

Thy Kingdom Come

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Creation Care in Eschatological Context

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ABSTRACT:

The concept of *missio Dei* has recently been subjected to scrutiny and theological re-interpretation - notably in response to the advent of 'Creation Care' as a key component in the changing landscape of mission praxis. The 'stewardship model' of Christian environmentalism no longer seems robust enough to withstand the expanding crisis of climate change (for those who accept the scientific data). Yet is 'saving the planet' a valid theological agenda? When creation care is framed in an eschatological context, immediate questions arise regarding apocalyptic expectations, and the expected 'end' of this world. Is environmental mission a fruitless endeavour, or does it rather demand a grander objective on par with 'reaching the world with the gospel'? The nature of the transition from creation to New Creation becomes the crucial theological underpinning for discerning our missional responsibility toward the environment. If Christ's return signals not an end but a transition, then perhaps it is possible that 'our labour is not in vain'. This paper seeks to develop a rational, purposeful, biblical justification for creation care in light of apocalyptic expectations and the concept of a new creation.

No one involved in missional thinking today can fail to be aware of the tremendous impact that environmental concerns and climate change are having on Christian theology and ethics, and likewise on mission theory and praxis. However, many fundamental questions remain unresolved. What are we to do about it? What is our missional responsibility in relation to weather phenomena and global climate events happening on a massive scale, or the idea that biological diversity is in critical endangerment, or that climate stability has reached a tipping point? Much of what we hear is highly controversial and still being vigorously debated at the highest levels of scientific and political authority – let alone within the Church. Is it simply beyond our scope, theologically? Is it

okay just to 'do our bit for the environment' and hope for the best, or ought we to have a grander objective in mind for the earth, something missionally equivalent to 'reaching the world with the gospel'? Do we need an overarching operational strategy, or should we simply proceed as individuals, tracking our carbon footprint like our calorie intake, perhaps in response to a niggling sense of consumerist guilt, or a communal participation in the prevailing social angst, or just because it innately seems the right thing to do?

This paper is predicated on the assumption that it is incumbent upon us, as missional-theologians, to seek a rational, purposeful, biblical justification for our action in the world – even if we suspect before we begin that

ultimately the task may be impossible. Thus far the Christian response to the secular/scientific outcry regarding the critical state of our planet has been tepid at best. We seem at a loss. Is 'saving the planet' really a valid theological agenda? Even if we reply affirmatively, is environmental mission to be considered as a goal on a par with saving souls? Or is it rather a matter of maintenance and good stewardship until Christ returns? Questions of priorities, resourcing mission, urgency of action, Christian unity, and the nature of theological training, are all contingent upon our response to this dilemma; yet we might take comfort in knowing that generations past have faced equally daunting challenges and emerged with deeper and richer theological insights because of them. Perhaps the most prescient question of all: how are we to think of our environmental mission to the earth in light of an expectation of an apocalyptic end to this world?

THE ADVENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL MISSION

There is mounting evidence that a new phenomenon is emerging in mission, its terminology vacillating between 'creation care' and 'environmental mission'. In 2012 the Lausanne Commission appointed its first ever Senior Associate in Creation Care. The mission agency OMF appointed a 'Creation Care Advocate' based at their international offices in Singapore. The Evangelical Theological Society's annual meeting was held under the theme of 'Caring for Creation', and the Micah Network issued a creation care 'Call to Action'. In November 2012 the Lausanne Commission convened a Global Consultation on 'Creation Care and the Gospel' in Jamaica, resulting in

a widely translated Call to Action;¹ and in a later newsletter, Senior Associate Ed Brown referred to Environmental Missions as the new 'hot topic' for organisations traditionally involved in church planting and evangelism, announcing plans for an Environmental Missions Consortium in the USA in 2013.² Such developments have continued to escalate over the past 18 months.

