival of young blacks in our nation's cities." The truth is, Cone concludes, *we need each other* because we "are fighting the same enemy—human beings' domination of

10. E.O. Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

11. In private conversation with David Rhoads.

12. Elizabeth Kolbert, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006) and Stephan Faris, *Forecast: The Consequences of Climate Change, from the Amazon to the Arctic, from Darfur to Napa Valley* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008).

each other and nature."[13] Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff has made the same argument:

> Liberation theology and ecological discourse have something in common.… Both discourses have as their starting point a cry: The cry of the poor for life, freedom, and beauty (cf. *Exodus* 3:7) and the cry of the earth (cf. *Romans* 8:22-23). Both seek liberation of the poor…and a liberation of the Earth.[14]

In an effort to see the problems as one, people in these movements often speak in terms of ecological justice or eco-justice, namely, the interrelated and integrated quest for justice for all Earth-community.[15]

Human injustice is inextricably interrelated to injustice against the Earth. One example of this is "environmental racism," especially evident in the United States, where it is well documented that a greater percentage of people of color live near polluting factories, waste incinerators, chemical brown-fields, and other ecological hazards.[16] Another example is Hurricane Katrina, which hit the New Orleans area in the US in 2006. It was a disaster caused as much by human activity degrading the environment as by natural forces. The temperature in the Gulf of Mexico was higher by one degree than usual, arguably due to global warming, which increased the intensity and length of the hurricane. The natural buffer of wetlands, which would have protected the mainland, had been developed into human projects. And the people most affected by Katrina were the poor, the elderly, the sick, people of color—people whose area of the city was most affected and who had the fewest resources to cope.[17]

This same dynamic is true of other global ecological crises, including global warming. The most vulnerable communities, particularly those who live close to the land, are bearing and will bear the brunt of these changes to our planet. Developing countries will be the most affected and will have the least resources with which to respond. For example, the melting of glaciers in the Andes and Himalayan Mountains is resulting in the loss of fresh water reserves for huge populations of South America and Asia. In Africa, environmental changes tend to have severe impacts on families: deforestation vitiates the energy supply; drought and soil degradation ruin the food sources; and there are few alternatives as in the West.[18] The loss of ice in the arctic region and the burning of rain forests are making indigenous peoples into "environmental refugees." Pollution of air is causing a tremendous increase in respiratory ailments, especially in inner cities where the poor reside. Pollution of water in remote regions is the source of an alarming rise in water-borne diseases.

As Christians we all stand together in solidarity with the oppressed, the exploited, the marginalized, the poor, the sick, the elderly, people of color, women—*and now also endangered nature.*

Cone's comment about "human beings' exploitation of each other and nature" is right on target. In "developed" societies in the north, we place profits above both people and nature. Much of our contemporary global economy is based upon the most efficient ways to strip resources from the land and pay the lowest wages to workers without regard to their health and well-being. When we do that, we reduce land and people to commodities that serve the financial markets.

Consider the differences between standard commercial coffee and fair-trade coffee. Most coffee is produced by a system in which the coffee plants have been grown on plantations in the global south where the land is stripped, crops are made to grow by toxic fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides, the workers (often including children) are paid below-standard wages, they are subjected to long hours in the sun and exposure to toxins, and there are about five middle-people who get most of the profits. By contrast, fair-trade, shade-grown coffee is produced under very different conditions: trees and shrubs are preserved on the land and their foliage serves as fertilizer; the workers are in a cooperative; they are paid a living wage and work under healthy conditions; and there are few middle-people. The production of most coffee is a common example of exploitation both of the poor and of the Earth. The fair-trade alternative is humane to people and sustainable for nature. There is a need for "fair trade everything."

This second mandate for mission is important because we Christians cannot allow environmental commitments to lead us to ignore the commitment to social justice. Nor can we allow our commitment to human justice to lead us to neglect the environmental crises. We need to expand our commitment to include the degradations of Earth, and we need to double our efforts for human justice. It is all of one piece. As Christians we all stand together in solidarity with the oppressed, the exploited, the marginalized,

13. James Cone, "Whose Earth is It Anyway?" in *Earth and Word: Classic Sermons on Saving the Planet*, edited by David Rhoads (New York: Continuum), 142.

14. Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 104.

