

The Promised Land and Its Care as a Means of Grace for God’s People

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Introduction

The growing environmental crisis has created a disheartening dichotomy for many Christians today. On the one hand, there is a sense of dread and fear because of the growing and sometimes vocal pessimism about the looming environmental crisis of global warming. On the other hand, people in the pews see stories in the media of people gluing themselves to the road in protest of global warming. So, with a bit of skepticism, they reject the radical agenda of the growing environmental cult. They view environmentalism as a new form of religion that detracts from the crucial mission Jesus left his disciples to do. Confusion, division, and despair result.

This pessimism has been mainly promoted by dispensational premillennialism, which has become the predominant eschatology among evangelicals. Christians long for the day of escape by rapture so they can be removed from this deteriorating and decaying world. Al Truesdale argues that this view has led evangelicals to abandon concern for the environment, which is all doomed anyway “in these last days.” He writes, “No lasting covenant between God and the creation exists. Although the creation is not viewed as inherently evil, the final destruction of evil entails the destruction of the world. In the end, despair, not hope, elimination, not redemption, is this world’s truth.” He adds, “Until evangelicals purge from their vision of the Christian faith the wine of pessimistic dispensationalist premillennialism, the Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation and the biblical image of stewardship will be orphans in their midst.”¹

At contention are various Bible passages that refer to creation and the

¹ Al Truesdale, “Last Things First: The Impact of Eschatology on Ecology,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 46 (1994): 116-20, 117, 118

end of this age. For example, in Genesis 1:26 and 28, God commands humanity to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (v. 28).² As stewards of creation, humans have a certain degree of creative and destructive power over the rest of the animate and inanimate objects of earth. Perhaps like no other time in recorded human history has this become an issue as it has with the present generation.

In a now-famous essay in 1967, Lynn White blamed Christianity for the growing environmental crisis because of its focus on anthropocentrism that comes from a literal interpretation of these verses from Genesis. Humanity has assumed dominion over the earth, and as a result, the earth has suffered because of human consumption. The result is a dichotomy between humanity and nature: people use nature as an object to be conquered to support their technological advancements.³ As Douglas Moo states, environmentalists “view orthodox Christianity as a cultural virus that must be eradicated from the world if the planet is to survive.”⁴

The basic blame is that Christianity is anthropocentric, especially in its push for individual salvation. Humans are the special focus of God’s creation. This idea is not erroneous in itself since we are made in the image of God, but the challenge is when the rest of creation is relegated to being an object to fulfill our pleasures. Environmentalists have taken the opposite position to the point of advocating a new ideology of ecocentrism. Humans are but a small and temporary nuisance in the overall existence of nature. Behind both these positions lies the fundamental spiritual problem of sin. At its root, sin is an egocentric rebellion against God that appears to destroy

² All quotations of Scripture unless otherwise noted are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

³ Lynn White. “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-207.

⁴ Douglas J. Moo. “Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment. *Jets* 49/3 (September 2006) 449-88, p. 450.

the very purposes of God's creation. Fallen human nature leads to a distortion of God's grace.

John Wesley's definition and description of sin are helpful in reflecting on the growing crisis. He describes "inward sin" as "any sinful temper, passion, or affection; such as pride, self-will, love of the world, in any kind or degree; such as lust, anger, peevishness; any disposition contrary to the mind which was in Christ."⁵ Pride shows up as an exalted self-will, misguided love of the world, and unhealthy desire for earthly pleasures.⁶ Our misuse of the earth and all its creatures for such selfish reasons is but a manifestation of "practical atheism" whereby we sin against God by rejecting his sovereignty over it and our place in it as God's stewards.⁷ Sin is seeking fulfillment in self and creation rather than in the Creator. The result is that nature becomes an object to fulfill the desires of flesh-bound human nature.

The self-centeredness of the post-Enlightenment, post-modern period in which we live has caused people to see humans as the center of creation. People see the earth as ours to discover and exploit for our own selfish purposes. This drive has only served to feed the hedonism that consumes the human soul, expressed in all forms of idolatry. Wesley summarized idolatry in three forms: objects that gratify the outward senses, objects that enliven our imagination with false promises, and the pride of life that entices us with honor, wealth, and things that feed selfishness.⁸ The Christian message of new hope in Christ counters this notion with the promise of release from the bondage of sin and the transformation into new persons capable of perfect love.

The care of the earth is a theme that runs throughout the Bible. In the

⁵ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition (Vol. 1-4; ed. by Albert C. Outler, Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 1:320.

⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 1:337-38; see also 3:353-55; 4:152-54.

⁷ Theodore H. Runyan, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 207.

⁸ Wesley, *Works*, 4:65.

