

Reconciliation with Creation

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We live in a world of deep fractures and brokenness. Due to social media and globalisation, these divisions are pushed to the front of our consciousness. We hear constantly of the rise of nationalism, of ethnic conflict, forced migration and racism, of a new era of wars with the world's superpowers taking sides, of deepening political divides within nations, of a widening chasm between the super-rich and those trapped in extreme poverty, of a digital divide between those who can access new technologies and those who cannot, of ideological warfare on issues of gender, sexuality and identity, and of generational tensions between young and older. After the trauma of two world wars, the second half of the 20th century promised a new beginning – an era of United Nations, of global peace and prosperity. Today that dream has been shattered.

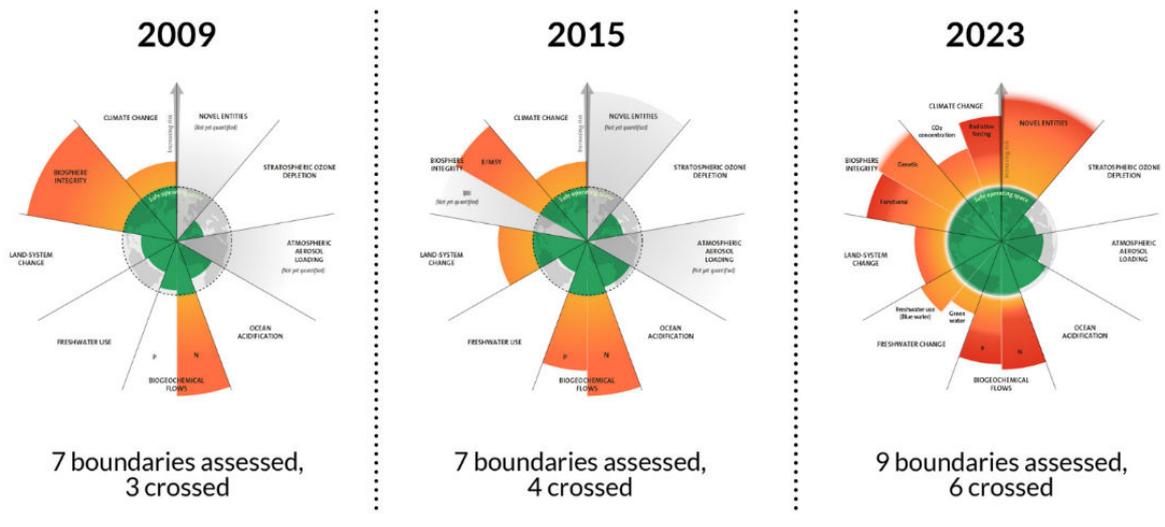
Yet, our problems go even deeper. Not only are humans deeply divided against each other, we are also fighting and destroying the ecological systems upon which all life depends. In his classic book, *A Sand County Almanac*, the American philosopher and scientist Aldo Leopold stated, "One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds".ⁱ This concept of a 'world of wounds' is an important one. It has analogies to St Paul's words in Romans 8, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time"ⁱⁱ. The groaning, or wounds, of creation are seen in multiple ways and it is important we begin by briefing summarising them. Seventy years ago, Aldo Leopold wrote, "An ecologist ... must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise."ⁱⁱⁱ To put it another way, a doctor cannot heal a patient who refuses to acknowledge they are sick. In terms of this conference, we cannot talk about reconciliation until we understand what it is that needs to be reconciled.

Planetary Boundaries

If we look at global environmental issues, Climate change dominates media coverage and governmental initiatives. Scientists are increasingly certain that it is human behaviour which is causing most of the problems we're experiencing. The Sixth Assessment Report of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states that, 'human activities, principally through emissions of greenhouse gases, have unequivocally caused global warming.'^{iv} In plain, yet chilling, language the report demands, 'deep, rapid and sustained global greenhouse gas emissions reduction' to avoid 'abrupt and/or irreversible changes'^v to earth's ability to sustain human and other life. As climate scientist and evangelical Christian professor Katharine Hayhoe states, "Climate change has already caused widespread and substantial losses to almost every aspect of human life on this planet, and the impacts on future generations depend on the choices we make now."^{vi} For Christians, this is an urgent issue of justice and also begs the question, 'What is the good news – the gospel – we proclaim whilst we are destroying God's good creation?'

Sadly, however, climate change is only one of many wounds, multiple environmental challenges, that we face this century. Researchers increasingly use the concept of 'planetary boundaries'^{vii, viii} to describe nine areas of human impact upon natural systems.^{ix}

Figure 1. The nine planetary boundaries



Source: "Planetary Boundaries," Stockholm Resilience Centre, University of Stockholm, accessed May 16, 2023, <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html>;
Credit: J. Lokrantz/Azote based on Steffen et al., 2023

