

Essays on Ecological Theology: Introduction

Dr Philip Freier

The essays in this volume have arisen in response to two requests from the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia. By Resolution 74/07, the General Synod asked the Doctrine Commission ‘to identify those areas of doctrine and theology that support the inter-dependent relationship between humanity and the natural world’, and by Resolution 77/07 asked us to ‘develop a Christian Theology for a sustainable future including a Global Ethic’.

The nature of our relationship to, and responsibility for, the natural world develops from a range of theological bases – creation, anthropology, incarnation, redemption, eschatology and Trinity. If we were to attempt a sketchy summary of how these doctrines interrelate in an ecological theology, we could say:

- God is the creator of the world. It is a world of both order and diversity, and as originally created, it was ‘very good’. Like the trees in the garden, which were both ‘pleasing to the eye and good for food’ (Gen 2:9), the created order has both beauty and utility, for us to use and enjoy.
- Humanity has a special place in God’s world. We are part of the creation – indeed, made from the same dust, and yet we are more than mere dust, because we have been made in the image of God. God made us as the crowning glory of his creative acts, to enjoy the creation he made and to exercise a responsibility over the creation to serve and care for it.
- Because of human sin, the created order we experience is one which has been ‘subjected to decay’ (Rom 8:21). The created order continues to suffer because of our sin, as our greed leads us to excessive consumption and the exploitation of the environment. We pervert our God-given dominion over nature into a domination of it.
- If our doctrine of creation were not enough to assure us of the ongoing importance of the created order in God’s purposes, then the incarnation puts this matter beyond any doubt. The Word becomes ‘flesh’, and in doing so, all of nature is drawn into the redemption of human beings by God in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the agent of creation, the incarnate Word within creation, the atoning Saviour for the creation, and the resurrected Lord of Creation.
- The earth belongs to the Lord, and he cares for and sustains his creation in an ongoing way (Ps 145). Although humanity has an obligation to look after the creation, we must not succumb to the arrogance of thinking that the solution to all the current ecological problems is within our grasp. All our acts in addressing environmental issues ought to be done in prayerful dependence on the one who holds all things in his powerful hand. Our response to God should be one of ‘embodied praise’, reflecting and incorporating our createdness in our worship.

- Our ultimate aim is not an earthly utopia based on carbon-neutral production and renewable resources and energy sources (though all of these things are the outworking of a Christian ethic of responsible stewardship). Our lives must be shaped by the knowledge that world will one day be redeemed, and transformed into a new heaven and a new earth – a deconstruction and reconstruction. This created order will enter into its Sabbath Rest for which it was created. The curse will be reversed. ‘Nature, red in tooth and claw’ will be replaced by ‘the wolf and the lamb which will feed together’ (Isa 65:25). While we act to preserve this creation, it is Christ alone who can and will redeem the creation. Creation's future is bound to the redemption of men and women in Christ.

To explore some of the issues arising from this understanding of our relationship to and responsibility for the creation, the members of the Doctrine Commission have written a series of essays.

In the first essay, Michael Stead argues that the mandate to 'rule over' and 'subdue' the creation in Gen 1:26-28 does not give humanity rights over the creation, but rather gives us a responsibility for it. God has delegated to us a dominion over creation that is to be patterned after God's dominion – that is, a loving rule that protects and nurtures, not a despotic rule that exploits and degrades. The Old Testament gives various examples which demonstrate how this responsibility for care and nurture was to be expressed. He argues that this Old Testament foundation continues to shape a Christian response to the environment.

In the second essay, Glenn Davies explores the connections between Sabbath and Ecology. The Book of Genesis records God's creation of the heavens and the earth in six days and his resting on the seventh day, when he entered his Sabbath rest. This provides an insight into the sabbatical structure of this world order, as the present creation and its human occupants look toward the goal of also entering God's Sabbath rest, wherein lie the new heavens and a new earth. Israel's weekly Sabbath, seventh yearly Sabbath and year of Jubilee all provide mandated opportunities for the enjoyment of rest from human labour and rest for the earth. Biblical principles of stewardship of the earth and its resources suggest that an appropriation of a sabbatical structure would not only provide a regeneration of the earth and its resources, but also provide a reminder of the eschatological hope of a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells.