Interestingly, while all this would seem to indicate a remarkable momentum, there are other signs that this has been a long and arduous journey, and that the larger Church is only finally beginning to stir from its lethargy. In 1984 an Anglican Consultative Council meeting set out four 'marks of mission', and in 1990, most significantly, a fifth was added. It is worthwhile listing them here in full:³

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

I find this list fascinating for two reasons: first because it precisely mirrors my own journey of mission awareness and enthusiasm; and second because the fifth one is unique. It is unique because it is the only one not specifically anthropocentric, and not (on the surface at least) exclusively tied to human salvation; it came

1 See <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/all/2012-creation-care/1881-call-to-action.html>

2 See <http://conversation.lausanne.org/en/home/creation-care>

3 Cathy Ross, ed., *Life Widening Mission: Global Anglican Perspectives*. Oxford: Regnum Books, 2012, p147.

last, like an afterthought, but its implications are vast. In fact the surprise is not that it came last, but that it came at all. Considering that this meeting took place over 20 years ago, one could argue that the fifth mark lurched dramatically toward the idealistic and prophetic, unlike the others which are historically descriptive of the changing paradigm of the *missio Dei*. On the other hand, perhaps it was merely a recognition of the ever-present undercurrent of our creation mandate – to rule over the earth and subdue it.

The question I wish to pose regarding this fifth mark of mission is 'why'? Why is it a missional imperative to 'safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth'? In the book *Life Widening Mission*, arising from the 2010 Edinburgh Conference, John Kafwanka undertakes an explanation which on the surface, seems perfectly valid:

It is very important to emphasise here that all the Five Marks of Mission are biblical and reflect the ministry and work of Jesus Christ, in whom God's mission has complete manifestation in the world. The life and ministry of Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, was to bring about healing, wholeness and reconciliation of God's creation, and the Five Marks of Mission express both the reconciling and the holistic nature of God's mission.⁴

My intention here is not to dispute this statement theologically, although the shift from a reconciliation of God and man to a reconciliation of God's creation is striking, as is the claim that the nature of God's mission is holistic rather than salvific. And the reference to the ministry and work of Jesus Christ is puzzling, since perhaps the most tangible expression of Christ's environmental concern is the withering of the fig tree. As it happens,

4 John Kafwanka, "The Five Marks of Mission and the Anglican Communion", In *Life-Widening Mission*, op. cit. pp146-7.

I essentially agree with Kafwanka's statement, but I believe the fifth mark requires a far more complex theological construction and justification than the other four, and simply stating that the fifth is likewise biblical and reflects the work of Jesus Christ may actually undermine that task. The view that this fifth mark was part of the 'reconciling work of Christ' is not readily apparent, or it would have been recognised for the past 2000 years rather than the past 20. I believe the disparity lies in a fundamental difference in the way we now regard the concept of the *missio Dei*. And that begs the deeper question: What is the so-called 'holistic nature' of God's mission?

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE *MISSIO DEI*

To ascertain just how radical I believe the extent of this difference is, we need only turn to David Bosch's seminal 1991 publication of *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission*. In over 500 pages, there is not a whisper of an expanded or holistic *missio Dei* encompassing the concept of creation. At times 'the whole world' is included, but this is clearly the whole human world, not the whole of creation. Bosch describes the paradigm shift from a *missio ecclesia* to a *missio Dei* in the mid-20th century, tracing the roots of this transition to Karl Barth's monumental influence at the 1952 Willingen Conference.⁵ Here the classical Trinitarian 'sending' model expands to include the church: 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world. Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God.'⁶ This gradually developed

5 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. New York: Orbis, 1991, p390.

6 Ibid.

into the commonly heard adage, 'It's not the Church that has a mission, but God's mission that has a church'. Thus the church came to be seen as the instrument, rather than the source, of mission. Yet the nature of that mission had not conceptually changed. It was, and remained, essentially salvific, as Moltmann's original statement clearly expresses: 'It is not the church that has a mission of *salvation* to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church'⁷ (my italics). As Bosch adds, 'To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love *toward people*'⁸ (my italics). Bosch goes on to elucidate thirteen different models of mission in what he calls the 'emerging ecumenical paradigm', all of which are salvation based and anthropocentric, none of which mention creation as a part of the new paradigm. Even the final eschatological section centres on a 'salvation-historical' model, and Bosch's deferral to Hoekendijk is telling: 'Where liberation to true humanity has taken place, we may conclude that the *missio Dei* has reached its goal'.⁹

If Bosch's acclaimed work in 1991 contains no mention of a creation-centred missional paradigm, then clearly such a proposal is both recent and radical. But it is perhaps less surprising when one considers that the very concept of the *missio-Dei* has always been ascertained as God's response to the fall. In other words, God's mission has been seen as a *rescue mission*, a restorative, reconciliatory, redemptive mission to save mankind from the effects of sin and the fall. But what if the mission of God were seen as stemming not from

the fall, but *prior* to the fall, from the creation mandate? Missiologically we trace our need for redemption to Adam's sin, but theologically, God's purposes for humankind precede the fall. The creation mandate of Ge 1:28 is not merely a command for humankind, but a teleological statement of God's mission for the whole of creation.

