

“For the Earth is the Lord’s and the Fullness Thereof”: Caring for the Creation as Christian Mission as Engagement

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I am grateful for the opportunity to share some reflections on how we conceive and practice mission today. In this age of resistance to Christian mission in many places in the world, the single concern that would and should bring communities of faith together for the sustenance and betterment of all is ‘care for the creation.’ I am not an expert on this topic, but because it threatens our very existence and our beloved earth community, I have singled out ‘care for creation’ for our consideration among the many issues and concerns that challenge us today. In our globalized world this could become our mission for all and mission for the sake of all. But such a focus would require that All the traditional models and concepts of mission be re-examined as we wake up to the truth that natural world sustains us and therefore gives us a context for anything we do.

Modern society has adopted three utilitarian attitudes toward nature, according to Ian Barbour: non-human life is devoid of mind and feeling and humans can do anything as necessity arises, nature is the source of raw materials, and an element in the creation of wealth and a means of profit. These attitudes have come to dominate human relations to nature. “People assumed that nature was a given which could be exploited for an unquestioned and unlimited growth in production. It was immediately disposable in exchange for cash.”¹ The technological changes occurring during the modern era led us to believe that nature existed to be discovered, brought into order and harnessed to and exploited for human use. “Scientific research was often motivated by a utilitarian ethic that saw experimentation as legitimate as long as it could be justified to the smallest extent as being of benefit to humanity.”² Langdon Gilkey calls this modern approach ‘scientific positivism and anthropocentric pragmatism’.³ This mechanistic and manipulative approach to nature has led to the present ecological crisis.

The current series of ecological crises- of which human-induced climate change is merely the most obvious- is causing us to re-evaluate the bond between the human species and the rest of the creation and rethink our mission engagement at the deepest levels. Every ecological problem affects the human community, usually having the greatest impact on the most vulnerable—the poor, people of color, developing countries, the elderly, the disabled, and so on. Every ecological problem is inextricably related to issues of human justice and every human justice problem is exacerbated by the degradation of creation. Unfortunately, till recently, we have separated human justice and care of the creation to our detriment. A good example of this is the “environmental racism” in the United States. It is well documented that a greater percentage of people of color live near polluting factories, waste incinerators, chemical brown-fields, and

¹ J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission?: Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 168.

² *Ibid.*, 169.

³ Langdon Gilkey, “Creation,” in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, 112. Cited in J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission?: Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 169.

other ecological hazards.⁴ The impact of environmental degradation is still worse in developing nations. Christian Aid Mission, an UK based organization, points out that “(t)he potential ravages of climate change are so severe that they could nullify efforts to secure meaningful and sustainable development in poor countries. At worst, they could send the real progress that has already been achieved spinning into reverse. No other single issue presents such a clear and present danger to the future welfare of the world’s poor.”⁵ Affirming the threat faced by the developing countries, Nazmul Chowdbury, a Bangladesh relief worker, bluntly states: “... the people who are facing the brunt of this process are the villagers who are poor to start with. Now they are in an even more vulnerable situation. Forget about making poverty history. Climate change will make poverty permanent.”⁶

This is not to say that care for creation is simply a contemporary reaction to our current environmental crises, but rather a genuine recovery of a biblically integrated understanding of mission. Arguably, mission that excludes non-human creation stems from a biblically deficient definition of God’s mission for humanity, and the simple equation of mission with humanity does not stand up to biblical scrutiny. The overemphasis on the ‘missionary mandate’ of Mathew 28: 19-20, “Go into all the world and make disciples...” forgets that Christ’s Great Commission is slightly different in each Gospel, and in Mark 16 speaks of preaching the Gospel “to the whole creation.” Dave Bookless argues that “within the whole sweep of Scripture, we must remember that the first ‘Great Commission’ is the creation mandate of Genesis 1:26-28- the call on human beings to be God’s representatives and stewards in serving and preserving non-human creation.” He adds, “Jesus would have seen this as the context for our entire mission, and so must we.”⁷ The clearest illustration of this responsibility is in Genesis 6-9, where the familiar story of Noah’s ark needs to be rediscovered, include an understanding of God’s creating and saving purposes. This passage indeed shows that the mission of humanity and the purpose of God is to direct us to a covenant love towards the whole creation- almost marginalizing human beings, as the central emphasis becomes on the preservation of biodiversity. Noah’s missiology left no room for anthropocentrism.

Mission is ultimately the *missio Dei* – God’s mission to his world- including both the human and nonhuman elements of that world. Our commission is to participate in God’s mission, as ambassadors of Christ, who is not only savior of the world, but the ‘One in whom all things hold together’ (Colossians 1:17). Mission that ignores creation will always present too small a vision

⁴ David Rhoads, “Our Beloved Earth Community” unpublished paper, 9.

