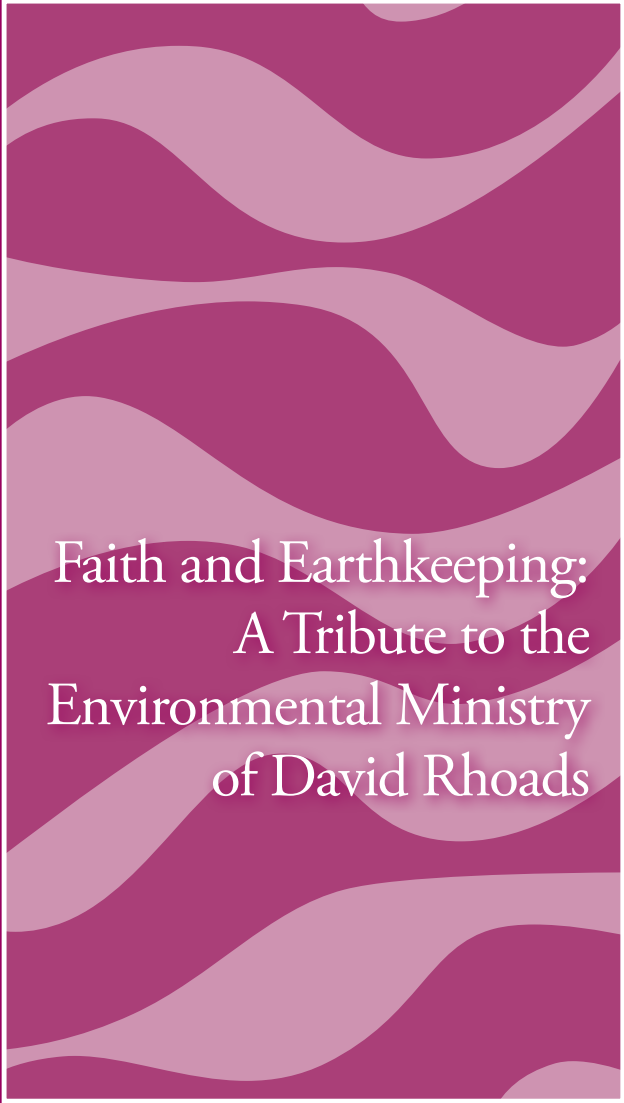


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Faith and Earthkeeping:  
A Tribute to the  
Environmental Ministry  
of David Rhoads

**CURRENTS**  
in Theology and Mission

# Currents in Theology and Mission

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David Rhoads

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# Faith and Earthkeeping: A Tribute to the Environmental Ministry of David Rhoads

It is an honor to present this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* as a tribute to the environmental scholarship and advocacy of the Rev. Dr. David M. Rhoads, who this year will complete his more than two decades of service to the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) as professor of New Testament.

In addition to his groundbreaking work in New Testament studies, Dave has been a champion for care of creation in the life of the church. Beginning in the 1980s, long before the issue of ecology and its relationship to theology and ministry became prominent on the agenda of theological schools, Dave argued that “Earthkeeping” is a central tenet of Christian faith and should thus be front and center in theological education. While pursuing his teaching and research in Bible at LSTC, he also organized numerous projects in relationship to care for creation. These include:

- Teaching courses on “Greening Your Congregation” and “The Future of Creation” at the seminary, as well as presenting seminars and continuing education events for pastors and lay leaders, and leading ELCA synods to become “green” synods;
- Editing the collection *Earth and Word: Classic Sermons on Saving the Planet* (Continuum, 2007), as well as publishing scholarly articles on ecological theology and hermeneutics, and practical resources such as *Care of the Earth: A Manual for Church Leaders* (1993);
- Spearheading important initiatives on behalf of the church’s care for creation, including the Green Seminary Initiative, The Web of Creation ([www.webofcreation.org](http://www.webofcreation.org)), The Green Congregation Program, Lutheran Earthkeeping Network of the Synods (LENS), and, most recently, the comprehensive project Lutherans Restoring Creation ([www.lutheransrestoringcreation.org](http://www.lutheransrestoringcreation.org));
- Serving as a faculty advisor for student initiatives such as the Green Zone (LSTC’s student group promoting creation care in the life of the community), the Environmental Ministry Emphasis in the M.Div. and M.A. programs, as well as LSTC’s “Earth Year: 2009-2010”; and
- Hosting and directing the DVD “Earthbound,” a six-session curriculum produced by Seraphim Communications, which introduces Earthkeeping ministry to congregations through Bible study and practical examples of stewardship.

With an exceptional combination of gentleness of spirit and firmness of purpose, Dave has kept ecological consciousness as part of the “ethos” (one of his favorite terms) of LSTC, and has been a chief instigator toward helping that consciousness become more central to the life of the church.

The contributors to this volume have all worked with Dave in some capacity—as scholarly colleagues, students, church leaders, and fellow advocates. This collection of essays seeks to honor the various aspects of Dave’s Earthkeeping work. **Larry Rasmussen’s** essay

“Waiting for the Lutherans,” delivered as an address in connection with the “Earth Year at LSTC,” identifies those aspects of the Lutheran tradition that have been underutilized as resources for environmental advocacy. Rasmussen is Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York. **Rosemary Radford Ruether** shares challenges and opportunities connected to the endeavor of introducing ecological concern into the life and curricula of theological schools. She suggests some current initiatives by which ecology might become more prominent in theological education. Ruether is the Carpenter Emerita Professor of Feminist Theology at Pacific School of Religion and the GTU, as well as the Georgia Harkness Emerita Professor of Applied Theology at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary.

**Peter Perry** (LSTC Ph.D 2009, with distinction) takes up Dave’s own field, New Testament studies, to argue that an “ecological hermeneutic” applied to the book of Revelation discloses that text’s concern for the well-being of aquatic life (contrary to the rampant anti-ecological interpretations of Revelation present in popular culture). Perry serves as pastor at St. John’s Lutheran Church, Phoenix, Ariz. **Norman Habel**, Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia, suggests ways in which the Christian tradition can claim its prophetic role in denouncing ways of thinking and acting that encourage denigration of creation; he also suggests some measures by which Christians can identify “mandates” to safeguard the health of the natural world. **Robert Saler**, a Ph.D student at LSTC and collaborator with Dave on the Lutherans Restoring Creation project, investigates the work of a groundbreaking ecological theologian, Joseph Sittler, and argues that Sittler’s early text *The Structure of Christian Ethics* offers some helpful insights into the theological methods that Sittler would employ in his later, more explicitly environmental, writings.

We also include public testimony by ELCA leaders on two critical aspects of the climate change crisis—mitigation and adaptation—that affect hundreds of millions of the world’s poorest people. Presiding Bishop of the ELCA **Mark Hanson** submitted written testimony to the U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee in June 2007, advocating for legislation that requires strong reduction targets for emissions of greenhouse gases. Also featured is the March 25, 2009, testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives by **Bishop Callon Holloway**, of the ELCA Southern Ohio Synod, which calls for the U.S. to provide funding for adaptation assistance to developing nations.

“Practical earthkeeping” is the subject of the essay by **John Spangler**, a former student of Dave’s at Carthage College and now at Gettysburg Seminary, who employs Dave’s own method of envisioning what communities that take care for creation seriously might look like.

In the DVD “Earthbound” Dave cautions Christians regarding earth-denying theologies as embodied in the hymn “The Earth is Not My Home.” In contrast to such theology, Dave has devoted his life to persuading Christians that the Earth *is* our home, and that the Earth is God’s home as well. We are confident that, even as he retires from active teaching at the seminary, he will continue to be a prophetic voice on behalf of God’s good Earth. With gratitude for all of his ministry, we and the LSTC faculty dedicate this issue to him.

**Barbara Rossing and Robert Saler**  
*Co-editors for the April 2010 issue*

# Caring for God's Beautiful Creation: A Salute to David Rhoads

Michael T. Shelley

*Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs  
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

Ah, you are beautiful, my love; ah, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves. Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly lovely (Song of Solomon 1:15–16).

Stephanie Paulsell, in a recent short essay in *The Christian Century*, urges us to look at the world with these words in our hearts, and asks: “What will we hear if we spend time noticing and praising the beauty all around us, breathing it in and breathing it out? What will we hear if we make the words of the Song our own?”<sup>1</sup> In a similar spirit, David Rhoads has written: “Our delight in nature will be the right basis for our use of nature. We will be less likely to exploit that in which we delight. Or to put it another way: We will not save what we do not love.”<sup>2</sup>

I find the language of love very helpful as we reflect upon the environmental crisis facing the Earth. Love in its most profound sense is not about oneself. It has to do with what is best for the beloved. It entails becoming intimately familiar with the beloved, a familiarity not simply interested in how the beloved can serve one's

own needs. It is a thoughtful alertness and attentiveness to both the beauty and wonders of the beloved and to the challenges, hurts, and pains the beloved is facing. To love entails preserving and caring for that beauty and those wonders, and also striving to prevent the beloved from being injured, from enduring ongoing pain, and when the beloved does experience injury and pain, it then means working to eliminate or alleviate that hurt.

An accomplished New Testament scholar, David Rhoads has for over two decades also exerted great effort in alerting people to the environmental crisis facing our world. At the Lutheran School of Theology's recent leadership conference, he “called for a new way of reading the Bible that recognizes that God has redeemed all of creation and that we are called to love and care for all that God has redeemed.”<sup>3</sup> He called for a reformation in the way we look upon and care for the Earth. A courageous and superb teacher,<sup>4</sup> he has a gift for challenging and inspiring faculty colleagues, students, staff, pastors, and

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1. *The Christian Century* (September 22, 2009): 35.

2. David Rhoads, ed. *Earth and Word: Classic Sermons on Saving the Planet* (New York: Continuum, 2007), xvi.

3. Janet Boden, “LSTC *E.pistle*: Monthly News for Alumni and Friends,” (February 2010).

4. He was awarded the 2004 Fortress Press Teacher of the Year Award for Innovative Teaching in a Graduate Setting.

congregations to join in the task. This effort is deeply rooted in his faith convictions and in a long endeavor to become well informed about environmental issues. While admitting that the task has sometimes seemed overwhelming, he nevertheless has persisted, fortified by his faith. In addition to teaching in various contexts, he has produced a variety of ecological resources for faith-based communities. These include two Web sites, [www.webofcreation.org](http://www.webofcreation.org) and [www.lutheransrestoringcreation.org](http://www.lutheransrestoringcreation.org), and a collection of sermons, *Earth and Word: Classic Sermons on Saving the Planet* (Continuum, 2007). For David Rhoads, it has been a labor of love for the sake of the beloved.

Largely as a result of David's work, the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, where he has been a faculty member for some twenty years, strives to be a "green" seminary. We are resolved to reduce our consumption of carbon-based energy resources and paper products. We plant and nurture shrubs, trees, flowers, and potted plants within and outside of our buildings. We offer an emphasis in environmental ministry whereby students can acquire training for work in the congregation and/or community. During the current academic year, we are focusing on care of the creation. It is a thematic thread running through and connecting much of what we do. This is one way of honoring David Rhoads, who will retire from full-time teaching at the end of this academic year. Care of the creation was the theme of our annual Lutheran Heritage Lecture in October, our Leadership Conference

in February, and an interfaith conference in March. It has had a prominent place in many of our courses and activities.<sup>5</sup>

David Rhoads has been a determined and persistent spokesperson in this cause for many years. It gives us, his colleagues and students, great pleasure to celebrate his long and wonderful career of teaching and training people for ministry in the church of Jesus Christ.

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For David  
Rhoads, it  
has been a labor of  
love for the sake of  
the beloved.

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5. David Rhoads taught a course during the January Term titled "Greening Congregations," Ben Stewart taught "Liturgy, Body and Ecology in the Fall semester and co-teaches a course with the Zygon Center's Gayle Woloschak on "The Future of Creation"; and one of LSTC's Ph.D. students, Robert Saler, will teach a course during the Maymester titled "Nature Writing in Theological Perspective." Other faculty members have worked a component on care for the environment into their courses.

# Waiting for the Lutherans<sup>1</sup>

Larry Rasmussen

*Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics, Union Theological Seminary*

All ethics is contextual in much the same way that all theology is biographical. But it was Luther's particular genius to grab his tumultuous existence theologically and wrestle with God, Satan, church, and society all in the same moment, trusting radically in God to see him through. The outcome was a dynamic of protest and reform matched to a keen sense of *kairos*. Fortunately, it also included a saving sense of humor. I want to be nothing more than God's little court jester, he once said.<sup>2</sup>

Lutherans do well to follow Luther on all these counts. But what is our God wrestle, our Jabbok moment, perhaps even, like Jacob, wresting a new name, identity, and blessing from the grapple down by the riverside?

Paul Hawken, in a commencement address to the class of 2009, said: "You are going to have to figure out what it means to be a human being on earth at a time when every living system is declining, and the rate of decline is accelerating."<sup>3</sup>

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1. This address was given at The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago as the 2009 Heritage Lecture. I have retained the wording and tone of an address meant, in the first instance, to be heard.

2. [www.cslewisinstitute.org/files/webfm/knowning\\_doing/LutherProfile.pdf](http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/files/webfm/knowning_doing/LutherProfile.pdf). See a full account of Luther and his legacy, see Eric Gritsch, *Martin-God's Court Jester* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

3. Paul Hawken, "Commencement Address to the Class of 2009," University of Portland, available online at [www.paulhawken.com/...UofP\\_Commencement\\_05.03.09](http://www.paulhawken.com/...UofP_Commencement_05.03.09).

"[F]igure out what it means to be a human being on earth at a time when..." sounds theological to me. Hawken went on to say: "There is invisible writing on the back of the diploma you will receive, and in case you didn't bring lemon juice to decode it, I can tell you what it says: You are brilliant, and the earth is hiring. The earth couldn't afford to send recruiters or limos to your school. It sent you rain, sunsets, ripe cherries, night blooming jasmine, and that unbelievably cute person you are dating. Take the hint. And here's the deal: Forget that this task of planet-saving is not possible in the time required. Don't be put off by people who know what is not possible. Do what needs to be done, and check to see if it was impossible only after you are done."<sup>4</sup> "Forget that this task...is not possible...check to see if it was impossible only after you are done..." sounds like the energy and trust of faith—and reformation—to me.

By faith alone, and grace alone, and all of us together, this reformation will happen, not with recruiters or limos but rain, sunsets, jasmine, and that unbelievably cute person.

But how exactly is our planet faring, and why the decline in its life systems? Take a look at these graphs from James Speth's *The Bridge at the Edge of the World*. (See *graphs*, pages 87-88)

The drivers are in the top graph, upper left—unprecedented human population matched to unprecedented global

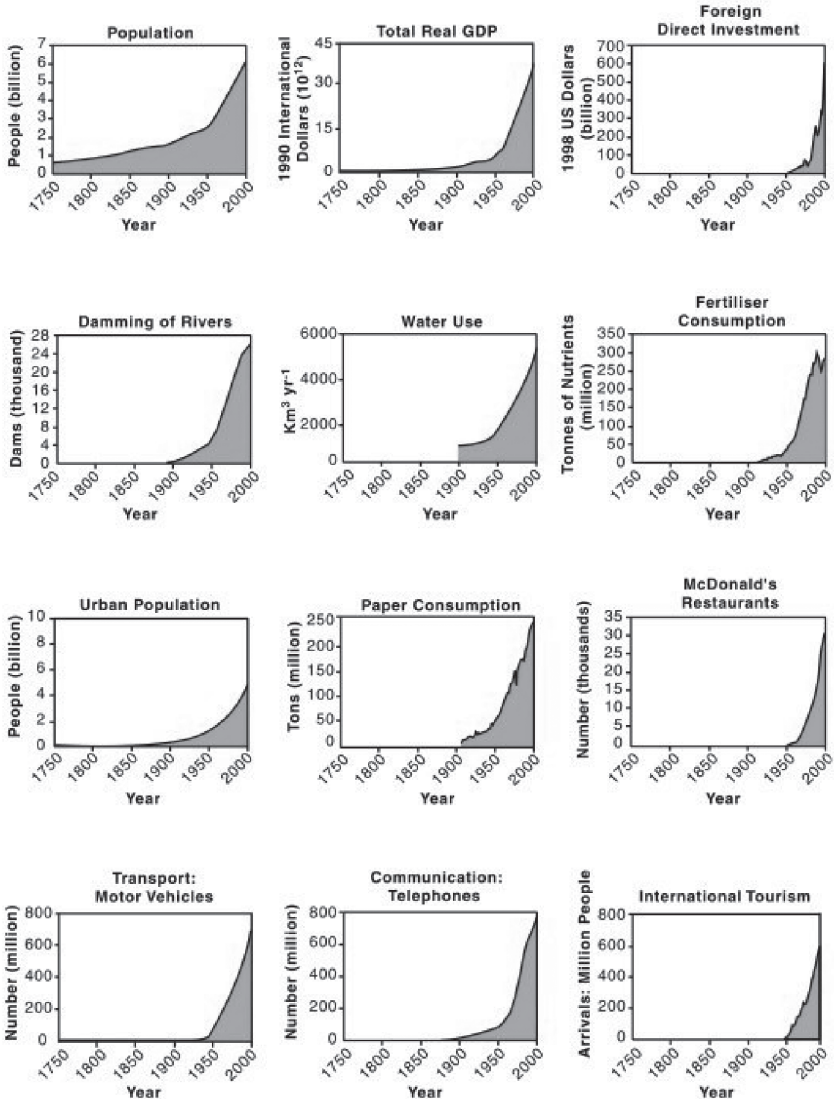
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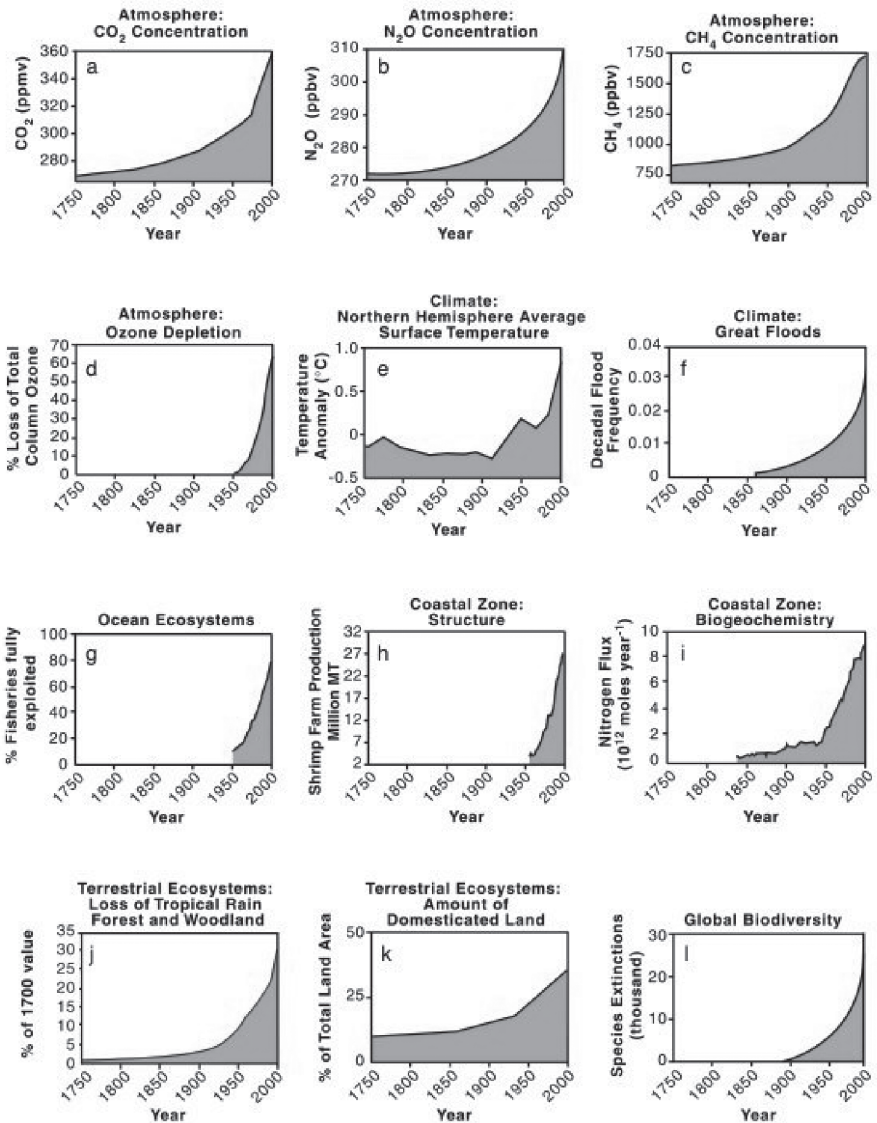
4. Hawken, "Commencement Address," see previous note for online source.



economic activity. It took all of human history—roughly 200,000 years—to arrive at 1.6 billion souls by 1900. In a single century, that number flipped to 6.1 billion. Now we're at 6.8 billion and heading for 9–10 billion within the lifetime of some of us.

Total real economic activity follows the same line, doubling the world economy just since 1960 with a projected quadrupling again by 2050. Contrast that with the per capita income increase over the *one thousand* years from 1000 to 2000 C.E.—little more than a couple hundred dollars a





year.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, this doubling and much of the projected quadrupling has been fueled by CO<sub>2</sub> sources that are changing

the hydrologic system and, through that, the climate itself. Both biosphere and atmosphere are being destabilized.

But why this “screeching acceleration”<sup>6</sup> across wildly different factors—paper consumption, motor vehicles, fertilizer

5. J. R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2000), 4.

6. Ibid.

consumption, loss of biodiversity, jump in species extinctions, climate change? Look at the dates. 1750 is the left-hand date in each graph, the onset of the fossil-fuel interlude of planetary history we call the Industrial Revolution. Change is gradual until 1950, the onset of the post-WWII explosion into the global consumer economy of industrial capitalism and socialism. Then, in the wink of time since 1950, humans truly “left the moorings of the past” and, at least from the planet’s point of view, assaulted the community of life so as to engage in “a gigantic uncontrolled experiment”<sup>7</sup> that has left every living system in decline at an accelerating rate. The result is a massive threat to any durable future.

I will spare you the back-stories of these graphs. Save them for your prayer time.

James Speth calls these graphs the Great Collision, the collision of the global human economy with nature’s economy. The human economy has rolled along with “pathological indifference to the ecological costs.”<sup>8</sup> Generating enormous human benefits we are dying to keep, and will die to keep, it also wedded economic brutality to ecological brutality by never even asking what nature’s economy requires for its own regeneration and renewal on its own non-negotiable terms and time lines. Oddly, the churches didn’t ask either what God’s creation needs for life beyond human service. So you don’t see nature’s needs on any of these graphs; you only

see nature’s degradation as the collateral damage of the industrial paradigm and late industrial capitalism. Yet because every human economy that ever was is wholly dependent upon nature’s economy, and is an embedded part of it, *not* to align the human economy with the planet’s in a tightly coupled world prescribes disaster. Write a note, then, for your fridge door: “Today I will remember what the Industrial Revolution paid no mind: planetary health is primary, human well-being is derivative.”<sup>9</sup>

Before I move to what Lutherans might contribute to Earth-healing, allow Tim Flannery’s double conclusion and then two asides. Flannery, in *Now or Never*, says that “[t]here is no real debate about how serious our predicament is: all plausible projections indicate that over the next forty to ninety years humanity will exceed—in all probability by about 100 percent—the capacity of Earth to supply our needs.... The most credible estimates indicate that we are already exceeding Earth’s capacity to support our species (this is called its biocapacity) by about 25 percent.” He also says that “[e]veryone knows what the solution is: we must begin to live sustainably,” meaning to live “in such a way as not to detract from the potential quality of life of future generations.”<sup>10</sup>

This conclusion leads to the first aside.

I asked [*for the lecture—eds.*] that three empty chairs be placed onstage, with three signs: the poor, (the rest of) nature, and

7. James Gustave Speth’s summary of J. R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun*, 16–17; Speth’s *The Bridge at the End of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 4.

8. Heather Eaton, “Reflections on Water,” n.p., copy of paper made available to me.

9. So says Thomas Berry, in many of his writings, one of which is *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), 19.

10. Tim Flannery, *Now or Never: Why We Must Act Now to End Climate Change and Create a Sustainable Future* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2009), 2.

future generations. The three chairs stand in for voices we do not hear firsthand in this gathering and most others. The chairs were suggested by Danish Lutheran pastor Henrik Grape for all meetings leading up to the Copenhagen climate change negotiations of December (2009). We owe the occupants of these chairs a mountain of ecological debt: people living in poverty, the majority of them women and children; (the rest of) nature; and future generations, both human and more-than-human. These contribute least to Earth's distress but they suffer first and most. Yet their cumulative presence is so monumental that if their well-being is *not* centered, it is certain we will all inhabit a vastly diminished planet, a brown, dirty water world with a few gated green enclaves along Lake Michigan.

Second, the present fear seems to be that the economy on this track (the graphs) *won't* continue. We should fear that it will. To continue on this track fits the proverbial definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over yet expecting different results. But I know it is easier to convince U. S. Americans of the end of the world than to convince them of the end of capitalism as we know and love it, so I won't say anymore except this. The immediate and ongoing issue is whether or not we can thoroughly "ecologize" turbocapitalism. Can nature's own requirements for its own health on its own terms (Earth's biocapacity) be internalized in consumer capitalism's profit-driven, growth-driven, short-haul market compulsions, focused as they are exclusively on human needs and wants? And can it be done at the same time that we wean ourselves from the dirty fuels of that capitalism? It will be a long, hard transition; that is already in the cards. We need a reformation ethic and spirituality that correspond.

Let me say this differently. The Lutheran School of Theology's Earth Year is

*not* about environmental issues as the public and the churches conceive them; namely, greening our present way of life sufficiently well that we get to keep it. What we face on Jabbok's bank is a profound civilizational identity and challenge, a challenge to a way of life that makes "endless consumption... the proximate goal of" endless production. Ironically, ours is also a way of life that "neither consumption nor productivity [can] fulfill."<sup>11</sup> For the kind of creatures we are—namely, bio-social—only caretaking and strong community bonds fulfill. This civilizational challenge is about faith, morality, and a different way of life.

What James Baldwin advised on matters of race puts it well. In *The Price of the Ticket*, Baldwin wrote of "do[ing] our first works over." "In the church I come from—which is not at all the same church to which white Americans belong—we were counseled, from time to time, to do our first works over." "Go back to where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it. Sing or shout or testify or keep it to yourself," Baldwin says, "but *know whence you came*."<sup>12</sup> To do first works over means to reexamine everything from its onset, and speak the

11. Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 165, 166.

12. James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), xix. I am indebted to the panel of Union Theological Seminary students and alumnae/alumni at the American Academy of Religion, Toronto, 2002, for this reference. The panel, on white racism, cited Baldwin and titled its session, "Doing Our First Works Over." Members were Elizabeth Bounds, Karin Case, Robin Gorsline, Dwight Hopkins, Sally MacNichol, Jennifer Harvey, and Aana Vigen.

truth as best we can. Sounds like a reformation to me.

The graphs show us whence we came, together with present consequences and projected dangers. Now what?

The promise of the gospel is that to all who truly repent, God will give good news. So let's turn to the treasures Lutherans might offer those who must do some first works over.

The "Lutherans Restoring Creation" program of the Lutheran Earthkeeping Network of the Synods (LENS), has the list. David Rhoads, whom we honor here, has given key leadership to LENS and "Lutherans Restoring Creation" as well as to LSTC. Here is the list:

Lutherans are uniquely positioned to offer leadership in the movement to restore creation, based on: a strong theology of creation, a sacramental theology that discerns the active presence of God in all of life, a theology of the cross that leads us to identify with the most vulnerable, a situational ethic that enables us to respond creatively to new challenges, an ecclesiology which says that the church exists for the sake of the world, a tradition of commitment to social ministry and public advocacy for justice, an understanding of justification that empowers us to act out of gratitude and grace, and our affirmation of a future that is in God's hands.<sup>13</sup>

That is the curriculum for the rest of your life. Your part in "the great work" (Berry) before us could not be better lined out than that. Take and eat.

Each element in that summary merits a

13. From the first page of the rationale for "Lutherans Restoring Creation," available on the LSTC hosted Web site: [www.webofcreation.org](http://www.webofcreation.org). Further information available at [www.lutheransrestoringcreation.org](http://www.lutheransrestoringcreation.org), specifically under the section "Why Lutherans?"

separate LSTC Heritage Lecture. I will intersect only a few, with comments to Luther's robust love of the Earth, life and creatureliness in his pantheism; to Lutheran insights into the presence and power of sin that can catch us unawares; and to the feisty grace and freedom in Christ as faith's own reform dynamic.