This idea is perhaps expressed most clearly in the recent emergence of 'temple theology' (e.g. such as by that Greg Beale¹⁰ and John Walton¹¹), viewing the central concept of the temple through the lens of the Ancient Near Eastern cosmological worldview, and building a strong case that the Garden of Eden is in fact the first temple; the temple represents the point of connection between God and man, the nexus of heaven and earth, the place from which God's rule is asserted and where his presence is located. While in other Ancient Near Eastern cults, the god's image was situated in the temple and ministered to by the priests, in the Old Testament narrative, God's image is found in the man and woman themselves, and they were to act as priests to creation, mediating God's presence and rule outward toward the rest of creation – beyond the Garden, the holy place of his temple on earth. In temple theology, we begin to glimpse the relationship between creation and new creation, not just as old and new, but as purpose and fulfilment. And most importantly, we see in this the crucial role of human beings, as the image bearers of God, to be the intended instruments of bringing about this transformation. We see the eschatological trajectory of creation to new creation as a *process*, not an *event*. And the free agency of

7 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*. London: SCM, 1977, p64.

8 Bosch: p390.

9 J.C. Hoekendijk in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, op. cit. p 507.

10 Greg Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission, New Studies in Biblical Theology*. Leicester: Apollos, 2004.

11 John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*. Nottingham: Apollos, 2007.

human beings as a creative projection of God's own purposes, rather than the tragic channel through which sin and death enter the picture and change forever the means to that end.

THE FIFTH MARK OF MISSION

And so – back to the fifth mark of mission. Reporting on the 2010 World Mission Conference in Edinburgh, at which one track was dedicated to developing the corresponding theological themes of each mark of mission, Kapya John Kaoma expressed deep disappointment that 'the integrity of creation was not addressed as an independent missiological issue...[but] ecological issues were only integrated in major themes.'¹² Positively he notes that the context of the current ecological crisis conveyed serious eco-social and theological overtones amongst the conference participants,¹³ yet there was little evidence that this resulted in deeper theological deliberations. Kaoma himself admirably attempts to implant this new mark of mission within the *missio Dei*, yet his emphasis focuses on discovering the sacramental nature of Creation, developing a 'creation-centred consciousness', and protecting the dignity of the earth as belonging to the Lord.

Tragically, all of this seems to miss the mark. Along with the deep environmental concern for the sinful damage humanity has inflicted on the earth, Kaoma's insights seem grounded in the here-and-now, in the present creation, the damage we have done to it, and our Christian imperative to take care of the earth because it is the Lord's. I detected nothing of a future-looking purpose for the earth beyond the obvious recognition that the earth is our home

and therefore a necessary context for mission. One phrase stood out in particular: 'Christians ought to remember that the death of Earth, is the death of Christian Mission!'¹⁴ Well, perhaps true – but is this necessarily a bad thing? If one steps back from the *missio Dei* and into the broader eschatological view of God's purposes – the fulfilment of mission, the destruction of the earth, and the end of this present age, all have a distinctly biblical ring! The phrase 'death of the earth' perhaps overstates the case, but certainly bible-believing Christians expect an apocalyptic 'ending' of some sort.

Subtle hints of a broader view can be found in Kaoma's attempt to revisit the concept of the *missio Dei*. 'In short', he writes, 'mission is an invitation to participate in God's purposes for the entire created order.'¹⁵ This certainly reflects a departure from prior concepts of the *missio Dei*, which centred exclusively on the particularity of God's love and salvific desire for humanity; but the eschatological implications have not yet been fully grasped, and thus it lacks the theological conviction of a truly re-interpreted *missio Dei*. 'Safeguarding the integrity of creation' somehow intimates the preserving of what is, rather than the transforming into what it will become. Yet why do we assume God's purposes for creation are static, while his purposes for his people are dynamic and future oriented? Should we see *creatio continua* or should we look for an end to this present creation? If the fifth mark of mission is limited to the here and now, it will inevitably be interpreted in parallel with its secular counterpart, as a desperate bid to 'save the planet'. Once again, we return to the question of what is the wider purpose of God, or the nature of a holistic *missio Dei*?