The boundaries use a traffic light system to indicate whether current human impact is 'green' (a safe operating area for humanity), 'amber' (zone of uncertainty and risk), or 'red' (high risk to human thriving). The Planetary Boundaries graphic shows that climate change is currently in the 'amber' or warning zone, whereas two others, 'Biochemical flows' and 'Biosphere integrity' are both deeply into the red danger zone, so these are perhaps an even more immediate threat. In brief, 'Biochemical flows' refers to the use of nitrogen and phosphorous in agricultural fertilisers and their impact on soil and water quality. 'Biosphere integrity' concerns the loss of species and habitats worldwide (often called biodiversity loss). To summarise the results of the Planetary Boundaries studies, the support systems on which all life depends including oxygen from plants, pollination from insects, healthy food, clean water and a stable climate are rapidly deteriorating due to humanity's accelerating impact. To illustrate this, it is estimated that of all mammals on earth 96 percent are either livestock or humans, and only 4 percent are the remaining wild mammals.^{x,xi}

Across societies and amongst many Christians worldwide, there is both ignorance and denial about the scale and threat of the challenges we face. Recently, I attended the 4th Lausanne Congress in South Korea, where more than 5,000 Christians from 200 countries were gathered. Climate change received a brief 15-minute plenary slot (and that only after persistent lobbying!) and creation care was relegated to one of 25 'Gaps in the Great Commission' and bundled together with caring for 'the vulnerable'. The take-home message from those who put together the Congress programme was that the really big issues were around digitalization, Artificial Intelligence, sexuality, and engaging Gen Z with mission. Yet, human society itself, our health and wellbeing, our social and economic stability, all depend completely on the natural world's flourishing. In terms of engaging Gen Z, a survey of 10,000 young people across 10 very different countries^{xii} showed that the biggest worry was the same: fear about the future of the planet. Even from a narrowly evangelistic perspective, addressing a Christian response to the ecological crisis has now become the number one issue in Christian apologetics.

The new creation has come!

So, in this context, it is with joy that I welcome the Japan Evangelical Theological Society's emphasis on reconciliation with creation, within society and within the church. For too long, as evangelicals, we have focused only on the Gospel as spiritual reconciliation between individual sinners and God. Of course, that is core and must never be lost or overlooked. Yet, the Good News – the Gospel – that Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated is about a reconciliation that is so much bigger and more wonderful.

Our defining biblical text here is 2 Corinthians 5:17–19: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation."

There are clues in these verses about the scale and scope of the reconciliation that Christ has achieved through the cross. The Greek text literally says, "If anyone is in Christ ... new creation!" It is often translated as "If anyone is in Christ, he/she is a new creation" but it is probably more accurate to go with the New International Version which says, "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come". In other words, the personal transformation when an individual comes to Christ is a sign and a pointer to the renewal of creation itself.

This leads us to a very significant conclusion. When we hear the words 'new creation' or 'new heavens and new earth' we might assume something brand new with no connection to the 'old'. We live in a modern world where we are used to products that are made, used, disposed of and replaced – whether it is our phones, computers, cars or refrigerators. We have an addiction to novelty. Yet, that was not the world of the New Testament, and it is not the world of God's creation. In the natural world, as in most pre-industrial cultures, things are constantly reused, reshaped, repaired and recycled. As I have written elsewhere, "God Doesn't do Waste"^{xiii}. God has made a world within which nothing is wasted, and everything is constantly remade.

The Apostle Paul states, when a person is "in Christ, the new creation has come"^{xiv}. Think about the implications of that statement. A new believer is born again. They become a new creation. Yet, if their family or friends were to meet them, they would still recognise them. If they had a limp, or a bald head, or a tattoo, those would still be there. If they took a DNA test just before and immediately after their conversion, the result would be the same. But they have become part of the new creation. Something fundamental has changed, although their physical being is the same. So, when we think about 'new creation' we need to have ideas of both continuity and discontinuity in mind. Perhaps the best example of this is the body of the Risen Christ.

When Jesus rose from the dead, he became the first fruits of the new creation. Yet, there was both continuity and discontinuity. Firstly, continuity: he had the same physical body, because the garden tomb was empty and Jesus still bore the scars of the nails and the spear – scars which Thomas was invited to reach out and touch. This was a physical, material resurrection body which could eat fish by the lakeside. Yet there was also discontinuity. Christ's risen body could appear and disappear, even suddenly being present in a locked room with the disciples. Moreover, he must have looked somewhat different, because both Mary in the garden and the two friends on the road to Emmaus failed to recognise him until he said significant words which gave them insight into who he was.

The Greek text of the New Testament helps us in understanding what is meant by 'new creation'. In Greek, there are two words for new, *neos* and *kainos* or *kaine*. Not all bible translations and not all commentators seem to understand the subtle differences between these two terms. Basically, *neos* is a chronological term, something that is new in time, whereas *kainos* is a qualitative term, something that has an essentially and radically new quality to it. For instance, in Luke 5:38 both words are used. *Neos* wine (wine that is brand new, just produced) should be put into *kainos* wineskins (flexible, not hardened by prior use). What is striking is that *kainos* is always used to describe anything related to the results of the resurrection of Jesus, and also to every single New Testament reference to new creation, new heavens, new earth, new Jerusalem.