Luther the monk learned powerful insights into human nature and sin from St. Augustine and Augustine's own God wrestle. St. Augustine, too, learned from agonizing introspection on his own lived experience. But Augustine also learned from his preacher and teacher, St. Ambrose. Consider this from Ambrose as our entry point. It's a fourth century text.

Why do the injuries of nature delight you?

The world has been created for all, while you rich are trying to keep it for yourselves. Not merely the possession of the earth, but the very sky, air and the sea are claimed for the use of the rich few... Not from your own do you bestow on the poor man, but you make return from what is his. For what has been given as common for the use of all, you appropriate for yourself alone. The earth belongs to all, not to the rich.<sup>14</sup>

Augustine was moved by Ambrose in such degree that he left behind his Manichaeanism. No longer was the universe carved into opposing spheres of good and evil in which earth and the world were hostile to the God of the common earthly good. "Spirit flowers out of matter,"<sup>15</sup> not in opposition to it, and the primal elements of earth, air, fire, and water are what Augustine

14. *De Nabuthe Jezraelita* 3, 11, cited from Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Sisters of Earth: Religious women and ecological spirituality," *The Witness*, May, 2000:14-15.

15. The phrase is Harrison's in *Gardens*, 51.

calls “the standing miracles” that render other wonders rather petty by comparison. Like Ambrose, Augustine thus came to understand redeemed creation to be the *alternative* to cosmic dualisms of spiritual good and material evil. In his (third) commentary on Genesis Augustine says that paradise itself has been hidden within the earth since creation, like “seeds waiting for the light of justice and mercy.”<sup>16</sup> The world, when justice and mercy shine, is “a smiling place.”<sup>17</sup>

Augustine also shared his teacher’s suspicions of the rich and their treatment of earth. In *The City of God*, he reflects on the bitter experience of empires without justice. “Remove justice, and what are kingdoms but gangs of criminals on a large scale?” he asks. He goes on to say that the “ranks of the demoralized” themselves are a source of “many recruits” who in turn acquire territory, capture cities, and subdue people for the rewards parceled out by their leaders. The grand title of “kingdom” is then conferred on all this, clothing it in majesty. The Berber bishop adds the caveat that the title, kingdom, is conferred “not by the renouncing of aggression but by the attainment of impunity.”<sup>18</sup> He clinches his point with a famous exchange borrowed

from Cicero.

For it was a witty and a truthful rejoinder which was given by a captured pirate to Alexander the Great. The king asked the fellow, “What is your idea, in infesting the sea?” And the pirate answered, with uninhibited insolence, “The same as yours, in infesting the earth. But because I do it with a tiny craft, I’m called a pirate; because you have a mighty army, you’re called an emperor.”<sup>19</sup>

Though both Ambrose and Augustine are cozy with empire as partners to the magistrates (again like Luther), neither shrinks from inveighing against its injustice. Ambrose in fact excommunicated Emperor Theodosius after Theodosius ordered a massacre in Thessalonica in retaliation for the murder there of one of his guards. The bishop withheld the Eucharist from him until either he publicly repented or renounced his baptism and left the community. Only after Theodosius underwent the rigors of repentance for eight months—fasting, almsgiving, worshiping in plain clothes alongside other penitents—could he rejoin the community for the Eucharist. Theodosius, in other words, had to do some first works over (Baldwin) and change his ways.

For his part, Augustine rejected Eusebius’ fawning account of Constantine and the empire as a Christianized earthly paradise in which Christ, with the help of Constantine’s sword, triumphed over his enemies. Redeemed earth as paradise was

16. This is the phrase of Brock and Parker describing Augustine’s commentary on Genesis. From Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 104.

17. Augustine’s Sermon 169.4, as cited by Johannes Van Oort in *Saving Paradise*, 104.

18. This is a succinct anticipation of Max Weber on the modern nation-state. The nation-state’s distinguishing mark is not the renunciation of violence but the legal control of it.

19. Augustine cites as the source of this exchange Cicero’s *De Reb.*, 3, 14, 24. The full passage is from Augustine’s *The City of God*, Book IV, Chp. 5, Section 4. Cf. *The City of God*, Modern Library Edition, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1993), 113.

the *alternative* to empire for Augustine; it was not empire's manifest destiny. "The city of God," imperfectly expressed through the church, was the critic and judge of imperial power.<sup>20</sup>

What moves Ambrose and Augustine and fuels their courage to stand as they do *vis-à-vis* imperial power, despite their presence in the corridors of power? Basically it is this: neither bishop can give up on the biblical dream for the Earth: justice, community, and the common good, with "righteousness" as an upright life lived in good institutions. Neither can imagine that Earth has not been given "as common for the use of all" (Ambrose) or that Eden might not be reborn, this time uninfested (Augustine). Neither would leave our three chairs unvoiced.

Luther shared that same biblical passion for Earth as paradise just as he shared the prophetic critique of unjust privilege and power, whether in church or society. And both for the same reason. He had a serious case of "biophilia," a love of creaturely life, including the delightful intimacy with other-than-human life that spices his theological writing and preaching. He had a similar case of "cosmophilia," utter awe in the presence of life and a sure sense of belonging to a community that far surpassed him in time and space. The biblical dream drives the action for Luther. Degraded life and avoidable creaturely suffering are unacceptable.

Thankfully, some Lutherans have taken up Luther's protest and reform together with quiet, extensive work for the common good. Yet our context and its planetary conditions ask for reform in Lutheran accounts themselves, as Luther's asked for reform of his Roman Catholicism. We, too have some first works to edit. Let me suggest two changes in our

treatment of sin.

While the Reformers, like the prophets Ambrose and Augustine, had a fine nose for the abuses of power and privilege, they didn't internalize within *theological* method itself a systemic analysis of race, class, gender, culture, and the welfare of other-than-human nature. With the rise of the social sciences, theologies of liberation, and the eco-crisis, that has changed somewhat. The result is a better sense for how the sin of systems works. Nonetheless, a multivalent analysis does not yet belong to the ways of most Lutheran parishes. It resides in but a few of our liturgies, sermons, or catechesis. Thus we don't have a worthy answer to the question, "Why do the injuries of nature delight you?" They "delight" because the polity of our living, the way we organize our lives on scales large and small, cultivates vices and virtues independently of our reflection and intention. Good people you would not describe as heartless, greedy, indifferent and wasteful nonetheless *live* an institutionalized utilitarian indifference toward the rest of the community of life, an indifference that is destructive *en masse*, destructive even of the places we don't live, such as the oceans. Our graphs reflect a certain *superbia* (pride) on the part of good, and even modest, people who, via their institutions, actually live a collective arrogance and overweening pride *vis-à-vis* the rest of nature, the poor, and future generations. So while Lutherans are good at uncovering the sins of the heart and seeking Sunday forgiveness for sins known and unknown, we rarely even ask about the concrete sinful systemic outcomes of a taken-for-granted way of life. Where is the confession of sin of the U. S. citizen as U. S. citizen, the consumer as consumer, the banker as banker, the nutritionist, pedagogue, farmer, or scientist? We treat sin as though it were only individual and

20. Brock and Parker, *Saving Paradise*, 102–105.

interpersonal and not primarily institutional and collective.

A related reform should come easily, since Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and their very best student, Reinhold Niebuhr, excelled in a profound understanding of human nature. Their understanding of sin was thus a species understanding; i.e., it pertained to all humans. *Cor curvatum in se* (the heart curved inward upon itself) is about the *human* heart, not just some errant individual's, or the pope's. Yet, strangely, the Reformers and their progeny never carried through to ask whether *as a species* we do not think of ourselves more highly than we ought. We rarely take our proper suspicions of power and privilege and the deceived and deceitful heart and apply them to our life as neighbor and kin to the rest of creation. Where is the elaboration of pan-human sin as overweening species pride? The science and the graphs are clear: we are wreaking havoc on innumerable lives and their home habitats, lives and habitats precious to God. We have in fact become imperial uncreators, or decreators, terminators who deal death to birth itself by way of extinction; the sixth great wave of extinction, to be exact, and the first at human hands. Why is not such serial killing a real crime, on the books and enforced? Why isn't it declared a mortal sin, at least by those who profess life itself the gracious gift of God for which we have tilling-and-keeping responsibilities? Why is nature stage, resources, information, recreation, and dumpster, but not a fellow "thou" and a neighbor to be loved as we love ourselves? And why don't we confess this sin?

Yet sin as species pride is never expressed in some even, smooth pan-human way. The Environmental Justice Movement of Peoples of Color has made the same point as C. S. Lewis over and

again; namely, that what we call human power over nature is also and most always the power of some humans over others. That is, the sinful consequences of species pride always play out in ways coupled to economic, socio-cultural, and political advantage on the part of some people over others. Think of colonization and conquest; plantations and agribusiness; urban, suburban and exurban growth; or in-town zoning, property values and gentrification. The treatment of Ambrose's "land, sea, and sky" is rarely, if ever, apart from the treatment of people as well. All comeuppance is not, then, equal. Nor is the same confession and hymnody required of all parties. When ExxonMobil, Monsanto, Wall Street, the coal industry, or my own little empire sing "We shall overcome," it means something very different from those denied their proper share, whether humankind or otherkind.

The theology of the cross itself asks these reforms of us. Jesus is not some fleeting docetic visitor or ghostly bearer of Gnostic truth. Jesus is mortal flesh and blood from the countryside, wholly of earth. In such earthy flesh is God present and revealed. Moreover, God is present as a broken and vilified human being; in this scandalous condition, rather than where most expect—and hope—God to be, in reigning power, majesty, riches, and fame. (Such are theologies of glory.)

This earthly identification with the most vulnerable puts Lutheran theology at the merging point of sacramental theologies of creation and justice-centered theologies of liberation, without either trumping the other and without separating planetary well-being from human welfare.

A Lutheran ethic might put it like this: God's way in Jesus enters the places where life is most torn and ruined, there to draw upon the power of God to work healing



from within the wounds themselves. The moral assumption here is that the farther one is removed from the suffering present in creation, the farther one is from its central moral reality (such distance from suffering belongs to theologies of glory). And the closer one is to the suffering of creation, the more difficult it is to refuse participation in that afflicted life, human-kind's or otherkind's (such intimacy is cross theology). "The injuries of nature delight us" because we have not gone where God in Jesus goes and do not truly feel pain when nature suffers and creation groans, awaiting its redemption via our own. Thus we abuse without recognizing it as abuse, or enslave the non-human neighbor without thinking of it as slavery.

Another needed focus also belongs to the theology of the cross; namely, Luther's joyous panentheism (the view that "all is in God"). *Finitum capax infinitum*—the finite bears the infinite, the creaturely carries the divine, the immanent bears the transcendent, the pregnant moment captures eternity. For Luther, this incarnate concreteness is *the* attribute of God as far as humans can know God's ways. Put it this way: the awesome secret of creation is God's dwelling in, with, and under it all. That is cause for sacramental wonder and not a little whooping and stomping along with Bach and Christian rock. But please note: God's potent indwelling belongs to all created things, including "water, air, the earth and all its products" (I am quoting Luther).<sup>21</sup> "God," Luther says, "exists at the same time in every little seed, whole and entire, and yet also in all and above all

and outside all created things."<sup>22</sup> "Christ... is present in all creatures, and I might find [Christ] in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope, for [Christ] is there,"<sup>23</sup> says Luther. Creation, all of it, is God's abode. It may also be what Annie Dillard says it is, just "one [big] lunatic fringe." "No claims of any and all revelation," she goes on, "could be so far-fetched as a single giraffe."<sup>24</sup> And while for Luther and the reformers the scope of salvation unnecessarily shrank to the human being, his biophilia and cosmophilia counter that. Luther's "*Furcht vor dem Leben*"—"awe in the presence of life"—exults in creatureliness as God's own body and masks, giraffes included. Sin, then, is to try as creatures to rise above nature or flee from the body rather than rejoice and be glad to be humble, awesome humus, *ādāmāh* of God's *ādāmāh* (creatures of living earth, the six inches of topsoil plus a little rain from which you came as a groundling and to which you return).

"The cultivation of the earth came from a clod," Luther says of us in his *Lectures on Genesis*, noting that all creatures are *ādāmāh* kin, soil brothers and sisters. Furthermore, dear clods and cultivators, we multiply "in the same manner as the other beasts," he says, there being no difference "between a pregnant cow and a

22. Luther, "Confession concerning Christ's Supper," cited from Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World*, 84.

23. Luther, "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics," cited from Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World*, 84.

24. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek* as cited by David Toolan in *At Home in the Cosmos* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 161.

21. Luther, "Sermon on Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity," cited from Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 84.

woman with child.”<sup>25</sup>

Worse, woman or man, we, too, live the life and die the death all nature knows. Even the long-lived among us recognize the Morning Rosh Hashanah liturgy, itself an echo of Isaiah.

[Our] origin is dust,  
and dust is [our] end.  
Each of us is a shattered urn,  
grass that must wither,  
a flower that will fade,  
a shadow moving on,  
a cloud passing by,  
a particle of dust floating on the wind,  
a dream soon forgotten.  
But You are the Eternal One,  
the everlasting God!<sup>26</sup>

As the last line indicates, all this is less about us individually than about the One in whom we live and move and have our being in a community of creation that was here long before we arrived as a species and will be here well after we depart. Yet nothing is lost to God, nor is anything lost in creation, but only changed. So let us move to the conclusion the world needs and Lutherans proclaim: no less than *God* is present *to* creation *in* creation *through* and *as* creation. *Finite* creation, yes, but infinitely precious and lush with Christ’s own beauty.

Now let’s add Luther’s feisty freedom in Christ to his passionate panentheism and its lost gospel of earth.

Doing first works over in the face of massive systemic sin threatening life systems themselves requires morally and spiritually renewable freedom, specifically

25. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 1:83.

26. Morning Rosh Hashanah Service, *The Gates of Repentance* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1978), 109–110.

a freedom *of* and *for* deep reform. A boldness is needed, the boldness to venture into unknown terrain. Luther’s advice to Melancthon, to “sin boldly but believe in Christ, and rejoice, more boldly still,” was more than a passing attempt at humor. Deep reform will not happen apart from risk that is both needed and dangerous. We will not attain sustainability smoothly and without error. Nor will it come without great cost and wrenching change. Molds will be broken and much will be a colossal mess, not least because, as the Archbishop of Canterbury said, people have allowed themselves to become “addicted to fantasies about prosperity and growth, dreams of wealth without risk and profit without cost.”<sup>27</sup> We should use the climate crisis, he went on, to learn to become human again, setting aside these soul-damaging and Earth-destructive behaviors.

Amid all of this, free grace and faith’s trust in God as the only *ultimate* authority sends us off to “sin boldly,” i.e., to risk in pursuit of the common planetary good. There is even great joy in doing the good works faith frees us for, the works *of* saving faith itself.

This same freedom of the Christian who is lord of all, subject to none, while simultaneously neighbor to all, subject to all, has its cautious side. It’s the proverbial difference between being fools for Christ and damn fools. The cautionary side of be-not-afraid gospel freedom rests in the Reformation’s insight that we are all anxious souls in search of security and a world we can count on, with fixed meanings we can live by. When life does not offer that, but passing happiness as fragile as glass, we run to deities and despots, or fad, fame, and fashion, or promises and dreams and mountains of stuff, to relieve

27. From a report available at: [www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/oct/13/rowan.williams.climate.crisis](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/oct/13/rowan.williams.climate.crisis)

the burden of life's *inherent* uncertainty. Tragedies happen or the wages of sin catch us unaware and we try to close life's open circle, by force if necessary and almost always at the cost of the neighbors we don't like, in order to ensure a stable world we moderns wrongly think we can control. Faith in God is the trust that answers to this idolatrous propensity to close the circle and fix the universe, just as renewing grace through faith is the source for boldly venturing pliable responses to present unsustainability. Did you hear President Obama? Ours is a new era of responsibility, he said in his inaugural address, in which God calls us to an uncertain destiny. What U. S. president says our destiny is uncertain? It's always "manifest," the opposite of uncertain. Yet ours *is* uncertain, just as the breadth and depth of responsibility *is* new in a world suddenly small, round, under threat and minus an exit ramp. That argues for the cautionary side of a bold faith and freedom. So a Reformation-inspired ethic might say: in God, unbounded freedom to venture new first works, yes, but do not act in such a way as to make the planet a huge, uncontrolled, trial-and-error experiment. Reduce carbon emissions and other greenhouse gases rather than wait to see what might happen. Don't burn and then learn. And always protect the integral functioning of biospheric and atmospheric systems. If you don't, you and those in our three chairs will suffer and die before their days are long. Or, on another tack, if an entity cannot be reclaimed, reused, and recycled, do not make it. If it cannot be reproduced without deleterious effects, do not grow it. If the probable consequences of its use cannot be reasonably known, tracked, and paid for, do not venture it. Learn to be true conservatives, all you reformers.

In short, the dynamic of Reformation

freedom in Christ is bold, imaginative, Earth-caring, and careful.

I summarize and close. Our hearts, souls, and minds are raised on a mess

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of stories. Then they write their own, sometimes of necessity. That is one way to talk about our Reformation heritage and "doing our first works over." Such a legacy addresses the post-1950 prodigal

century with a daring faith. It is not for us to ravage the sea and the land. So let's go straight to faith's most basic issue, namely the ethical one of *how* we live and *for what*. Change in how we live and for what in turn means that faith convictions are vital to any successful transition, convictions that in our Jabbok moment understand creation and the natural world as sacred and not secondary. Creation is the abode of God and the stunning medium of God's gracious presence. It is also our own true home, the only place fit for the kind of creatures we are. Successful transformation does *not* lie in trying to retrieve and replicate the economy of the old days, any old days. Pre-1900 the planet was large and richly endowed, with a small human population. Ours is degraded, "hot, flat, and crowded."<sup>28</sup> With that in view, a *reverential* ethic with creation's integral functioning at its core is mandatory. But such an ethic will not work if driven by fear, since we only save what we respect, love, and take joy in. Yes, we must muster all the green technology we can, but even that pales in

significance compared with the whooping and stomping that sane people should do in the presence of the sheer beauty of creaturely life and the standing miracles of topsoil, water, good food, and clean air. Sharing in the delight of the two-year-old who is elated to find a stray Cheerio<sup>®</sup> caught between the couch cushions might be a good place to start, learning anew what it means to be human. By that I mean that the ethic we need will be fired by a faith that shares Luther's exuberance, yes, his irrational exuberance, for life. That in turn means a visionary ethic even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. This faith receives life as the free gift of a gracious Creator and this faith knows that all our striving is significant, even in the face of inevitable corruptions, losses and defeats. This is a long-haul faith that, to those who repent, proclaims good news in an unsteady world and embraces freedom to ride out the risks of a new era of responsibility and an uncertain destiny.

It sounds like we are waiting for the Lutherans.

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28. Thomas Friedman, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution—and How It Can Renew America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

# Reflections on Sustainable Theological Education: A Tribute to David Rhoads

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As many of us who have sought to integrate ecological concerns into theological education know all too well, the struggle to get administrators and faculty of theological schools to take ecological sustainability seriously as a central topic for theological education often has been deeply disappointing. Among theological educators, at least in more liberal schools, no one is likely to be directly hostile to considering ecological crisis as an important issue, but very few theological faculty members make it a central topic of their research, teaching, and concern. Theological schools have a difficult time getting it on the front burner of their attention.

I will illustrate my own experience with this struggle, without naming the particular schools involved. My purpose is not to attack particular schools, but to illustrate the pattern of the problem. During the 1980s and '90s at a school where I taught for many years, I regularly begged the Dean to make ecological crisis a topic for faculty discussion at one of the several meetings each year where we considered critical issues for theological education, but without avail. This despite the fact that there was considerable attention to this subject at several of the other theological schools in the same area.

Moreover, elsewhere in the region a long standing Center for Neighborhood Technology had formed a joint program with the regional theological schools to create a city-wide program, the Inter-religious Sustainability Project of Greater

Chicago. Yet very few of these regional theological schools showed much interest in participating in this program.

At the end of the '90s I moved to another region of the United States, where I taught for six years at a theological school affiliated with a major university and a coalition of theological schools. My experience at these theological schools was also disappointing. Each year that I taught there I offered a course on feminist ecological theology that was always well attended. For several years the course mandated field education projects focused on the local theological schools themselves and their connection with the ecological issue. Each year groups of students would take on the task of interviewing the president of the coalition, as well as the presidents of the member schools, to ask that the issue of sustainability be included in the schools' mission statements. The students, to their amazement, mostly received a run-around from these presidents. Two presidents were more open to the idea, and a staff member at one school proposed that this school declare itself a "green seminary." But little has changed in reality.

Most disappointing has been the treatment of a student-organized project on ecological ethics and spirituality. Year after year the students of this group organized lectures, discussions, and courses on key ecological themes, such as climate change and agricultural practices. Faculty rarely attended their meetings. The group had difficulty finding regular office space. They

did all their own fundraising. Moreover, the president of the coalition seemed to have a hard time seeing to it that this group would continue as an important initiative as student leaders graduated.

The students involved with this project at one point did a survey of ecological programs in theological education across the country. They found that at our local coalition of theological schools there were a considerable number of doctoral theses related to ecology, yet no field of study had been defined that hosted this issue as important. When the faculty was polled on where ecological sustainability fitted into theological education, some faculty members saw it as a topic for the ethics field but not any other field in the curriculum.

Particularly troublesome has been the response of this coalition of theological schools to the Forum on Ecology and World Religions, developed by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, with its stunning record of numerous conferences and book publications over the period from 1995 to the present. Tucker and Grim spent a year in our area hoping to find a receptive home for their Forum between the theological schools and the University. The University was interested, but the theological schools were not. Tucker and Grim ended up going to the Yale School of Forestry, a school long associated with American conservationism that seems to have realized that this issue needs new thought today, and that the connection with religion is important.

I now teach at another coalition of theological schools affiliated with a university. Concern for ecology doesn't seem much better here, even though there has been a history of attention to this issue at these theological schools for some time. At one faculty meeting designed to consider the mission statements of the several fields of the program, only one

mentioned "environmental ethics" as a topic. That was the program on Islamic studies. When I asked why there was no concern for this in six other areas having to do with biblical studies, ethics, and theology, there was silence.

I continue to be very puzzled by this kind of "passive resistance" to taking ecology seriously in theological education. I know my colleagues would agree that this is a crisis situation for global society. They know too that Christianity and other religions have not only contributed to perpetuating the crisis, but also have the resources to shape an alternative. Why do they continue to resist putting this issue on the "front burner," making it a priority or at least a topic for concern? I really do not have an answer to this question. It seems as if taking ecology seriously as a theme in theological education would entail too radical a rethinking of the whole project. It seems to be easier to continue with "business as usual."

Yet there are creative efforts worldwide to get ecology to the front and center in theological reflection. One of these is a project developed by Ernest Conradie of the Department of Religion and Theology of the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. Starting in January 2007, Conradie has developed teams of theologians and religious scholars around the globe to reflect on key challenges of ecological crisis to Christian theology. He presently has twelve established working groups drawn from religious scholars internationally, with other groups in the planning.<sup>1</sup> These teams are working on the following themes:

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1. Information on these working groups is available at <http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/christianity/Christian-FaithandEarth/CFE%20Homepage.html>. The quoted titles and one-sentence descriptions of each group are available at that site.

*Christianity and Other Religions:* “Where on earth may God be found? Christian notions of God amidst other religious traditions and various forms of spirituality.” This topic challenges the assumption that God is only found through our particular tradition of revelation. It also suggests that God’s presence is not only found in humans but also in non-human nature. How do we take seriously the whole creation as made in the “image of God”?

*Human Vocation:* “At home on earth. Christian discourse on the place and vocation of human beings within the world.” This theme challenges the tendency in Christianity to assume that we are merely sojourners on the earth, awaiting our release to “another world.” In what way do humans have a permanent vocation to be at home on this earth? How does redemption apply to this earth?

*Providence and Suffering:* “How does God respond to suffering in creation? Christian views on God’s providence amidst sin and evil.” This theme raises the basic theological question about the centrality of the human drama of sin and suffering to the created world. It challenges us to recognize that humans have only existed as part of the earth community for a very short period of perhaps fifty to seventy-five thousand years in the four and a half billion-year history of the earth, much less the much larger history of the universe. If humans have been only recent members of the earth community, might they also be only passing members of that community? How do we think about God if human destructiveness might cause the human species to disappear from the earth, even as the earth continues in altered form? Does God have a permanent commitment to humans, or could we think of a God who would let our species disappear? How would we think of divine providence if this is a possibility?

*Salvation:* “How is the earth itself to be saved? Christian discourse on creation, redemption, and eschatological fulfillment.” Christianity was shaped by an apocalyptic perspective that saw the final redemption as in some sense putting an end to temporal creation, destroying it and replacing it with an “eternal creation,” populated by deathless resurrected beings. Can this still be the context for thinking about redemption? How do we take finitude, our own and that of our fellow creatures, seriously in the context of redemption. Is death the final “evil” to be eradicated or an enduring aspect of creation?

*The Church:* “Where on earth is the church? Christian discourse on the nature, governance and mission of the church.” This theme takes seriously the concept of Christian church and its redemptive mission. How do we include the whole earth in the mission of the church and not just the human being, or perhaps just the human “soul” divorced from its bodily context?

*Ethics:* “Where can we find an appropriate ethic for our time? Christian discourse on categories such as justice, frugality, rights, respect, simplicity, sustainability, and wisdom.” This theme focuses on the shaping of an effective ecological ethics for Christian life. How would ethics change if the context for discussing good and evil, fall and salvation, is the whole earth and its destiny and hope, rather than just the human community and especially the human as privatized individual?

*Trinity:* “How can Trinitarian theology deepen the development of an ecological doctrine of creation?” This theme opens up the question of the immanent or historical dimension of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. How do we recover the sense of the Trinity as not simply about the transcendent nature of the divine disconnected with the earth,

but as an understanding of the divine that encompasses the creation and redemption of the whole creation?

*The Holy Spirit:* "Whither does the Wind Blow? Theological reflection on the person and work of the Holy Spirit." This theme focuses the question central to the reflection on the Trinity and ecology. How do we think about the understanding of the Holy Spirit as immersed in the whole creation and redemptive transformation of the earth and universe, and by implication in all human cultures?

*Creation and Evolution:* "How can Christian discourse on the doctrine of creation contribute to an ecological understanding of the story of the universe? Reflections on cosmology, creation, and evolution." Christianity arose two millennia ago in the context of a Platonic-Jewish synthesis of cosmology limited to seven thousand years and one solar system (originally an earth-centered solar system). Many Christians still think in terms of this outdated framework. How do we take seriously the new universe story with its vastly expanded time and space, millions of galaxies and a fourteen to sixteen billion-year past history of a still open future?

*Christology:* "Who is Jesus Christ for all of us on earth, today? Theological reflection on the person and work of Jesus Christ from an ecological perspective." This theme raises the question of the universality of the Christian story centered in the life and work of Jesus Christ, a figure that appeared in human history a mere two thousand years ago in one small part of the earth. Christianity sought to put Jesus in the context of its cosmology and earth history, but that context was a limited one of the Platonic-Jewish synthesis. Can Christology genuinely encompass the expanded universe's story? Do we need to think of the Christ symbol as one among many redemptive mediators, such as Bud-

dha, Moses, Mohammed, and others, and all these mediators as limited moments in the much larger cosmic story?

*Liturgy and Sacraments:* "Liturgy and Life: What can Christian worship and celebration of the sacraments teach us about our relation to the earth?" In other words, how do we reshape Christian liturgy, including church architecture and environment, to be ways of situating our context as Christian humans in the universe story and the ecological crisis? How do we make the ecological challenge something we reflect on as Christians every Sunday to live it every day? Ecology is not just something to be pulled out of a hat once a year for an "earth day" liturgy, if that often!

*Hermeneutics and Methodology:* "What methods are appropriate for ecological theology? Hermeneutical reflection on the role of God's revelation, Scripture, natural theology, tradition, experience, reason (science), and cultural context." This theme steps back from a particular set of theological challenges to ask about methodology and particularly the scriptural sources and their interpretation.

The project as outlined by Conradie hopes that these teams will develop a mature reflection and set of resources on the themes over the next few years to culminate in a conference to be held in Cape Town, 6–10 August, 2010. Although this seems like a bold and important project, I wonder if it is too little and too late. Where are the other world religions? Already considerable work has been done bringing all world religions into the context of ecological reflection through the Forum on World Religions and Ecology, yet this work, done in the 1990s, is absent from this project. Where is the reflection on theological education and the institutions by which we pursue the training of both theologians and ministers? Reflection on these themes is an important piece of the



work that Christians need to do, but it needs to be broader.