¹² Kapya John Kaoma, *Life Widening Mission*, op. cit. p83.

¹³ Ibid. p75.

¹⁴ Ibid. p80.

¹⁵ Ibid. p79.

MISSION IN ESCHATOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Perhaps the answer to this question lies buried in the fertile fields of eschatology. As Martin Luther famously remarked, ‘Even if I knew that the world would end tomorrow, I would still plant my apple tree today.’ Rather than sheer stubbornness or bravado, what if Luther actually had a theological basis for his assertion? Is it possible that what we do now in this present creation has implications for the advent of the New Creation? Paul’s concluding statement in 1Co 15:58 implies exactly that: ‘Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.’ If our ‘work’ still involves, as part of God’s own mission, the creation mandate, then our care of creation now is not in vain, even in light of the New Creation to come. We might equate this with our own temporal human existence. Although our Christian hope lies in receiving resurrected bodies of sinless perfection, we consider our present sanctification as critical and profoundly meaningful. We may not grasp how, but based on Christ’s resurrection, we know that our own identities in this life will carry forward, at least in part, to our resurrected identities in a New Heaven and New Earth. How we live now matters.

Christians throughout the centuries have lived in tension between the promises of this life, and the future hope of the life to come, the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’. The final step, to leave behind this body of sin in the sure and certain hope that it will be replaced with a resurrected body (1Co 15:42-44) is utterly foundational to our faith, and unique to Christianity. Should that likewise be our expectation for the earth? Carrying this analogy to an extreme, we might conclude that this present creation must

therefore die, and be resurrected as a new creation at the *parousia*. But is it theologically justifiable to consider the earth in such tight parallel with humanity? The natural world is subject to the laws of entropy, and according to Ro 8:20 subject to ‘frustration’. But death and resurrection? It seems not. As Paul clarifies, ‘creation waits in eager expectation...in hope that it will be liberated from its bondage to decay, and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We are subject to death, and await a resurrection; creation is subject to decay and awaits its liberation.

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

But this is where we run into an eschatological gridlock, and finally we are forced to confront the elephant in the room: the elephant of the apocalypse. When looking toward ultimate purposes – the true ‘holistic mission of God’ – the eschatological New Creation forces itself into the picture like a bull in a china shop. It presents an inescapable reality which, without careful consideration, diminishes the goal of preserving this earth, and demolishes the idea that saving this earth should be a key aspect of the *missio Dei*. Quite the opposite it seems to imply, this present earth is destined for destruction – not by human recklessness, but by God’s own command (Mt 24:35, 2Pe 3:7). And yet, a careful exegesis is needed here. The language of ‘destruction’ leads too easily to an overly simplistic interpretational scheme where discontinuity becomes absolute. Yet throughout all the periods of salvation history, we see continuity inter-mixed with discontinuity. Even the 2Peter 3 passage compares the coming ‘destruction’ with the destruction of Noah’s day, a destruction which both author and recipients knew full well did not ‘destroy’ the earth itself,

but destroyed the 'world' of that day, a world rife with sin and wickedness. After 150 days of waiting (Ge 8:3), the waters receded from the earth, and Noah and his family eventually stepped out into very same creation they had left behind.

Whatever this coming destruction may entail, it is set in the context of the coming of Christ, and his *parousia* remains one of the great unifying beliefs of the Christian faith in all its diversity. As the Nicene creed states, 'He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.' And when he returns, the present age will come to an end (Mt 24:30). Christians uniformly believe that this world, rife with sickness, poverty, suffering and wickedness is destined to end. Sin and evil will be destroyed. Death will be no more. And the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord (Rev 11:15). The *parousia* likewise signals our entrance into a glorious age of a New Creation: a New Heaven and a New Earth. But here we find it is all too easy to focus purely on the before and after, leaving aside any thought of transition or continuity. Our theology describes our resurrection as a miraculous 'event', and we freely ascribe this 'event' motif to the advent of the whole of the New Creation. Unless our theological thinking undergoes a drastic revision, it seems both the resurrection – and the New Creation as its context – will take place in a miraculous divine 'moment'. And an apocalyptic ending, judgement, and total destruction, seem to be a straightforward and even necessary precursor to such an event.