15. On ecological ethics, see Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen, editors, *Earth Habitat: Eco-Justice and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); Michael Northcott, *Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1996); and Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

16. See, for example, the essays in Robert Bullard, ed., *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 2005).

17. See Jones, *Green Collar Economy.*

18. See Rosemary Ruether, *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion* (Maryknoll, NJ:Orbis, 1996), 143–160.

the poor, the sick, the elderly, people of color, women—*and now also endangered nature*.

3) The third mandate for mission is this: The Bible presents care for creation as fundamental to our human vocation and mission. For the last centuries in the field of biblical studies, the global north has read Christian scripture through human-centered eyes, as if the Bible was about *human* salvation-history alone. In this view, the ancient Hebrew people were superior because they forsook the nature gods for a God who called primarily for morality among humans. Christianity interpreted the command in the creation stories to exercise dominion as though it had to do with domination and exploitation of nature for human use. By contrast, through creation-care lenses, interpreters are able to see that the Bible is really about salvation history of *all creation* and about the foundational mission of human beings to serve Earth.[19]

Biblical creation stories teach the nature of the human relationship with creation. For example, the name given to the first human was "Adam," the masculine form of *adamah*, the Hebrew word for tillable soil—out of which Adam was created. The message is that human creatures belong to the earth (*Genesis* 2:5–15).[20] If for all these centuries, we had translated "Adam" literally with the name "Earth" or "Earth-one," it would have made a difference in how we humans think about ourselves and our human relationship to Earth. Nature does no belong to us. We belong to nature. The writers of the Bible were indigenous people who knew this because they themselves were dependent upon the land.[21]

In the creation stories, the command to "exercise dominion" does not mean domination or exploitation. Rather, it is the word used of rulers who are to care for and be responsible to the people in their realm (*Genesis* 1:1-2:4). And the commands given to humans that are typically translated "to till and to keep" are words used of slaves for their "service" to those to whom they were beholden. So we humans are "to serve and to preserve" the Earth (*Genesis* 2:5-15). This turns our relationship to Earth upside down. It puts qualifications even on our position of "dominion" by defining our responsibility in terms of serving—just as Jesus teaches us to be "least of all and be servant of all" (*Mark* 9:35).

In the Bible, all creatures are valued for their own sake, not just for what they can do for humans. God created all living things and called them "good." In the creation stories, *all creatures*, not only humans, are commanded to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (*Genesis* 1:1–2:4). So we humans are to relate to the rest of creation in such a way that all creatures thrive together. The covenant given to Moses was primarily about God's relationship with humans, but it also provided for animals to rest on the Sabbath day and for the land to lie fallow in the Sabbath year. Even more creation-encompassing was the covenant God made with Noah and with the birds of the air and the fish of the sea and the land animals to preserve Earth for all to thrive together (*Genesis* 2:28; *Hosea* 2:18). [22]

In the biblical view, all creation is sacramental. Earth is "filled with God's glory." God's creation gives glory to animals, as *Psalm* 104 tells it, because the grass is created for the cattle, the trees for the birds, the crags for the mountain goats—and God gives the all their food in due season. Furthermore, all creation is called to worship and praise God—just by being what it is and doing what it does: "Let the sea roar and all that fills it; Let the earth exalt and everything in it; then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy" (*I Chronicles* 16:29–34). All of creation together—human and non-human creatures and the rest of the created order—is to "praise the name of the Lord" (*Psalm* 148). What a difference it would make to Christian worship practices if worshippers saw Earth as our sanctuary and all creation as partners in adoration![23]

In the Bible the degradation of creation is interrelated with human injustice. When there is injustice against fellow humans, the land withers, the grape vines dry up, and the granaries fail (*Joel* 1:1–20). In turn, salvation involves the restoration of creation. When Jesus announces that "The Kingdom of God has arrived" (*Mark* 1:15), he is announcing the restoration of creation to liberation and wholeness. Jesus ministered to the most vulnerable of the earth, which must now for us include also endangered creation. According to Paul, through Jesus "God was pleased to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven by making peace through the blood of his cross" (*Colossians* 1:20).