Dorothy Lee's essay, 'Ecology and the Johannine Literature', explores the way in which the Gospel of John, the Epistles of John, and the Book of Revelation understand creation. In each text, nature is drawn into the redemption of human beings by God in Jesus Christ. The use of 'flesh' in the Gospel and 1, 2, and 3 John is mostly positive, grounded in the creation and the incarnation, expressing Jesus' sovereignty over all created things, and God's will to redeem. The Book of Revelation embraces creation within the bounds of the New Jerusalem, using garden imagery to depict the restoration and transformation of the Garden of Eden.

In the fourth essay, Mark Thompson argues that, although the Bible does not address environmentalism directly, it does provide important resources for any discussion of the environment. Most critically it insists we view all around us under the category of

'creation' with all that this means for our dependence upon, and accountability to, the God who made us. It reminds us that the origin, sustenance and the future of all things is ultimately out of our hands, even if we are called to act responsibly towards the gifts that God has given us. God reminds us through his word that creation's future is bound to the redemption of men and women in Christ.

Heather Thomson's essay 'Fallen Images and Redeemed Dust: Being Human in God's Creation' argues that a theological understanding of being human makes a distinctive contribution to ecological theology. Heather Thomson's article considers key symbols within the Bible and Christian tradition that convey humanity's place in the world and in relation to God: that we are images of God, dust of the earth, fallen and redeemed. Our place in the world God created is significant, but we are only a part of a much larger story. A theological view of humanity is still God-centred, and if we are to know ourselves within this view, we need to know the calling upon us to become who we were created to be. This takes us closer to the earth and all its creatures than we may have first imagined.

John Dunnill's essay, entitled "'Through Your Goodness We Have These Gifts To Share": Ecology, Humanity and Eucharistic Being' asks why human beings seem to be so ill at ease in creation. It argues that wonder is an innate awareness of the presence of God in the world, at the root of religion, and that praise and thanks, which grow from it, are fundamental ways of relating to the world. The Israelite thank-offering and the Christian Eucharist are described as forms of 'embodied praise', affirming God's place in the whole of life. The essay argues that it is our failure to recognise and respond to God in creation that underlies the ecological crisis, and it calls for a renewed vision and practice of 'Eucharistic being'.

The essay by Andrew McGowan demonstrates how Augustine's distinction between 'use' and 'enjoyment' aids our thinking about ecology. Although his theology has been viewed as problematic by modern critics concerned with human embodiment and the natural world, Augustine of Hippo has some fruitful ideas for contemporary Christian reflection on ecology. Although sometimes labelled 'dualistic' in his thinking, Augustine's conception of the God-world relationship relativises typical matter-spirit dualities, arguing that creation as a whole – material or spiritual – stands in a relationship of dependence on God. Augustine sees the world as reflecting a divine 'order of love' marred by human will to power. His distinction between 'use' and 'enjoyment' of things also assists reflection on relations between humanity and nature.

Peter Adam's essay on 'Christ and Creation' shows the central and unique significance of Jesus Christ as the agent of creation, the incarnate Word, the atoning Saviour, and the resurrected Lord, as the basis for a profoundly Christian view of creation, ecology and environment. He shows from the Bible a constant, consistent and coherent theology of God, Christ and creation, with examples from a wide range of expected and unexpected theologians.

The final essay, by Duncan Reid (a special contributor to this project) examines our Trinitarian experience and the ecological imperative. Reid explores the Trinitarian God who relates to his creation as Breath, Word and Source. God's Breath first formed and shaped the creation, and continues to give the breath of life to all living

things. As incarnate Word, God makes a fundamental identification with – not just humanity – but "all flesh". As the eternal source, God the Father sends forth both Spirit and Word, through whom he invites the creation into a living community. Reid argues that humanity is subject to an ecological imperative to serve and protect all creation that is deeply grounded in the Trinitarian nature of God.

The Doctrine Commission is pleased to contribute these essays to a special edition of *St Mark's Review*. This work is offered in the hope it will help the church to reflect on ecological theology, and to incorporate this into our thinking and practice.

+Philip

The Most Revd Dr Philip Freier, Archbishop of Melbourne, is Chairman of the Doctrine Commission of the Anglican Church of Australia.