Our challenge is to consider an alternative, and by doing so, perhaps to demand a hearing for a substantial revision in our theology. If our aim in creation care is to join the secular bandwagon in a desperate bid to 'save the planet' we Christians face a tragic dilemma.

Biblically, the apocalypse will come, and then the new creation. If that apocalypse represents a complete destruction – a radical discontinuity with the present creation – we have no more chance of succeeding than we have in avoiding death. Medicine may preserve life for a time, but death will triumph in the end. On the other hand, if our aim in creation care is merely to 'safeguard the integrity of creation' or to 'sustain the life of the earth' as the fifth mark of mission espouses, then we face an opposite dilemma. By aiming to preserve creation 'as it is' (even including a positive impetus toward reversing the effects of pollution, exploitation and environmental degradation) we may ultimately find ourselves working *against* God's missiological and eschatological plan to *transform* creation into New Creation. Saving the planet is not equivalent to transforming it. And if that transformation is a miraculous work of God at the time of the *parousia*, then our meagre attempts at creation care now have no future relevance or eschatological purpose. We need a third alternative, and one small clue can be even be found in the fifth mark – the word 'renew'. To 'sustain and renew the life of the earth', yet these two words – sustain and renew – seem to imply quite different ideas.

A THIRD ALTERNATIVE: THE END AS TRANSITION

The third alternative sees the concept of 'the end' not as final but as transitional. Eschatology is often misrepresented as a study of the end, yet theologically in both individual and corporate terms, *the end* is never absolute, but is rather a process or an event which serves as a transitional phase from one state to another. In fact 'end' is an unfortunate choice of words, because it signifies a terminal point. In terms

of our apocalyptic expectations for the earth, ‘cataclysmic upheaval’ may be a better phrase, and indeed is not without precedent. From a scientific perspective, the earth has undergone several such transitional upheavals in its history, as has life on earth in general, and even human existence.¹⁶ Some of these transitions – collisions with comets and asteroids, mass extinctions, or dramatic climate shifts – have been incredibly destructive, even catastrophic, yet none has represented a complete or absolute end; life on earth recovered, and continuity has remained within the discontinuity.

Until recently, it was possible to hold both an apocalyptic expectation and an environmental responsibility in creative tension, albeit without a great deal of theological rationale. ‘After all’, we reason, ‘this world may end, but we don’t know when, so until it does, we ought to look after it’ – as long as it doesn’t require too much effort or sacrifice. But in the context of the current ecological and climate change crisis – this casual attitude no longer has any currency; in fact such lazy reasoning is regarded with disdain by many creation care advocates (not to mention secular environmentalists) who see a drastic and immediate need for radical changes in lifestyle to forestall the tipping point of an irreversible doomsday scenario for the earth. We cannot escape the possibility that the current ecological crisis may well be a harbinger of the end, and we need a more robust response.

The only interpretative position that gives credence to both an apocalyptic expectation and a New Creation, and at the same time makes sense of our missiological responsibility to the earth, is one in which our involvement in Creation Care *now* will be genuinely worthwhile

¹⁶ William R. Stoeger “Scientific Accounts of Ultimate Catastrophes in Our Life-Bearing Universe.” In *The End of the World and the Ends of God*, edited by John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000.

and eschatologically meaningful, and will somehow *carry over* into the New Creation. Is such a view possible? It needs to be. Only when we can theologically articulate why our labour is not in vain, will the Church be able to find a platform to fully engage in environmental mission, strategically, unreservedly, and with all the resources at its disposal. The key consideration in this theological dilemma is a proper assessment of the level of continuity and discontinuity between this present earth/creation and the new creation to come.

CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

I have thus far suggested that human death and resurrection are not in direct parallel with the end of this age and the advent of a New Creation. But they do share something in common – a strong veneer of radical discontinuity. The theological challenge is to determine whether there is continuity within the apparent discontinuity. There are three theological positions which need to be considered. The first is the still prevalent misconception that we go to heaven when we die, and there we shall encounter the paradise of the New Creation, already in existence beyond this physical space-time universe. The second is the previously mentioned view that the resurrection of humanity is a model paralleling the resurrection of the earth. The third position posits two different means of transition: while humanity’s resurrection involves a divine act, the transformation of the earth will be a process, guided by God, but involving his people as mediators of that transformation. This becomes a purposeful post-resurrection activity, with God’s people given authority over creation as human beings were intended to have from the beginning.