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament does not envision personal salvation apart from community. Nor does it envision human salvation apart from all creation. Paul hears all creation groaning in labor pains for the "revealing of the children of God," who will manifest peace and justice for all creation (*Romans* 8:18-25). And the *Book of Revelation* has this astounding vision in which the writer hears the entire creation—everything in heaven, on Earth, under the Earth, and in the sea—praising God and saying, "Blessing and honor and glory and might be to our God who sits upon the throne and to the lamb forever and

19. On biblical interpretation, see Ronald Simkins, *Creator and Creation: Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994); Dianne Bergant, *Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Terence Fretheim. *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005); and Norman Habel and Peter Trudinger, eds., *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008). See especially the five volumes in the Earth Bible Series edited by Norman Habel and Vicki Balabanski for Sheffield Academic Press. For a copy of the New Revised Standard Version Bible with passages related to nature highlighted, see The Green Bible (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

20. Theodore Hiebert, *The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

21. Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

22. Bernard Anderson, "Creation and Noachic Covenant" *Cry of the Environment,* Philip Joranson and Ken Butigan, eds. (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1984), 510–551.

23. See worship resources at www.seasonofcreation.com. See also Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) and Paul Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

ever" (*Revelation* 5:13).

The final vision of the New Jerusalem is that of a "renewed heaven and a renewed earth" (*Revelation* 21:1–27). And God comes to dwell among people. In that vision, the river of the water of life flows down the middle of the city streets; and it is available free of charge, so that the poor will never go thirsty. And on either side of the river is the tree of life yielding fruit twelve months of the year, so that no one will go hungry. This is one glorious vision of God and humans and the rest of nature—creator and all creation—living in harmony together. [24]

This third principle is important because Christians must learn to read scripture in creation-centered ways. When we read it through the lens of creation, we discover that humans and the rest of nature are one. We discover that loving and tending creation is fundamental to what it means to be human. It is our mission as Christians to create a sustainable future in which all Earth-community survives and thrives. The Bible is about God's love for creation and God's mandate for humans to be Earth-keepers with God. Scripture teaches us that creation-care is *not* one more social issue among others. Rather, care for creation is foundational to our vocation as human beings. It is as basic as the great commandment: love God, love your neighbor, and love creation.

4) The fourth principle is this: Our mission to all creation leads us to see theology in new ways, because *how we think* shapes *how we act*. Christian theological ideas are often not earth-friendly. They are anthropocentric, dualistic, and individualistic. They do not respect the alterity and integrity of nature, nor do they affirm that God is really immanent in creation as well as transcendent. A test of theology in this century might be whether theological ideas promote the sustaining of all Earth community.

There are many insights from theology that can lead to thinking in Earth-friendly ways.[25] First is to strengthen our grounding in the first article of the creed, affirming our belief in God as creator. God did not create the world and then separate from it. Nor was Earth formed as we know it never to change. Rather, God is involved in the process of continuous creation.[26] It has taken five billion years for the cosmos to bring forth life on Earth as it is at present. And the Earth continues to change. God is in and with creation influencing and shaping but not controlling. God is not above Earth manipulating events and outcomes. Rather, as Paul says, "in everything God works for good" (*Romans* 8:28). Because of this, life is to be considered sacred. A theology of reverence for all of life will serve Christians well. If we humans do not have reverence for creation, we will not care for it.

Care for creation is foundational to our vocation as human beings. It is as basic as the great commandment: love God, love your neighbor, and love creation.

Reverence in religions of indigenous people can be a model for a rebirth of Christian theology. As we have said, the Bible itself was written by indigenous people living close to the land. Also, Native Americans have much to teach about reverence for Mother Earth.[27] Among the communities in the global south where many cultures still operate with pre-industrial perspectives, indigenous worldviews still sacralize space and the world of nature—land, forests, and bodies of water under the guardianship of the Earth deity. In Africa, the Earth deity is so sacred that she is regarded as the guardian of morality. Earth and the ancestors together unite in creating a theory of obligation in communities where there is no secular theory of obligation.[28] For example, indigenous communities often practice rotational farming systems that allow parts of the community's land to renew itself. Christian theology can learn from such reverence.

A renewed Christian theology will consider the whole of creation as the realm of God's saving activity. God creates Earth, and God loves creation. As developed mammals, as higher primates and more, humans are embedded in creation. Along with God, humans are also now engaged in the process of the ongoing evolution of Earth, including the changes happening due to global warming and other degradations of Earth's ecosystems. Consequently, sin includes our injustices toward the rest of nature as well as toward other human beings—exploitation of life, lack of limits on our behavior, pursuit of a consumer lifestyle without regard to consequences. The spectrum of sins now includes not only personal and social sins but also ecological sins against God's creation. The degraded creation cries out for liberation and restoration from such human exploitation. Therefore, as humans, we are called as

24. Barbara Rossing, "River of Life in God's New Jerusalem: An Ecological Vision for Earth's Future" in Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Dieter Hessel, eds., *Christianity and Ecology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press Center for World Religions, 1999), 205–224.

25. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Theological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) and *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000); Steven Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler and Jurgen Moltmann* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); and *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008); Viggo Mortensen, ed., *Concern for Creation: Voices on the Theology of Creation* (Uppsala: Tro & Tanke, 1995).

26. See Thomas Berry and Brian Schwimme, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

27. Jace Weaver, ed., *Defending Mother Earth: Native American Perspectives on Environmental Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

28. Ogbu U. Kalu, "Gods as Policemen: Religion and Social Control in Igboland," in *Religious Pluralism in Africa,* K. Olupona and S. Nyang, eds. (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993).

> Therefore, as humans, we are called as partners to work with God to redeem and restore Earth for the sustainability of all life.

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Second is to rethink the second article of the creed—our understanding of the work of Jesus Christ—so as to see redemption as a renewal of creation. God's creation was an act of love. The "new creation" through Jesus is also an act of love. As such, redemption is not an escape from matter or physical creation but the restoration of it. Jesus belonged to this Earth; and the New Testament affirms this humanity of Jesus. As Paul affirms, the Son was "born of a woman, born under the Law" (*Galatians* 4:4). And I John states it as a test of belief that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (*First John* 4:2). In modern terms, the theological confession of the humanity of Jesus affirms that Jesus was in the gene pool, that Jesus too was a mammal—in solidarity not only with all humanity but also in solidarity with all creation.

Jesus was God incarnate in life—embodied word. But, theologically, Christians do not need to portray Jesus as the great exception, as if God is not present anywhere else in creation. Rather, Jesus can be seen as the great exemplar; as the definitive expression of God's incarnation, God is in all of life—and Jesus is what God looks like wherever God may be found. The movement of God is not to draw humans away from Earth but for Jesus to return and for God to be present on Earth. And the risen Jesus needs no longer to be seen as a reality dealing only with spiritual matters of the fate of individuals. Rather, the risen Jesus is a cosmic Christ, redeeming all of life, a Christ large enough to address the size of whatever problems Earth community faces.[29]

Third, we Christians need to rethink the concept of the Holy Spirit.[30] Theologically, the Holy Spirit is the re-newer and sustainer of life. How much more ecological can this be—the Holy Spirit bringing about a renewed and sustained Earth? In the New Testament, the Spirit is given to the whole community; individuals experience the Spirit by virtue of being part of the community; and all have gifts that contribute to the well-being of the whole (*I Corinthians*). This is similar to the way a sustainable ecosystem works. Just so, the Holy Spirit works creatively in creation to guide humans to see our place in Earth-community so that we cooperate together with the rest of creation to be sustainable *as* creation. In this way, it is the "communion of the Holy Spirit" that secures the relationship with all creation as a communion of life.

This fourth principle for mission is important because both consciously and unconsciously human attitudes and actions toward nature are formed by religious worldview and ethics.[31] We Christians need to become aware of how we think, so as to see the consequences of our thoughts and assumptions. We need to change our thinking about God and ourselves and Earth so as to provide a solid foundation for Earth-care action.

5) The fifth principle for mission is this: Earth-care action is integral to the mission of our Christian communities and our spiritual discipline. Neither systemic nor technological nor behavioral advances will work in the long run without also addressing the issues at a deeper level. At heart, the environmental crisis is a spiritual problem about our human estrangement from nature and our failure to see all of nature as sacramental. Many people, especially people from developed nations, no longer have close relationships to Earth that lead us humans to protect it. We Christians have spent centuries cultivating the human relationship with God and the human relationship with one another. Now it is time also for us to cultivate our relationship with nature.

Because we are not spiritually, humanly rooted in Earth, we in the global north tend not to realize the consequences to Earth-community of daily decisions, personal choices, and public policies. Furthermore, we have done much in the name of progress and market expansion without seeing the devastation we have left in our wake. Now we are in a place where Christians in the global north must address the destructive implications of our daily actions for people in other parts of the globe. People in the global north must make radical changes to embrace Earth-friendly lifestyles and engage in life-restoring actions,[32] including advocating for mandatory limits on carbon and other governmental policies, just as those in the communities of the global south must also embrace sustainable actions. The spiritual recovery of the sense of reverence, of awe, of a creation mystique in nature is the first step towards a pro-active program for conserving Earth.