My own vision of what sustainable theological education should look like has been deeply shaped by the work of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) on this question, particularly by David Rhoads. So I am happy to lift up the work of this theological community, and of David Rhoads, as central to my own thought on this issue. What I have learned from LSTC is that the reshaping of theological education for ecological sustainability should have three aspects: 1) integration of the ecological issue throughout the curriculum, not simply in the field of ethics; 2) practical application to the theological school buildings and grounds; and 3) application to the practice of ministry. Let me discuss each of these in turn.

1. *Integration throughout the curriculum:* Just as we realized earlier that feminism needs to be integrated throughout the curriculum, so also ecology needs to be integrated throughout the curriculum. Just as hostility to women has affected the whole Christian tradition in all its expressions, so also hostility to nature, treating it either as inferior to (male ruling class) humans or as something to be transcended and left behind by the redeemed human soul, has affected all aspects of theological theory and practice. Adequate attention to ecological sustainability in theological education needs to address biblical studies, theology, church history, and ethics, as well as liturgy, pastoral psychology, religious education, and ministry.

Attention to the issue of the theology of the land in biblical studies is crucial. Significant work has been done on this by several biblical scholars, such as Ted Hiebert at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. The Bible is not to be discussed only when we talk of hermeneutics, but all parts of Hebrew Scripture and New

Testament need to be reread ecologically. Ecological rereading of theology is also crucial, and the South African project is addressing many of the key issues. Theology needs to focus on its often neglected understanding of the doctrine of creation and its relation to different cosmologies. What kind of personal and social ethics, and what kind of spirituality, can help us really engage the crisis in human existence on the planet today? This is the topic of Margaret Swedish's stunning new book that appeared from Orbis Press in March 2008, *Living Beyond the "End of the World." A Spirituality of Hope*.

Christians need to take seriously why it is that leading fundamentalist Christian leaders have labeled any concern with ecology a form of "paganism," while readily embracing an apocalypticism that counsels the abandonment of the planet to divine destruction. This active hostility to the issue of sustainability among right wing Christians unfortunately is matched by the benign neglect of the issue among liberal Christians. Happily, a group of "Creation care" evangelicals has recently insisted that this topic is actually central to the biblical message and needs to be taken seriously by anyone who takes the Bible seriously.

2. *Practical application to theological school buildings and grounds:* The second important aspect of sustainability in theological education needs to be the actual practice of living in theological schools. Active concern for organic food, vegetarian options, food waste, discarded paper, the use of energy and water, the use of land in and around all the buildings of the theological school, the dorms, administration offices and classrooms, should be integrated into ecological living in theological schools. Students, faculty, and staff should work together to make the theological school a "green" institution and thereby also learn basic skills to carry sustainability into ministry. Important

here is real communication with the cooks and maintenance staff responsible for food service and the practical care of buildings and grounds..

3. *Training for ministry*: Finally ecological sustainability needs to be a key part of training for ministry. This involves Christian education, church administration, liturgy, and preaching. There are several excellent curriculae that have been written from various Christian denominations that model how to teach the ecological issue as a part of Christian education for both children and adults. An example is Sharon Delgado's *Hope for the Earth*, a ten module curriculum that integrates the Methodist quadrilateral (Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience) into a graded introduction to ecological ideas and practice.<sup>2</sup> Each study unit includes biblical study, theology, science, and practical action. Through regular offering of such courses on Christian faith and ecological theory and practice, local churches can build a core of people in their congregation committed to the sustainability issue.

The church building itself needs to become ecologically friendly in its relation to the surrounding land. Obviously churches also need to address questions of energy use, waste of paper and other pollutants in the church's plant. Use of the land around the church for food gardens, and the elimination of heavy use of water for lawns for drought-resistant sustainable planting are also important areas for consideration. The church needs to become a center of outreach to the local community and, from there, regionally, nationally, and globally on the ecological issue.

Why have theological educators been so resistant to taking this issue of

sustainability seriously as a key element in theological education? As I said before, I don't know the answer to this question. Despite the hostility of a few Christian spokespeople on the Christian right, this resistance does not seem primarily ideological, but rather reflects a kind of apathy and paralysis rooted in the inability to respond to the enormity of the crisis of our times. This crisis, while it has been building for decades, if not centuries, is relatively new in cultural consciousness and its stunning implications are so threatening that many hope that somehow it will go away if we ignore it or make only token gestures in response to it.

As Margaret Swedish, in her excellent book, *Living Beyond the "End of the World,"* says, "Our way of life is dying, or rather it is killing us and killing the planet."<sup>3</sup> It is thus critical that our entire culture and way of life transform itself to cope with this challenge. Changing our spirituality and worldview is a crucial part of this transformation. But most of us find that challenge too difficult and too foreign to our entire socialization to know what to do. Thus we court worse disaster by being unable to pay attention to what is happening now. We wait for the levees to break and the water to begin to rise in our living rooms before fleeing pell-mell to higher ground. But those of us who have made ecology central to our thought for some time cannot give up. We need to continue to press this issue throughout our society, but particularly, as theological educators, in theological education. Eventually we will be heard, even as the time grows later and the urgency increases.

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2. Sharon Delgado, *Hope for the Earth: A Handbook for Christian Environmental Groups* (Geneva: Geneva Board of Church and Society, 1994).

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3. Margaret Swedish, *Living Beyond the "End of the World: A Spirituality of Hope* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2008), xi.

# ‘Things having lives’: Ecology, Allusion, and Performance in Revelation 8:9

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David Rhoads inspired me long before I met him. In seminary in 1992, I read *Mark as Story* and he gave me a new way to read the Bible: narrative criticism. As a graduate student at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago from 2004–2009, he invited me to be a part of his trailblazing adventure into performance criticism. I offer this essay in tribute to two of his passions: concern for God’s creation and performance criticism.<sup>1</sup>

“Do animals have souls?” is an age-old Sunday school question. The book of Revelation portrays sea creatures (a broad category that includes fish and sea mammals) as having *psychai*, often translated as “lives” or “souls.” A more difficult question is whether the book of Revelation values these sea creatures and offers reasons for modern Christians to protect them.

## **Ecology: Does Revelation value sea creatures?**

The book of Revelation seems to offer little reason to value marine animals, for example,

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1. This paper was first presented at the Ecological Hermeneutics Section of the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in November 2008.

the Bala Shark, a tiny, endangered fish native to India and Thailand that has suffered due to loss of habitat and overfishing. After the second trumpet in Rev 8, a great mountain burning with fire is thrown into the sea and one third of the sea becomes blood, and, as the NRSV translates it, “one third of the living creatures in the sea died.” If not valued, why should human beings change their behavior to protect, for example, the giant sperm whale? The sperm whale is one of 18 cetaceans in the Mediterranean Sea<sup>2</sup> and perhaps one of the sea creatures that John of Patmos might have seen. Its migration patterns are affected by human shipping routes and their food chain altered by agricultural runoff. After the second bowl plague, John sees that the sea “became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing in the sea died” (Rev 16:3). Why change human behavior for the creatures like the striped dolphin (another denizen of the Mediterranean Sea)? Why protect their habitats when Revelation seems not to value the sea—it will “pass away” when the new heaven and new earth appear (Rev 21:1)? The book of Revelation seems to present

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2. “The Mediterranean Sea,” [www-1.unipv.it/webcib/edu\\_Mediterraneo\\_uk.html](http://www-1.unipv.it/webcib/edu_Mediterraneo_uk.html). Accessed 12 November 2008.

no reason for human beings to change their relationship with sea creatures, economically, socially, politically or theologically. Or does it?

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We critically  
expose  
the view that human  
beings are the center  
of the universe  
and that the rest of  
creation is only for  
human management  
and consumption.

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I argue that this gloomy assessment does not accurately reflect what Revelation says about sea creatures. Instead, Rev 8:9 says these sea creatures have “lives,” or *psychai* in Greek, the same word often translated as “soul.” What does this mean in the context of the book of Revelation?

- First, the phrase “things having lives” alludes to the creation narrative in Genesis 1, which reminds the audience that these sea creatures have *psychai* and a relationship with God independent of human beings.
- Second, the use of *psychê* for both humans and sea creatures in the book of Revelation invites human beings to identify with them. Together humans and sea creatures are dying because of human sin. Together they are praising God and the Lamb.
- Third, the abrupt syntax in this verse

suggests John’s emotion over the death of sea creatures.

In essence, I am arguing that the book of Revelation can be a resource for new relationships with creatures in the sea. Other scholars have demonstrated that the book of Revelation does offer resources for valuing creation and persuading humans to change. The work of Duncan Reid<sup>3</sup> and Barbara Rossing<sup>4</sup> as well as a 2008 issue of *Biblical Theology Bulletin* featuring articles by Richard Bauckham, Richard Woods and Mark Bredin have all found the book of Revelation to be a fertile source for ecological reflection.

Of special significance is the work of SBL Ecological Hermeneutics seminar from 2004 to 2006 that has been published in 2008 as *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*.<sup>5</sup> This seminar has proposed a three part method that I use here: Suspicion, Identification, and Retrieval. First, we are

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3. D. Reid, “Setting aside the ladder to heaven: Revelation 21.1—22.5 from the perspective of the Earth,” in *Readings from the perspective of Earth* (Earth Bible 1; ed. N. C. Habel; Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

4. B. R. Rossing, “Alas for Earth! Lament and Resistance in Revelation 12” in *The Earth Story in the New Testament* (Earth Bible 5; ed. N. C. Habel and V. Balabanski; Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002); “For the Healing of the Nations: Reading *Revelation* Ecologically” in *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective* (ed. D. Rhoads; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 165-182; “River of Life in God’s New Jerusalem: An Ecological Vision for Earth’s Future” in *Christianity and Ecology* (ed. R. R. Ruether and D. Hessel; Cambridge: Harvard University Press Center for World Religions, 1999), 205-224.

5. N. C. Habel and P. Trudinger, eds., *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (Atlanta: SBL, 2008).

suspicious, critical of the anthropocentric bias of the authors, their transmitters and translators. We critically expose the view that human beings are the center of the universe and that the rest of creation is only for human management and consumption. The second task is identification with creation: We look for ways that Jewish and Christian scriptures help us to identify with all of God's creation. Last, we retrieve the voices of creation that have been silenced or muffled by our anthropocentric bias.

### Solecisms get attention and signal Hebrew syntax

With respect to Rev 8:9, suspicion about anthropocentric bias is confirmed by modern translations of this passage. The NIV (1984), NRSV (1989) and ESV (updated 2007) translate this verse "a third of living creatures in the sea died," as if the Greek text simply had the participle "living" modifying "creatures." Early English translations, from Tyndale's Bible (1534) to the King James (1611), more closely reflect the Greek text and emphasize the life of the sea creatures. For example, the KJV translates "and the third part of the creatures which were in the sea, and had life, died," which highlights the phrase "and had life" by setting it off with commas.

The issue is that there is a grammatical problem. The phrase *ta echonta psychas* (literally "the things having lives") matches the gender and number of the noun *ktismatôn* ("creatures"). It should also match its case, but "the things having lives" is nominative and "creatures" is genitive.<sup>6</sup> In the ears of a Greek speaker this is a solecism, a mistake in grammar. In English, the same mistake

may be made when the subjective pronoun is exchanged for an objective one, such as "John gave *she* the coat." "She" is properly the pronoun used as subject; "her" is the objective case in English. When someone makes this kind of mistake, it is usually associated with those lacking education or experience in English.

For the most part, this is how interpreters have taken John's solecisms with cases. Interpreters have concluded John spoke Greek as a second language, and that the syntax of Rev 8:9 reflects the Semitic syntax of his primary language.<sup>7</sup> R. H. Charles concluded about this kind of solecism:

This peculiar idiom is derived from the Hebrew, according to which the noun or phrase which stands in apposition to a noun in an oblique case remains unchanged. Instances of this usage occur in the LXX; but what is a rare phenomena in the Greek version of the O.T. (cf. Ezek 23:7, 12) is a well established idiom in the Greek text of the Apocalypse.<sup>8</sup>

John uses this kind of solecism, the nominative case in apposition with an oblique case, in several places. One of the most famous is Rev 1:5, which lists descriptions of Jesus in the nominative case that should

7. W. Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1896), 295.

8. R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John* (2 vols; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920), 1:cxlx. He lists 1:5; 2:13, 20; 3:12; 8:9; 9:14; 14:12; 20:2 as exhibits of this same solecism.

6. See D. E. Aune, *Revelation* (3 vols; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997–1998), 2:484; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 477–478.

match the genitive case of "Jesus Christ."<sup>9</sup> However, even if it can be explained by an appeal to Hebrew idiom, the abrupt change in syntax grabs the audience's attention<sup>10</sup> and is, I will suggest below, a cue to the emotion of the speaker.

Greg Beale goes further to suggest that solecisms signal the audience to search for an allusion to the Hebrew Bible.

[John] does not change the OT grammatical form to fit the immediate syntactical context in Revelation, so the OT expression sticks out like a sore thumb. This creates 'syntactical dissonance.'... This 'dissonance' is one of the ways that John seeks to focus the readers' attention more on the phrase and to force them to recognize the presence of an Old Testament allusion.<sup>11</sup>

9. Some mss (e.g., Andreas) correct this solecism by changing the first article to a relative pronoun and adding *estin*. Cf. G. Mussies, *The Morphology of Koine Greek as Used in the Apocalypse of John: A Study in Bilingualism* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 191; J. Schmid, *Studien zur Geschichte des griechischen Apokalypse-Texte* (2 vol; München: Zink, 1955), 2:239; Aune, 1:25.

10. For a similar conclusion, see J.-P. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse: The Transformation of Prophetic Language in Revelation 16:17—19: 10* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1989), 220: "It is not simply a matter of inelegant composition or incompetence in Greek on the author's part, but of conscious and intentional difficulties placed before the reader as obstacles to confound an ordinary reading of the text." Cf. S. Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 82.

11. Beale, *Revelation*, 101; cf. idem, "Solecisms in the Apocalypse as signals for the presence of Old Testament allusions," in *Early Christian Interpretation of the Scripture of Israel* (Ed. C. Evans and J. Sanders; Sheffield: Sheffield Press, 1997), 421–466.

Beale's analysis has received criticism for reaching too far.<sup>12</sup> Not every solecism in Revelation indicates an allusion (for example, the solecism in Rev 1:5 mentioned above), and not every allusion is accompanied by a solecism. However, Beale's more modest claim that solecisms focus the audience's attention on the phrasing makes sense. Solecisms were a known rhetorical strategy in the first century. Quintilian, a teacher of rhetoric in Rome at the end of the first century, wrote:

For abnormal figures lying outside the range of common speech, while they are for that reason more striking, and stimulate the ear by their novelty, prove cloying if used too lavishly, and make it quite clear that they did not present themselves naturally to the speaker, but were hunted out by him, dragged from obscure corners and artificially piled to.<sup>13</sup>

Quintilian gives the exchange of cases as one example of an effective solecism. While John may be accused of using solecisms too lavishly, the point is clear: solecisms are not necessarily a sign of poor education, but could be chosen as a part of a deliberate strategy.

More specifically, Bousset, Charles, and Beale demonstrate that the solecism of

12. M. Jauhainen, *The Use of Zechariah in Revelation* (WUNT-2 199; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 20–21; Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse*, 97–100; S. Moyise, "Does the Author of Revelation Misappropriate the Scriptures?" *AUSS* 40 (2002): 3–21; J. Paulien, "Criteria and the Assessment of Allusions to the Old Testament in the Book of Revelation," in *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (ed. S. Moyise; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 113–129.

13. Quintilian, *Inst.* 9.31.5–10 (LCL; trans. H. E. Butler). Quintilian gives the exchange of cases as one example of an effective solecism (9.31.10).

a nominative in apposition to an oblique case suggests Hebrew syntax. It reminds the hearer, first, of the Jewish Christian origin of Revelation, and second, that the solecism may be combined with other signals to suggest an allusion to Jewish scripture.

### Allusion: Remapping Exodus plagues onto creation

How do we know when John is alluding to the Hebrew Bible? Or, more specifically, how do we know if *ta echonta psychas* is an allusion, and to what source? It is not an exact quotation of any known text. Some scholars note the phrase alludes to the fish killed in the first Exodus plague. With Massingberd Ford, Paulien, and Beale I argue below that it also refers to the creation narrative. Specifically, this phrase alludes to Genesis 1:20–21 within a remapping of the Exodus plagues onto creation.

To make this case, we need to clearly describe how to detect allusions. Marko Jauhiainen helps us do this by using the work of Zvi Ben-Porat. Ben-Porat defines:

An allusion is a device for the simultaneous activation of two texts. The activation is achieved through the manipulation of a special signal: a sign (simple or complex) in a given text characterized by an additional larger “referent.” This referent is always an independent text. The simultaneous activation of the two texts thus connected results in the formation of intertextual patterns whose nature cannot be predetermined.<sup>14</sup>

By this definition, an allusion is a simple or complex sign in the presence of a larger referent that has been previously signaled.

In the case of Rev 8:9, both the Exodus plague narrative and the creation

narrative are larger referents. First, the Exodus plagues (Exod 7–12) provide a general model for the kinds of plagues following the trumpet and bowls: water to blood, hail, locusts, darkness, etc.<sup>15</sup> The Exodus plagues also suggest the purpose

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The Exodus plagues also suggest the purpose of plagues in Revelation: to demonstrate the sovereignty of God to sinful humans and to liberate God’s people.

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of plagues in Revelation: to demonstrate the sovereignty of God to sinful humans and to liberate God’s people.<sup>16</sup>

Within this larger referent, the sign of water turning to blood specifically alludes to the first plague. It is natural that

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15. W. J. Harrington, *Revelation* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1993), 108. Cf. M. E. Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1989), 135; Rossing, “For the Healing of the Nations,” 168.

16. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 70–1; Boring, 135; P. Richard, *Apocalypse: A People’s Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Trans. P. Berryman; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 77; Woods, “Seven Bowls of Wrath,” 68; see the extensive discussion in Aune, 2:499–505.

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14. Jauhiainen, 29.

interpreters have understood *ta echonta psychas* as the fish who died in the Nile river.<sup>17</sup> Since the purpose of the plagues in Exodus also seems to be the purpose of the plagues in Revelation, these sea creatures are dying because of human sin.

The phrase *ta echonta psychas*, however, is not illuminated by the Exodus plagues. In Revelation, the location for the plague is the sea, whereas it is the river in Exodus. In Exod 7:21 LXX, the creatures are simply referred to as fish (*hoi ichthyes*). The creatures in Revelation are described with this ambiguous wording, saying they have "lives," which certainly includes fish but seems designed have a different ring. In other words, the connection with the Exodus plagues encourages the audience to remember the fish who died, but it does not explain the solecism or the use of *psychê*. The audience must search further for illumination.

The second larger referent is the creation narrative. The specific targets of the trumpet plagues evoke Gen 1: earth, trees and grass, the sea and sea creatures, the sun, moon and stars. As Caird says, "the plagues must be transferred from their local setting in Egypt to cover the whole natural order."<sup>18</sup> To make sense of the plagues in Revelation, it is necessary to recognize that the Exodus plagues are

here being remapped onto creation.

Within this context, the phrase *ta echonta psychas* becomes intelligible. It is a sign alluding to the language of Gen 1:20–21 LXX, *psychôn zôsôn* (in Hebrew *nephesh hayah*).

And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures (*psychôn zôsôn*), and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature (*pasan psychên zôôn*) that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."

Massingberd Ford was the first I know to suggest this.<sup>19</sup> Her suggestion was explored in greater depth and affirmed by Paulien and Beale. Paulien concludes:

since the undoing of creation is a structural theme of the seven trumpets, and Gen 1 is the only place in the Old Testament where sea creatures are described as having souls, a direct allusion is quite likely.<sup>20</sup>

(As an aside, Ezek 47:9 LXX is another use of *psychê* for sea creatures in the Old Testament, a fact that should be the topic of investigation beyond this paper.) The key to detecting the allusion in Rev 8:9 is the larger referent of the creation narrative combined with the complex sign *ta*

17. Bousset, 295; Charles, 1:234; Boring, 135; Aune, 2:499; Beale, *Revelation*, 477; R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (2nd ed; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 180; G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 113. Jon Paulien summarizes "[m]ost of the listed commentators see a reference to Exod 7:19–21 in the second trumpet" (*Decoding Revelation's Trumpets: Literary Allusions and the Interpretation of Revelation 8:7–12* [Berrien Springs: Andrews University, 1987], 253).

18. Caird, 113.

19. Her suggestion based on the fact that "the author does not use *ichthus* 'fish,' but a phrase which is closer, although not identical, to Gen 1:20–21." *Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 133.

20. Paulien, 253. Cf. Beale, *Revelation*, 477–478. It is not the only use of *psychê* for sea creatures—see Ezek 47:9 LXX.



*echonta psychas*. Syntactically, the solecism grabs the audience's attention and alerts it to the Hebrew background of the syntax. Lexically, the unique use of *psychê* evokes the specific language of Gen 1:20–21 LXX. The phrase certainly includes fish, and the allusion to the Exodus plagues, but the use of the term "life, soul" (*psychê*) with "creatures" (*ktismata*) draws the audience to Genesis.

By alluding to the creation narrative, John reminds the audience that the sea creatures were created on the fifth day, and that these creatures have *psychai*. The audience may recall that these are the same creatures that God saw as "good." These are the creatures that God blessed and that first received the command "be fruitful and multiply." In short, the allusion reminds the audience that these sea creatures have a relationship with God that is independent of human beings. God values these sea creatures. This is the first point: the sea creatures have "lives" or "souls," *psychai*. The last two parts of my thesis—that humans are invited to identify with these creatures and that humans are invited to mourn their death—build on this primary point.

### Inviting humans to identify

Human beings are invited to identify with sea creatures in three ways. Both humans and sea creatures are *psychai*, both are dying because of human sin, and both are praising God and the Lamb. First, both sea creatures and human beings are called *psychai* who are dying because of human sin. The use of the word *psychê* for sea creatures in Rev 8:9 is unique in the New Testament but not in Greek literature and philosophy. Lexicons such as BDAG and LSJ have long acknowledged that *psychê* can apply to both humans and non-humans. Debates about the difference between human and animals were common in Greek philoso-

phy, and the discussion of whether animals had souls and what kind of souls entered early Christian discourse. The book of Revelation is unique because it is the only place in the New Testament that refers to animals having *psychai*. Eduard Schweizer writes in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, "Only here [Rev 16:3]

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These are the  
creatures  
that God blessed and  
that first received the  
command "be fruitful  
and multiply."

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and in 8:9 is *psychê* used for animal life in the NT; in both cases marine creatures are in view."<sup>21</sup>

However, in Revelation *psychê* usually refers to human beings, and this fact encourages human listeners to identify with sea creatures in Rev 8:9. The most common use of the word is for the saints who are killed for their testimony. John sees *psychai* under the altar that have been slaughtered for their testimony to the Word of God (Rev 6:9). Those who defeat the dragon are the ones who did not love their *psychê*, even to death (12:11). After the dragon is imprisoned, those *psychai* who are beheaded for their testimony are raised to life (20:4). All of these examples highlight that *psychê* is typically used in Revelation to describe believers who give up their lives witnessing, human beings killed by

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21. Schweizer, "psychê" *TDNT* 9:2026–27.

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## The Lamb is not only for human beings, but for all creation that joins in praise of it.

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idolatrous, sinful powers of the dragon, the beast, and the great city Babylon.

The second way humans are invited to identify with sea creatures is that both are dying because of human sin, specifically because of the city Babylon that consumes *psychai*. Rev 8:9 juxtaposes the death of one third of sea creatures with the destruction of ships on the sea, which anticipates merchants in Rev 18 who have sailed their ships on the sea and have become rich selling goods to Babylon. Watching Babylon burn, the merchants lament that they will no longer be able to sell their goods to her. The catalog of goods climaxes with the phrase *sōmatōn kai psychas anthrōpōn* “bodies, even lives of human beings!” (18:13). John is reminded that slaves (literally “bodies”) are *psychai* who are trafficked by merchants like wine and other commodities. Revelation protests the commodification of life, even taunting Babylon that the “fruit which your *psychē* desired is gone from you!” (18:14). Once again, the point is that *psychai* are valued by God. Slaves are *psychai*, created by God, just like the believers who are killed, just like the sea creatures who are killed when a third of the sea turns to blood. When John describes in Rev 8:9 that these sea creatures have *psychai*, “lives,” and are dying because of sin, human beings can identify with them.

The third way that Revelation invites humans to identify with sea creatures is that both are portrayed as giving praise to God and the Lamb. In chapter 5, when the Lamb took the sealed scroll, the cosmos erupted in praise. Every creature “in heaven and in earth and under the earth and in the sea” joined in singing praise to the One Sitting on the Throne and to the Lamb (5:13). The phrase “every creature” (*pan ktisma*) emphasizes the relationship of Creator to creation (cf. 4:11; 10:6) and provides the background for *ktismatōn* in Rev 8:9. It emphasizes unity of all creatures, even those in the underworld, and portrays their common action: praise of the One Who Is Sitting on the Throne and the Lamb. Furthermore, it expresses a common relationship with the Lamb. The Lamb is not only for human beings, but for all creation that joins in praise of it.

### Translation and performance

How can the value of sea creatures in Revelation be retrieved and emphasized? I suggest two ways: re-translation of Rev 8:9 and a focus on the performance of the text. First, Rev 8:9 should be translated to express the abrupt syntax and nuance discussed above. In print, I suggest using long dashes and an exclamation point to emphasize the abrupt syntax and the word “life” to translate *psychē*. I have used “soul” occasionally during this paper to highlight the radical claim found in Rev 8:9, but I suggest that *psychē* should be consistently translated as “life” throughout Revelation to avoid a soul-matter dualism that denigrates creation. Rev 8:9 then may be translated: “A third of creatures in the sea—things that have life!—they died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.” This is similar to the way this verse was translated in early English translations.

Second, I suggest that performance of Rev 8:9 is able to express the nuances

described above. The relevant question is: how would this line be spoken? This is the question that first began my study of this verse. At that time I was translating Revelation to perform it, using performance criticism to analyze the text. As a method, Biblical Performance Criticism embraces many methods, reframes the biblical materials in the context of oral/scrabal cultures, constructs scenarios of ancient performances, learns from contemporary performances of these materials, and reinterprets biblical writings accordingly.<sup>22</sup> In short, Performance Criticism asks: how would it be spoken?

Some options for how to perform this verse include (1) informing or reminding, as a teacher instructing students, (2) surprise, as if John only just realized this as he was saying it, (3) sadness, in recognition of the toll of the plagues on all creatures. Based on the analysis in this paper, sadness seems to best communicate the importance of sea creatures who are valued *psychai* and who are united in praise and witness to God. By juxtaposing the death of these creatures with language recalling their creation, their loss is more profound and acute. This sadness helps to retrieve the voice of the sea creatures, crying out in anguish.

When all sea creatures die in Rev. 16:3, this tragedy is amplified. The word choice (*pasa psychê zôês*) in Rev 16:3 is almost identical to Gen 1:21 (*pasan psychên zôôn*) and this heightens the audiences' awareness that these are God's creatures, who have lives, *psychai*. Whatever emotion was evoked by Rev 8:9 is recalled here and amplified by the phrasing even closer to Gen 1:21.

In summary, the book of Revelation does provide motivation for human beings to change their relationship to sea creatures. First, Revelation depicts sea creatures as having *psychai*, having "lives." This means they are valued by God independent of human beings, in relationship to their creator. Second, Revelation invites human beings to identify with sea creatures. Both human beings and sea creatures have *psychai*. Both are praising God and the Lamb. Both are dying as a result of human sin. Third, this abrupt phrase interrupts the plagues to express sadness at the death of sea creatures. Given all this, human beings have reason to change economically, socially, politically, and theologically so that these *psychai*, from the smallest Bala Shark to the largest whale, may be fruitful and multiply.

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22. Cf. D. Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies—Part I," *BTB* 36 (2006:1–16) and "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies—Part II," *BTB* 36 (2006:164–184).

# Earth-Mission: The Third Mission of the Church

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In 2009 we celebrated the 40th anniversary of humans landing on the moon. Now we are hearing again the call for a Mars Mission costing trillions of dollars to “conquer” another planet. Meanwhile, planet Earth is experiencing an environmental crisis. It is time, I believe, for an Earth Mission rather than a Mars Mission. In recognition of the great work done by David Rhoads, I recommend an Earth Mission involving the following mandates:

- 1. To celebrate and protect our planet as sacred, a mysterious piece of stardust and a sanctuary filled with God’s presence (*kabod*). This mandate is a call to worship leaders.**
- 2. To enable the voice of Earth to be heard by empathizing with the various domains of our planet as they suffer injustices caused by humans. This mandate is a call for advocacy.**
- 3. To explore the ecosystems of Earth in order to discern just ways to balance the needs of all people and habitats of a planet in crisis. This mandate is a call to recognize the principle of Wisdom.**
- 4. To affirm that our ultimate motivation for healing Earth is grounded in the act of God becoming incarnate, part of planet Earth, to reconcile and heal all things. This mandate is a call for faith.**

An Earth Mission might well be called the

third mission of the church. Traditionally, the first mission of the church, grounded in Matt 28:19, has been to go into the world and preach the gospel to “save souls” or save human beings from personal sins. The second mission, grounded in Luke 4:18–19, extended the saving power of Christ to include saving lives, by liberating human beings from whatever forces oppressed them.