⁵ “Climate of Poverty: Facts, Figures and Hopes, A Christian Aid Report August 2006” p. 3, in http://www.christianaid.org.uk/Images/climate_of_poverty_tcm15-21613.pdf assessed on January 4, 2009.

⁶ Nazmul Chowdbury cited in “Climate of Poverty: Bangladesh, Erosion and Flood” of Christian Aid, p34, in http://www.christianaid.org.uk/Images/climate_of_poverty_tcm15-21613.pdf assessed on January 4, 2009.

⁷ Dave Bookless, “To Strive to Safeguard the Integrity of Creation and Sustain and Renew the Life of the Earth, ii” in *Mission in the 21st Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*, ed. Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross, (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 97.

of God and his purposes. Instead, mission that encompasses caring for creation provides a message of hope and of life in all its fullness. The good news of the Kingdom of God ‘on earth as it is in heaven’ is good news for people, communities, and for a groaning creation.

The church has always realized that it does not exist for any other reason but mission; that it should be sign, presence, foretaste and witness that the reign of God is here. The often quoted Emile Brunner’s statement, “The Church exists for mission as a fire exists for burning. Where there is no mission, there is no church,”⁸ speaks to the pivotal importance given to the church’s mission. In other words, if the church ceases to be missionary, it has not only failed in one of its tasks, it has ceased being church. Thus, the church’s self understanding and sense of identity [its ecclesiology] is inherently bound up with its call to share and live out the Gospel. If the church exists for the sake of the world, it must pay attention to what is happening to the world and see whether its services are addressing the needs of the hour. However, the concept of mission in the past century has been anthropocentric, focusing exclusively on human beings while neglecting our responsibility to care for creation as if nature were neutral or a benevolent stage upon which humans play out their lives. But, much to the contrary, human beings are so embedded in nature that nature is part of us.

For the last two decades, world-wide ecumenical organizations like the WCC, LWF, WARC, and others have been grappling with this issue and sought to build and nurture beloved Earth communities. Though a few, like Dr. Joseph Sittler, a former professor of Divinity School and later associated with LSTC as far back as 1961 worked hard to create awareness of this missional calling of the church among seminarians, theologians, congregations, and the larger society, it is only from the 1983 sixth General Assembly of the WCC held in Vancouver in 1983, that this issue was seriously considered as mission.

If we agree that the mission of the church does not exist for the sake of the human world alone but for the sake of all creation, we need to re-conceptualize mission in order to turn proclamation, preaching, teaching, and witnessing to the care for creation as central to missional vocation. Earth-care arises from the fact that this life is the creation of God, that it bears God’s glory, that all of life is sacramental, and that lifestyles that contribute to the desecration and destruction of nature should be challenged as part of our spiritual response to God’s grace. But to respond faithfully to this call the church must experience a deep repentance, a metanoia- a change of mind and a change in practice. This change must be ecumenical and interfaith because all religions contain salient eco-ethics that could be recovered for crafting a new eco-ethics. This change will involve a widespread reorganization of structures and a reprioritization in mission.

Reexamining the traditional models and concepts of mission as we wake up to the truth that nature is the context for all we do, involves some of the following. Our proclamation of the Good News needs to grapple in its apologetics with the accusation that Christianity has nothing helpful to say about today’s biggest question- how to have a sustainable relationship with planet earth. Indeed, we also have to overcome the widely held perception that Christianity is to blame for the ecological crisis, through placing humanity as the ‘image of God’ on a pedestal above the

⁸ Emile Brunner, *The Word and the World* (London: SCM, 1931), 108.

rest of nature. It is a claim that can be straightforwardly refuted theologically, but people won't listen unless they see practical evidence of Christians taking care of the earth?⁹ Responding to human need in loving service is increasingly becoming a self-defeating task unless we address the root causes of those human needs. It is not irrelevant to quote Chowdbury again, "Forget about making poverty history- climate change will make poverty permanent." Transforming the unjust structures of society must mean addressing not only the global injustices which prevent the poor from accessing development, but also questioning our very aspirations for development that led to lifestyles we now find to be unsustainable.¹⁰ Bookless argues:

...the nettle nobody grasps is that while we believe in justice and a better life for all and support the aspirations of developing nations, there is simply not enough to go around if all earth's citizens want to live at the levels the West considers 'normal'... if everybody wanted to live at the levels of the average UK citizen, we would need more than three planet earths to support the world's current population. Justice must look not only at increasing access for the majority, but at drastically reducing the living standards of the wealthy western minority.¹¹

Contemporary Expressions of Environmental Mission:

Today, there is a rapid and often spontaneous movement towards ecological mission both around the world and across the main Christian traditions. The welcomed news is that even more theologically conservative parts of the Christian church have been moving into practical expressions of 'care for the creation' mission. In the interest of time, let me talk about two examples of 'care for the creation mission' around the world, beginning with one at our own doorstep.