People who are born again are *kainos* creations in Christ. They are physically and biologically the same yet are qualitatively and spiritually transformed into something new. There is both continuity and radical, existential newness. The resurrection body of Jesus was not *neos* in the sense of a new physical body in time and space but was qualitatively transformed from a body limited by time and decay into an eternal body. In a similar way, this current created order which, as we have seen, is wounded and groaning, is also waiting not to be replaced but to be transformed. As Romans 8 puts it, creation is groaning in labour pains; waiting for the new creation to be birthed from the

womb of this current world; waiting to “be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God”.^{xv}

I have deliberately begun this theological examination of reconciliation with creation by looking at eschatology, because our ideas about the future destiny of the earth can dominate and dictate our ideas about reconciliation. After all, someone might argue that if the earth is going to be burned up, destroyed and replaced then why should we bother with reconciliation with creation?

Four dimensions of fractured relationships

Now however, having given that tantalising glimpse of the future reconciliation of all things in Christ, I want to pull back the lens to wide-angle and look at the big picture of God’s reconciling work from creation to new creation. This will then provide the context and foundation for us to examine the ‘what’ and ‘how’ for Christian disciples today in terms of practicing reconciliation with creation.

The first scene of the biblical drama presents a world with no need for reconciliation. In Genesis 1 and 2, we read of God creating in love, bringing order out of chaos, separating day and night, land and ocean, and delighting in a world of extraordinary diversity and fruitfulness. The refrain “it was good” echoes through the account, culminating in the completion of the material world and the seal “it was all very good”^{xvi}; note the emphasis on “all”! The final act of creation is Day Seven – the Sabbath Day – as God rests and enjoys all that has been created so good. God’s blessing and provision is upon all creation, and humanity is entrusted with a special responsibility to reflect God’s image and likeness towards our fellow creatures, that each might flourish and worship God according to their kind. The first human is invited to name his fellow creatures, creating a mutual relationship with each one. Later, we picture the first man and woman walking in naked innocence with God in the garden of creation. All is good, all is harmonious, all is at it should be.

Then comes the radical disruption of sin, as humanity chooses selfishly, rejecting dependence and interdependence in favour of independence from God. The Genesis text makes it clear that the impact of sin is multi-dimensional. Four key relationships are fractured: with God, each other, ourselves and creation. Firstly, the relationship between humans and God is broken. No longer can Adam and Eve walk with God in intimacy and innocence. Instead, there is lying, mistrust and inevitable alienation. The humans must leave the garden and enter a world – our world – where God’s presence is no longer experienced so closely. Secondly, relationships between human beings are distorted and polluted. Adam and Eve argue about blame and responsibility, and later chapters soon descend into jealousy, murder, and divisions of language and race. Thirdly, as well as these spiritual and social fractures, there is an inner conflict within every human being. Later chapters in Genesis show the inner struggle and frequent failures of each generation in wrestling with moral choices. Paul sums up this inner struggle between the law of life and the law of sin and death in stating in Romans 7 “For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing”.^{xvii}

The fourth fractured relationship is with creation. Adam and Eve are ejected from the garden and face a world of pain in childbirth and hard labour in producing food from the earth. Adam’s name is closely related to the Hebrew *adamah*, meaning earth or soil, and he is told, “Cursed is the ground [the *adamah*] because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return”.^{xviii}

Christopher Wright has helpfully pictured the impacts of sin in terms of a triangle with three corners: God, humanity, and the land (or creation).^{xix} The Fall does not only break humanity’s relationship with God. It damages and distorts all three sides of the triangle. To reduce the Gospel simply to a spiritual issue of personal sin and an individual relationship with God is to disrespect the biblical text. As we have seen, every key relationship, with God, each other, ourselves and creation, is broken and distorted due to sin.

Four dimensions of Reconciliation in Christ

The first three chapters of the Bible present the problem: a good world created by God that is fractured and damaged by human sin, leading to multiple broken relationships. In some ways, the whole of the rest of the biblical drama depicts the story of God's plans to restore what is broken and reconcile that which has been divided. Just as broken relationships are in four dimensions: with God, one another, ourselves and with creation. Since this lecture's focus is specifically on the fourth of these, I will briefly mention the first three and then delve more deeply into both the theological process and the practical implications of reconciliation with creation.

Reconciliation between sinful humanity and a perfect God is only possible through God's gracious initiative. After repeated human failures to keep God's law, God sends His only Son to live the perfect life, to die a redeeming death on the cross bearing the sins of the whole world, and to rise in glory to the Father's right hand. Christ not only becomes the way to the Father. He also models and makes possible reconciliation within human relationships. God's new society is one where, in the words of Galatians 3:28 "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The third broken relationship, with ourselves, is restored as we are given a new identity in Christ. As Romans 8 beautifully puts it, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (v.1). Moreover, we are given God's Holy Spirit (vv.4-11) to live lives free from the power of sin, to receive life and peace, and to know that we are adopted into God's family, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (vv.14-17).

You will notice the common theme between these first three forms of reconciliation: each is centred on the person and work of Jesus Christ. He alone provides forgiveness of sins, creates a new community, and gives us a new identity. The same is true of the fourth dimension of reconciliation, with creation. It is entirely dependent and centred upon the saving work of Christ.