The third mission goes beyond the first two and embraces the whole Earth (Mark 16:15). This mission is intended to bring a message of good news for Earth. The gospel of Christ is for all creation, including planet Earth. This mission, however, involves more than preaching a message to creation. It involves a commitment to be custodians, advocates, wise scientists, and people of faith in the face of the current environmental crisis.

**Our First Mandate is to:**

**Celebrate and protect our planet as sacred, a mysterious piece of stardust and a sanctuary filled with God’s presence, in which we are welcome to worship.**

## Earth as sanctuary

The first mandate of the Earth Mission is grounded in two mysteries associated with our Creator God: the grace of creation and the gift of presence.

Planet Earth exists! We exist! And that is grace! Planet Earth exists as an amazing

moment in the time-space explosions of the cosmos. That is grace! Planet Earth is an amazing creation brought into being through the deep impulses of the cosmos that give birth to galaxies, black holes, and baby planets. That is grace! And we believe that the impulse behind all these impulses is our Creator. For this planet to exist in this time and place is grace indeed, a wonder beyond all wonders, a mystery beneath a mass of mysteries.

And that creating impulse called God is as active as ever, sustaining life and bringing life into existence. *Creatio continua* is not simply an ancient dogmatic idiom. The impulse called creation is bringing cosmic worlds and embryonic forms into existence every instant.

Our response to this ultimate expression of God's grace involves more than simply saying, "Thanks!" We are called to recognize this planet as sacred, as a unique place in the universe where the impulses of the Creator are expressed.

The sacred dimension of Earth is also expressed in a special way. Earth is a sacred site in the cosmos, a domain where God's presence is revealed in and through creation itself. The clues for this special revelation are first described in connection with God's appearance on Mount Sinai. On that sacred mountain the people of God saw God's *kabod*, that shining fire-cloud expressing God's visible presence. Later that same *kabod* of God's presence is said to have "filled" the holy of holies in the tabernacle. And even later, that same *kabod* "filled" the holy of holies in the temple of Solomon. The *kabod* was the shining visible expression of God's presence in the sanctuaries of Israel.

However, when Isaiah has his famous experience of God's presence in that same temple, the message sung by the seraphim has a new focus. In the original Sanctus, they cry:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts  
The whole Earth is filled with his  
*kabod*. (Isa 6:3)

The message is striking. That visible presence that once filled the tabernacle and the temple is now announced as filling the whole Earth. The text does not say, "heaven and Earth" as in the Sanctus of many liturgies, but the whole Earth. Earth is a sanctuary. Earth is filled with God's presence. Earth is alive with God's *kabod*! What an amazing message!

If Earth is indeed a sanctuary filled with God's presence, who are we? Just observers of this wonder? No. We are called to be guardians, custodians of this sacred planet. Or, if you will, priests in this tabernacle called Earth. What a privilege and what a possibility! Surely, as guardians and priests we are responsible for creating respect for, and developing the means of protecting, this sanctuary.

## The original mission

Where does this concept of humans functioning as custodians of Earth originate? We are so often reminded of how the mandate to dominate found in Gen 1:26–28 has influenced the way humans have both dominated and desecrated the planet. Permission to "rule over all creatures" and "subdue Earth" has been appropriated as the decisive word from God about how humans ought to relate to nature. Some political leaders have even begun to speak of conquering Mars and controlling space.

If we turn, however, to the creation story of Gen 2, we hear a totally different mission. The story begins with an image of Earth that is devoid of vegetation, rain, and a living creature to "serve" the land. The Hebrew word *abad* means "serve," whether that refers to a citizen serving a king or a priest serving in the temple. To

render the term as “till” detracts from the basic meaning of the concept. God creates a human being to overcome this need in the primal world. Humans are created precisely to “serve” Earth. Earth is not created for humans—just the opposite! The full implication of that custodianship becomes apparent when we recognize that Earth is a sanctuary of God’s presence, a presence experienced personally by our first parents in the forest of Eden.

### **Alienation from the Earth, “heavenism”**

Sad to say, over the course of history we humans have become alienated from Earth as our source and sacred habitat. The process that separated us from Earth goes back a long way. As children we were told to kneel at our bedside, close our eyes and pray to God—in heaven. God was in heaven looking down on Earth ready to bless little people like us. The spiritual world was in heaven—separated, distinct and superior to Earth. At least that is what our teachers implied. The world of heaven was a world apart, where God dwelt in splendor and majesty. That world was not only more glorious than Earth, it was also more valued and pure. Heaven was holy and very high. This valuing of heaven as God’s abode above meant a consequent devaluing of Earth as a mere footstool. In a word of God from the prophet: *Heaven is my throne and Earth is my footstool* ((Isa 66:1). A footstool indeed!

The underlying problem with this portrayal is that it devalues Earth. Heaven is spiritual, other-worldly, superior and pure. Heaven is where God dwells, Christ reigns and St Peter waits for us. Earth is where God visits, humans suffer and rabbits multiply. Earth is an alien place characterized by trials and tribulations; heaven is a domain of endless bliss. For Christians, it is better to be at home in

heaven than be an alien on Earth.

This orientation has sometimes been termed *heavenism*—a belief that ultimately heaven above is our true home and Earth is but a stopover on the road to eternity. We followed the popular interpretation of certain passages in the book of Hebrews believing that, like Abraham, we are strangers and aliens on Earth desiring a “better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb 11:14–16). With this text ringing in our ears we cheerfully sang: *Guide me O thou great Jehovah, Pilgrim through this barren land.*

The first mandate for Earth Mission summons us to return home to Earth, to celebrate Earth as a chosen sanctuary with God and by God, not merely a stopping place en route to heaven. We are called back to serve Earth as a sacred habitat.

### **Mission through worship**

That means starting with our worshipping community. We are called to find ways of raising the awareness of our worshipers and enriching their faith relative to the plight of Earth and our Earth Mission. This process of mission through worship involves more than preaching and prayer about the needs and future of Earth. *The Season of Creation*, known as *Creation Time* in Europe, provides an ideal context in which to explore, over an extended season of the church year, the key dimensions of an Earth Mission.<sup>1</sup> These key components include:

- a. An invocation and worship setting that consciously expresses our location in Earth as a sanctuary of God’s presence,

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1. See the worship resources at [www.seasonofcreation.com](http://www.seasonofcreation.com). For biblical exegesis from the perspective of Earth, see Norman Habel, ed., *The Earth Bible* (5 vols; Sheffield) and *An Inconvenient Text: Is a Green Reading of the Bible Possible?* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2009).

- b. An invitation to worship that involves worshipping with creation and our kin in creation rather than simply saying thanks for creation;
- c. A confession and absolution that takes into account our environmental sins and the underlying problem that we have become alienated from Earth as our home;
- d. Prayers that express empathy with Earth;
- e. A gospel that affirms both a deep incarnation and the cosmic Christ that reveal God's commitment to creation;
- f. A Eucharist that extends the healing blessing of the sacrament to Earth; and
- g. A closing commission to pursue an Earth ministry and mission.

The impetus to celebrate with creation and raise an awareness of mission through worship has begun to emerge in various church bodies around the globe. *The Season of Creation* is celebrated in some churches in Australia, America, and South Africa and promoted through the *Web of Creation* in Chicago. *Creation Time* is the designation for the same worship season fostered by the ECEN (European Christian Environmental Network). Their work links worship with a range of environmental activities and highlights the significance of worship as a vehicle for mission. *Creation Time* has been endorsed by Anglican bishops in London and Catholic bishops in the Philippines. This season was given special attention in a panel at the Parliament of World Religions in Melbourne, December 2009.

Many church bodies find it difficult to introduce a new season of the church year and modify the accepted sequence of readings or the components of the liturgy. The urgency of our mission to Earth challenges us to develop worship patterns that

reflect the very sanctuary in which we live and move and have our being.

#### **Our Second Mandate is to:**

**Enable the voice of Earth to be heard by empathizing with the various domains of our planet as they suffer injustices caused by humans.**

### **The cries of Earth**

The prophets of Israel were especially concerned about justice for oppressed people. They were also concerned about justice for Earth and members of the Earth community.

In Isaiah, Jeremiah and Joel, Earth is addressed as a subject who can hear God or the prophet's word (Isa 1:2; 34:1; 49:13; Jer 6:19; 22:29; Joel 2:21–22). Earth is portrayed as having emotions; Earth and the Earth community suffer and mourn (Isa 24:4; 33:9; Jer 4:28; 12:4, 11; 14:4; 23:10; Joel 1:18–20;). Earth can obey God's commands (Isa 43:6; 45:8; 48:13). Earth may tremble or quake in response to human or divine deeds (Jer 8:16; 10:10; 49:21). In short, Earth is a subject with a voice. Where do we hear the voice of Earth today?

Throughout the Prophets, God threatens Israel and other nations with the devastation of their lands. The natural domains are to be laid waste for the wrongs of their inhabitants. Earth suffers for the sins of the people! Jeremiah's vision of this devastation of Earth reaches cosmic proportions. He writes: *I looked on Earth, and lo, it was lifeless and empty! I looked to the skies and they had no light!* (4:23). In Jeremiah's vision, Earth returns to the lifeless and empty state (*tohu wabohu*) that existed before creation (in Gen 1:2). The birds flee, the mountains shake, and the farmlands become deserts. Earth suffers because of the fierce anger of God against the people.

Jeremiah also has his ear to the ground. He has a deep empathy for his land. He not only sees a vision of impending disaster, he also hears Earth crying out in pain (4:28). The empathy of Earth is also revealed here; she is not a passive, silent mound of matter. Jeremiah, in turn, is asked to weep and wail for the mountains, the fields and the animals (6:10).

The spiritual impulse for empathy is especially evident in an Earth reading of Jer 12. After screaming about personal injustice and the prosperity of the wicked, Jeremiah is moved by the empathy of Earth. The physical expressions of “mourning” seem to be drought and desolation; the spiritual dimension is anguish and pain in the face of Israel’s sin.

How long will Earth mourn,  
And the grass of every field wither?  
For the wickedness of those who live  
in it  
The animals and the birds are swept  
away,  
And because the people said,  
“He is blind to our ways.” (12:4)

Jeremiah discerned an impulse for empathy within the domains of Earth, a spiritual impulse reaching out to God (12:11). The anguish of creation is more than a poetic metaphor. It reflects an inner impulse to suffer with the creatures of Earth, including human beings. Earth mourns because human beings have become spiritually blind and lost.

## Indigenous listening

Many of the indigenous people of Earth have experienced the suffering of Earth and groaned deeply since the European invasion of their lands. Their spiritual kinship with Earth often means that they are more sensitive to the cries of creation than most Western Christians. They experience the

land suffering. The groaning of creation and the Spirit that Paul hears and records in Rom 8 has its counterpart in the lived experiences of indigenous people today. The suffering of the land is linked to what some indigenous Australians call the “Spirit of the land,” the spiritual presence in the land. In the words of the Rainbow Spirit Elders, “the Creator Spirit is crying because the deep spiritual bonds with the land and the people have been broken.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the most powerful expressions of this suffering is reflected in a poem by Mary Duroux.

My mother, my mother  
what have they done?  
Crucified you  
like the Only Son?  
Murder committed  
by mortal hand!  
I weep, my mother,  
my mother, the land.<sup>3</sup>

We noted earlier how Earth, in biblical texts, suffers vicariously for the sins of the people. Earth still suffers today because of the wrongs committed by humanity against God’s creation. Earth is indeed a Christ figure. In Duroux’s words, the profound abuse of her mother, the land, can only be compared with what happened to the Crucified One.

## Cries for justice

At the very end of his oath of innocence, Job swears that he will let his land become thorns and weeds if the land has “cried out” against him and its furrows “wept together” (31:38–40). Job is sensitive to the need for justice in his community. He also knows the cry of injustice that can rise

2. Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology* (Harper Collins, 1997), 42.

3. Duroux, *Dirge for Hidden Art* (Morinya: Heritage Publishing, 1992), 20.



from Earth (cf., Joel 1:10, 18, 20).

It is an axiom of social justice that the true nature, depth, and force of any injustice can only be understood by those experiencing that injustice. So too with justice for Earth! The suffering of creation today is probably far more extensive and serious than in Job's day. The cries of the fallen forest, the dying deserts and the polluted air rise daily from Earth. We need to hear Earth and empathize with Earth.

Social justice and eco-justice, however, are closely connected. The prophets repeatedly called on God's people to "do justice and show compassion" (Micah 6:8). A second look at the passages describing the anguish of Earth in the Prophets reveals that their cries are related to what humans have done.

In the words of Leonardo Boff,

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. Exod 3:7) and the cry of Earth (cf. Rom 8:22–23). Both seek liberation of the poor...and liberation of the Earth.<sup>4</sup>

The poor of Earth are the most vulnerable in times of ecological disaster, and the plight of the poor is likely to reach disastrous proportions in the near future. The melting of the Arctic and Antarctic ice caps is expected to raise sea levels and make numerous indigenous people and island nations into "environmental refugees."

The island of Tuvalu in the Pacific is one such island. It will be one of the first to be inundated with water. Some of the Christian elders of the island are not worried. They believe that the promise God made to Noah that God will never again flood the Earth still applies today. Tuvalu

is safe from any flooding! Or is it?

Sad to say, the Noah covenant will not save the island. It is not surprising then that some of the Tuvalu leaders have approached Australia about the possibility of relocating in Australia as an independent nation. Yes, we need to promise the sea that we will, like Noah, take care of the refugees.

## Mission through advocacy

The prophets of old and the indigenous people of many lands offer us examples of how those in the past have listened to Earth and expressed her anger, anguish, and hope. The challenge before us is how we can be contemporary prophets who give voice to the sufferings of Earth in a meaningful way. The anguish of Earth is apparent in so many arenas of our world.

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Where  
is the  
prophetic voice of  
the church being  
heard in the current  
environmental crisis?

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The forests, the rivers, the arable lands, the atmosphere, and the oceans are all suffering degradation at the hands of humans. And they are all calling for someone to hear their cries and articulate their plight. The Earth, in turn, summons us to hear the cries for justice rising from the poor, weak, and vulnerable.

Where is the prophetic voice of the church being heard in the current environmental crisis? A few bodies like the

4. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1997), 104.

Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches have contributed documents to the debate before and after the Copenhagen Conference.<sup>5</sup> Much more needs to be done so that the message will be heard among people in our churches.

### The Third Mandate is to:

**Explore the ecosystems of Earth to discern just ways to balance the needs of all people and the habitats of a planet in crisis—a call for wisdom.**

## The ways of wisdom

Any mission that involves seeking to heal Earth, or adapting to the changing environmental circumstances on Earth, inevitably involves close cooperation with the scientists of our ages—be they meteorologists, physicists, environmentalists, or geologists. Our mission cannot be effective if it merely concentrates on prayer and pious dreams. Our mission must involve science.

Thinkers around the globe are currently trying to understand the nature of climate change and how we can best come to terms with the crisis that seems imminent. We could view this crisis as the judgment of God on the greedy ways of humanity—an archaic prophetic approach. We could see it as but another cycle in the long-term weather patterns that surround our planet—a paleo-climatology approach. Or we could perhaps read it as a God-given sign of the end times—a narrow apocalyptic approach.

There is, I believe, another way of approaching this phenomenon that has been given little consideration by biblical scholars. Within the biblical traditions, wisdom represents a school of thought

that seeks to understand both society and nature in a realistic way. The observation of nature is an integral part of the task of “gaining wisdom.” And gaining wisdom, I suggest, may be of considerable value in the current environmental climate. The wise may be classified as the scientists of the ancient world, sages who depended on the observation of creation and society rather than direct revelation from God.

Have you ever wondered why a frog always jumps like a frog and never runs like an ant? Have you ever been fascinated by the way a baby bird learns to fly as a bird rather than swim like an eel? There is something inbuilt in each creature that enables it to be true to its nature. Scientists have examined this phenomenon in terms of genetics or ecosystems.

This mystery is also one that occupied the minds of the wise in the ancient world. The wise used a number of terms in reference to this inner code. The most explicit term is “the way” (*derek* in Hebrew). In some contexts, the term “way” (*derek*) has a technical sense.<sup>6</sup> It refers to the inner code of behavior that characterizes a phenomenon of the natural world. The way of something reflects its essential character, its instinctual nature, its internal impulse. So the way of an eagle is to soar across the sky and with its eagle eye to discern prey far below. The way of a snake is to slither across rocks without any legs and to camouflage its presence in the grass.

As noted above, the wise are the scientists of old, those committed to observing phenomena and trying to “discern” their very nature. The verb “to discern” (*bin*) might readily be translated “to research through close examination.” The person

5. See Karen Bloomquist, ed., *God, Creation and Climate Change: Spiritual and Ethical Perspectives* (Lutheran World Federation/Lutheran University Press, 2009).

6. For this argument see Norman Habel, “The Implications of God Discovering Wisdom in Creation” in E. J. van Wolde, ed., *Job 28: Cognition in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 281–298, especially 286.

with the necessary cognitive skills of discernment can discover the “code” or “way” of what is being examined. Behind those various codes the ancient wise discerned wisdom as a dynamic blueprint, a force that integrated all the laws of nature. Wisdom is the system behind the eco-systems of the universe. The task of the wise is one we may well wish to emulate in the current climate context, especially when we see species disappearing and their “way” on our planet becoming extinct.

In other words, the wise of the ancient world explored the “ways” of wisdom just as scientists today seek to understand the laws of nature—everything from the gravity that governs galaxies to the forces that control genes. Only in recent years have they really begun to grasp the complexity of the laws that govern the ecosystems that influence the climate that envelopes our planet. Our mission depends on working with scientists to understand the “ways” of Earth and what humans have done to affect them.

## Pursuing folly or wisdom

The environmental folly of humanity in the last hundred years or so is immediately apparent. Especially significant is the folly involved in breaking the boundaries of several domains.

According to the wise, the scientists of old, each domain had its “place” and the elements of each domain have their “place” or locus in nature (Job 28). Humans, however, have extracted fossil fuels from their “place” in the domains below Earth where they belong, transformed them into various gaseous forms, and disseminated them in another domain, namely, the atmosphere. The result is an atmosphere overloaded with greenhouses and a disruption of the existing balance in the “ways” or laws of nature.

The dilemma we now face is a change in climate patterns. The previous codes or

ways which governed the cycle and pattern of the winds, seas, storms, and droughts seem to have been disrupted. The laws that govern the weather patterns seem to have changed. Let me illustrate from the 2009 bushfires in the State of Victoria in Australia. As a boy on the farm I knew the “way” of bushfires. I knew the force of the hot North wind. I knew the speed of the fire and the time needed to prepare for the actual flames. I knew how to burn firebreaks to retard the fire. But with climate change, all of these factors changed.

On Black Saturday—February 7, 2009—all the known patterns of a bushfire were transcended. More than 180 people were burned alive. 7000 people became homeless. Graham Mills, from the Centre for Australian Weather and Climate Research is quoted in *The Australian* of February 10 as saying: “On Saturday the temperature set a new set of records. When you get these conditions, nobody has really had experience of them before.” With Black Saturday the paradigm of a typical bushfire changed, the furor intensified and the classic bushfire scenario was superseded. The “way” of the bushfire we once knew has been superseded.

This example can be multiplied. The way of the seemingly eternal ice caps has changed and seas are rising. The ways of the storm, the drought, and the floods have changed. The way of the ocean is changing as villages, like those on the shores of Orissa on the Bay of Bengal, are inundated by incoming waters. With these changes in the codes of our climate, how do we interpret our cosmos? Where do we find wisdom?

## The Joseph Principle

Involvement of scientists in the Earth Mission involves far more than providing evidence and explanations for the various climate change phenomena that are

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Pharaoh  
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becoming ever more obvious. The skill of the scientist is vital to our understanding of the environmental crisis and its potential effects on both the planet and her people. It is now crucial that science is also an agent of wisdom, a means of warding off disasters and providing means of survival.

In this context the wisdom of the so-called Joseph Principle may prove helpful. Pharaoh, you will recall, has a dream about seven fat cows and seven thin cows. The thin cows consume the fat cows and remain as thin as before they ate. Joseph interprets the dream as a portend of famine. There will be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Unless Pharaoh stores some of the food grown during the years of plenty, the years of famine will be disastrous. Joseph is then put in charge of rescuing Egypt from the impending disaster.

This tradition highlights what we might call the Joseph Principle: ***It is wise in times of relative prosperity to prepare for the day of impending scarcity.*** Or in contemporary terms, while the planet still remains relatively prosperous we need to prepare for the oncoming disasters caused by global warming. This principle is consistent with the counsel offered in biblical proverbs that recognise wisdom as a greater

good than wealth (e.g., Prov 16:16).

It is significant to recognise that the Earth Mission presented here is intended to engage the world of science as integral to healing and survival. This mission, however, is not just intended for the elite scientist. All who explore the “ways” of nature and seek to understand the wisdom in the complex interconnected ecosystems of our planet have the potential to be wise scientists.

#### **The Fourth Mandate is to:**

**Affirm that, as Earth beings, our ultimate motivation for healing Earth is grounded in the act of God becoming incarnate, a part of planet Earth, to reconcile and heal all things.**

Ecology has begun to change our understanding of the world. We are faced with the challenge of a new view of the natural world, a new understanding of the universe, a new cosmology that has little in common with the biblical, the geocentric or the heliocentric cosmologies of the past. We are becoming aware of an eco-cosmology, a worldview where ecology conditions our thinking. In the light of ecology, we also have a rich new understanding of Earth.

Earth is a living planet. Earth is also a community of kin. Recent research in biology, genetics, and evolutionary science has reminded us that we are kin with all other living things in Earth. As human beings we are related to all living things; some creatures are close relatives and other are distant kin. Some seem friendly and others fierce. But we are related to all, whether they are ants or elephants, sea horses or hidden organisms. Deep within, the genetic coding of humans is little different from that of most other animals. We belong to the same family, a community of kin.

## Earth incarnation

Our concern for creation is also grounded in God's own commitment to creation revealed through the incarnation. The incarnation means that the Creator becomes a creature; the God whose presence permeates Earth becomes a human born of Earth. God becomes an Earth being. As Irenaeus and other theologians have long recognised, this action of God means that God becomes incarnate in humanity not simply in a Jew from Galilee. God, however, becomes incarnate in more than humanity. God becomes "flesh," the very stuff of Earth.

The classic text of John 1:14 reads:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

The first significant feature of the incarnation announced here is that God, the creating Word, becomes flesh. God becomes flesh, the Creator becomes clay, the Word becomes Earth. The Word incarnate (*logos ensarkos*) has all the biological elements of a human body.

Jesus breathes the same air as all the living creatures on Earth, eats food grown from the same ground and drinks water from the same raindrops. The natural biological processes of human flesh are true of the man Jesus. Jesus smells, tastes, and feels in the same way that all humans do. In Jesus, God joins the web of life, becomes part of Earth's biology.

A second significant feature is the reference to God's glory, the very glory we discussed earlier. The glory of God that once filled the temple and, according to Isaiah, fills all of Earth and "dwells" in flesh. Or as the original Greek implies, God's presence "tabernacles" in a human abode as the glory of God once tabernacled in

the wilderness. The very presence of God that fills Earth fills Jesus. Our immanent God who fills all creation may be seen in creation, but this God is revealed in a definitive way in Jesus Christ.

Through Jesus, the God immanent in creation is more fully revealed. That revelation, however, not only unveils a deeper dimension of God. It also reveals a deeper dimension of creation. Jesus, the Incarnate Word, reveals creation as an expression of God who is something more than a great and mighty Creator. In Jesus we also meet creation as the revelation of a suffering God. Creation participates by way of the cross.

If we recognise Earth as a living organism, can we also say God became "incarnate" in Earth? Does Jesus the creature represent all creation? The answer, we believe, is yes! Jesus, as animated dust from the ground, is that piece of Earth where God's presence is concentrated in the incarnation. God becomes flesh, clay, Earth. Just as Luther says of the sacrament, "God is wholly in the grain and the grain is holy in God,"<sup>7</sup> we can say of the incarnation, "God is wholly in that piece of Earth called Jesus and that piece of Earth, that is holy in God, represents all of Earth."<sup>8</sup> This incarnation may be called a deep incarnation or even an Earth incarnation. Jesus is the Word of God incarnate in flesh from Earth. Jesus is the presence of God incarnate in Earth, a planet in the depths of the cosmos. As Niels Gregersen writes,

In this context, the incarnation of

7. Larry Rasmussen, "Returning to our Senses: The Theology of the Cross as a Theology of Ecojustice" in Dieter Hessel *After Nature's Revolt. Ecojustice and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 42.

8. Habel, "The Crucified Land: Towards our Reconciliation with the Earth" *Colloquium* 28 (1996), 14.

God in Christ can be understood as a radical or “deep” incarnation, that is, an incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence, the system of nature. Understood in this way, the death of Christ becomes an icon of God’s redemptive co-suffering with all sentient life as well as the victims of social competition.<sup>9</sup>

It is this God in this piece of Earth, this God immersed in our biology, this God incarnate deep in creation, that we know as Jesus Christ, the Crucified One. The gospel is a message that embraces creation through this Earth incarnation. The Earth Mission before us is anticipated by God’s own mission. God’s commitment to creation in the incarnate Christ is a call for us to follow suit. We are called as followers of Christ, to follow the commitment of God to creation through Christ.

## The cross in creation

Human reason tends to favor theologies of glory in which God’s power and might triumph gloriously. The God of suffering love revealed in Jesus Christ lives as a servant and dies a shameful death on a cross. Yet this is the very God whose presence fills Earth. Through the cross, the true nature of this God has been revealed as the one suffering both with God’s people and with creation. Beneath the Earth that trembled at the appearance of God in the storm, was a God suffering with the victim of the onslaught. The cross reveals to us that the God whose presence fills Earth is the suffering God known to us at Calvary. This God is part of the Earth Mission, suffering and healing in, with, and under planet Earth. As people of faith, we affirm God’s incarnate presence in the pains of

the current ecological crisis.

The God whose presence fills Earth and who suffers with creation is also the God who through Christ is renewing creation and reconciling the alienated parties in creation. How is reconciliation and renewal of creation achieved? There is a trinity of empathy longing for this renewal of creation. Sensitive humans, creation itself, and the Spirit of God, all three are groaning in anticipation of a renewed creation, born of this creation (Rom 8:18–28). In what work of God is this renewal grounded?

Ultimately all reconciliation is achieved through God’s suffering on the cross. This reconciliation brings peace between God and humans (2 Cor 5:18) as well as between human communities in conflict (Eph 2:14–16). Of special significance here is the message of Paul that this reconciliation extends to “all things.” God reconciles “all things” to God’s self whether they are in heaven or on Earth (Col 1:20). All alienation in creation is being overcome. This work of God is a “deep” reconciliation, a radical healing that reaches into all corners of the cosmos.

How? By a spectacular cosmic conquest? No! Peace is made “through the blood of the cross.” Peace is effected through the God who suffers on the cross and with creation. Embodied in that piece of Earth called Jesus Christ, God bonds with Earth in the battle against those forces of sin and evil that destroy peace and perpetuate alienation. In Christ, then, Earth too suffers and bears the cross. The land too is crucified with the incarnate God. God thereby liberates Earth.

The sin that Christ overcomes is not merely the personal wrong of individual humans, but the massive corporate sin and environmental injustice perpetrated against our planet. Christ is the “lamb of God” who not only takes away my sins, but

9. Gregerson, “The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40 (2001), 205.

as our liturgy says, “the sins of the whole world.” And those sins include our crimes against creation. In short, God incarnate also dies for Earth. Earth and its human inhabitants are one.<sup>10</sup>

If this healing process of God is alive today, then struggle, suffering, and the cross of Christ continue to be the vehicle for reconciliation, for reconnecting the alienated and disconnected pieces of God’s world. God’s wounded planet will not be healed by God waving some grand cosmic wand that removes all ills and immediately turns people into friends of Earth. Only by taking up the cross will the suffering turn into healing and the broken be mended.

The incarnate Christ becomes the risen Christ, the one who is already at work transforming the cosmos, renewing creation and reconciling all things. The resurrection is more than the rising of an individual human from the grave; it is the rising of creation, the creation in which God became incarnate. Christ rises with creation, with the Earth that he embraced in his body and in his grave.