Old Testament, the land is promised, gained, lost, and restored. As the church grew beyond the land of Israel, the idea of a land for God's people became spiritualized. The spiritualization of the "promised land" can potentially diminish concern for the care of the earth. Essential aspects of the land in Israel's history, such as Sabbath rest and blessings and curses for obedience or disobedience, can be lost. Spiritualization of the land universalizes God's promises for all people and motivates believers to be faithful. A careful reading of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, reveals that God always intended the land as a means of providential grace to point to his greater promise of salvation. Earth care for believers today can also be a means of grace that builds hope for the eternal "land of promise" spiritualized in the New Testament.

The Land as the Obedience of Faith in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the land serves as God's tool to lead his people to faithful obedience.⁹ God as creator is the owner of all land and gives it to humanity for cultivating food (Gen 2:8). In the midst of the battle over sovereignty between Pharaoh and God, Moses reminds Pharaoh of the fundamental truth of creation: "The earth is the Lord's" (Exod 9:29). As sovereign, God can bless people with land or remove them from it. Walter Brueggemann has argued that the land is the central motif of Old Testament theology: "The Bible is the story of God's people with God's land."¹⁰ The story of Israel is about land, summarized in the cycle of the metanarrative of the Old Testament:

- Land created and given (creation)
- Land lost (flood)
- Land promised (Abraham)
- Land gained (conquest)
- Land lost again (Judges, kingdom, and exile)

⁹ Several almost synonymous words are used for land in the Hebrew Bible: *'ereš*, *ʾādāmā*, and *sādeh*.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 13.

Land restored (return from exile).

People depend on the land for their food, safety, culture, and life itself. The interdependence of humanity to the earth can be seen in creation as humankind (' *ādām*) comes from the dirt (' *ādāmā*; Gen 2:7). Humanity must be reminded of this relationship and that our bodies will one day return to the earth and become one with it again (Gen 3:19; Job 34:15). To attack the land is to attack our very source of existence. The relationship of humanity to the earth is governed by our relationship with God. When Israel failed in its covenant with God, the earth likewise failed them. Their disobedience broke the harmony (*šālôm*) with creation. The story of brokenness began with the disobedience of Adam and Eve in Eden as God pronounced a curse on the land (Gen 3:17-19). From that point on, it has been a struggle for humans to restore balance.

The Land as Promise

The metanarrative of the Pentateuch centers on the theme of promise/fulfillment, particularly as it relates to the possession of the land of Canaan. God was not finished with humanity or its relationship to the earth after the failure of the first parents or the generations after them. Even after the destruction and reboot of the flood, God provided a promise through nature with the rainbow that life would continue (Gen 8:21-22). The divine plan of redemption began to unfold through God's promises to the landless, wandering nomad named Abram found in Genesis 12:1: "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" With this promise, the curse of the land began to be reversed, but it was a difficult journey to the land of promise. Several times, Abraham had to be reminded that land was part of God's promise and plan for his yet-unborn descendants (12:7; 13:15-17; 15:12-21). Abraham responded with the obedience of faith by leaving the old land and going to the unknown future land. The promise of lineage was fulfilled through the miraculous birth of Isaac (Gen 18), but the promise of land was still a long time in coming. God made a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15:18 in a common covenantal fashion, promising him "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, 21

the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Gergashites, and the Jebusites.”

There were two major interruptions in God’s plan of abundance and land for Abraham’s descendants. The first was forced slavery under the pharaohs of Egypt. God raised up Moses specifically to free the people from bondage in order to fulfill the promise to Abraham. God said to Moses, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . .” (Exod 3:7-8). The exodus from Egypt became the primary symbol of God’s saving grace toward Israel.

The second interruption in the fulfillment of the promise was the crisis of faith at Kadesh Barnea as the now-freed Hebrew people faced the decision to enter the land promised to Abraham. They rejected the optimism of faith shown by Caleb and Joshua and instead turned to listening to their fear of the inhabitants of the land (Num 13:27-29). Their lack of faith resulted in a forty-year disharmony between the harsh desert and their basic survival (Num 20:4-5). They were without land, home, or anything to support their life except the promises of Yahweh that he would be with them. Brueggemann writes, “To be placed in the wilderness is to be cast into the land of the enemy—cosmic, natural, historical—without any of the props or resources that give life order and meaning.”¹¹ Since Israel had no resources, it had to trust God fully.

God did not leave them alone in their struggle but provided manna and quail. They had to learn to trust in God, who is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation” (Exod 34:6-7).

¹¹Brueggemann, *Land*, 29.

The Land as a Means of Grace

The fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham came with the conquest of the promised land by Joshua and the Israelites (Josh 21:43-45). The landless and homeless now had everything they needed to thrive in peace and harmony. The land provided rest and security from the hard labor of slavery and the struggle for survival in the desert. A significant message in the Pentateuch and the Historical Books is that the continued possession of the land required the obedience of faith. Each generation would need to learn of God's mercy towards them (Deut 3:20; 12:9-10). They needed to know that the land was a special inheritance (*nahālâ*), a gift of God's grace and not their own righteousness (Deut 9:4-5).