How then can we develop a spiritual discipline of Earth care as part of our identity and mission?[33] Many Christian communities of various denominations worldwide have been engaged in

29. Joseph Sittler, "Called to Unity" in *Evocations of Grace: Writings on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 38–50.

30. Mark Wallace, *Fragments of the Spirit: Nature, Violence, and the Renewal of Creation* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International Press, 2002); Sittler, *Evocations of Grace,* 59–75; Dennis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004).

31. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Allen Grim, "The Emerging Alliance of Religion and Ecology," *Worldviews: Environment. Culture, Religion* 1, no. 1 (April 1997).

32. Michael Schut, ed. and compiler, *Simpler Life, Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective* (Denver, CO: Living the Good News, 1999); and Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

33. On eco-spirituality, see Sarah McFarland Taylor, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) and Howard Clinebell, *Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

bringing care for creation centrally into their life and mission.[34] This is not an add-on, not a fad, not something a few do on behalf of the rest of the faith community. Rather, creation-care is integral to how a congregation goes about doing everything. It is central to the worship life, the educational program, the maintenance of buildings and land, the discipleship of members at home and work, and the commitment to transform the world around them. People are hungry to connect their concern for the natural world to their faith and their faith communities.

Congregations can learn from the attitudes and behaviors of early Christian communities with their expectation of the end of the world and of their experience of an emerging new world.[35] Here are some relevant traits of those New Testament communities:

- There was a deep and urgent sense of mission to call individuals and nations to repent and change behavior, illustrated by the life of the Apostle Paul and the mission charges in the Gospels (*Mark* 13:10; *Matthew* 28:19-20; *Luke* 24:47).
- Like Jesus, the early Christians were truth-tellers. They fearlessly confronted the destructive powers-that-be and challenging their idolatry and hypocrisy, risking loss, persecution, and death. They made penetrating analyses both of themselves and of their culture, not just in terms of obvious evil, but also in terms of the dark side of goodness and compromises—transforming and replacing these dynamics with life-giving actions and stories.
- Like Jesus, they did prophetic acts. In a sense, their lives were prophetic symbols—healing the sick, feeding the hungry, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, all prophetic symbols of a new age impinging on the present.
- Many early Christians withdrew and dissociated from the behavior and lifestyles of the culture. Mark urged people to break with cultural values and institutions that were destructive (*Mark* 8:27-10:45) while the author of Revelation admonished people to withdraw from participation in the social and economic life of idolatrous Rome (*Revelation* 18:4).
- They not only broke from the cultures around them; they formed alternative communities of the emerging new kingdom of God, apocalyptic pockets of counter cultural reality[36] such as those reflected in the *Gospel of John*, the *Acts of the Apostles* (2:43–47), and the *First Letter of Peter* (2:9–10). They had a vision of the future and sought to live it now in the present so as to be a light for the world. Perhaps the greatest mission of the church in our own time is to offer the world a vision for alternative communities that are signs of the kingdom of God.
- In all of this, the early Christians were willing to act *unilaterally* to create a new world without waiting for the leaders of the nation or the rest of the populace to lead the way or even to agree with them.

We can learn from this behavior of the early Christian communities facing what they believed to be the end of the world as a means to discover alternative behaviors for our faith communities as we face ultimate choices for avoiding ecological disaster and for creating a new, sustainable life on earth

We can also bear the spiritual witness as individuals in our daily lives. People in the global south will often be negotiating a sustainable lifestyle with issues of immediate survival. People in the global north can act in solidarity. We can recognize that our living spaces are connected directly to virtually every ecological issue we face. Consider the emissions from furnaces; the food that has been transported from a distance; beef the production of which contributes more to global warming than do automobiles; the gas and oil in the car in the driveway; the water that comes in and goes out of the house; paper for office and household use; the cleaning products that enter the waste stream; the pesticides and herbicides used on lawn and garden that leech into the watershed; the electricity from power plants; the wood in the products purchased; the garbage that goes into landfills; and on and on. People can make choices every day that have an impact for good or ill on the well-being of God's Earth.

Accumulative decisions by individuals and faith communities to change lifestyle have the potential to make an enormous impact. In the face of our discouragement at what seem to be such puny efforts of our own, Stan Hallett, a Chicago environmentalist gave this encouraging analogy about the aftermath of eruption Mount St. Helens, an active volcano in northwest US. When the volcano blew, it completely destroyed all plant and animal life for miles around. The whole area was decimated. The incredible aspen stands were burned flat to the ground. For a long time, nothing grew. Then, the moss came back, and the moss created the conditions for the lichen to grow. The lichen returned, and that created the conditions for the shrubbery to grow. The shrubbery returned, and that has created the conditions for the aspen to begin to grow again. And the animal life returned. All these small efforts we make at the grass roots are like the moss, creating the conditions for greater measures to be taken, which in turn create the conditions for more extensive changes to take place at the level of corporations and governments. Thus, even with small efforts, there is an important process of regeneration, indeed a process of resurrection, which is taking place among us.