### **Earth Mission through faith**

The first three mandates focus on mission through worship, through advocacy, and through science. Ultimately, however, people of faith need a deep spiritual ground

for their mission. Those involved in Earth Mission need to have a deep sense of their nature as Earth beings who are responsible for Earth. As Earth beings, rather than souls en route to heaven, they need to be the eyes and ears of the cosmic Christ and discern God’s immanent presence, not only in the splendours of nature, but also in the groaning of creation.

As Earth beings with faith, we are called to sense more than scientific unknowns in our planet. We are called to sense the very mystery of God in everything from evolving embryos to emigrating godwits. We are called to sense the suffering of God in the flesh, in the soil, in the sea, and in the air, no matter how polluted they may be by human abuses. We are, in fact, called to faith in a world where the distant God we once knew has become obsolete and the God incarnate in our planet needs to be rediscovered. Our mission is to reveal the God suffering in, with, and under our planet.

How do we foster a faith formation that is bold, radical, and vital for the future of our habitat? The tradition of preaching, teaching, and pastoral care has a long history of concern for faith in personal and social contexts. The move into a creation context in crisis is a leap of faith indeed.

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10. Habel, *The Crucified Land*, 15.

# Creativity in Earthkeeping: The Contribution of Joseph Sittler's *The Structure of Christian Ethics* to Ecological Theology

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## Introduction

It is appropriate to honor the gracefully persistent and effective environmental ministry of David Rhoads by revisiting the legacy of his friend and mentor, Joseph Sittler. It was Dave who introduced me to Sittler's writings by suggesting my appointment to work for the Joseph Sittler Archives at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) in 2007. Since that time, he and I have had many helpful conversations about Sittler's work.

Indeed, Sittler is a figure of particular centrality to the identity of LSTC, the setting from which Dave has pursued so much of his ecological advocacy. Having retired from several decades of teaching at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, Sittler spent the last fifteen years of his life as Distinguished Professor in Residence at LSTC. In connection with both positions, he mentored several generations of pastors, academics, and church leaders while making substantial scholarly contributions to the fields of systematic theology, ethics, biblical hermeneutics, and religion and literature. However, since he preferred the publication of occasional essays and lectures to that of full-length books, it has been difficult for non-specialists to access the broad contours of his work since they

must do so without the aid of any kind of comprehensive *summa* produced by the author himself.

That being said, I contend that Christians engaged in the sort of ecological considerations that Dave has pursued throughout his career would do well to consider the ongoing relevance of Sittler's mid-twentieth century writings to contemporary theology, particularly as that theology seeks to articulate specifically Christian rationales for ecological intervention. Sittler is often referred to as a "pioneering" ecological theologian, given that his earliest writings on theology's relationship to environmental ethics date from the early 1950s—over a decade before Rachel Carson's 1962 text *Silent Spring* would bring ecology to the forefront of the North American conversation. While this appellation invariably is meant as a compliment, it can just as easily imply benign dismissal: to be a "pioneer" is associated with the condition of being "first" but can also imply being "out-of-date," surpassed by the later efforts that the pioneer's work makes possible. Such, at least, might be one explanation as to why the voluminous contemporary literature on eco-theology and ethics regularly credits Sittler with foresight in identifying the coming crisis of environmental degradation and theol-



ogy's mandate to address it, but spends less time in deep exegesis of his work or in constructive furthering of its central propositions.

What I propose to do in this essay is contribute to a project that I hope will be undertaken by many scholars in the near future: a sustained and widespread reassessment of Sittler's theology as a resource, not simply of historical interest to contemporary ecological theology, but for constructively addressing the massive theological challenge of our time: to speak a credible and compelling word of gospel to a world becoming ever more aware of the growing threat of environmental degradation in all its disturbing facets, and subsequently to outline an ethical vision grounded in that theology. I will not, however, give main attention to the writings in which Sittler explicitly addresses environmental concerns.<sup>1</sup> Rather, I would like to suggest that another text in Sittler's *oeuvre*, his early book *The Structure of Christian Ethics* (1958), stands as a valuable contribution to one of the pressing questions faced by those wishing to articulate a theologically compelling rationale for ecological activism: what specific resources from the Christian tradition can most effectively be brought to bear upon the task of thinking ethically about environmental concerns?

Sittler's more explicitly environmental essays such as "Care of the Earth," "Called to Unity," and "Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility" provide more

1. The unsurpassed resource for those wishing to engage the writings in which Sittler does directly engage the relationship between theology and environmental ethics is the anthology *Evocations of Grace: The Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology, Theology and Ethics*, ed. Stephen Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2000).

substance concerning the specific doctrinal loci (particularly the relationship of nature to grace, Christology, and soteriology) upon which Sittler drew to craft what he called his "theology of the incarnation applied to nature."<sup>2</sup> My contention, however, is that *The Structure of Christian Ethics* manifests a certain style of Christian ethical thinking that both clarifies Sittler's own writings on environmental theology and offers some intriguing possibilities for future work in Christian ecological ethics. To support this claim, I will first examine some key elements of Sittler's vision for Christian ecological responsibility before turning to the text of the *Structure of Christian Ethics* itself to discover how Sittler's assertions there limn and amplify that same vision.

## A rhetoric of responsibility

At the risk of oversimplifying the work of a notoriously labyrinthine and unsystematic thinker, one can portray the overarching drive of Sittler's ecological theology as the drive to articulate a contemporary rhetoric<sup>3</sup> of ecological *responsibility* with respect to two fundamental data available to Christians: the graced character of nature as God's creation and the growing capacity

2. "My theology is not one derived from nature, it is a theology of the incarnation applied to nature which is quite different." Sittler, *Gravity and Grace: Reflections and Provocations*, ed. Thomas S. Hanson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2005), 54.

3. I choose the term "rhetoric" here in acknowledgment of Sittler's insistence, repeated throughout many of his writings, that one of the main theological tasks facing the contemporary church is finding an adequate language by which to describe and investigate core concepts and beliefs. In other words, for Sittler, how one talks about a problem is as important as any proposed solution.

of humanity to render the natural world plastic to humanity's own projects.<sup>4</sup> The former, as Sittler often insisted, is implied in the indispensability of the appellation "creation" (with its implied concomitant, "Creator") for Christian descriptions of

results of that shift in his description of humanity as "*homo operator*:"

This [contemporary] man is primarily *homo operator*! He is up to the neck involved in fantastically complicated, incessant transactions with some aspect of the life and productivity of nature. He is extracting, refining, fabricating, transforming, transporting, assembling, selling, redesigning, thinking about how to do something which has not been done before with the ever more abundantly available forces and products of a rationalized and managed nature.<sup>5</sup>

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Sittler was  
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and spiritual health.

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Given the thoroughgoing character of humanity's accession (particularly in developed nations) to the role of "manager" over nature, Sittler displays little interest in entertaining visions of a quasi-Luddite retreat from that position. One looks in vain in Sittler's writings for any confidence on the theologian's part that withdrawal from the legacy of the Industrial Revolution could even be possible, much less desirable. However, Sittler was deeply engaged in discerning how theology could name the threats—spiritual and material—that such a managerial approach to nature could pose to ecological and spiritual health. Long before 1967, when Lynn White Jr. galvanized theological attention to environmental degradation by arguing—while writing as a Christian himself—that the Judeo-Christian tradition bears substantial guilt for modern ecological traumas, Sittler was already in

the natural world. The latter stems from the paradigm shift, characteristic of modernity, by which humanity regards nature less as a threatening Other to the human endeavor and more as a storehouse of raw material (land, fuel, etc.) for the furtherance of human aims. Sittler captures the

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4. For a sustained interdisciplinary discussion between theologians and scientists concerning the problematics of the term "nature" and the implications of that term's attenuation for theology, see the excellent collection of essays *Without Nature? A New Condition for Theology*, ed. David Albertson and Cabell King (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

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5. Sittler, *The Anguish of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Augsburg, 1966), 18. When quoting him, I have chosen to retain Sittler's original use of masculine terminology for generic humanity with the understanding that, were Sittler writing today, he almost certainly would have modified his own language toward more inclusive standards.

the process of seeking out resources for diagnosing human rapaciousness toward nature as a spiritual malady so as to facilitate deployment of sufficiently reworked Christian theological loci as provocations towards more salutary human interactions with the natural world.

Sittler's explorations of cosmic Christology ("Called to Unity"), grace (*Essays on Nature and Grace*), and creative reworking of the Augustinian use/enjoyment dialectic ("The Care of the Earth") are well-known instances of this theological strategy, and Sittler scholars have documented the nuances of his treatment of these topics in substantial detail; thus, I will not rehearse those discussions here.<sup>6</sup> What I do contend, however, is that virtually all of Sittler's writings on ecology and theology can be comprehended, faithfully if not exhaustively, under a rubric of ecological responsibility derived from the two senses of "creation" discussed above. Because nature as God's creation (the first sense of "creation") is fundamental to the Earth's identity, and creativity in interacting with nature—"creation" in the second sense, which involves producing novelty, initiating movement, and shaping such previously unshapeable structures as mountains and atoms—has become, for better or worse, an inescapable concomitant of

contemporary humanity's self-image,<sup>7</sup> proper human acknowledgment of the former reality must stem from, and be reflected in, proper human exercise of its own creative capacities *vis-à-vis* nature.

This rubric suggests that an adequately theological and ecological Christian ethic toward nature would have to take human creativity seriously; moreover, in a manner entirely in keeping with Sittler's lifelong conceptual daring as a constructive theologian, such positive (if reservedly so) appraisal of human creativity would extend to the theoretical realms (i.e. philosophy, theology, ethics, etc.) as much as the material (science, technology, etc.). As Sittler's student and later colleague Philip Hefner has suggested in multiple venues, humans exercising their creative capacities can, by virtue of these capacities as gifts from God, merit the appellation "created co-creators" with God.<sup>8</sup> My point is that the emphasis upon the two senses of creation found in Sittler's theoretical interventions into the fields of ecology and theology suggests that this creativity extends to the fields of morality and ethical reflection no less

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6. In my view, the single best critical discussion of Sittler's writings on ecology and theology remains Peter Bakken's unpublished doctoral dissertation. See Bakken, "The Ecology of Grace: Ultimacy and Environmental Ethics in Aldo Leopold and Joseph Sittler," unpublished PhD. dissertation (University of Chicago, 1991). For a more accessible account, see Stephen Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Jürgen Moltmann* (Atlanta: AAR, 1995).

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7. Here one could protest, with some justification, that Sittler's depiction of the contemporary human as *homo operator* is really a picture of the man or woman that exists in "developed" nations, particularly in the West. For an incisive contemporary portrayal of how populations in developing nations are interacting, often antagonistically, with Western (particularly American) patterns of consumption and ecological damage, see Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2005).

8. Cf. Hefner, *Technology and Human Becoming* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003).

than those of technology.<sup>9</sup>

John Wall, an ethicist whose recent work shares substantial similarity with Sittler's approach, points out in his study of the relationship between creativity and morality that such a move runs counter to several venerable traditions of ethical thought, including the most common renditions of Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Kantianism. As Wall puts it, these traditions have in common the supposition that "the task of moral practice and inquiry...is not to invent moral practices but to recover past virtues or values or to uncover and live by moral standards that are fixed and unmoving. It is not to transform, open up, innovate, or instigate, but to repeat, ground, or bring closure."<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to this deeply ingrained suspicion of creativity in classical ethics, Wall offers his own defense of the proposition that the realm of human ethics is inherently creative:

Moral practice and reflection may seem far removed from creative activity, but in fact, I claim, it is both possible and absolutely necessary that human beings create, on the basis of what has already been created in history, new and hitherto unimagined social relations and worlds. One source of evil in the world is the human propensity to deny its original creative capability by clinging to narrow or fixed historical

9. A sustained call for—as well as performative enactment of—such ethical creativity on Sittler's own part can be found in his many late writings on aging, death, and biomedical ethics. See, for instance, his 1984 speech "Dying, Ethics, and Theology," available as an audio recording at the Joseph Sittler Archives located at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

10. Wall, *Moral Creativity: Paul Ricoeur and the Poetics of Possibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7.

worldviews from the past, acquiescing in distorted systems of power in the present, or failing to engage with others in the formation of a more genuinely human and inclusive future. Part of our moral responsibility under such fallen conditions is the ever more perfect realization of our own primordially creative possibilities both in how we act in the world and in how we think about how to act. To be created in the image of a Creator is one way of saying, in part, that we are perpetually responsible for fashioning new moral worlds within the multiplicity, disorder, complexity, and tragedy of human life.<sup>11</sup>

Wall's location of human creativity (as a concomitant of that other primordial datum, the existence of a Creator) at the center of theological ethics parallels what I will be suggesting is Sittler's basic project in *The Structure of Christian Ethics*: to outline a vision of the Christian project of thinking about, and acting upon, ethical mores that eschews the false security of immutable ethical verities (particularly as those are then systematized into comprehensive ethical systems) in favor of a more dynamic, ambiguous, and ultimately biblical construal of a life lived in obedience to the demands and promise of the gospel.

## Dynamic Obedience: The Argument of Sittler's *Structure of Christian Ethics*

Sittler's *The Structure of Christian Ethics*, which originally took the form of three lectures, is his attempt to suggest that the reality that gives a "structure" to Christian ethics is not an *a priori* system of ethical givens of which Jesus' body of teachings is a mere exemplar—the great mistake of, for instance, much nineteenth-century liberal Protestant ethical thought. Rather, it is the

11. *Ibid.*, 5

dynamic call to obedience issued by a very particular living God—the God of Abraham and Jacob, the God made manifest in the Incarnation of Jesus the Christ.

The organic content of Jesus' address... was not composed of highly personal epigrams condensed from the most elegant moral idealism ever envisioned by man in his quest for the good. This content was constituted, rather, by a lived-out and historically obedient God-relationship in the fire of which all things are what they are by virtue of the Creator, all decisions are crucial in virtue of their witness to his primacy and glory, all events interpreted in terms of their transparency, recalcitrancy, or service to God's kingly rule.<sup>12</sup>

This statement by Sittler from *The Structure of Christian Ethics* encompasses virtually every facet of that book's brief but potent argument: the biblical witness to Jesus Christ as the source and norm of Christian ethical thinking, the inadequacy of prefabricated or overly systematized ethical categories for translating the vitality of that witness, and the pattern of Christian ethical life as conformity to the Creator's kingdom. While it is not my intention here to give extensive summary of the text, I will highlight those aspects of Sittler's argument that are most salient for addressing the following questions: what theological description of ethical life reinforces the theological notion that human ethics are responsible to "creation" in both of that term's senses? And what might such an ethical vision contribute to ecological theology and ethics today?

The call to obedience, as experienced by the contemporary Christian, is thor-

oughly christological in shape, which means that for Sittler the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus becomes not only the manifestation of God's will but also the paradigm by which the believer responds to God's salvific activity.

The Christian life is [in the New Testament] understood as a re-enactment from below on the part of men of the shape of the revelatory drama of God's holy will in Jesus Christ. The dynamics of this life are not abstractly indicated, nor is its creative power psychologically explicated. Suffering, death, burial, resurrection, a new life—these are actualities which plot out the arc of God's self-giving deed in Christ's descent and death and ascension; and precisely *this same shape of grace*, in its recapitulation within the life of the believer and the faithful community, is the nuclear matrix which grounds and unfolds as the Christian life. (36, Sittler's emphasis).

Sittler's concern here is to stress that, within the Bible's pattern of fully "organic" speech and Jesus' pattern of unrelenting living obedience to God's will, the Christian life is inexplicable in any terms other than that same organic, vital pattern. "Christian ethics is *christological* ethics, not in the sense that such ethics are correlates derived from propositions about Christ, but in the sense that they are faithful re-enactments of that life" (48). Put differently, Christianity is not a particular species within a broader genus of human ethical thought; rather, it is an irreducibly particular yet comprehensive response to God's kingdom as the divine will toward that kingdom is revealed in Christ. Christ reveals both how God's kingdom is to be, and how a human life can be lived out in obedience to that demand.

This means, among other things, that in order to be ethical the Christian life

12. Sittler, *The Structure of Christian Ethics*, reprint ed. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 12. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

(conceived in terms of this christological pattern of human response to God's will and saving activity) can accept but does not *require* supplementation by more general philosophical systems or other ethical traditions; or, more precisely, in Sittler's terms, "it is definitely not asserted here that the philosophical enterprise has no relevancy to the concrete tasks of Christian ethics; it is simply asserted that the faculty of reflection when functioning within the structure of Christian ethical life must not betray that structure" (41). It also means that the attempt to derive specific "principles" of ethics from Jesus' life and teachings that can then be abstracted from that life—a strategy that Sittler regards as a perennial temptation in Christian ethics—is destined to miss the point. Sittler will go so far as to say that "the methodology which works with principles subtly belies the very nature of the truth of Christianity" (49). The desire to reduce the Christian ethical life to a series of Christian ethical principles is precisely the sort of betrayal of the structure of that life against which Sittler warns his readers. This is because Jesus' teachings do not illustrate some more general principle of ethics; they are illustrative only of the particular nature of Christ's (and, by extension through baptism, Christ's church's) concrete relationship with God. They are severe and irreducible in their particularity. I will say more below about how, should this description of Jesus' teachings be convincing, it might have substantial implication for how we think about Christian ecological "ethics."

Sittler's privileged example in describing Jesus' teaching style is the Sermon on the Mount, which he says "have been and remain an embarrassment to every effort to derive Christian ethics from Jesus according to the principles of ethics" (49). Rather than comprehensive, the teachings of Jesus on the Mount are occasional and thus illustrative of a deeper motivation

behind them. Drawing upon one of his favorite terms, Sittler speaks about this in terms of style:

System is proper to the inorganic; the living has a characteristic *style*. Jesus in his teaching did not attempt a systematization or exhaustive coverage of all areas of human behavior. He did not, after the manner proper to philosophers of the good, attempt to articulate general principles which, once stated, have then only to be beaten out in corollaries applicable to the variety of human life. He speaks, rather, of God and man and of the human community in a relational and living fashion... (50).

The image here is suggestive: for Sittler, a christological response to a living God with whom one is in relationship cannot be captured by static ethical categories because such stasis is appropriate to that which is dead (like a crystal), not that which has life and movement.

It is important in this connection to highlight Sittler's awareness of the fact that to invoke *style* in connection with Christian ethics is to place a level of uncertainty and ambiguity directly at the heart of ethical action. Sittler was fond of quoting Robert Oppenheimer's observation that "it is style which is the deference that action pays to uncertainty,"<sup>13</sup> because Sittler found in the tension between action and uncertainty a fertile ground for envisioning the sort of theological/ethical vision outlined by the *Structure*. Here I would suggest that part of the reason why Sittler is so concerned to preserve the "relational and living" character of Christian ethics and to resist systematization of these vitalities into ethical "principles" stems from his sense, which

13. The original quote can be found in W. Walker Gibson, ed. *The Limits of Language* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), 50–51.

in recent years has been articulated by thinkers as diverse as Jacques Derrida and William Placher, that there exists a certain kind of ethical self-satisfaction that comes when one decides upon a prefabricated system of ethical mores and then regards the task of ethics as simple application (in the manner of, say, an arithmetic problem) of these principles to the dilemma at hand. Such a methodology partakes of the same kind of seductiveness characteristic of fundamentalism (religious or otherwise) on the one hand or foundationalism (the desire to ground Christian ethics in some more abstract or “universal” system of verities) on the other;<sup>14</sup> both alternatives, however, were fully unacceptable to Sittler.

Rather, to speak about ethical “style” is to imply that Christian ethical action is predicated, not upon the self-satisfaction of recourse to principles prematurely invested with comprehensive adequacy, but upon the dynamics of action that responds with appropriate decisiveness to ethical dilemmas without ever being fully assured of anything other than provisional moral acceptability. It is, I believe, another way of construing the sort of “moral creativity” advocated by Wall—provided one views ambiguity and creativity as mutually reinforcing realities.

Evidence that such creativity is what Sittler has in mind can be found in his description of what a life lived according to the christological pattern of obedience might entail. According to Sittler, “Christian ethical decision is generated between the two poles of faith and the facts of life” (74). This means that, as Christians become more and more conformed to the same pattern of relation to the living God that characterized the life of Christ, they are

in fact free to approach both the perennial ethical dilemmas of human existence (e.g., questions such as whether it is ever ethical to go to war, to lie for a just cause, etc.) and those quandaries brought about by circumstances and structures that have no precedent in humankind’s experience with a spirit of openness rooted in the dynamics of faith. Such twenty-first-century issues as the ongoing proliferation of nuclear weapons, the availability of heretofore unimagined methods of prolonging human life by use of biomedical technology, and the growing threat posed to the planet’s sustainability by global climate change would all be instances of the latter category, that is, of genuinely novel ethical challenges. On my reading, Sittler’s text offers several substantive directions for thinking about them.

First, as I have suggested, the freedom that comes from envisioning the Christian ethical life as one geared, not toward static principles, but a living (and thus changing) relationship with a dynamic God mandates *against* simple application of past mores to unprecedented ethical difficulties and *toward* the sort of ethical creativity that recognizes humanity’s God-given capacities to innovate, however imperfectly, in the direction of love, kindness, and peace. “To have to stand under God’s absolute demand is the only way to keep man open to forms and occasions of obedience that the emerging and unpredictable facts of man’s involvement in social change constantly present to him for his obedience” (56). To be sure, such innovation cannot be freed from the effects of sin; thus, part of the poetic tragedy of ethical creativity (as both Sittler and Wall recognize) will be that innovations toward justice will likely create as much pain on one level as they alleviate on another, and that the very means by which humans might create liberation (e.g., atomic energy) might be the

14. Cf. Vitor Westhelle, “Luther on the Authority of Scriptures” *Lutheran Quarterly* 19/4 (Winter 2005): 373–391.

very means by which we bring about even greater threats of poverty and destruction (atomic bombs). Hence the importance of relating humanity's creative capacities to the fundamental shape of ethical life disclosed in Christ's manifestation of God's kingdom.

But how, in specific terms, might such christologically patterned obedience act as a normative influence upon human ethical and material creativity? Here Sittler concludes the *Structure* by discussing a theme that would become increasingly important to him as he turned to more explicitly ecological topics in his later writings: the importance of thinking of ethical action as the enactment of *systemic justice*. As Sittler would suggest throughout his career, one of the realities that characterizes an increasingly globalized world is the growing consciousness (or, at least, the need to be conscious) of the fundamentally interrelated character of sin, virtue, and human need. "Ecology" was a term in Sittler's theological vocabulary long before he gave explicit attention to environmental matters, because from the beginning of his writing career he had the tendency to analyze both Christian claims and the human situation in terms of organic systems rather than isolated phenomena. This tendency is evident in the *Structure* as well:

There are, indeed, needs of the neighbor, uninvolved with patterns of group life; these confront the believer with a demand for concern which is immediate, simple, and urgent. But deepening areas of contemporary man's need are shaped by and involved with his existence in the huge collectives of economy, politics, community organization... The quest for justice is, on the one hand, an effort to understand the peculiar requirements of human life in its mobile career, and, on the other hand, to create instruments of positive law to certify these

requirements, set limits to forces that would ignore them, and order collective life toward a tolerable balance of the good (76).

In contrast to those who would designate "love" as the central mandate of Christian ethics, Sittler argued that the increasingly systemic and interdependent nature of human life demands that the central motif be justice—which Sittler was fond of defining as "love operating at a distance." The shape of human ethical response to God's absolute demand is free to diagnose ever-greater layers of how participation in ambiguous systems produces both good and evil and, to return to Wall's phrase quoted above, "create, on the basis of what has already been created in history, new and hitherto unimagined social relations and worlds."

## Conclusion: Some thoughts on environmental ethics

I suggested at the beginning of this essay that *The Structure of Christian Ethics*, when read in connection with the project of articulating a rhetoric of responsibility that encompasses the two senses of creation (nature as God's creation and human capacity for innovation) that is characteristic of Sittler's writings on ecological theology, both clarifies and extends that project. I also stated that the vision offered by Sittler in these texts offers some intriguing possibility for future work in ethics, environmental and otherwise. I will conclude by offering some thoughts as to how that might be so.

First, Sittler's emphasis in the *Structure* upon the christological shape of ethics in relation to the demands of God's kingdom clarifies why his writings on ecological theology have so little recourse to any external ethical system (e.g., Kantianism, Aristotelianism, etc.) or any overarching



metaphysic. Sittler's project, as he often noted, was to articulate a rationale for care of the Earth using native Christian categories, albeit reworked to fit contemporary needs. He exhibited a profound confidence in the Christian theological tradition's own resources, even as he was aware of how deeply implicated that tradition has been in destructive ecological practices.

For our purposes, this focus on Christology raises the possibility that a Christian ethical rationale for environmental advocacy might be less dependent upon metaphysical categories than the work of some prominent contemporary eco-theologians might suggest. One of the most striking features about Sittler's ecological writings, when read in light of contemporary discussions on ecology and theology, is their lack of involvement with the interminable (and, in my view, ultimately less than helpful) scholarly debates over panentheism, pantheism, etc.—wranglings that have dominated much of the discussion in contemporary eco-theology. Put simply, Sittler was less interested in the status of God's presence in, say, a tree, and more interested in how the christologically shaped mandate for systemic justice would influence our thinking about the proper use of that tree. While he would not deny that metaphysics might have a clarificatory role in theology and ethics, both the *Structure* and his ecological writings demonstrate how fierce advocacy for justice can proceed without them.

Second, as I suggested above, Sittler's description of Christian ethics as a kind of "style" both acknowledges and makes peace with ambiguity as an inescapable concomitant of ethical action. "A Christian ethics must, therefore, work where love reveals need. It must do this work in

faith which comes from God and not as an accumulating achievement to present to God. In this working it must seek limited objectives without apology, and support failure without despair. It can accept ambiguity without lassitude, and seek justice without identifying justice and love" (84). Such contentment with ambiguity and our own finitude is, as Christians from Saint Paul to Reinhold Niebuhr have demonstrated, a crucial safeguard against the ethical self-satisfaction that leads to tyranny as well as the despair that leads to inertia, or worse.

Finally, Sittler's *Structure* operates as a kind of methodological *apologia* for the sort of theological and ethical creativity that Sittler displays throughout his entire body of work. Such a method should, I think, give aid and comfort to those of us who believe that speaking a word of gospel to ever-complexifying contemporary challenges will require the exercise, however ambiguous, of our God-given capacities for theological and ethical innovation. It is certainly the case that Christianity has demonstrated its potential to create environmentally oppressive theologies just as humankind has made manifest its capacity to create environmentally destructive technologies. But we are beginning to glimpse the glimmer of hope that technologies, laws, and other civil realities can be (imperfect) instruments of ecological justice, and theologians like Sittler and Dave Rhoads have pointed the way toward similar rehabilitations of our theology. The years ahead will prove a testing ground as to whether the quest to innovate toward more ecologically salutary human transactions with nature can be supported by the exercise of Christian theological creativity that honors both Creator and creation.

# The Urgency of Climate Change Legislation: Testimony to U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, June 2007

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Mark S. Hanson

*Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*

On behalf of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), a church of more than 4.9 million members and 10,000 congregations nationwide, I thank the members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee for considering the views of people of faith as the committee works to address the critical issue of global warming.

God's exhortation to us to till and keep the earth (Gen 2:15) urges us to action in the face of a growing body of evidence from scientists around the world that global warming is threatening the future of creation, and the health and well-being of our children and all living things. Recent reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) make it clear that Earth's climate is warming, largely due to humanity's use of fossil fuels. This phenomenon is likely to lead to disastrous consequences for all of creation, and particularly for "the least of these" (Matt 25:40), people living in poverty, who are most vulnerable to rising sea levels, the spread of infectious disease, extending areas of drought, and other impacts of rising temperatures, many of which are already occurring.

In 1993, the ELCA recognized that "the buildup of greenhouse gases,

especially carbon dioxide" threatens our planet.<sup>1</sup> *Caring for Creation*, our church's social policy on the care of God's Earth, recognizes that the use of fossil fuels for our homes, our churches, our cars, and our places of business is a substantial part of the problem. In the United States, we produce one-quarter of the world's carbon emissions, even though we represent only five percent of the planet's human population.

The *Caring for Creation* social statement was adopted by a more than two-thirds majority vote by the churchwide assembly of the ELCA on August 28, 1993.

Recognizing our role as stewards of God's creation, we must act to reverse this disparity and to take responsibility for our actions. We must follow the recommendations of leading scientists in order to protect all of God's creation from present and future harm. Therefore, we urge that the Committee, when writing legislation to address global warming emissions, include comprehensive, mandatory, and aggressive emission reductions that aim to limit the increase in Earth's temperature to

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1. *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice* (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1993).