This is vital to emphasise today. There are many seeking to save the planet, whether through technology, science, politics, education or campaigning. The majority are sincere and some of the methods and solutions proposed are genuinely helpful. But the biblical witness is that reconciliation and restoration for creation is ultimately only possible in Christ. In addition, there are many people who recognise the fracture between humanity and the rest of the natural world, and therefore seek a more harmonious relationship between people and nature, putting aside notions of human superiority and even of stewardship, to rediscover a common creatureliness. This move towards a more ecocentric spirituality sometimes alarms Christians, who fear nature-worship, replacing the Creator with creation. Yet, in many ways, it is a helpful rebalancing from the aggressive anthropocentrism of Western culture and – as we will see – there are plenty of biblical passages which suggest a much less hierarchical and human-dominated relationship with nature than Western Christianity has usually modelled. Once again, however, the key question is about the place of Jesus Christ. Any attempt to heal and restore relationships between humanity and the natural world which ignores or marginalises Christ is ultimately doomed to failure.

Tracing the trajectory of creation's reconciliation

Often, when we try to summarise the Gospel – God's good news of reconciliation – we talk about a pattern of creation – fall – redemption. This outline, so familiar from evangelistic books and talk does an injustice to the Biblical text because it completely ignores everything between Genesis 3 and the New Testament! It is, I am afraid, a typical symptom of the individualism and anthropocentrism which has plagued Western Christianity and of simplistic attempts to turn the glorious Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ into a neat marketing formula.

In reality, the biblical narrative is complex and textured reflecting the richness of God's purposes and the interweaving of human sin and salvation with God's wider purposes for the whole created order. If we use reconciliation as the lens through which to see these purposes, it helpfully allows us to discern and identify the threads of God's purposes for the whole creation, the earth and all its creatures, as well as for human beings. I wish to focus on five key threads in relation to creation, each of which concerns a decisive divine intervention within the biblical narrative^{xx}. To put it another way, these are five hermeneutical keys that are critical to the biblical narrative as a

whole. As we will see, each relates both to God's reconciling purposes for humanity and for the wider creation.

Creation

First, most obviously, is creation itself. God did not have to create, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit existed eternally in harmony outside time and space. So, creation is God's free act, a choice within the Godhead to bring into being a cosmos filled with diverse and abundant life. The bible is clear that God delights in creation, repeatedly calling it good, that God sustains and provides for all living creatures. It is not going too far to say God loves creation. In fact, John 3:16 says exactly that! Something that is very important here is to recognise that God did not make creation for human beings. Rather, the purpose of creation's existence is to worship and glorify God. "The earth is the Lord's" says Psalm 24:1, and in Colossians 1:16 we read "All things were made by and for Christ".

1We often misread scripture, assuming it is all about us as people, and the natural world is simply the stage on which our story is acted out. That is fundamentally mistaken, based on misunderstanding what 'image of God' and 'dominion' mean in Genesis 1. Rather, a careful overview of the whole biblical text shows that God's care of wild creatures and the land is independent of their usefulness to humanity. Two passages which demonstrate that with clarity are Psalm 104 and Job 38–41. In the former, God celebrates the vastness, diversity and provision of the natural world. Rivers and mountains, animals and birds, night and day are all part of God's wise oversight. Humans are only mentioned briefly in vs.14–15 and v.23. We are simply one of the many creatures God provides and cares for. The high mountains belong to wild goats and hyrax, the night-time is for the lions, and the treetops are home to the birds. Psalm 104 is clear that the 'stewardship' and care of the natural world are primarily God's work, rather than ours. Job 38–41 has a similar message but goes further. God repeatedly mocks Job for his inability to understand or manage wild nature. He is incapable of comprehending, let alone controlling the heavens, the oceans or the climate. He fails to understand or provide for mountain goats, donkeys, ostriches, warhorses or lions, yet in each case God knows and cares for them. Even monstrous, threatening aspects of the natural world, Behemoth and Leviathan, are described with affection. Whereas we tend to place ourselves on a pedestal above the rest of creation, God pointedly says to Job, "Look at Behemoth, which I made along with you" (40:15) emphasising creaturely kinship, and later God describes Behemoth as "first among the works of God" (v.19), further challenging human arrogance. Similarly, Leviathan is terrifying and untameable, "king over all that are proud" (41:34) yet God delights in "its strength and its graceful form" (v.12).

If we are to be reconciled with God and with creation then, like Job, we need to put aside human arrogance and exceptionalism. We need a creaturely humility, standing in awe before the vastness and mysteriousness of the universe and its biodiversity, and of the God who knows it and cares for it. For too long we have lazily used Genesis 1:26–28 to excuse a doctrine of human mastery without looking at the rest of scripture or at the context of Genesis 1. 'Image of God' is not a descriptor that places us on a pedestal above nature. In the context of creation, it is an invitation to one creature to reflect God's character and purposes towards our fellow creatures: "the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and ... every living creature that moves on the ground" (1:28). In other words, it is a vocation towards biodiversity conservation! The term 'dominion' is not to be equated with 'domination'. It must be understood within the biblical doctrine of kingship. It is about servant leadership. The kings of Israel were to be different from the kings of the nations, not oppressing and exploiting but acting as good shepherds, sacrificially serving the needs of their flock.