And what if we Christians brought these commitments to labor—work places, factories, farms, businesses, organizations, corporations—with which we are affiliated? What if we collectively advocated for Earth-friendly laws and policies in the public realm? What if we participated in hands-on efforts to restore degraded habitats? What if it became part of our collective consciousness to

34. For care for creation resources for faith communities, see www.webofcreation.org. On stewardship as a Christian environmental model, see R. J. Berry, ed., *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives—Past and Present* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006).

35. See David Rhoads, "Who Will Speak for the Sparrow: Eco-Justice Criticism of the New Testament" in *Literary Encounters with the Kingdom of God: Essays in Honor of Robert Tannehill,* Sharon Ringe and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, eds., (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 64ff.

36. Brian Blount, *Go Preach! Mark's Kingdom Message and the Black Church Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), 15ff.

avoid certain behaviors and embrace others—simply as part of our life together? Missionary engagement with the world must include the deliberate engineering of salient eco-ethics and radical changes of lifestyle, the commitments and the sacrifices—the new ways of living needed—for a just and sustainable world.

When we embrace the fact that the church exists for the sake of the world, our faith communities can become alternative communities. We can bear our mission by being a light to the world. We can show what it means to care for the wretched of the Earth as well as for the wretched Earth. We can manifest a contrasting lifestyle to the economic exploitation of nature and people that impacts so many cultures. We can be in the forefront of advocating for local practices, national laws and policies, and global treaties that bring us together on behalf of all.

What will motivate us for this labor of love? What will sustain us for the duration? Will we be motivated by fear? We have reason to be afraid, but fear would not sustain us for long and it certainly would not motivate others. Will we be motivated by guilt or shame? These emotions might lead us to realize our culpability and make some changes but, again, these would not sustain us for the long haul. We certainly may be motivated by outrage at how much wanton destruction is happening and how little is being done, especially at the corporate and governmental levels. But anger would exhaust us before long. What about grief at the loss of life as we have known it? Again, this is an appropriate response but certainly not life sustaining. We may see all these emotions as alarm systems—fear, guilt, shame, anger, grief—all as appropriate signals in a warning system, but not good grounds for making wise decisions or for providing the nurture needed to sustain us.

In the end, we may discover the answer with the very God who impels our mission. What can sustain the whole of creation is the presence of God in all of life witnessed by Jesus. Gerard Manley Hopkins referred to this presence as the "dearest freshness deep down things."[37] Wendell Berry names it "the fund of grace out of which we all live."[38] This reservoir of God's presence in all of life and God's love for all creation does not quit. And it does nothing but generate more love and grace—in us. This is what empowers and sustains us for the mission ahead.

Conclusion. These then are five principles of mission for the "great work" that lies before the churches, principles for a new reformation, for a transformation of the church into the twenty-first century, a movement that can serve to renew the church itself. These efforts are absolutely crucial for the future of the Christian church everywhere—and for the Earth. When we learn about the ecological crisis, we will be better prepared to contribute to humanity's efforts to restore Earth and make our life sustainable. When we understand the integrity of creation and justice, we will bear a witness to public ministry that is indeed holistic. When we worship God with creation and act on behalf of creation, we will recover our vital love of and reverence for Earth.

The early church announced an apocalyptic sea-change that occurred as a result of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This apocalypse transformation continues today. It includes a call to withdraw "from this present evil age" (*Galatians* 1:4; *Revelation* 18:4-5) and to enter into a "new creation" coming into being (*Galatians* 6:15). Contemporary churches, in response to the enormity of the ecological crises we face, are challenged to be "transformed in the renewal of your minds to what is the good and perfect and acceptable will of God" (*Romans* 8:22-23) for our time—the mission to restore God's creation and to form a sustainable life for God's beloved Earth community.

37. Gerald Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in *Poems of Gerald Manley Hopkins,* 4th ed. W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKensie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

38. Wendell Berry, "Original Sin," in *Given: New Poems* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker Hoard, 2005), 35.