2 degrees Celsius or less. In the short term, global warming legislation should focus on reducing U.S. carbon emissions by 15 to 20 percent by 2020. In the long term, global warming legislation should focus on reducing U.S. carbon emissions to 80 percent of 2000 levels by the year 2050.

The IPCC, in its recent reports, recognized that “the least of these”—those living in poverty in our own nation and around the globe—will be most affected by rising sea levels, increased drought, and other impacts of global warming. As a matter of justice, we urge that any legislation considered by the Committee work to mitigate the impacts on poor and vulnerable populations around the globe who are least likely to have contributed to global warming and most likely to suffer from its effects. Specifically, we urge that the Committee pass legislation ensuring a fair and equitable distribution of total benefits and costs among people, communities, and nations. We also urge that any legislation passed by the Committee recognize the disproportionate impact that low-income communities have experienced, and will continue to experience, as the climate changes. And we urge that legislation include mechanisms to help poor communities around the globe adapt to changes in climate that will continue to occur even if we are able to slow changes in the planet’s climate.

Our church supports the principle of sustainability and policies that provide “an acceptable quality of life for present generations without compromising that of future generations.” In addressing global warming, we must make investments that ensure a good quality of life for humanity while ensuring that health and well-being of creation and the quality of life for future generations are not compromised by our actions. To reach our goal of sustainability,

we urge the Committee to adopt legislation to encourage research and investment in clean, renewable energy sources that will both benefit current generations and our environment and ensure that future generations enjoy the same benefits.

*Caring for Creation* states that “in a world of finite resources, for all to have enough means that those with more than enough will have to change their patterns of acquisition and consumption.” We cannot achieve significant reductions in global warming emissions unless we make changes in our lifestyles, and particularly in our energy consumption. To support

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the goal of sufficiency, we urge the Committee to pass legislation that encourages energy conservation in our homes, our communities, and our places of worship. We also urge the adoption of legislation that encourages energy conservation in national transportation and distribution systems and commercial enterprises, and pushes the federal government to lead through research and example in the practice and implementation of energy conservation.

# Adaptation Assistance and Climate Change: Testimony to U.S. House of Representatives, March 25, 2009

Callon W. Holloway Jr

*Bishop, Southern Ohio Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*

Good morning Chairman Markey, Congressman Upton, and members of the committee. Thank you for the invitation to testify today. I am Callon Holloway, Bishop of the Southern Ohio Synod for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). I am here today representing both the ELCA, the largest Lutheran denomination in the United States representing nearly 5 million people, and the National Council of Churches (NCC), an organization that represents 35 Christian denominations, 100,000 congregations and approximately 45 million people in the United States.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to discuss the perspective of the faith community on global climate change with you. Specifically, I will address the need for U.S. legislation to address the challenges that the poorest people in the world are already facing due to the warming of our earth's atmosphere. As you may know, a broad and diverse coalition of faith communities, including Evangelicals, Protestants, Catholics, and others, stand united in the conviction that the U.S. Government must aggressively reduce greenhouse gas emissions while ensuring that any climate change legislation provide for the most vulnerable here at home and

around the world. As you draft climate change legislation in the coming weeks, I urge you to include language supporting mechanisms for international assistance for moral, economic, and security reasons.

For many people of faith, the conviction to be good stewards of the earth is grounded in God's command in Genesis to keep and till the earth (Gen 2:15). We do not view the riches of our earth simply as material to be exploited, but rather as treasure we are called to protect, preserve, and utilize in sustainable ways for the well-being of God's people and God's creation. The Christian community also approaches the issue of global climate change through the lens of justice. Just as Christ worked for justice on behalf of the marginalized and impoverished, we are also called to serve those most in need and add our voices to the chorus of those living in extreme poverty who had the least to do with causing global climate change but will be most severely affected by the subsequent changes.

In its most recent report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states that by 2020—in just eleven years—rising temperatures caused by global warming may reduce yields of rain-fed agriculture in Africa by up to 50 percent. As

the climate grows warmer, food insecurity will increase in places where food is already scarce, like many countries in Africa, and will also rise in parts of the world that have seen progress in the fight against hunger like Latin America. One to two billion people will face water scarcity this century and by 2020 approximately 250 million will face water scarcity in Africa.

Millions of individuals around the world will be at greater risk of contracting diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, and West Nile virus because of climactic changes and increasing ranges for the insects that carry these disease vectors.

Other impacts predicted by the IPCC and others include increased migration, both within and outside of national borders, due to increases in natural disasters such as storms and long-term drought. In addition, predicted rising sea levels will likely lead to the permanent displacement of entire communities and even entire nations in the case of small islands. The cultural impact of these displacements, together with the impact that they have on the economic security of the displaced, lend a sense of urgency both to efforts to mitigate climate impacts now and to efforts to provide adaptation assistance that may enable people to stay in their own communities. In addition, large numbers of environmental migrants, coupled with increased competition for scarce resources among people and nations, are potentially destabilizing forces that cannot be ignored.

A 2008 report by the National Council of Churches outlines the impact that many of these changes will have on people living in poverty around the globe and also on the ministries of U.S. churches and our global partners. For example, the ELCA supports relief, disaster response, and development work in many countries through ELCA World Hunger, which provides financial assistance to the work

of our global communion, the Lutheran World Federation; to national Lutheran churches in developing countries; and to U.S.-based development agencies, Lutheran World Relief and Church World Service (CWS).

I have been privileged to see the results of the church's response to global climate change though my synod's companion relationships with Lutheran churches in Tanzania and Brazil. In Tanzania, I met farmers struggling to cope with extreme weather patterns and unpredictable rain falls. Lutheran ministries are working with pastoralist groups to diversify their livelihood by supplementing traditional animal grazing, threatened by desertification, with cultivation of drought-resistant crops like cassava. And, as the ice caps melt on Mount Kilimanjaro, reducing flows in rivers that supply water to nearby communities and endangering a major source of tourism dollars to the region the Tanganyika Christian Refugee Service is working with local villages to increase alternative household waters supplies through rainwater harvesting and sand dams. Our work in Tanzania is only one example of how our ministries are already confronting the effects of a changing climate; there are many more.

While churches and other non-governmental organizations are working to assist communities in ongoing development and adaptation measures, the reality is, as the NCC report concludes, that the challenges are just too great for us to manage alone. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the UN Development Program estimate that the cost for developing countries to adapt to climate impacts could be up to \$86 billion per year. Governments of both developed and developing nations must play a role in addressing these needs.

The U.S. must assume a leadership role in an effort to help developing coun-

tries prepare for the impacts of climate change that we can no longer prevent. While our great nation represents a mere five percent of the global population, we are the world's largest historical emitter, currently responsible for approximately a quarter of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. This reality is a justice issue.

The U.S. also has tremendous economic and security incentives for acting now. In today's global economy, the United States relies on other nations to be stable and prosperous. International adaptation assistance will be vital to ensure the economic and political stability of dozens of developing nations throughout the world, many of which are also hardest hit by the current global economic crisis. This assistance is critical to help countries manage the societal strains that will result from floods, drought, famine, and migration. It will also provide emergency relief assistance for disasters that are inevitable as a result the earth's warming. Lastly, international adaptation assistance can help mitigate the emissions of developing countries, ensuring that they develop in a sustainable, low carbon manner.

A number of proposed bills in the House during the 110th session included international adaptation assistance in the form of financial support to developing nations. The faith community also worked closely with Senator Warner last year in developing international adaptation assistance language for the Climate Security Act (S. 2191).

Building on this clear precedent to address the international consequences of global climate change, I urge the Committee to include the following legislative objectives related to international adaptation assistance in any climate bill:

1. The funds should be appropriately targeted in terms of recipient countries;

they should go to the "most vulnerable developing countries" (with the legislation including an agreed-upon definition of what that means) and no more than 10 percent should go to any one country in any single year.

2. Local communities must be engaged in a participatory process through transparent mechanisms with adequate monitoring and evaluation.
3. The funds provided should be in addition to current funding levels of official development assistance.
4. The funds should be appropriately targeted to adapting to climate impacts, including impacts related to drought, natural disasters, diseases, refugees, etc.
5. Legislation should also address the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in developing nations by reducing emissions from deforestation and providing for transfer of clean energy technologies.

The U.S. must acknowledge its responsibility for this global crisis and should commit to providing substantial financial support reaching between \$7 billion and \$21.5 billion a year by 2030 and further increasing with time.

Some will say we cannot afford to make this sort of investment at a time of global economic turmoil. I would counter that we cannot afford *not* to.

As a matter of justice, adaptation assistance for vulnerable communities abroad must be a part of any climate policy. We look forward to working with the Committee as it develops legislation that protects God's good creation and all of God's people. Thank you.

# Bringing Virtue to a Practical Issue: LutheransRestoringCreation.org

John R. Spangler Jr.

*Executive Assistant to the President for Communication and Planning  
Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg*

*"How can you love your neighbor if you don't know how to build or mend a fence, how to keep your filth out of his [or her] water supply and your poison out of his [or her] air... How can you be a neighbor without applying principle—without bringing virtue to a practical issue?"*

—Wendell Berry<sup>1</sup>

Environmental awareness was not invented by theologians and not certainly in the last decade. But "creative earth-keeping" is poised to take a great step forward with the making of a new Web site devoted to responsible, serious engagement with the environmental issues among Lutheran (and likely other) Christian communities and institutions. Lutherans Restoring Creation ([www.lutheransrestoringcreation.org](http://www.lutheransrestoringcreation.org)) is a Web-based portal designed to support and grow a grass roots movement for environmental awareness and action initiated by New Testament scholar David Rhoads and a team of diverse scholars, teachers, students, and church leaders. Applying his ability to extract from the narrative worlds of scripture distinctive features and identifiable values and standards of judgment, David Rhoads has described the distinctive communal

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1. Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land* (North Point, 1981), 275.

implications of New Testament writers.<sup>2</sup> He pushes interpretation to describe the characteristic commitments of a community that would take the Gospel of Mark seriously (or Luke, or Matthew, or the writings of Paul). What Rhoads had already managed to accomplish with his reading of the Gospels and implications for the communities that take them seriously, he has extended to the "environmental age" those who would take such "green lenses" to heart.<sup>3</sup>

Lutherans Restoring Creation (LRC) is a new project specifically designed to offer congregations, synods, and seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) a clearinghouse of resources and, even more importantly, a network of people and institutions active in green thinking.

## What would such a community look like?

In bringing about the LRC initiative and its Web site, this creative team of

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2. David Rhoads, *The Challenge of Diversity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 96 ff.

3. David Rhoads, "Reading the New Testament in the Environmental Age," [www.webofcreation.org/green-congregation-program/worship/324-reading-the-new-testament-in-the-environmental-age-by-david-rhoads](http://www.webofcreation.org/green-congregation-program/worship/324-reading-the-new-testament-in-the-environmental-age-by-david-rhoads), February 6, 2010.

fers a model of what it might look like if Christian communities took the moral implications of their environmental and philosophical commitments seriously. Potentially inspired by any number of sources in the Gospels and Paul's writings,

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Such a  
community  
would seek justice,  
but not for themselves  
as much as for their  
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generations to come  
after them.

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a community that takes the environment seriously would bring the virtue of its sense of righteousness and stewardship to practical issue in its institutional life as well as the lives of its individual members. While environmental issues appear in many areas of a seminary curriculum, it is another matter to incorporate the implications of such study personally, communally, and institutionally. Such a community would seek justice, but not for themselves as much as for their neighbors and the generations to come after them. Care for the earth, its water and air, its soil and climate health would be at the forefront.

This imaginative community (congregation, seminary, organization) would try to exercise the most responsible stewardship possible over that which it has been given. If the school, congregation, or institution

has little land, it might be particularly deliberate about establishing priorities for its land use and make careful decisions about how the resource should be used. One school might consider, for example, urban gardening land use, facilities that accommodate bicycles, or other options that do not require large open spaces. Public transport and zip cars might also be ready resources. Perhaps a nearby partnership with community-supported agriculture would enable locally produced food to be consumed close to its source. A community with greater land holding might study the feasibility of geothermal heating and cooling, wind or photovoltaic solar methods of generating electricity. Many contextual factors drive such decisions, as does the availability of investment capital.

A community taking its environmental responsibilities seriously would want its leader to preach frequently about creation and nature and its blessings, and also about ways to support reform and renewal and restoration. Individuals in this community might want to stake their commitment with a pledge of personal behavior that would apply discipline to their lifestyles. They would see their choices about purchasing and consumption to be important arenas of acting with integrity. They might initiate a rigorous practice of recycling, reduce waste in printing and energy consumption, and find ways to help others do the same. They would likely engage in the study of the Bible with a "green lens" and seek out ways to advocate in public for best practices and new opportunities to make a difference in the carbon footprint of the resources under their stewardship. They might participate in the public discussions about global warming and encourage their community members to weigh in on important alternatives. Such a community would want to share what it knows and learn new ideas and practices from others.



## **Getting started: Theological schools and the environment**

Seminaries and theological schools naturally develop deep wells of understanding, specialized knowledge, and resources in every imaginable theological, historical, and biblical arena. However, they are often challenged to place their store of virtue in service to a practical issue. That challenge is precisely where the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and its environmental focus began its effort to create something new and useful beyond its own glass walls.

“Grass roots” Web sites, generated by an imaginative team of scholars led by Rhoads, such as [www.lutheransrestoringcreation.org](http://www.lutheransrestoringcreation.org) and its older cousin [www.Webofcreation.org](http://www.Webofcreation.org) support modern communities and institutions seeking to care for creation and to find ways to act upon those commitments.

The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg began recycling paper more than a decade ago. It has paid attention to the recycled content of the paper it uses to publish printed communications. But in 2006 and 2007, the seminary began to think creatively on an institutional level about its energy consumption and, specifically, began to plan for the replacement of its century-old steam heating system for the central part of the campus. With 52 acres and 25 buildings, Gettysburg Seminary has an extensive built environment. When it began to assess the feasibility of alternatives such as geothermal-based heating and cooling systems, it turned to sister seminary Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, which installed such a system nearly a decade earlier. That consultation, together with a study performed by an engineer and a successful 400-foot-deep test well, enabled Gettysburg Seminary to formulate a master plan for future reduction in its

consumption of fossil fuels.

With a grant from the Stewardship of Life Institute, a stewardship resource for the ELCA, Gettysburg also experienced a renewed interest in its recycling program when its provider expanded the material list it is able to receive from the campus and the town as well. Within the last year, the Gettysburg Seminary campus is recycling as much as it is throwing away in its main academic buildings, and hopes to reverse its estimated original ratio of 80 percent trash to 20 percent recycling.

## **Now thinking more widely and comprehensively**

When the LRC team was in touch with each of the ELCA seminaries, it shared a resource document that helped Gettysburg realize a wider scope of thinking on environmental issues. The Web site requested each of the seminaries to report on its activities on at least five major fronts: curriculum, buildings and grounds, worship and liturgy, discipleship at home and work, public ministry and political action.

This resource helped the Gettysburg green task force to think more broadly about the scope of its environmental interests. In retrospect, Gettysburg Seminary realized that it began to engage the public ministry and action when opportunity came to weigh in on a proposed gaming facility three miles east of the campus on the Lincoln Highway. As stewards of the land and in partnership with others in the community, the seminary found itself embroiled in a growing local land use controversy when a group of investors sought a license for installing a casino in the Gettysburg area. The seminary was the first large institution in the area to oppose the casino application, and it helped to generate activity by local clergy and congregational leaders. Civil war preservationists followed with significant resistance, and the conflict made news

in national media outlets until the state commission rendered a decision to deny the license.

LutheransRestoringCreation.org is the first stop on the Web for ideas, plans, and models of implementation. Schools, congregations, and other interested communities will learn much from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and its “Earth Year” emphasis. One may be able to learn about the story and experience of Wartburg Theological Seminary’s geothermal installation and the length of time it took for the Dubuque campus to realize its return on investment. When Gettysburg Seminary can capitalize its plan, that project will also become a resource available to others.

Our institutions, agencies, and schools are ripe for measures and practices that help reduce their carbon footprint. What if these projects also saved money that would free an institution to spend its scarce resources in other ways? How many creative and contextually imaginative practices might we find among the seminaries and congregations working on these issues? After seeing the powerful aggregate effect of what could happen when hundreds and eventually thousands of students at Yale University took the “Yale Sustainability Pledge,” a green task force from Gettysburg Seminary took up the task of creating and adapting such a pledge for individual seminary community members. This pledge, rewritten and emended for a seminary context, will be shared with LutheransRestoringCreation.org when it is published in March of 2010.

Web of Creation ([www.WebofCreation.org](http://www.WebofCreation.org)) and Lutherans Restoring Cre-

ation are first attempts to create a global village around the virtues of knowing how to practice living in environmentally responsible ways. These Web sites are new enough to be in the early stages of developing resources. But they are coming online at the right time for a generation of leaders who will serve communities hungry for wise guidance through the maze of options. These leaders will know how to lead communities to do the right thing and be smart about it. The economic climate we now face provides a window of opportunity. Institutions, agencies, and congregations will be motivated to do the right thing because it reduces the carbon footprint of the school. They will be joined and supported by others who will see the virtues of a healthy return on investment in direct energy savings. Environmentally responsible decisions are never more persuasive to broad constituencies than when steep energy cost escalation is in view.

What was once the concern of a farmer or a small town resident with close neighbors now has a new, global context of nations and continents, communities of scientists, entire industries, and the complex of energy production. What is different now is that what was once known and well understood as an essential virtue in a rural and small town context matters on a widening planetary scale. Everyone from scientists, to mountain climbers, to island dwellers, theological ethicists, and economists are asking, “What does sustainability look like?” LutheransRestoringCreation.org is potentially one of the most effective places to seek an answer.

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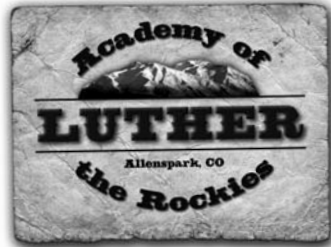
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## Book Reviews

*Without Nature? A New Condition for Theology.* by David Albertson and Cabell King. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009. 448 pages. Paper. \$39.00.

This genuinely interdisciplinary collection of essays emerges from a conference held at the University of Chicago Divinity School in 2005. That conference brought biologists, geographers, anthropologists, and historians into conversation with theologians around the question of whether our global reality is now, to use Bill McKibben's term, "without nature." That is, now that we realize how malleable and vulnerable the natural world—ecosystems, biodiversity, climate systems, etc.—is to human intervention and misuse, does the category of "nature" as something distinct from the artetactual realm have any relevance? The various scientists and social scientists involved in the conference (including Stuart Newman, Lorraine Daston, Edward Soja, and Peter Raven) come to different conclusions to that question. The group of theologians tasked with response (including Sallie McFague, William Schweiker, Kathryn Tanner, and Lisa Sowle Cahill) offer a scintillating array of reflections on how new attitudes about "nature" offer both pitfalls and promise to the theological enterprise in the twenty-first century. A major strength of this volume is that the essays routinely reference each other, and thus a picture emerges of a unified conversation across disciplines and perspectives. This book will be of interest, not only to those specifically interested in ecological theology, but to anyone who finds value in substantive dialogue between theology and the sciences.

Robert C. Saler  
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

*Creation: Law and Probability.* Edited by Fraser Watts. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008. xii and 200 pages. Paperback. \$22.00.

Amidst the landscape of religion and science texts, the subject of creation repeatedly occurs as a key area of study. In *Creation: Law and Probability*, Fraser Watts has edited together the work of some of the brightest minds in religion and science to ponder the effects of chance and law on the created universe. This book is based on the work begun at the second conference of the International Society for Science and Religion held in Boston in 2004 (xi).

The book contains essays by Fraser Watts, Peter Harrison, Philip Clayton, George F.R. Ellis, Niels Henrik Gregersen, Michael Ruse, Nancy Murphy, David J. Bartholomew, Wesley J. Wildman, and John Bowker, a formidable lineup of scholars. In addition, there is an afterword written by John Polkinghorne offering "Some Further Reflections." The text is clearly not for the novice in religion and science. The language can be technical at times, and the ideas quite dense. Essays such as George Ellis' "Multiverses and Ultimate Causation" and Wesley Wildman's "From Law and Chance in Nature to Ultimate Reality" can be very intense for the reader unaccustomed to the science and logic involved. This is not to diminish the quality of the volume, but to highlight its substance. This is evidenced in the many relevant nuggets of information found in the text such as the distinction made in Wildman's piece between the design arguments of William Paley and those of current intelligent design proponents (167–169). Another would be the historical overview contained in Ruse's article, "Chance and Evolution." Both of these examples ground the discussion in a context that religion and science scholarship would be remiss to neglect. In this same way, the text is full of discussion that will inform the reader, even outside of the main theme of the volume.

Overall, this book is another solid addition to the *Theology and the Sciences* series by Fortress Press. In general this series provides strong contributions, and this volume is no



exception. As noted, it is definitely not for the beginner in religion and science study, as a solid knowledge of the field of theology, logic, and science will be a prerequisite for anyone reading this book. For those looking for a thought-provoking discussion of the top minds in religion and science, however, this text fits the bill.

*George Tsakiridis*  
*Chicago, Ill.*

***Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis.*** By H. Paul Santmire. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008. xvi and 311 pages. Paper. \$20.00.

Douglas John Hall has described theology as “thinking about everything all the time.” H. Paul Santmire’s *Ritualizing Nature* exemplifies that description. The book’s cumbersome title and subtitle manage only to hint at the diversity of topics considered within its pages. Santmire’s discussion ranges across the fields of Christian liturgy and ecclesiastical architecture, biblical interpretation and exposition, Christian mission, phenomenology of religion, congregational ministry and political advocacy—all under a rubric of “earth-care” and set within a recurrent travelogue that reaches from Massachusetts to Washington state and other parts of the world.

The central conviction of Santmire’s ranging discussion is “that the human creature is fashioned by God to imitate the deliberate and wise ways the Creator works with nature” (232). Santmire seeks to demonstrate the truth of that conviction on the grounds of scripture and Christian theology, and argues for the consequences of that truth in the worship and witness of the Christian assembly. Though not explicitly invoking Hall’s categories of *thinking*, *professing*, and *confessing* the Christian faith, Santmire provides a reflection of how congregations and larger ecclesial bodies might undertake those disciplines with regard to concern for ecological well-being.

Pastors and other ministry leaders will benefit from Santmire’s ability to relate ordinary details of local church life to an extraordinary vision of cosmic integration in

Christ. Indeed, the book might have been alternately titled, “Why Church Matters,” because it contends for the universal significance of every local congregation. For Santmire, this means contending also for the ecumenical and ecological significance of every local congregation.

Santmire describes the content of this book as a “work in progress” (124, 126). He draws upon a host of historical and contemporary witnesses to inform his work, and explicitly seeks the collaboration of his readers in the ongoing effort. May the progress continue.

*Paul Baglyos*  
*Wartburg Theological Seminary*

***Sharper Than a Two-Edged Sword: Preaching, Teaching, and Living the Bible.*** Michael Root and James J. Buckley, eds. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. viii and 103 pages. Paper. \$16.00.

This very readable collection of essays comes out of a May 2006 Conference on Preaching, Teaching, and Living the Bible, co-sponsored by Duke Divinity School and the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology. The contributors are R. R. Reno, Robert W. Jenson, Thomas E. Breidenthal, Ellen F. Davis, Amy Plantinga Pauw, and Richard B. Hays. There is substantial overlap in this group with the Scripture Project that resulted in the influential *The Art of Reading Scripture* (2003). Both publications push forward what, for the last ten years or so, has been increasingly called “Theological Exegesis” or “the Theological Investigation of Scripture.” The essays in *Sharper Than a Two-Edged Sword* represent various attempts to think through what this means, in more-or-less practical terms, for the life of the church.

The shadows thrown from the “narrative turn” effected by the Yale school (e.g., George Lindbeck, Hans Frei, Brevard Childs) can be felt everywhere in this volume. If the basic hermeneutical choices upon the church are bubbled down to: (a) letting the Bible be absorbed into our own world, or (b) allowing our world to be absorbed into the narrative of the Bible, this collection clearly favors the latter.



The title of Ellen Davis' contribution could stand as the leitmotiv of the book, "Entering the Story: Teaching the Bible in the Church." Davis sees positive value in "the experience of entering deeply into a story and being claimed by it, totally taken in" (45). Jenson similarly suggests, "When the Bible lacks force in the church, it is regularly...because we presume that the 'real world' is some other world than the one that opens in the Bible, and that what we have to do is figure out how to make the Bible effective in the putatively 'real' world. The thing is: it cannot be done." (27)

The authors are not arguing for a new Biblicism that is "conservative" against a "liberal" alternative. They are suggesting, rather, that it is time to think anew about the way God engages the church (and through it, the world) by means of the Bible. It is a way that is sensitive to the church's confessional tradition, the history of exegesis, and developments in biblical studies since the Enlightenment. This little book deserves close reading by those in the church who are presently unsatisfied with the choices (conservative/liberal) that are constantly being constructed by North American culture and are hungry for a theologically rich and scripturally engaged alternative. If one wants a quick and engaging introduction to "Theological Exegesis" by those who have been major advocates, this book serves well.

Erik M. Heen  
*The Lutheran Theological Seminary  
 at Philadelphia*

***The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire.*** By Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. viii + 280 pages, Paper. \$29.00.

Since her *Rhetoric and Ethic* was published in 1999, empire studies and post-colonial criticism have bloomed in the field of Biblical Studies, for example, in the work of Richard Horsley and Stephen Moore. Schüssler Fiorenza's latest book, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire*, is a feminist engagement with that new crop of literature that both criticizes and affirms. For example,

she affirms their analysis of power but criticizes the tendency of some empire studies to allow the language of imperial domination to be reinscribed on God and humanity without critical evaluation. The book seems aimed at an audience immersed in empire studies, post-colonial and feminist criticism and does not seem useful outside of those discussions, which is ironic since she decries specialization in Biblical Studies. The last chapter on "Transforming Biblical Studies" (a revised version of a 2003 essay) may be of special interest to those who teach Biblical Studies.

Peter S. Perry  
*Chicago, Ill.*

***Christology and Science.*** By F. LeRon Shults. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. x and 171 pages. \$30.00.

With this book, Shults, a well-known Evangelical theologian, takes Evangelical thinking into new horizons. This book is an experiment in correlational theology in which the specific doctrines of the incarnation, atonement, and the parousia (Christ's second advent) are interfaced with the results of biology, contemporary social theory, and anthropology. The results are not surprising for many mainline Protestants or Roman Catholics who were trained by correlational theologians or are familiar with the contours of correlational theology. It is fascinating to see an Evangelical scholar make parallel moves to mainline Protestant theologians as his attempt to respond to newer trends in the sciences.

Employing the familiar language of seeking coherence and plausibility in theology as well as the need for reconstruction and reform, Shults proposes that science and theology be construed not as in a "warfare" but instead as lovers. Christology, when so construed, becomes inherently interdisciplinary (11), following the contextuality of all scientific inquiry (7).

In an interesting and somewhat bold move, Shults appeals to the Christian mystical tradition in its desire for "spiritual transformation" in relation to God and the world



as a springboard for utilizing the dynamic and relational categories of contemporary social sciences (18).

In light of classical christological perspectives codified in the creeds and councils of the church, as well as contemporary evolutionary theory, Shults believes that the incarnation is best seen as the definitive moment of transcendence-in-immanence, which reveals the creator (47). Similar to Schleiermacher's view of "God-consciousness," the coming-to-be of Jesus' identity as both human and divine was graciously constituted by his dependence of the life-giving Spirit. The coming-to-be of Jesus' self-identity is thoroughly configured in relation to the divine Logos (59).

Likewise with respect to the atonement—particularly as Shults plays it out in relation to René Girard—Jesus' "way of acting in relation to God and others is indeed the display of divine justice. His agency was formed in utter reliance on the Spirit of justice, whose liberating presence breaks the cycle of mimetic violence that is rooted in human anxiety over the power to secure finite goods" (104).

Finally, the issue in Jesus' return is not the matter, when is he coming back, but instead, how is the promising presence of God mediated through Christ in a way that transforms human aesthetic desires? (144).

The parallels between many mainline Protestants and at least one Evangelical theologian should be apparent from this review alone. If Shults represents a trend in Evangelical theology, it will be interesting to see how the theological continuum is reconfigured.

Mark Mattes  
Grand View University

**Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus.** By Klyne Snodgrass. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. xviii and 846 pages. Cloth. \$50.00.

The word "comprehensive" in the subtitle defines this work accurately. No one will read this large book from beginning to end. It is a work of reference, to be consulted often about the interpretation of individual parables. But to

benefit from that one should read the first sixty pages, which cover the basic issues in parable studies: definition of the genre parable, sub-genres under the term parable, and principles of interpretation, including a helpful discussion of allegory. Snodgrass' final classification of parables is "similitudes, interrogative parables, double indirect narrative parables, judicial parables (as a specific type of double narrative parables), 'How much more' parables, and single indirect parables." He also describes the characteristics of Jesus' parables, and ends up with "NT Criticism—Assumptions and Hesitations, Method and Procedure."