In recent years there has been much theological controversy around the term 'stewardship' to describe our human role.^{xxi} Whilst Jesus tells several parables about the importance of being good stewards of all that God entrusts to us, the term is never used explicitly to refer to our relationship with nature. Some have criticised its use as being managerial and even exploitative rather than relational in nature, and too associated with colonialist and capitalist assumptions. Stewards look after property: resources and objects belonging to another. It is, to use Martin Buber's typology,^{xxii} an "I–it" relationship. But we are creatures reflecting God's image amongst our fellow creatures, which should be an "I–Thou" relationship. If we are to be reconciled with creation, we need to model our attitudes and relationships on Christ who showed kingly

leadership by humbling himself and taking the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:6–8). If we use the language of stewardship, we need to qualify it, speaking of ourselves as 'servant-stewards' and adding more relational language. Perhaps we should speak of ourselves as 'guardians' of creation, a term that speaks not only of responsibility but of kinship and familial bond.

Covenant

The second thread, or divine intervention, in the biblical narrative is covenant – God's response to a world infected by sin, death and evil. Note, the fall itself is not one of these themes because it is caused by human action, not God's intervention. Covenant is God's response to the fall, and of course the first explicit covenant is that through Noah. The later covenants build on this and never contradict it. A covenant is a binding legal contract providing the basis for reconciliation. Of course, a legal contract cannot change hearts, which is why in the end we needed a new covenant, through Christ, with new hearts and a new Spirit.

However, the context of Noah, and of day-to-day living today, is of a world distorted and damaged by sin. What is striking is the scope of God's saving and reconciling work. Throughout theological history, Noah's ark has been seen as a prototype of God's saving work in Christ, yet who gets saved? That simple question is theological high explosive! Only four pairs of humans are mentioned, and yet seven pairs of most birds, animals and other creatures, and even one pair of unclean animals – those that were useless, repulsive and even dangerous for Noah. God's reason for including abundant biodiversity is not their usefulness to humans, or unclean creatures would have been excluded.

Rather, according to Genesis 7:3, it is simply "to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth". God's saving purposes include creatures other than human. This is re-emphasised repeatedly in Genesis 9 with God's covenant, made with the sign of the rainbow. God has a saving covenant relationship which includes not only humans but "every living creature ... the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals ... every living creature on earth ... every living creature with you ... the covenant between me and the earth ... all living creatures of every kind ... all living creatures of every kind on the earth" ... "all life on earth".^{xxiii} Do you think God is making a point here? How is it that our theologies of covenant, of redemption, of reconciliation have ignored this so often?

The implications of the Noahic covenant, and the fact that later covenants with Abraham and Israel also include the land and its creatures – wild and domestic – cannot be over-emphasised. There is no salvation for humans, no reconciliation with God, that happens independently of reconciliation with the rest of creation. All our relationships are deeply interconnected. God has created a reality where the spiritual and the material are not distinct spheres. They deeply interpenetrate and influence each other. Sin involved a physical action that impinged on the material world, and so covenant includes the earth and its creatures and, as we will see, final redemption was not to be possible without physical incarnation, suffering, death and resurrection.

This interconnectedness affects everything. It means we cannot tackle the problems of sin and evil in our world as if they are only spiritual. We need to recognise that they have social, cultural, economic and profoundly ecological dimensions. The prophets speak powerfully of how moral sin and economic injustice are linked to ecological destruction. Jeremiah 12:4: "How long will the land lie parched and the grass in every field be withered? Because those who live in it are wicked, the animals and birds have perished". Hosea 4:1–3 "Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: 'There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Because of this the land dries up, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea are swept away.'"

The connection between sin against God and neighbour, and nature's destruction, also means we need to rethink our missiology. 'Saving souls' (a deeply unbiblical term) cannot be separated from transforming society and enabling creation to flourish. As Lausanne's Cape Town Commitment puts it, "The gospel is God's good news, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for individual persons, and for society, and for creation. All three are broken and suffering because of sin; all three are included in

the redeeming love and mission of God; all three must be part of the comprehensive mission of God's people.^{xxiv}

This model of integral mission, including evangelism, compassion and justice, and creation care, is nothing new! We find it clearly expressed in God's words to a people in exile in Babylon in Jeremiah 29:5-7. These are amazing words, giving a wonderfully wholistic, rounded vision of Christian mission: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." Here we see the ecological (plant gardens – even in a godless enemy city), the social (marry and have children – even in exile), the economic and political (peace and prosperity of the city), and the spiritual (pray to the Lord for it). Three thousand five hundred years prior to the United Nations inventing the notion of sustainable development,^{xxv} or modern missiologists 'inventing' integral mission,^{xxvi} we find both described here in Jeremiah!