In assessing these three positions, it is helpful to clarify the use of the term 'heaven'. N.T. Wright's examination of the biblical concept of 'heaven' reveals that our future hope is not a hope of heaven, but a hope of resurrection.¹⁷ Likewise he points to a proper understanding of eternal life as 'the life of the age to come'. For Christianity, the terminus of human destiny is not heaven, but resurrected life in the new creation. As Wright says, we might *call* this heaven, but the Bible never does. In the OT Jewish understanding, the 'age to come' was always a new age on the earth – with nationalistic fulfilment of promises, in continuity with the present age. And on a more universal scale, inherent in our creation mandate is the understanding that we are creatures *of* the earth, we were created *for* this earth, and resurrected life is accordingly earth-centric – even accepting that a new and open relationship with heaven may well be accessible to us.

Likewise, resurrection means, (despite some modern scholarship's re-interpretation), a 're-embodiment to new life'. It refers to a physically embodied state, not a spiritual experience; therefore *where* this resurrection occurs becomes a vital consideration. It must take place in an environment conducive to physical embodiment – and thus the connection between humanity and the new creation becomes a dominant eschatological theme. Moltmann writes, 'We cannot talk about the new creation of human beings without talking about the new creation of the earth. There is no eternal life without "the life of the world to come"'.¹⁸

17 See e.g. *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of Christian Hope*. Vol. B11, Grove Biblical Series. Cambridge: Grove Books, 1999; "New Heavens, New Earth." In *Called to One Hope*, ed. John Colwell. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000; *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. New York: Harper One, 2008.

18 Jürgen Moltmann, *In the End – the Beginning: The Life of Hope*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004, p151.

'Only the new earth offers possibilities for the new embodiment of human beings'.¹⁹

Philosopher Nancey Murphy clears elucidates the case for the second position:

Our essential physicality emphasizes our unity with the rest of nature, and suggests that we are not saved *out of* this cosmos, but as part of it. That is, it leads us to expect that the entire cosmos will be transformed or re-created in the same way as we humans are.²⁰

Our consideration here is on the earth being transformed *in the same way* as we humans are. In a similar vein, physicist-theologian John Polkinghorne sees little sense in talking about human resurrection apart from its material relationship to new creation as a whole:

'The scope of this new creation is cosmic and it is not limited to human destiny alone'.²¹ The fact that the Lord's risen body is the glorified form of his dead body testifies to the fact that in Christ there is a destiny not only for humankind but also for matter.²²

Both Polkinghorne and Murphy see the scope of new creation as encompassing the entire cosmos – all of matter – thus the resurrection is a profound indication that God himself has chosen to become ontologically joined to this material universe.

A positive assessment of this position suggests that resurrected eternal life for humanity – with no more death or suffering or

19 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, p104.

20 Nancey Murphy, "Resurrection Body and Personal Identity: Possibilities and Limits of Eschatological Knowledge." In *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, edited by Ted Peters, Robert J. Russell and Michael Welker. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, pp203-4.

21 John Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World*. London: SPCK, 2002, p84.

22 John Polkinghorne, *Science and the Trinity*. London: SPCK, 2004, p168.

pain – requires a similarly transformed earth. New Creation in this view is clearly earth (not heaven), but an earth utterly transformed and renewed, perhaps in a way ‘resurrected’. There is a well-known controversy here between advocates of a ‘destruction-recreation’ model, and advocates of a ‘renewal-transformation’ model. But for our purposes it makes no difference; in both cases, the transformation is a divine act, an event rather than a process. And herein lies the first element of a negative assessment – this view poses a disturbingly radical discontinuity. It fails to recognise any transitional phase. A second criticism centres on the idea that a transformation of all matter under a new regime of laws would require a divine act of universal and cosmic magnitude (i.e. changing the laws of nature). The need for such a cosmic-scale transformation of matter is not clearly demonstrated, but is problematic in that it removes *a priori* any possibility of humanity playing a role in the transformation.