After a survey of parables in the Old Testament, early Judaism, Greco-Roman literature, the early church and later Jewish literature, Snodgrass gives detailed interpretation of the synoptic parables (he does not treat the Johannine "I am" sayings). He documents the interpretation of each parable from modern exegetical literature (the notes are extensive), suggests further reading on each parable, discusses parallels from other ancient literature, and highlights issues in interpretation, with his own suggestions for solutions.

This is a rich resource for preaching and adult education. One will not exhaust its resources in a lifetime of parable study.

Edgar Krentz

## Briefly Noted

Anthony Thiselton's *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Eerdmans, \$30.00) makes a more immediately usable and helpful form of his careful, detailed exegesis in his NIGT commentary available for parish pastors. He concentrates on practical, pastoral issues. Pastors will find the "Suggestions for Reflection" especially helpful; lay people will find it comprehensible. This commentary deserves a place in pastors' libraries and on parish library shelves.

Edgar Krentz



# Preaching Helps

Proper 5C – Proper 12C

## “Mea Culpa!”

Perhaps you have noticed—or experienced—that life can be overwhelming. For several months, I experienced life as overwhelming and these days I am discovering, by the balls I dropped, just how overwhelmed I was. When I recruited writers for Preaching Helps, for example, I overlooked a few Sundays and festivals. For this issue, I neglected to recruit someone for Pentecost and Trinity Sunday. “Mea Culpa!” I ask your forgiveness for this (and any other recent) oversight, and I humbly offer these reflections in the hope that they will in some way contribute to your preaching.

On **Pentecost** (May 24, 2010), Genesis 11:1–9 and Acts 2:1–21 are paired to compare and contrast how God is at work in human communication. In Genesis, the LORD confuses human language, so that we do not understand one another’s speech, and scatters humanity abroad over all the face of the earth (vv. 7–8). Though we might want to see this diversity as God giving different gifts to different people, I cannot escape understanding God’s confusing and scattering as punishment for creatures made from dust attempting to “make a name” or “build a reputation” for themselves by making a city and tower out of dust. In other words, Babel is humanity’s second attempt to become like God. Regardless of how God intended it, confusion and scattering led to separation, estrangement, mistrust, and competition among the people of the world.

As the Book of Acts tells it, God undoes all this by giving the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Each of the apostles, traditionally representing one of the twelve tribes of Israel, received the ability to speak in the language of another nation. Everyone heard the apostles speaking in their native language. Babel was undone. The gospel of Christ Jesus and the Spirit of his death and resurrection unite us. God frees us from needing to make a name for ourselves, by naming us children of God and giving us the Spirit of adoption in baptism, making us heirs with Christ who, like Jesus, cry to God as “Abba” (cf. Rom 8:14–17). By pouring out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the unity, reconciliation, trust, and cooperation that are ours in Christ Jesus become manifest as each and all hear the gospel in their own tongue. The Spirit frees and empowers humanity to bring glory to God by loving and serving the neighbor.

The doing and undoing of Babel also warns preachers and congregations who have declared their mission and vision and come up with their plan to be careful. Those who settled on a plain in the land of Shinar had a vision, a mission, and a plan to make their name great. God blew in, scattering their blueprints to the wind and their lives in unimaginable directions. If the Easter readings were any indication, the apostles likewise had a plan: remaining behind locked doors or perhaps resuming a life of fishing. Yet, the Spirit blew and the apostles acted boldly and spoke with power. The pairing of these readings makes plain that, whether gathered or scattered, comprehending or confused, we are utterly dependent upon the Holy Spirit. Our God both gifts and lifts us, so that we might participate in God’s own purpose. And God’s purpose is bigger than

giving birth to the church. In Christ, God is about reconciling all humanity to God's own self in ways that bring the world together. The sermon might help the Christian, congregation, and church to consider how the Spirit is empowering and limiting us to share in God's own work of reconciliation.

On **Trinity Sunday** (May 31, 2010), the church frequently explains a doctrine rather than proclaiming the gospel through the appointed readings. The homiletic challenge is helping people to understand why knowing God as Triune is important for our lives and for the world. The short answer is that we share the very life of God and the Trinity reveals to us what that life is and is to be.

Proverbs 8:1–4, 22–31 offers the unexpected image of Lady (or Teacher) Wisdom showing up everywhere and shouting at us to come to her. On Trinity Sunday, this image always causes me confusion. My inclination is to think of God as proclaimed in the Hebrew Scriptures as Father or Creator. Yet, Wisdom's words in vv. 22–29 remind me of John's Prologue and Wisdom "rejoicing in the Lord's inhabited world and delighting in the human race" (v. 30) leads me to think of Matthew's description of Jesus as Emmanuel (1:23). So, rather than assigning a Person of the Trinity to this passage, the preacher might reflect upon what it suggests about the Triune God. For example, the Trinity is everywhere calling to us. Wisdom as God's "helper" evokes the reciprocity of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit helping one another in the unity of God. Finally, Wisdom's persona is joyous; she gladly and overwhelmingly offers her gifts to humanity.

Romans 5:1–5 seems to describe the Trinity's relationship to humanity. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have access to this grace. God's love is in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, which has been given to us. So, even as we boast in our hope of sharing the life of the Trinity, we have faith that the Trinity shares our life of suffering and produces endurance, character, and hope within us.

The Holy Spirit is the subject of Jesus' teaching in John 16:12–15. Jesus calls the Holy Spirit "the Spirit of truth" (v. 13), and suggests that truth, like the Trinity, is relational. Just as we often reduce the Trinity to a doctrine, so we often want to embrace or dismiss truth as proposition or fact. The Trinity invites us into the truth that flows out of relationships and that creates and strengthens community. In contrast to the truth of the individual, which so characterizes our culture and leads us to value and decide everything in terms of ourselves, the relational Trinity invites us to decide and value unselfishly, according to whether something points to the Father, glorifies Christ, and is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Two pastors that I attended seminary with, S. Blake Duncan (June) and Carrie Ballenger Smith (July) provided the preaching helps for this time after Pentecost. Blake and I were students at Trinity Seminary together; Carrie was a patient learner as I attempted to teach at LSTC. Pastor Duncan serves as pastor of Peace Lutheran Church in Steeleville, Illinois, and pastoral head of staff for the Wartburg Lutheran Parish. Prior to coming to Steeleville, Pastor Duncan served as minister of music for St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Bloomington and as pastor for worship and music at St. John's Lutheran Church also in Bloomington. He taught for the last 18 years as a member of the music faculty at Bradley University in Peoria; he has also taught oboe and directed the Collegium Musicum at Lutheran Summer Music for 15 years. Pastor Duncan received the MDiv from Trinity Lutheran Seminary and music performance

degrees from the New England Conservatory of Music and SUNY-Binghamton. Pastor Duncan has recorded with WiZARDS! – A Double Reed Consort; these recordings are available from Crystal Records. He is married and has two grown children. His pastoral blog can be found at: <http://pastorduncansblog.blogspot.com/>

Carrie Ballenger Smith is pastor of Capron Lutheran Church in Capron, Illinois. She is a 2009 graduate of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. She was a finalist for the 2009 James Kenneth Echols Excellence in Preaching Award. Prior to attending seminary, Carrie was a music teacher, doula, and lactation counselor. She is married to the Rev. Robert Smith (ELCA Global Mission) and has two sons, Caleb and Zion.

I am grateful to Blake and Carrie for their contributions and to you for your understanding. Mea Culpa!

*Craig A. Satterlee, Editor, Preaching Helps*  
<http://craigasatterlee.com>

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## **Proper 5C** **June 6, 2010**

1 Kings 17:8–16  
Psalm 146  
Galatians 1:11–24  
Luke 7:11–17

When Jesus emerges from the wilderness in Luke, Chapter 4, he goes into the synagogue in his hometown and preaches a very brief sermon on the text from Isa 61:1–2. It does not go over well. But this text from Isaiah is important for Luke as it lays out the foundation of the ministry of Jesus:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... he has anointed me, to bring good news to the poor... proclaim release to the captives... recovery of sight to the blind... let the oppressed go free... proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”  
(Luke 4:18–19)

This is not new to the readers of this Gospel as it echoes the words of Mary’s song in the first chapter of Luke, but here

we have Jesus affirming that this is God’s agenda, and by extension the priorities for his own ministry. The kingdom of God has come into the midst of men and women in Jesus and we can expect that these themes will resonate again and again in the stories and events that follow.

And just in case we all need a refresher of these themes, Psalm 146 provides this reminder. Set within the context of a song of praise the psalmist recounts the amazing things that God has done, which include creating the earth and seas and all that is in them, giving justice to the oppressed, food to the hungry, setting the prisoners free, caring for the stranger, and sustaining the orphan and widow. It is important to be reminded that while God loves all of God’s creation, God has a special interest in those who have particular needs; those who are hungry, oppressed, prisoners, alone, sick, and so forth. God will never abandon those whom society has forgotten. Here at the start of the summer, as we are planning our vacations and the days turn hot, it is easy to forget this and to allow the lazy days of summer to distract us from

our task of caring for those who are on the fringes of society. Today's readings remind us that yes, the kingdom of God has broken into our world through Jesus, and we are called to be the hands and feet and mouth of Jesus now in the midst of this world.

Another consistent theme in the Gospel of Luke is the question of authority. By whose or what authority does Jesus act as he does? Luke is addressing this question constantly, either directly or indirectly. In the passage from Luke 4, which is referenced above, the people wonder aloud who it is that this guy is: "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they ask. Jesus responds by making some very pointed comments about a prophet not being accepted in his own home and then continuing to cite examples. Specifically he points to the prophet Elijah and the widow in Zaraphath, whose son was raised from the dead by Elijah's intercession, and to the Syrian officer Naaman, whose leprosy was healed through Elijah. These are not accidental references. Naaman, the Gentile officer is healed, just as the servant of the Roman centurion was healed in Luke 7:1-10, which immediately precedes this passage, and which was the Gospel reading for Proper 4C. And in our Gospel reading today from Luke 7 we have a direct parallel between the raising of the widow's son in Zaraphath by Elijah and the raising of the widow's son in Nain by Jesus. In both stories young men who are the only remaining sons of poor widows are restored to life. In both stories the mothers are met at the gate, and following the return of life to these young men the prophet and Jesus both "gave him to his mother" (Luke quotes the Septuagint here). Despite this, Jesus is completely focused on the widowed mother who would have been left completely destitute without her only son to provide for her both a living and a standing in the community. Fred

Craddock writes, "... this episode offers a dramatic example of Jesus' ministry of compassion ... Jesus acts without drama, ritual or even prayer."<sup>1</sup> There are no incantations or other religious gyrations. Jesus is not trying to focus attention on himself or create a spectacle (like perhaps the priests of Baal during the contest with Elijah). Instead he simply touches the bier and the boy returns to life. God focuses on the needs of God's people and reaches out to them without spectacle or drama.

But there are others who are witnesses to this event and they are the ones who answer the question of authority. The text tells us that fear seizes all of those witnessing this event and they all glorify God saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us." Yes, Jesus is Elijah, but greater than Elijah. "God has looked favorably on His people!" The Greek phrase here is *epeskepsato ho Theos ton laon autou*. This phrase is more accurately translated "God has visited his people" as it appears in the KJV and the RSV. The verb is in aorist tense, which in many respects makes the verb tense-less. In other words, to use the past tense, to say that "God visited" would mean that it happened and is over; to use the present, "God visits," or "God is visiting" is simply too present. By using the aorist Luke is saying: God has visited God's people, as usual, because this is what God does and has done and will continue to do forever. There is no end and there is no beginning. God's involvement with God's creation is ongoing and everlasting. This is what always happens! If I were writing a musical or an opera this would make a great chorus to surround the events of this story because the crowd throughout Luke acts as

1. Fred B. Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 96-97.

a kind of chorus commenting and making important points for the reader.

By what authority does Jesus do these things? Jesus acts by the authority of the God of Israel, the authority of prophecy, and the authority of being the Messiah. The parallels with Elijah make it clear that Jesus has the authority of the great prophet Elijah, but he is greater than Elijah. Jesus is the Messiah and “it is as Messiah where the authority of God and the authority of prophecy is brought to bear in the ministry of Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

### **A Few Words on the Reading from Galatians**

One of the things I like about e-mail is that when you participate in an e-mail “thread” all of the comments remain. So, if I can’t remember the question posed, which the respondent is answering, all I have to do is scroll down to see previous e-mails. How helpful this would have been in regard to Paul’s correspondence. But, alas, with Paul we only get his side of the story. And it is obvious in the letter to the Galatians that Paul is responding to something in particular that has him pretty upset. The issue is the Jewish laws regarding circumcision and the Jewish dietary laws. Do we follow these laws or not? And what about when there are Gentiles present, can we eat with Gentile believers who would be ritually unclean? Paul minces no words. He is forthright and verbally brutal in his response. We are saved by God’s grace not by following the dietary laws. And he doesn’t care who disagrees with him—James, Peter, Barnabas, whoever. Paul’s position is that they are wrong—period! In this Sunday’s

reading, Paul begins by establishing his credentials. In so doing, Paul makes it clear that he knows and has experience with Cephas. Even so, Peter is wrong on this! We should not allow the rather watered down account of this conflict as recorded by Luke in Acts to affect our interpretation of this conflict as recounted directly in the letter to the Galatians by Paul. There are strong feelings here and there is evidence that this was a major breach between these apostles.

So what is the big deal? And who is right? We look back on this conflict, shrug our shoulders and go “ho-hum.” Who cares about the dietary laws? This is a non-issue for us now, and it is hard for many of us to understand the intensity of this conflict. So perhaps we should take another issue and insert it here—say, for example, the resolutions regarding the rostering of gay men and women who are in committed, monogamous relationships that were passed at the ELCA’s last churchwide assembly. This is an intensive debate that is in the process of splitting that church. It does not seem to matter to folks on either side of the issue that our sexuality is not central to our ministry as Christians. All that seems to matter is being right. And being right seems more and more to be equated with being the “true” Christians.

In her excellent blog posting, Episcopal priest and theologian Sarah Dylan Breuer draws a parallel to our approach to this issue, which is facing both of our churches, with the bitter theological conflict between the “conservative” establishment (Peter and James) and the “liberal” Paul and she asks this rhetorical question:

“So who was the nasty heretic who should have been kicked out of the church, or at least out of all positions

2. Frederick Schmidt, *Conversations with Scripture: The Gospel of Luke* (Milwaukee: Morehouse Publishing, 2009), 72.

of leadership: Peter or Paul? Who is it who's not a real Christian: Peter or Paul?"<sup>3</sup>

Well? Most of us would be hard-pressed to choose between these two apostles. So perhaps we need to look carefully at our ways of dealing with conflicts on matters of faith and start by recognizing that God is bigger than all of us and that there is room for debate and disagreement.

If Peter and Paul can disagree passionately about something that Paul and perhaps even both of them thought was about the very "truth of the gospel," and if we can celebrate them both as apostles of Christ and heroes of the faith, why does it seem to happen so often in our churches today that any serious disagreement about an important matter of faith becomes an occasion to condemn one party as not only completely wrong, but outside the bounds of Christianity itself? And don't say that the difference is that money and property weren't at stake then; when famine befalls the Christians in Jerusalem, at least some of whom seem to have been on Peter's side of this conflict, Paul spends no small amount of political capital to get churches he founded to take up a collection for their sisters and brothers in Christ in Jerusalem. (Take note—those of you who seem to think withholding benevolence is the way to get what you want.) So, who should have been expelled from the first-century communion of churches: Peter or Paul? Whose witness to Christ was superfluous? Whose ministry was not needed? And if these are silly questions to ask

about Peter and Paul, what makes them any less silly to ask about any of our sisters or brothers today?<sup>4</sup>

Amen! SBD

## Proper 6C June 13, 2010

1 Kings 21:1–21a

Psalms 5:1–8

Galatians 2:15–21

Luke 7:36–8:3

King Ahab just had to have that vineyard. Nothing else would please him. And when Naboth refused to sell it Ahab started sulking. What is the point in being king if you can't get what you want all the time? It's not fair. So his wife Jezebel, in order to try to cheer up her husband and perhaps to orchestrate a little surprise for him, forged his signature on an order, which took Naboth's life and delivered that vineyard to Ahab. What a nice present. Too bad there are consequences to the decisions we make.

We live in a "have to have" society. Our children just have to have the next coolest toy; we have to see the latest movie; get this and that. Some of us run up our credit cards to obscenely high levels in order to "get." Big salaries, huge bonuses, and exotic vacations are "have to have" items for many of our banks and financial firms. When these have been threatened we hear whining variations on a theme by Chicken Little: "those things are not negotiable, we have to have them, no matter what!" But therein lays the problem: the *what*—or the *who*. Someone has to pay for these. If these are "have to have" luxuries for the rich and powerful, like

3. Sarah Dylan Breuer – *SarahLaughed.net* – Blog entry June 8, 2007  
[www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2007/06/proper\\_5\\_year\\_c.html](http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2007/06/proper_5_year_c.html)

4. Ibid.

Ahab and Jezebel, then who pays for them? Well, there is always a Naboth.

Naboth paid with his life so that Ahab and Jezebel could have their lovely country vineyard. Who are the Naboths among us in our communities, in our society who pay the price for the have to haves? They are not just the Bernie Madoffs, running illegal operations that scam thousands. As bad as these individuals are, we should also recognize that sometimes the scams are institutional. And sometimes we are the beneficiaries of these institutions ourselves. Nevertheless, people are hurt and we are to blame. And Elijah's words are addressed to us as well: "You have sold yourself!" And the consequence: *disaster!* It might be the next financial meltdown or it might be the focus on things that begins to alienate us from our friends and family. But there are consequences.

From the words of the Magnificat (Luke 1) and in Jesus' inaugural sermon (Luke 4), it is clear that God and Jesus have a special concern for the poor. No matter how you might try to explain it away, God cares for those who are in need, those who are poor and those who are hungry. And if you are on the side of those who are adding to the misery, well, then you are on the side of the mighty who will be toppled and the rich who will be sent empty away. Sarah Dylan Breuer writes:

The Gospel According to Luke emphasizes this particularly, and Luke-Acts strongly and repeatedly condemns behavior widening the divide between the "haves" and the "have nots" in language that should make those of us who live in the wealthiest nations in the world think and pray long and hard about how we might respond. The Christ presented by Luke is no "Buddy Jesus" who just wants you to have the right attitude toward your

wealth; he has very strong words about the proper use of it.<sup>5</sup>

Given this truth, it may seem surprising that Jesus accepts an invitation to dine with the wealthy Pharisee, Simon. Still, why not? Jesus, as presented by Luke, seems to love a party and is always open to accepting dinner invitations, be they from tax collectors, sinners, or Pharisees. What is surprising is that Simon, the host, is apparently so inhospitable. Jesus is quite direct in pointing out that Simon did not provide the kind of welcome he expected—no water for his feet, no kiss, no anointing. Instead Simon seems to be occupied with trying to figure out exactly who this Jesus is and Simon must have determined that Jesus was some kind of prophet. That is until SHE shows up.

Seemingly out of nowhere this woman of the street arrives. This may be a woman who has lost everything; one who is a widow and finds herself with no choice other than to turn to prostitution. At the same time, while this is hinted at, the text does not specifically say that she is a prostitute. But she is a woman who has suffered much and who has much to be forgiven. Now, this is not Mary Magdalene and it is important not to mix up this account in Luke with the accounts of similar incidents recounted in the other Gospels. They are not the same. Especially in John, this incident becomes a symbolic anointing for burial, but not here. In this incident Luke sets up a contrast between the female outcast sinner who shows perfect hospitality and the established male Pharisee who does not. For his part Simon seems oddly unconcerned about

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5. Sarah Dylan Breuer – *SarahLaughed.net* – Blog entry June 14, 2007 [www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2007/06/proper\\_6\\_year\\_c.html](http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2007/06/proper_6_year_c.html)

the presence of the woman in his house and continues to ponder the question of Jesus' identity. He concludes that since Jesus did not stop this woman from touching him; and since he should know who this woman is, if he is really a prophet: well, then maybe he's not really a prophet after all. Jesus' words at the conclusion of the parable of the debtors actually, in a way, confirm Simon's suspicions: Jesus is not just a prophet; Jesus is the Messiah, a Messiah who loves and cares and forgives and extends grace to those in need. Fred Craddock concludes his section on this text with these insightful words:

Setting the question of proper context aside, the word of Jesus "Go in peace" adds considerable pathos to the event. Where does one go when told by Christ "Go in peace"? The price of the woman's way of life in the city has been removal from the very institutions that carried the resources to restore her. The one place she is welcome is the street, among people like herself. What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. The story screams the need for a church, not just any church but one that says, "You are welcome here."<sup>6</sup>

This pericope concludes with Luke describing how Jesus continued his ministry throughout the towns and villages of the region. And with him were the twelve male disciples along with several female disciples, both women whom Jesus had cured and women of some means who were providing resources to assist in Jesus' ministry. My New Testament professor at seminary never used the word "disciples" in translating the word *mathetai*. Instead he used the word "students." And in Luke, especially, there is an inner group of men who are referred to as "the twelve" but the

disciples or students are a larger group of followers, which also included women. And these women were close enough and important enough that they are privy to the resurrection appearances. It is indeed a scandal that the church has in the past, and continues in some ways in the present, to marginalize the ministry of women.

### A Few Words on the Reading from Galatians

The issue at stake here is whether or not Gentiles need to be circumcised in order to become Christian, and the corollary issue concerns the dietary laws. These are related in that observant Jews were not to eat with uncircumcised Gentiles, as Gentiles were considered unclean. While Peter and James apparently agreed that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised, Peter, and perhaps James, did not apparently completely understand the full scope of what this meant and balked at eating with Gentiles. This infuriated Paul and created the conflict between them. Again, as I said above, we need to not refer to the Acts account of this conflict as it at the least takes the edge off the conflict. Paul spent a good bit of his ministry and spilled quite a bit of ink on defending himself against charges of not taking Scripture seriously by undermining the dietary laws. The fundamentalists and literalists of his day could simply not accept that it was okay to ignore these parts of the law.

Paul in this passage tried to explain that our relationship with God is not made right by our following all the laws. God sets our relationship right through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are made right by Jesus, not by our own efforts, but solely and completely through the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ. Remember, says Paul, there are no classes of sinners, we are all sinners and consequently we are all in need to God's love

6. Craddock, *Luke*, 106.



and forgiveness. And through Jesus our relationship with God is restored or made right. SBD

## Proper 7C June 20, 2010

1 Kings 19:1–15a  
Psalms 42 and 43  
Galatians 3:23–29  
Luke 8:26–39

The readings for this week from the Old Testament and the Gospel are all about demons and demon possession. In the Gospel Jesus encounters a man who is possessed by “legions” of demons. Jesus casts them out in a dramatic way, sending them into a herd of swine. But in the Old Testament reading, the Cecil B. DeMille drama in the story has already happened in the events that preceded the reading for this Sunday. In a great contest Elijah challenges the priests of Baal to a showdown and though they engage in all manner of religious histrionics nevertheless Baal is silent. Elijah calls upon the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel and God sends down the flames from heaven that devour the sacrifice upon the altar. Then the priests of Baal are rounded up, taken down to Kidron and slain.

But there are always consequences. The priests of Baal are favorites of the queen, Jezebel, and she is not pleased about the events that have transpired. So, she has put a price on the head of Elijah. Elijah runs and hides. Today’s reading finds Elijah filled with fear and self-doubt. He is feeling sorry for himself and is generally depressed. These are Elijah’s demons. He has been “very zealous for the Lord,” but what good has it done him? Now he is running for his life, holed up in this cave. He is a failure and

he is miserable. We twenty-first century Americans probably have much in common with Elijah. Depression, self-doubt, self-loathing are all very common in our society. Almost every day as a pastor I encounter people who are struggling with these demons themselves. And it would be disingenuous of me not to admit that I have had my own struggles with them. They are difficult demons to deal with and at the mere hint of weakness they will whisper in your ear. In the case of Elijah, God does not pursue him, though God remains present. God provides angels to minister to him and then he promises an epiphany.

In my last parish I regularly visited an elderly woman named Emma who lived in a very tiny apartment that was completely filled with angels. She had been collecting them since she was a little girl and she had them of all shapes and sizes and they were everywhere. When I would visit to take her communion I had to be careful not to step on one or knock one over or even to sit on one, because they were everywhere. This was a woman who had no family left, but she had her church. And at this congregation there were several people who looked in on her on a regular basis. They would take her shopping, to the doctor, sit and talk, and bring her communion. They were her ministering angels. Certainly the ornamental angels had a ministering affect, but it was these living and breathing angels that brought her the love of Christ.

In his magnificent oratorio “Elijah,” Felix Mendelssohn (who while he had been baptized as a Lutheran for political reason—to stave off rampant German anti-semitism—he was still the grandson of the great Talmudic scholar Moses Mendelssohn. It is no accident that one of his best works, and certainly his greatest work for chorus, orchestra, and soloists, was

based on an Old Testament figure—but I digress) brings the listeners through the highly dramatic contest with the priests of Baal, creating music that would rival Verdi in its dramatic intensity. But as Elijah stands outside the cave waiting for the Lord to reveal himself, we hear the chorus sing “Behold, God the Lord passes by.”<sup>7</sup> Riveted to our seats we wait to hear what will happen next—the wind blows and the mountains tremble, the oceans swell and the earth was shaken, and finally a fire—all accompanied by intense orchestral tempest—“but yet the Lord... was not... But yet the Lord was not in the fire, was not in the fire” the chorus finally sings. And the tempest gives way to a musical opening of the heavens and from there comes a “still small voice.” Using the phrase from KJV, Elijah experiences the presence of God not in the dramatic, overwhelming experience of supernatural phenomena, but rather God comes to him in a simple quiet manner.

Scholar Howard Wallace has this to say about this passage:

Being the exemplar of spectacular action for God, Elijah naturally expects to see God in the wind, the earthquake and the fire. But YHWH was not in any of these things. There follows one of the most memorable verses in scripture: “after the fire (came) a sound of sheer silence.” The NRSV renders it “sheer silence,” but most people recall the KJV’s “a still small voice.” In Hebrew the phrase is **qol dammah dakah** (possibly something like the “sound of soft stillness”). In the Aramaic Targum of 1 Kings the phrase summons up an image of God

as Lord of hosts. The Aramaic means “the voice of those who were praising softly.” In any case, the meaning is that God is not encountered in the sound and fury of loud and spectacular events. While that was the case in the time of Moses, it is no longer so. God will not be conjured up by the zealous activity of the prophet who now stands quiet and broken on the mountain-top. Elijah discovers that God is encountered when the activity ceases and the words stop. When his mind and heart are finally empty of ambition and self-promotion, God is heard.<sup>8</sup>

This is how God comes to us. Though we may be looking in the wrong places, God still comes in the still, small voice or sheer silence of the love and grace shown to us by those who reach out to us in Christ’s name. Emma experienced this voice of God through the love and ministering of the angels that visited her regularly. And Elijah’s experience of the presence of God in this quiet manner frees him from the demons of zealotness and over-confidence, of self-pity and depression, and enables him to continue his prophetic ministry.

The Gospel reading finds Jesus dealing with demons of a different kind. Jesus has just stilled the storm and chastised his students for their pitiful lack of faith. Now in the Gentile city of Gerasa he encounters a man who is completely possessed by demons. They instantly recognize Jesus and beg him not to be returned to the abyss. So Jesus gives the demons permission to enter into a herd of unclean swine which then rush down

7. Felix Mendelssohn, “Elijah” Chorus #28 (Author’s recommendation: stop reading and listen to this chorus—with your eyes closed!)

8. Harold Wallace, Weekly Comments on the Revised Common Lectionary – June 24, 2007 <http://hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au/WebOTcomments/OrdinaryC/Pent-41Kgs19.html>

the embankment and are drowned. Jesus' authority extends to nature and even to the demons. Jesus is truly the Messiah, whose ministry reaches out to Jews and Gentiles alike and whose ministry reflects care and concern for all.