This is an all-encompassing vision of reconciliation in all its dimensions, and at its heart are the words 'peace and prosperity', so it's important to understand them. Actually, it is just one word! 'Peace and prosperity' are both used to translate the Hebrew term *shalom*. *Shalom* is a wonderfully rich biblical concept which includes reconciliation with God, neighbour, self and nature. It is not simply the absence of conflict but includes the healing and restoration of broken relationships and a broken world. 'Prosperity' is potentially misleading because of how we use that term today. This is not about material success. Jeremiah was not advocating a 'prosperity gospel' whereby trusting in God would lead to a transformation in finances and good physical health. Far from it! These were words to prisoners in exile in a strange and oppressive land. A person can have billions of dollars and not be prosperous in the sense of *shalom*. 'Prosperity' is better translated as welfare or well-being and is primarily a relational term. Our well-being, our prosperity, consists of a strong and fruitful network of relationships, with God, and with the people and places where God plants us. Jeremiah 29 is a calling to put down deep roots wherever God places us, to invest in the welfare and harmony of the societies, communities, economies and ecosystems that we are part of. It is truly a vision of integral mission!

Christ

So, to the New Testament, and our third thread, God's great intervention in sending his only Son into the world. Sometimes people assume that the New Testament has less to say than the Old about creation, but actually if we dig into the text and its meaning there is a vast amount. Let us start with that term *shalom* with its vision of reconciliation in multiple dimensions including with creation. Obviously, *shalom* is a Hebrew term, focused on prophetic anticipation of a Messianic era of blessing, peace and well-being beyond judgment. So, we might wonder, what happens to this vision of reconciliation in the New Testament?

The answer, of course, is that it becomes focused on Jesus Christ, and how does Jesus describe the gospel, the good news of God? He repeatedly uses the phrase "the good news of the Kingdom of God". The phrase "Kingdom of God" (or in Matthew's Gospel, "Kingdom of Heaven") appears 162 times in the New Testament, most of them in the Synoptic Gospels.^{xxvii} The Kingdom includes personal salvation but goes beyond that. It is about God, in Jesus, becoming King of every area of our lives, of our lifestyle, our worldview, our cultures and societies, and ultimately of creation. It is, to adapt the Lord's Prayer, about God's rule coming on earth as it is in heaven. The earthing of heaven is the Kingdom of God, or to use Hans Kung's phrase "the kingdom of God is creation healed".^{xxviii} If that sounds a bit like the vision of *shalom* in the Old Testament perhaps that's more than coincidence. The more I have studied this, the more convinced I am that the longings for reconciliation in multiple dimensions contained in the Messianic vision of *shalom* are continued in Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God, and are fulfilled in Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension.

So, to Jesus' earthly life, and of course that means starting with the incarnation. In the context of first century Judaism, the idea that the God whose name could not even be uttered might enter this material world seemed incredible and blasphemous. Yet, with astonishing clarity and understanding, the New Testament writers are clear about the incarnation.

John's Gospel, the most complex and sophisticated theologically, puts Christ at the heart of the cosmic story. He deliberately reworks Genesis by starting his Gospel with "in the beginning", and placing Christ, the pre-incarnate Word, both as God and as God's agent of creation: "through him all things were made".^{xxix} In one stroke, the whole story of the Old Testament not merely leads up to Christ, it is itself Christ's story because he is the creator, the giver of light and life. Then, in 1:14, John says something profoundly shocking: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us". Not only is it astonishing that God becomes human, John also uses a surprising word 'flesh', *sarx* in Greek, rather than the obvious word for human, *anthropos*. Clearly, John is saying something more than 'God became man'. *Sarx* is the Greek term for 'flesh' or 'meat' and can refer to the flesh of any animal. It is the Greek equivalent of the Latin *carne*, which of course has found its way into 'incarnation' and is also exactly the same word as in the Italian dish 'chili-con-carne'! What does John mean here? Is he looking ahead to the sacrificial death of Christ, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (a phrase he quotes in v.29)? Is he also stating that, in Christ, God has not only become a human, but that the Creator has become a creature, in other words that the incarnation is not only God's identification with lost humanity but with a wounded creation? Given John's careful choice of language, it is certain that using *sarx* is a deliberate theological statement about Christ's incarnation.

It is also quite possible that what comes two chapters later in John's Gospel is linked to the prologue. In the familiar words of John 3:16-17 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him". I remember my own shock when I discovered that the Greek word for 'world' was *kosmos*. In both New Testament and classical Greek *kosmos* had the natural meaning of the whole created order, but in specific contexts it could also mean the world of human society and even the fallen, sinful world which believers are to resist. Clearly that latter meaning is not meant, as the *kosmos* in John 3 is loved and will be saved by God. So, is it human society or the whole created order that God loves and promises to save in John 3? From the immediate context we cannot be sure, but I would suggest that the wider context of John's prologue, of Christ as creator of all, bringer of life and light to the whole world, and incarnate in creaturely form, gives weight to seeing *kosmos* in John 3 as relating to the whole created order.