NEW CREATION AS A TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESS

In the third position, God’s teleological purposes likewise refer to this earth, but the transformation to new creation need only take place within an earthly framework rather than the universe as whole. Accordingly, the transformation need not involve such a dramatic overturning of physical laws and transience as Polkinghorne proposes, but might rather involve the *removal* of the obstacles to creation’s fulfilment: sin and evil, corruption, environmental degradation, pollution, exploitation of the earth’s beauty and resources, etc. Despite the conjecture that a resurrected humanity requires an utterly transformed creation, we must consider that Christ, in his resurrected body, breathed the

air, walked the ground, and ate the food of this present creation!

There is a strong case both biblically and theologically (not to mention scientifically) for *continuity* in creation. If the new creation does not require a Divine overturning of the current laws of nature, then we ought to consider the possibility that the advent of a new creation need not be a miraculous, divine act of God, but may instead be a long and gradual process involving God’s people as the agents of transformation, mediating the presence of God to all creation. Such a goal can only be fully realised *after* the *parousia*, and after the destruction of sin and evil in the world. But the process can begin even now in the present creation. Biblically, the redeemed in Christ are ‘new creations’ already, even if not yet in their final resurrected bodies. In this proposal, the creation mandate applies to us now, as it did to Adam and Eve, and as it will continue to apply *after* resurrection. That mandate involves the transition from creation to new creation, and in this view, it will be the work of God’s post-resurrection people just as it our responsibility to care for the earth now.

CREATION CARE IN ESCHATOLOGICAL CONTEXT

We now return to a theology of creation care. If the New Creation comes all at once as a divine work of God’s power, superseding the present creation, then missiologically speaking, there is no demonstrable continuity between the work of stewardship in the present creation (i.e. our role in the *missio Dei*) and the final form of the future creation; there may be a material continuity, but we have no role in that, and there is no eschatological *purpose* for Christian environmentalism. Stewardship for the present, yes; but in the context of ecological crisis, we

can justifiably abandon ship and await our rescue. In the process view, a strong theological and missiological basis is maintained; theologically, humans were designated as rulers and co-creators, given authority over creation and a mandate to fulfill, in the guise of Adam's role as priest-mediator to the rest of creation.²³ The intended purpose for Adam and Eve was not to transform the universe and overcome its transience, but to order creation properly toward God. Thus human beings will continue to act in that role, designated as God's mediators of transformation, through Christ, to all creation. This further implies that human resurrection will take place not in the context of a consummated new creation, but (just like Christ's resurrection) in the context of the present creation, as the *means of bringing about the new creation*. The redemption of creation (Romans 8) can be more accurately understood not as redemption from transience and death, but as the redemption of God's original purpose.²⁴ As with the other four marks of mission, this reflects the tension of the already and the not yet.

The idea that we might actually be responsible for fashioning and constructing the New Heaven and New Earth is not a widely-held view in Christian theology, but this I believe is because the focus has always been on the end result, not the process of getting there. In John's vision, the new Jerusalem is the holy of holies of the temple, expanded in dimensions but with the same purpose – to radiate God's presence outward into all creation. That work has always been the priestly role of God's people, and we might now assert that that priestly role

will at last be expressed in its fullness after Christ's coming – when redeemed humanity can guide creation toward its teleological goal of new creation, no longer contending with the obstacles of sin and wickedness. Furthermore, the missiological significance of this view is clear – it means that the work we do now is not in vain (1Co 15:58). The good works of creation care in the present climate, regardless of ecological crisis or apocalyptic upheaval, will nevertheless form the basis for a gradual transformation into new creation in the future.

What we do on this earth and with this earth will have a significant bearing on the New Heaven and New Earth, just as our present sanctification has a bearing on our resurrected identity. Luther's determination to plant the apple tree was, I believe, based on a positive view that what we do now really does matter, even in the face of the end. It doesn't really matter if the world will end tomorrow, or in a thousand years. We still have a rational theological justification to forge ahead and plant our apple trees today. The present creation is valuable and important to God not only because it belongs to Him, but because it will form the basis of the New Creation yet to come. Creation care advocates and Christian environmentalists can claim purpose and meaning to their work which transcends the present crisis, even if that crisis leads to cataclysmic upheaval. The elephant in the room is no longer a concern; for it turns out the room is sufficiently expansive to accommodate it.

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²³ Greg Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, *op. cit.*

²⁴ The idea of restoration to original intent as opposed to restoration of the original form is taken up by Moltmann in *The Coming of God*, *op. cit.* pp 264-6.