Boise Vineyard Fellowship in Idaho¹² is a good example of 'Care for creation,' as mission sometimes appears in unexpected places. As we all know the Vineyard church is of the Pentecostal tradition. Pastor Tri Robinson, convinced of the biblical mandate for 'creation care,' started several 'creation care ministries.' "These have grown to include a major recycling project, wilderness camps for high school students, partnerships with the Forest Service and the Boise Parks & Recreation Department, including trail maintenance and 're-leaf Boise', and a community garden, where food is grown in raised beds and then distributed among local socially disadvantaged families."¹³ The environmental projects undertaken by Boise Vineyard have been an integral part of the church's overall mission. In the words of Robinson, "Tending the Garden' is not a new commission to many Christians; it has been neglected by the Church. However, the

⁹ Dave Bookless, "To Strive to Safeguard the Integrity', 95.

¹⁰ Ibid., 95.

¹¹ Ibid, 95-96.

¹² <http://www.vineyardboise.org/>

¹³ Dave Bookless, "To Strive to Safeguard the Integrity of Creation,' 98.

church can't just "take it back"; we have to earn it back."¹⁴ At Vineyard they were able to reverse some of the prejudices. The various 'creation care ministries' of Boise Vineyard Fellowship was able to reverse some of the prejudice against Christianity that it is irrelevant in a time of ecological crisis. A television advertisement entitled "Let's tend the Garden" led to many new members joining church.¹⁵

A Rocha - Cruzinha:

Perhaps one of the most significant examples of "creation care" is the remarkable world-wide development of *A Rocha*.¹⁶ Let me say a few words about the vision and ethos of A Rocha. Peter and Miranda Harris arrived in the Algarve region of Southern Portugal as missionaries with an Anglican agency in the 1980s. They were sent to help the local Anglican Church to plant churches. Like other Anglican ministers in Portugal, they were bi-vocational and they took up somewhat novel idea of a Christian-based Bird Observatory & Field Studies Center. Like any other traditional missionaries they worked hard to understand the local language, culture, and community. They also thought seriously about the relevance of the Gospel to the ecological issues facing the Algarve. The concept of a Field Studies Center was not an excuse for evangelism, but stemmed from a growing awareness that creation provides the context for all our relationships. The vision eventually took shape in an old farmhouse, which became A Rocha's first project and the inspiration for what has now become a global network of diverse Christian conservation projects. A Rocha believes that "mission is about the restoration of broken relationships between God, human beings, and the natural world." It has embraced nature conservation of the nature as one of its five DNAs, the others being Christian, Community, cross-cultural, and cooperation. It works in cooperation with other organizations and individuals for the protection of the environment. This means partnerships with secular conservation or environmental organizations, and sometime with groups from other faiths and they work on all six continents. "Rather than seeing these partnerships as compromising A Rocha's Christian integrity, they are seen as ways of building bridges of trust, upon which lasting relationships can be constructed, and the Gospel can be shared."¹⁷ In A Rocha centers Christian faith is never hidden, prayer takes place before meals, and there are regular Bible-studies and worship to which everybody is welcome. Neither, however, is Christian faith imposed, but rather it infuses every aspect of life- from cooking and washing up, to the standards with which scientific studies or financial accounting are conducted, to the value given to people as whole persons, and to every other aspect of creation.

¹⁴ "Why Christians are called to Environmental Stewardship," www.letstendthegarden.org accessed on January 4, 2009.

¹⁵ <http://www.letstendthegarden.org>

¹⁶ A Rocha is a Christian nature conservation organization. Its name coming from the Portuguese for "the Rock," as the first initiative was a field study centre in Portugal. A Rocha projects are frequently cross-cultural in character, and share a community emphasis, with a focus on science and research, practical conservation and environmental education. see www.arocha.org

¹⁷ Dave Bookless, "To Strive to Safeguard the Integrity of Creation,"101.

A Rocha's mission has never been about the preservation of some mythical natural status quo, but rather about active involvement in studying, managing, and restoring a fragile and precious creation. For them "Environmental mission involves careful science in cataloguing and analyzing species in their ecosystems, leading to management strategies that seek to enhance the earth's fruitfulness and biodiversity, not forgetting that human beings are part of the natural system and also have needs and aspirations."¹⁸ Peter Harris says, "In conservational terms A Rocha's vision is quite wide really, because it's to see ecosystems restored, but its also to see the well-being of those human communities that are dependent upon them; so you're talking about restoration ecology, but sometimes you're also talking about development economics, or sustainability."¹⁹

Conclusion

The age of resistance to mission probably compels us to creative ways of engaging in mission. Caring for creation can be the rallying point that brings together people of diverse faith traditions to work in harmony for the wellbeing of fall. This call to caring for creation removes the existing prejudice against Christians and enable the church to be the light of the world and enable the earth to fulfill the call given to it.

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¹⁸Ibid., 101.

¹⁹ Peter Harris, Introduction to Rocha 2006." Cited in Ibid.