I suppose you might expect the reaction to be really positive. What a great miracle. This man now has his life back; his family and community now have this man back as a potentially productive member of society. But, this is not how they see it. Those who have worked with addiction know that often a secondary addiction develops in those who are in relationship with or dependent upon the one who is struggling with the addiction—be it the demon of alcoholism, other drugs, or sexual addiction. Sometimes this person (a spouse or others) may actually try to subvert the healing process. For as the one who struggles with this addiction is able to take control of the problem, get it under control and begin to rebuild his life, old ways of doing things, old friends and relationships and so forth need to be replaced or redefined. This can be very threatening. The reaction to Jesus' healing of the demoniac seems along these lines. Nothing will ever be the same and the reaction is fear of the unknown, fear of what this healing will mean for this community, for his former caregivers and so on. Perhaps there is also a concern about economic loss. The loss of the swine, but this is a profound thing that has occurred and who knows what the economic impact might be. Keeping the status quo is much safer and comfortable. Fred Craddock writes that

It remains the case to this day that a community becomes very involved when the impact of Jesus Christ affects the economy. And the gospel does stir the economy, because healings, conversions, and the embrace of Christian ethics radically influence getting and

spending. The Gerasene people are not praising God that a man is healed; they are counting the cost and finding it too much.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, after being healed, the man begs Jesus to allow him to follow, but Jesus refuses. He calls upon the man to return to his home, to his life and to declare what God has done. Returning to his home might have been the hardest option in front of him, especially given the reaction of his community. Nevertheless, God's healing presence calls us all to continue in our lives and ministry. This was true for this man, it was true for Elijah, and it is true for us.

### **A Few Words on the Reading from Galatians**

This reading is one of the most well-known passages in all of Paul's letters. After answering his critics on the issue of circumcision and the dietary laws, Paul now turns to an issue that he touched on in several other contexts in his writings: equality in Christ. It is not enough to accept the principle that Gentiles do not have to adhere to the Jewish law; it is not enough to accept the principle that women (like Thecla and Phoebe and Lydia) are actively engaged in the ministry of the church; it is not enough to accept the principle that owners (like Philemon) and slaves (like Onesimus) are brothers in Christ. These "principles" must be enacted as a way of living and a way of being in the world.

In many ways, this is one of Paul's most difficult, counter-cultural teachings, which continues to give us trouble today. What Paul is doing is subverting the social order of the Roman world in the first century.

9. Craddock, *Luke*, 117.

And Paul continues to do this today to our twenty-first century world.

In Christ we are a new creation and the old ways of looking at the world, the old ways of ordering the society, need to be revamped. In Christ we are no longer Americans and Africans or Palestinians or Asian; we are no longer black or white or brown skin; we are no longer gay or straight! All of the categories with which we organize and compartmentalize groups of people in order to separate and keep these groups in their social place—all of these must go in Christ.

There is no question that Paul accepted that God is able to call all human beings whom God created, to be a part of the Christian community and to ministry. Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan write:

Was Paul's emphasis about being one "in Christ" about unity or equality? The two are not the same. In a time of national crisis, an American president might say, "We are all Americans." The message would be clear: despite our differences, we are united in our concern and love for our country. But it would not mean we are all equal. So, is Paul's message about being "one in Christ" about unity rather than division? Or about equality rather than superiority and hierarchy?

We are persuaded that Paul's response to the conflict in Galatia is about equality and not simply unity. We don't think he was saying "Can't we all just get along, despite our differences?"...Paul's vision was about more than this. It was about equality instead of acceptance of hierarchy and superiority within (the) Christian community.... Equality, not simply unity, is the hallmark of the new creation.<sup>10</sup>

10. Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 196–197.

We have a long way to go. But we are not alone. The demons of exclusivity and fear and hate can be excised. But most often God will be found in the "still, small voice" of God's love and grace and acceptance and forgiveness. SBD

## Proper 8C June 27, 2010

2 Kings 2:1–2, 6–14  
Psalm 77:1–2, 11–20  
Galatians 5:1, 13–25  
Luke 9:51–62

Chapter 9 in the Gospel of Luke is pivotal. Jesus feeds the 5000, Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus defines what that means with the first passion prediction, and then, directly in the center of the chapter, stands the experience of the Transfiguration. As Jesus comes away from this experience, he has now set his face to go toward Jerusalem. In Luke the passion predictions of Jesus stand on either side of the Transfiguration. So the second passion prediction occurs afterward (there is a healing in-between). The reading for this Sunday stands at the end of the chapter after the passion predictions, the Transfiguration and on the road to Jerusalem.

The echoes of Elijah are also strong in this chapter. "Who do people say that I am?" Jesus asks the twelve. "They answered, John the Baptist, but others Elijah...." Moses and Elijah appear beside Jesus at the Transfiguration and the very first verse for today's Gospel reading—"When the days drew near for him to be taken up"—has echoes of the Old Testament reading for this Sunday.

But it doesn't end there. Samaria, and the Samaritan village where Jesus and his disciples enter, is located in the

Northern Kingdom of Israel. This is the region where both Elijah and Elisha were active and where, in 2 Kings 1, the King of the Northern Kingdom, Ahaziah, sends men to capture these prophets. Elijah calls down the fires of heaven to consume these men. No doubt this is what is in the minds of John and James when they ask Jesus to repeat the miracle for the rejection they experience. "Let's stamp out this kind of prejudice, let's hate those who hate us. Jesus will have none of it!"<sup>11</sup> Jesus is greater than Elijah and does not respond with violence. Instead he rebukes these two disciples. William Loader writes:

It is an odd story. Is it being critical of Elijah's act? This is less likely than that the author wants to show that Jesus is like Elijah but also someone more than Elijah. That theme will return in the following verses. Nevertheless violence is being set aside as a solution. Hating those who reject you is also a major religious theme, including a frame of reference for many in thinking about God and God's future. The cycle of violence easily becomes a devout response. James and John loved Jesus. That was a problem—for them and others.<sup>12</sup>

The parallels continue in the following section about the cost of discipleship. In 1 Kings 19:20, Elijah allows Elisha to bid farewell to his family before leaving them and joining Elijah. Not Jesus. This passage would have shocked and offended devout Jews at that time. Burial of the dead was a religious duty and, while touching a dead

body would make someone unclean, this was not true if the dead body was the body of a relative, especially your own father. Jesus' response is shocking. Jesus is saying that to follow him means that you put your hand to the plow, you set your face toward Jerusalem, you pick up the cross and you do not look back, for anything. Being a follower of Jesus is not to be a follower when it is convenient—but at all times.

In John Bunyan's wonderful allegorical novel, *A Pilgrim's Progress*, the Christian encounters Mr. By-Ends who comes from the town of Fair-Speech and who desires to travel to the Celestial City with Christian. Christian however responds to the request with these words:

If you will go with us, you must go against wind and tide; the which, I perceive, is against your opinion: you must also own Religion in his rags, as well as when in his silver slippers; and stand by him, too, when bound in irons, as well as when he walketh the streets with applause.

By-Ends protests: You must not impose or lord it over my faith; leave me to my liberty and let me go with you.

Christian: Not a step further, unless you will do as I do in what I propound.

By-Ends: I will never desert my old principals, since they are harmless and profitable.<sup>13</sup>

There are always excuses. There is always some reason not to follow Jesus, or to modify the demands of discipleship.

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11. William Loader, *First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages in the Lectionary: Pentecost 5* [www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost5.htm](http://www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost5.htm)

12. Ibid.

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13. John Bunyan, *A Pilgrim's Progress*, 1678, 82.

“Oh that is not really practical in our society;” “What will other people think;” “My way of living is fine—it is harmless and profitable—for me.” Jesus says, “No, the cost is high. Loyalty to me must take precedence over everything.”

But is Jesus undermining the family? This is a hard saying of Jesus, and not an easy text to preach on in this society, where there is at least lip service to a kind of worship of what we like to call “family values.” William Loader writes:

Jesus is not driving a wedge between family and the kingdom of God, but he is indicating a conflict of interest. He often does so. Many people suffer because they need this kind of liberation, whether through external pressures or through internalized ones. Churches have often reinforced the values which have prevented people from growing up. It is not just a therapeutic issue for individuals—and that alone is worth a sermon about liberating grace and some exorcism. It is also what it does to our community and our world when local family values, systems and loyalties, even local racial and national loyalties, lead us to betray other people, usually those much worse off than ourselves. What are the shock tactics of today to free people from such seductions or simply to lift them beyond the limited horizons of their own legitimate caring? The point is not the tactics but the invitation to a new kind of journeying, a new way of setting one’s face for Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup>

If you follow me, your family is larger than you think. You are to treat others like members of your own family; you are

to accept and welcome and care for the other as if that one is a member of your own family. And if you are wondering whom that might include, a few verses later in chapter 10, Jesus spells this out in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

So how do you respond to Jesus’ words in this passage? How do you respond to Elijah’s words to Elisha: “Now, you go on back, I’ll be fine!” What would you have done? “Ok, thanks, see you later?” Well, later would not have come. Perhaps Elisha knew this was the end and did not want to be parted early. Instead he follows Elijah doggedly and for this he is rewarded with not only the vision of Elijah’s assumption into heaven, but also a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. This is the kind of commitment Jesus is talking about in the Gospel passage. The kind of commitment that will not be swayed or distracted; the kind of commitment that is not too busy or stressed to respond to the Word of the Lord or the needs of God’s people.

## A Few Words on the Reading from Galatians

This is the next to final pericope from Paul’s letter to the Galatians. It is a passionate letter during which Paul argues for the equality of all within the Christian community. In this passage, he begins with the words: “For freedom Christ, has set us free.” This is addressed to a group of people who within the temporal realm might not have considered themselves free. Some may have been slaves, some were women; all were subjects of Rome. But within the Spirit of Christ we are free to live for others; we are free to live lives that reflect the fruit of the Spirit: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness and self-control. There is no law against such things.* And true freedom is

14. William Loader, *First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages in the Lectionary*: Pentecost 5, [www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost5.htm](http://www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost5.htm)

contained in these “fruits.”

Some mistakenly think that freedom means the freedom to indulge one’s selfish desires. This is a popular view today. “We live in a free country.” So this means that I can play my music as loud as I want whenever I want, I can do with my property what I want, I can drink and party to my heart’s desire, I can treat others however I want, I can use people any way I want. This is such a popular notion. Robert Belluh<sup>15</sup> suggested back in the early ‘80s that the phrase in the Declaration of Independence “The Pursuit of Happiness” has been interpreted as being a blanket permission to do whatever “I” want. The problem is that rarely does such behavior actually bring happiness or satisfaction or contentment. Instead at best it fractures our lives into various unrelated compartments, and at worst it enslaves us to various addictions. Happiness is not the goal of the Christian life. Happiness comes and goes. But God brings us fulfillment and joy as we follow and reach out to others in Christian love.

Paul sets up this contrast between works of the flesh and works of the Spirit. The usual interpretation equates “flesh” with the human body. But is that correct? Is Paul saying that the human experience, the experience of bodily needs and desires is somehow evil? After all at Christmas we celebrate that Jesus, our Lord, was born as a human child and that in this God is en-fleshed in Jesus. Yet, if you look at the list of those things that Paul lists as being “sins of the flesh,” they do include bodily experiences such as “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, drunkenness

and carousing.” But Paul also includes “sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions and envy.” Borg and Crossan write:

These are not evils flowing out of being embodied. As Paul uses the word “flesh,” it is not to be identified with our bodies, as if the problem is that we are embodied creatures who eat and drink and have sex. Rather the “works of the flesh” are characteristic of a comprehensive way of life that stands in contrast to life in Christ, life in the Spirit. They are the result of being centered in something other than the Spirit of God as known in Jesus. Abstractly, life centered in the flesh is life centered in the finite. More concretely, it is living by the “wisdom of this world,” the normalcy of the domination systems of his time. That life is marked by enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions and envy. The other way of life, the alternative to life centered in the “flesh,” is life centered in the Spirit.<sup>16</sup>

John Ylvisaker, who is best known for his song “Borning Cry,” has another song that goes: “For freedom Christ has set us free! Alleluia. He gave his life for you and me! Alleluia. Sing for Freedom! Sing for Freedom! Christ has set us Free!”<sup>17</sup>

Thanks be to God! SBD

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16. Borg and Crossan, *The First Paul*, 206.

17. John Ylvisaker, “Sing For Freedom,” *Borning Cry: Worship for a New Generation*, II-7, Congregational Edition (Waverly: New Generation Publishers, 1994), 401.

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15. Robert N. Belluh, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).

## Proper 9C July 4, 2010

Isaiah 66:10–14

Psalm 66:1–9

Galatians 6:(1–6) 7–16

Luke 10:1–11, 16–20

### First Reading

It is difficult to ignore the striking feminine and maternal imagery in this passage from Isaiah. Both Jerusalem (v.11) and Yahweh (v. 13) will comfort Israel like a mother comforts a child. This is good news for the people of Israel as they return from the Babylonian exile. Once estranged and persecuted, they are now not only fed but satisfied, consoled, and loved. They will no longer just survive but will flourish. This is not only life, but life abundant. Because Yahweh will flow prosperity into Jerusalem, the people of Israel will not only be at home, but will be “dandled on her knees”—a phrase which calls to mind the image of a cherished and happy child, secure enough to enjoy playtime on her mother’s lap.

The letter to the Galatians exhorts readers to “bear one another’s burdens” (v. 2) and in that way to “fulfill the law of Christ.” However, this strong reference to the single commandment “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal 5:14) is balanced by an equally strong theme of personal responsibility. All must carry their own loads (v. 5) and one reaps what one sows (vv. 7–8). There is much work to be done, and each person should contribute so all can reap at harvest-time (v. 9). Even so, readers are cautioned not to boast in these efforts. Hard work, perseverance, personal responsibility, and even community building are admirable but can become a “good showing in the flesh” (v. 12). Paul is clear about this: “May

I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 14).

The Luke passage is a common ordination text, for obvious reasons. The themes of mission, urgency, and perseverance are appropriate for the sending out of a new pastor. However, it is worth noting that Luke is the only Gospel writer to include the sending of the seventy, and it is separate from the sending of the twelve disciples. There is a sense that this is the commissioning of all Christians, not just of the inner circle of followers. These instructions could be read as instructions for all who seek to preach and live the good news.

Jesus gives out very practical advice to the seventy, including what to carry (v. 4) and how to greet those along the way (v. 5). It is worth noting that the message to be delivered is the same whether one is welcomed or not welcomed—in either case, say to them: “The kingdom of God has come near” (vv. 9, 11). The Gospel message does not change in reaction to the hospitality received. All need to hear this saving word.

There is an interesting connection with the Galatians passage in the last verse. The seventy, upon returning home, take delight in the fact that “even demons submit to us” in the name of the Lord (v. 17). But Jesus, while affirming these events, cautions them: “Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (v. 20). As Paul reminded the Galatians, good works (even passionate evangelism) are not the focus of our rejoicing or boasting, but rather the cross of Christ and eternal salvation.

### Pastoral Reflection

This is the text for Sunday, July 4th, which forces the pastor to make some



decisions about how—and whether—to address this holiday in the sermon. Parishioners will be participating in events that encourage boasting and rejoicing in the founding of their country. Though a delicate task, it may be fitting to affirm these celebrations (as Jesus affirmed the seventy upon their return) but to also proclaim that our joy lies in the fact that our names are written in heaven. While we may be proud of our country, we are reminded to boast of nothing but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, the Luke passage offers a wonderful opportunity to talk about mission and evangelism. Jesus gives real, practical advice, including: Remain in the same house. Do not move about. Get to know the people. Live there, eat there, and sleep there. How many churches have embarked on a leafleting campaign, only to be frustrated when no one comes to church the next Sunday? How many evangelism committees spend months developing brochures but don't know who lives next door to the church?

Jesus recommends not standing on the doorstep and passing out a leaflet, but entering the house. Enter your neighbor's world. Get to know it. Do not move about from house to house. Eat the food they provide, heal the sick, and proclaim the good news that the kingdom of God has come near. What would this look like today? In what ways do we stay on our neighbor's doorstep by not learning his language, not singing her music, or losing interest after only one try? The good news of the incarnation is that God showed up for us and stayed with us. Maybe this text provides an opportunity to celebrate Christmas in July, by proclaiming the good news that we have Emmanuel, God with us, who didn't just stay on the doorstep but moved right in. CBS

## Proper 10C July 11, 2010

Deuteronomy 30: 9–14  
Psalm 25:1–10  
Colossians 1:1–14  
Luke 10:25–37

### First Reading

This passage from Deuteronomy has a few pitfalls when read in our current context. Verses 9 and 10 could easily be used as the basis of a prosperity gospel sermon or a pop theology book: “For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law.” Follow the law, become prosperous, or so it seems. However, the second part of verse 10 is the more important phrase: “because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” Indeed, the cause-effect relationship here is not “good works=prosperity” but rather “turn to the Lord your God=obey the Lord your God.” Turning one's life toward God empowers one to follow the law.

In Deuteronomy, God will “make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil” (v. 9). Colossians continues with the fruitful theme, though now it is the gospel that has been bearing fruit. “Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it” (v. 6). And what is this word of truth that has been bearing fruit? Here, it is the “hope laid up for you in heaven” (v. 5) that leads the Colossians to bear the fruit of love.

The reading from Luke contains the

very familiar Good Samaritan story. First, though, Luke continues the lectionary theme of the relationship between the law and love. In contrast to the accounts in Mark and Matthew, verse 27 combines two commands into one: “He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’” Most people familiar with this story will not remember these introductory verses, but they set the stage for the example of the Samaritan.

The lawyer intends to test Jesus, and is shown to know the law well. Jesus replies, “And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live’” (v. 28). The words of the earlier Deuteronomy reading ring in our ears: “Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away” (v. 11). The lawyer is not satisfied, however, and wants to further complicate what Jesus implies should be an easy command. He wants to “justify” himself, asking, “And who is my neighbor?”

Imagine the lawyer’s surprise when Jesus responds to his legal question with a story! Explicating the law through the telling of a story makes the lawyer get out of his head and into his heart. Just as Jesus is the law of love in the flesh, so the telling of this story puts flesh on the law. Surely, this commandment is not so hard to understand—but through the telling of this story Jesus shows the lawyer that “the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”

### **Pastoral Reflection**

The story of the Good Samaritan is difficult to preach because it is so well-

known. How can you make this familiar story strange again? The choice of how to proclaim the Gospel text would be the first place to start. Consider memorizing the text and telling it as a story, the way the lawyer would have heard Jesus telling it. Alternatively, consider staging a dramatic reading with a few different voices. Look at contemporary translations of the text for ideas on how to make the story come alive again for your congregation.

For today’s hearer, the importance of the characters is mostly lost. The phrase “Good Samaritan” has become commonly used to mean “someone who voluntarily helps someone else who is in distress.” The strange and paradoxical nature of this moniker is lost on us today. The lawyer could not have conceived of a “Good Samaritan.” Help the hearers understand how inconceivable it would be to identify one’s self as the Samaritan in the story. Instead, help them to place themselves in the role of the man left for dead.

Seeing oneself as the victim may be difficult, especially for Westerners who are accustomed to being the “Good Samaritan” or the “hero” for the rest of the world. Even more difficult in our new global and increasingly diverse reality is the task of identifying the “other” from whom we would be unwilling to receive help or mercy. Who, in our twenty-first-century context, is the one whose otherness compares to the Samaritan in the story? An immigrant? An AIDS patient? A terrorist? The mentally ill?

The 2009 movie “District 9” takes on this challenge by making the “others” into immigrants from another planet—aliens. While this film is probably not appropriate to be used in a worship setting (it is rated R), it may provide the preacher with some helpful images. In the movie, the main character is sent to help move a large number of these alien “immigrants”

into a new detention area. Along the way, he becomes sick and begins to transform into an alien himself. He finds himself needing the assistance of the aliens in order to be healed. These are creatures he previously considered to be animals, but now his life depends on the assistance of one of them.

This film takes the idea of receiving mercy and help from the “other” to the extreme. But perhaps this level of extreme story-telling is necessary to make the Good Samaritan come alive for today’s hearers. In the end, the congregation needs to hear Jesus’ words, “Go and do likewise,” in a new way. They need to know this isn’t a command to be the heroes, but rather an invitation to receive mercy, healing, and forgiveness from unlikely sources. CBS

## Proper 11C July 18, 2010

Genesis 18:1–10a  
Psalm 15  
Colossians 1:15–28  
Luke 10:38–42

### First Reading

In Genesis, we get the beloved story of Abraham and Sarah. This is a story full of humor, which lends itself easily to a story-telling style of proclamation. Many in the congregation will laugh, especially older members who understand the preposterous nature of being told you will have a baby at an advanced age.

The primary theme of the text, however, is not miraculous conception, but hospitality. The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of the Mamre (v. 1) but in this instance, encountering the Lord doesn’t involve fear, trembling, or dismay. Instead, Abraham “ran from the

tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground” (v. 2). He pleads for them to stay, gathers a calf (“tender and good”), some milk and curds, and asks Sarah to bake some bread. This is hospitality, but the text implies that it was very, very good hospitality—fitting for a special guest. Within the context of this over-the-top hospitality, Sarah’s laughter could be seen as a huge affront to the guests. Indeed, even though she is standing in the background, her laughter does not go unnoticed. The Lord’s response, “Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?” (v. 14), comes across as a challenge to Sarah and Abraham’s faith. That faith will be tested, for they still have to wait until chapter 21 for the promise to be fulfilled.

The reading from Luke is also a story about hospitality. Just as Sarah was in the tent baking bread for the surprise guests, so also Martha is attending to the behind-the-scenes work of hospitality. But Martha is no shrinking violet—she has the great audacity to bring her complaint straight to Jesus. “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me” (v. 40). Martha may have expected Jesus to tow the party line or maintain the status quo. She may have expected him to rebuff Mary for her “lazy” behavior and lack of hospitality while sitting at Jesus’ feet.

Imagine her surprise when Jesus responds that Mary, in fact, has chosen the “better part.” Certainly, this can be read as Jesus honoring the role of women in his ministry (a theme in the Gospel of Luke) and Mary’s right to be assuming the position of a disciple at his feet. However, coming directly after the story of the Good Samaritan, this scene may be another reference to this commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and

with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (v. 27). The story of the Good Samaritan illustrated that one cannot love God without loving one’s neighbor. Here, Jesus reminds Martha that one cannot love (serve) one’s neighbor (guest) without loving the Lord. One’s good works or good intentions—even hospitality—can distract from hearing the word of God.

### **Pastoral Reflection**

The story of Sarah and Abraham offers an opportunity to preach on the relationship of blessings to faith. Contrary to pop theology, this is not a transactional agreement. Blessings do not come as a result of faith—clearly not, for Sarah did not have any! She even laughed at the notion that she might conceive in her old age. Most hearers will know how the story ends, with the birth of the long-awaited Isaac (“laughter”) and the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. These may be words of hope to folks who have been told their lack of faith is keeping them from prosperity, riches, or other success in life. Sarah and Abraham are pillars of our faith tradition, and yet they also struggled with faith in God’s promises.

Many hearers will find this story very funny, especially when thinking of Sarah conceiving in her old age. The birth of Isaac was an important part of the greater promise the Lord made to Abraham. Yet in our youth culture, we often think our time is already past, and God can no longer use us. I think of the elderly parishioner who says to me every week, “Pastor, people just shouldn’t get this old. I can’t do anything!” Sarah thought the same thing, and yet this story shows that God can use us at any time in our lives. Being old doesn’t mean we can’t have a part in the mission of the church or the

story of God’s people. Such thinking sells God short. But is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

The way the story of Mary and Martha has been used—to criticize those who choose service over contemplation—is not really good news for women. Women today are still the ones who provide the behind-the-scenes services that make our lives (and our congregations) run smoothly. Today we would be in trouble without the efforts of women in the kitchens, in the nurseries, in the sewing ministries, in the offices and behind the organs of our churches. These sometimes invisible but vital roles in the congregation help to make the house of God a hospitable place for both members and guests.

Together, these two texts (Sarah/Abraham and Mary/Martha) feature women in invisible positions who are made visible by the Lord. In Genesis, the Lord recognizes Sarah. He sees her even though she is behind the scenes; he hears her even though she was speaking only to herself; he blesses her even though she thinks herself undeserving.

In Luke, it is striking that Jesus affirms Mary’s choice (and right) to sit at his feet, in the posture of a disciple. And though Jesus does criticize Martha’s distracted and worrying attitude, he does so in a gentle way. “Martha, Martha” he chides, “you are distracted by many things” (v. 41). He names her situation and extends an invitation. Martha, who is feeling constrained by her duties and her societal role, is given permission by Jesus to explore another one. She, too, could sit at Jesus’ feet. She, too, needs to hear the word that he brings. Mary has chosen the better part, but maybe Martha didn’t know she had a choice! For the women in your congregation (and others who feel invisible) this could be a very liberating word. CBS

## Proper 12C July 25, 2010

Genesis 18:20–32

Psalms 138

Colossians 2:6–19

Luke 11:1–13

### First Reading

Though the story of Sodom and Gomorrah has been used in many unsavory ways by preachers and armchair theologians, this Genesis text can also be read as a testament to God's willingness to be in conversation with God's people. The Lord planned to go to Sodom and wreak some havoc, but Abraham "remained standing before the LORD" (v. 22) and then "Abraham came near" (v. 23). Is this audacity? Bravery? Stupidity? After all, this is an angry God! Whatever the reason, Abraham dares to remain in the presence of the Lord and to engage in conversation—bargaining, really—with the Creator.

One can feel the tension increasing as Abraham continues his line of questioning, until in verse 30 he only proceeds after softening his approach: "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." And then again in verse 31: "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." Finally after pushing one last time and receiving the answer "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it" (v. 32), the conversation is over. Though the Creator engages in give-and-take with the created, let there be no mistake about who is in charge here. In verse 33, "the LORD went his way, when *he* had finished speaking to Abraham." The conversation ended when God decided it was over, and so we are left with the number 10, and can only wonder how God might have answered,

had the conversation continued.

The Gospel text also concerns the proper way to address God. In Genesis, Abraham remained standing before the Lord and even dared to get closer. In Luke, Jesus tells his followers that they may also approach God in an audacious way—by using the name "Father." This is a shocking level of familiarity, akin to Abraham daring to inch closer to God. Jesus describes this parent-child relationship further in verses 11–13: "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?" Not only is God a parent, it seems, but God is a far better parent than any earthly one! Even earthly parents give their children food—the Father in heaven gives much more.

In the first part of the reading, Jesus responds to the disciples' request "Lord, teach us to pray" by giving them a simple formula: Pray for God's kingdom, pray for your daily needs, pray for forgiveness, and pray for deliverance from judgment. The second part of the response, however, relates to the spirit with which we are to pray. "Lord, teach us to pray," asked the disciples, and Jesus responds with two stories that demonstrate God's loving responsiveness. First, God is the friend who, though he may be busy with other things, will respond if the prayer is persistent. Second, God is the parent who would never think to give a snake to the child who asked for a fish, or a scorpion to the child who asked for an egg. The disciples, then, are to pray with persistence and confidence. It is worth noting the simplicity of the prayer Jesus teaches them, in contrast to the detail and time spent on these stories. Jesus doesn't give the disciples magic words, but teaches them the proper posture in which to pray.

## Pastoral Reflection

If you decide to preach on the Sodom and Gomorrah text, God bless you! However, it seems there is more than enough to be covered in the Luke text. In fact, a sermon series on the Lord's Prayer—or prayer in general—might be an excellent choice for the summer. Parishioners have many questions about prayer, and this passage alone could help them to investigate many of them. How do I pray? For what can I pray? Will God hear my prayer? This theme could work well in conjunction with an adult forum on the Lord's Prayer and the Small Catechism.

Jesus teaches the disciples that prayer is an intimate relationship. It is a conversation between parent and child, or between two family members who know and love each other. He teaches them to pray for the practical (daily bread) and the political (the coming of the kingdom). Pray for forgiveness, but let that prayer inform your actions (by first forgiving others). Pray with persistence—one could reference the popular Christian t-shirt which says "P.U.S.H.: Pray Until Something Happens." Above all, pray with confidence in God. This does not equal confidence in receiving what was requested, but rather confidence that a loving God will not deliver a scorpion.

Again, it is striking how simple the prayer of Jesus actually is. I doubt very

much this was intended to be prayed in the off-hand, rote manner in which we use it today. Still, people are always looking for a formula for prayer. Remember the Prayer of Jabez craze? The latest prayer fad seems to be the "We just" prayer: "Lord, we just ask you to come into our presence." "Lord, we just ask for your blessing." In the prayer of Jesus as presented in Luke 11, there is no "just" about it. These are serious needs requiring serious responses. We don't pray asking for "just" a little forgiveness or hope that God will "just" provide some of our needs.

How is this text heard by those who have prayed earnestly and persistently and yet have been disappointed by God? What can be said about God as loving parent when God didn't save a child who was dying? Some listeners may have given up on prayer after just such a circumstance. Why should they still pray? Verse 4 begs a few other questions: "And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." What does this mean? Are sins only forgiven if we forgive first? Hearers will have these and many other questions running through their minds. Above all, be sure they hear the good news that God hears prayers, and that we can pray with confidence. CBS



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