Regardless of whether you agree on John 3, the Apostle Paul is absolutely explicit about the scope of Christ's saving work. In Colossians 1:15-20 we have a dense theological summary of Jesus' significance as pre-existent creator (all things created 'in', 'through' and 'for' him v.16), as cosmic sustainer (all things 'hold together' in him v.17), as supreme in every sphere (including the church and through his resurrection the new creation v.18), and critically as achieving cosmic reconciliation through his death (v.20). Colossians 1:19-20 are worth quoting in full: "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross". The same Jesus who is the creator and sustainer is also the saviour of the whole created order, and it is highly significant that the term used for his saving work is 'reconcile' or *apokatallaxai*. It is a word only used three times in the New Testament, twice in Colossians 1 first with cosmic reference to all things on earth or in heaven and again in v.22 with specific reference to his human audience in Colossae being reconciled to God. The other occurrence is in Ephesians 2:16 referring again to Christ's work on the cross but in connection with reuniting Jew and Gentile into a new community. As a term, *apokatallaxai* means to transfer from one state to another, from division to harmony, disunity to unity, from alienation to reconciliation.

These references from John and Colossians, together with other passages on the supremacy and authority of the risen Christ make it clear that God's purpose in sending his Son to be born, live, die, rise and ascend to glory was to repair and reconcile all the relationships broken by the Fall. The Gospel, the good news of God in Christ, must

therefore not be limited to good news for a lost humanity. It is also good news for a wounded creation.

Church

The fourth thread, or divine intervention, begins on the day of Pentecost as God pours out his Spirit to bring to birth the Church, God's redeemed community. It may, or may not, be significant that Joel's prophecy, quoted by Peter in Acts 2:17–21 refers to God's Spirit being poured out on all 'flesh' (*sarx* again) and that the Hebrew of Joel 2:28 uses *basar*, which equally includes animal flesh and is the same term used through the Noahic covenant for the 'living creatures' with whom God chooses to covenant.^{xxx}

Linking the role of the Church to God's reconciling purposes for creation may appear fanciful, but some key New Testament passages give pause for thought. In two places, Paul links Christ as head of his body the Church with his headship in creation. Colossians 1:18 states, "he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy." Thus, Jesus' headship over the church and his supremacy in creation appear linked. Again, in Ephesians 1:22–23 we read "God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way." What is Paul asserting in these verses? Romans 8 offers some pointers, where Paul explicitly states that "the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed"^{xxxii} Children of God is Paul's language for those adopted into God's family, in other words the Church. So, creation is waiting for the Church. Paul explains further that despite creation's current frustration there is the hope "that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God"^{xxxiii}

Thus, in some way, the redeeming and reconciling work of Christ on behalf of creation is to be realised through the church, God's redeemed community. Exactly how is not spelt out but some, including N. T. Wright, have suggested a link back to Genesis 1. He has written, ""The whole creation is waiting in eager longing not just for its own redemption, its liberation from corruption and decay, but for God's children to be revealed: in other words, for the unveiling of those redeemed humans through whose stewardship creation will at last be brought back into that wise order for which it was made."^{xxxiii}

The original mandate to reflect God's image towards creation in servant leadership has been damaged and distorted by sin and evil, but now in the power of the Spirit those set free from the power of sin are to exercise once again the just and gentle leadership which God first intended. Another analogy would be to see Christ's body on earth, the Church, as empowered and commissioned to be his hands and feet, serving Christ's purposes as Lord of creation in caring for this world and anticipating its renewal in Christ.

Completion

We have examined four key threads, or hermeneutical keys in seeing the place of creation in the biblical narrative, each of them related to God's decisive interventions in creation, covenant, Christ and the Church. The fifth and final intervention was explored earlier in this lecture, in looking at eschatology: God's final purposes beyond judgment to restore and renew creation. We saw that new creation begins with the Risen Christ. His physical body becomes the firstfruits of the new heaven and new earth, of what Paul in Romans 8 calls creation's liberation from its bondage to decay. His return will inaugurate the completion of God's good purposes. As Peter puts it in Acts 3:21 "Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets."

This eschatological hope for creation should act as a motivator for Christian response in prayer and action today. If we are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, we should be actively engaged in seeking creation's protection and restoration here and now. The bible's first commandment, to reflect God's image towards our fellow creatures, wrongly labelled a cultural mandate and correctly described as a creational mandate, is revisited as a call to action for today's church.

I want to conclude with a more personal reflection on our place in seeking reconciliation with and for creation. My personal story is of somebody who grew up in India as the child of missionaries before moving to the UK. I had a strong, personal faith and a passion for mission from my teenage years and imagined I would end up in cross-cultural mission wherever God led. I understood the gospel in personal, individual terms and always struggled a bit with the bible's many passages about poverty and justice. Surely, I thought, it's our eternal destiny that really matters, not these social, material matters. For recreation I enjoyed the natural world – mountains, forests, birds and oceans – and whilst I believed God made these, I did not link them to the gospel or my missional calling.

All that changed abruptly during my theological training in my mid-twenties. However, it wasn't the lectures at first but a vacation on a small island with my family through which God spoke to me. On a corner of this beautiful island, I stood on a cliff-top about to throw our rubbish to join everybody else's trash. Then I sensed God's clear inner voice asking, "How do you think I feel about what you're doing to my world?" In that moment, my simplistic understanding of the gospel and of what God cared about, started to shatter. I realised that the God who created all things very good still cared about the flourishing of creation, and more than that, that if I loved and followed Jesus I should too. From there began a process of re-reading the bible, looking at my lifestyle as an issue of discipleship, and seeking others who were on a similar journey. That led me to A Rocha, the rock in Portuguese, at the time a single, small project on the Algarve coast of southern Portugal.

To cut a long story short, my wife and I got drawn into A Rocha and have now been involved for about 30 years. We've seen it grow from a single inspiring centre to a global family of conservation organisations working together to live out God's calling to care for creation and equip others to do likewise. A Rocha is unique as a Christian organisation working in creation care at the global level, both practically and theologically. The reason why I am sharing about its work is our conference theme of reconciliation. A Rocha has five core commitments,^{xxxiv} or core values: we are Christian, we do conservation, we build community, we embody cultural diversity, and we work collaboratively. The older I get as a Christian, the more I realise that integrating these values not just theologically but in practical expressions in different cultures around the world, is the most powerful witness to the Lordship of Christ. It is a living testimony of reconciliation. Of course, we are imperfect and make mistakes, but by holding together our reconciliation with God, each other and creation we make visible signs of the Kingdom. Whether we are protecting a threatened forest in Ghana,^{xxxv} restoring nesting habitats for endangered seabirds in New Zealand,^{xxxvi} growing food and doing environmental education in urban London,^{xxxvii} or mitigating human-elephant conflict in India,^{xxxviii} we are demonstrating that the gospel of the Kingdom of God is good news for individuals, for communities and for creation.

To conclude, God has created a world that is integrated and interdependent. Human life cannot survive without healthy ecosystems. Our very bodies contain a gut microbiome without which we could not function, and we rely on plants and animals for oxygen, water, food and so much more. The grand narrative of the Christian scriptures portray a time, before sin, where human beings dwelt in harmony with God and within a good creation. The biblical narratives also point to a future era of 'shalom', beyond decisive judgment, the fulness of the Kingdom of God where reconciliation with God, self, each other and all creation will be complete. Today, as followers of Christ we are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation,^{xxxix} building on Christ's reconciling work on the cross and anticipating the full reconciliation which can only take place when Christ returns. Creation care should therefore be fully integrated into the worship, discipleship and mission of every church. To conclude with words from the Lausanne Movement's 'State of the Great Commission' report published earlier this year, "The call to respond practically and urgently to our multifaceted ecological crisis is not simply topical. It is deeply biblical, rooted in God as Creator, Jesus as Lord and Saviour of creation, and the Holy Spirit who sustains and renews the earth. Creation care is, therefore, not just a pressing context for mission. Creation care is also integral to the content of the Great Commission. We are called to make disciples who live out the truth that Jesus is Lord of all creation."^{xl}

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- ⁱⁱ Romans 8:22 (NIV)
- ⁱⁱⁱ Aldo Leopold, *ibid.*
- ^{iv} "AR6 Synthesis Report: Headline Statements, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change" (section A.1), accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/resources/spm-headline-statements>.
- ^v *ibid* (section B.3), Accessed May 31, 2023.
- ^{vi} Katharine Hayhoe, March 20, 2023, <https://twitter.com/KHayhoe/status/1637875896433385481?lang=en>.
- ^{vii} Johan Rockström et al., "A Safe Operating Space for Humanity", *Nature* 461, no. 7263 (2009): 472–75.
- ^{viii} Will Steffen et al., "Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet," *Science* 347, no. 6223 (2015): 736–46.
- ^{ix} "The Nine Planetary Boundaries," Stockholm Resilience Centre, University of Stockholm, Accessed May 31, 2023, <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries/the-nine-planetary-boundaries.html>.
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- ^{xiii} Dave Bookless, *God Doesn't do Waste: redeeming the whole of life* (Nottingham: IVP), 2010
- ^{xiv} 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV)
- ^{xv} Romans 8:21–22 (NIV)
- ^{xvi} Genesis 1:31 (NIV)
- ^{xvii} Romans 7:19 (NIV)
- ^{xviii} Genesis 3:17–19 (NIV)
- ^{xix} Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 2000
- ^{xx} Largely based on PhD thesis: David Bookless, *Why should wild nature be preserved: A dialogue between biblical theology and biodiversity conservation*, Cambridge, 2017 <https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/items/90551ff0-1918-44e5-b360-b2a1b72a351b> accessed 22nd October 2024.
- ^{xxi} Clare Palmer, 'Stewardship: A Case study in Environmental Ethics', in R. J. Berry (ed.) *Environmental Stewardship: critical perspectives, past and present* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 2006; David Horrell, *Ecological Hermeneutic: Biblical, theological and historical perspectives* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 2010
- ^{xxii} Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 1937
- ^{xxiii} Genesis 9:10–17 (NIV)
- ^{xxiv} <https://lausanne.org/statement/ctcommitment#we-love-god-s-world>
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- ^{xxviii} Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*, (London: SCM), 1974 p.231
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