God's covenant with the people included many stipulations about how to live in the land. Harmony with God through obedience brought harmony with the land. The theme of the covenant is summarized in Deuteronomy 5:32-33: "You shall be careful therefore to do as the Lord your God has commanded you. You shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you shall possess." Failure to obey would lead to expulsion, just like in the garden of Eden (Gen 2:15-17; Deut 11:10-12). One reason the law was given was so that Israel would know how to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6). Being a holy nation allowed them to dwell in the land Yahweh had promised and helped them conquer. Brueggemann adds, "But Israel's Torah is markedly uninterested in a religion of obedience as such. It is rather interested in care for land, so that it is never forgotten from whence came the land and to whom it is entrusted and by whom."¹²

The promised land offered a return to the harmony between humanity and creation found in the Garden of Eden. The law governed this harmony by providing guidelines for how to care for the land. The laws are too numerous to list here, but several examples are revealing. Leviticus 25 describes two significant times when the land was reset. The Sabbath year

¹² Brueggemann, *Land*, 60.

provided rest for the land (vv. 1-7). As the people honored the land, they would also be honoring the Lord. In response, the land would provide what they needed. In addition, the year of Jubilee restored land lost so that the poor and needy could once again find sustenance from the land of their inheritance (vv. 8-17). The nation's security in the land depended on their obedience (v. 18). God reminded them that they were only sojourners on his land (v. 23). Part of their responsibility in the land was not to over harvest it so that the poor and needy would be cared for (Lev 19:9-10). They always needed to remember that it was the Lord who saved them from slavery and that the land was a matter of God's grace (19:5-6).

Losing Faith and Losing the Land

As the story of Israel in the land unfolds, the book of Judges records their struggle against the sin of idolatry, leading to moral compromise. Brueggemann notes, "The literature of Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings is the account of the tortuous route by which heirs became exiles."¹³ The possession of the land in Judges 2:6 became exile from the land in 2 Kings 24:14-15. Israel's kings were to be only servants of God on the land, but they and the people failed to keep the terms of the covenant and suffered the consequences for it. Brueggemann further states, "Remarkably, in one generation [Solomon] managed to confiscate Israel's freedom and reduce social order to the very situation of Egyptian slavery. . . . The very land that promised to create space for human joy and freedom became the very source of dehumanizing exploitation and oppression."¹⁴

Sin always makes nature humanity's enemy and results in its exploitation. As a consequence of Israel's rejection of God, the land rebelled against them for their disobedience. The prophet Hosea paints a vivid picture of the spiritual condition of Israel during the kingdom period. He describes the complete collapse of law and order and its effect upon the land in 4:1-3:

¹³ Brueggemann, *Land*, 73.

¹⁴ Brueggemann, *Land*, 10-11.

Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel,
 for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.
 There is no faithfulness or steadfast love,
 and no knowledge of God in the land;
 there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery;
 they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.
 Therefore the land mourns,
 and all who dwell in it languish,
 and also the beasts of the field
 and the birds of the heavens,
 and even the fish of the sea are taken away.

Jeremiah echoes this message in 12:4, “How long will the land mourn and the grass of every field wither? For the evil of those who dwell in it the beasts and the birds are swept away, because they said, ‘He will not see our latter end.’” Israel’s problem was not unique but lies at the very heart of humanity. As Arie Lova Eliav writes, “Thus, from the beginning of civilization, the human race has been afflicted by two kinds of slavery: one to nature, for the sake of survival; the other, of the weak to the strong, out of fear. This dual bondage has been the lot of humankind for countless centuries.”¹⁵ There is no mention of Jubilee or Sabbath rest for the land after the initial giving of the law in Leviticus and Numbers. It was a good theory that appears to never have been practiced by Israel. With exile, the spiritual problems of the people led to a loss of rest and social security. God removed his providential grace from the land, and the people suffered socially and physically.

Because God is merciful and gracious, not all was hopeless and lost. Isaiah 43:18-21 anticipates the renewal of the land:

Remember not the former things,
 nor consider the things of old.
 Behold, I am doing a new thing;
 now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

¹⁵Arie Lova Eliav, *New Heart New Spirit: Biblical Humanism for Modern Israel* (Philadelphia, New York, Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 67-68.

I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
The wild beasts will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches,
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
that they might declare my praise.

Interestingly, there is no mention of Jubilee or Sabbath rest for the land after the initial giving of the law in Leviticus and Numbers. It was a good theory that appears to never have been practiced by Israel. With exile, the spiritual problems of the people led to a loss of rest and social security. God removed his providential grace from the land, and the people suffered socially and physically. Isaiah 43:18-21 reminds us that God is merciful and gracious, and so not all was hopeless and lost. The Old Testament is the story of a journey to return to the harmony God created at the beginning.

Spiritualization of Creation in the New Testament

At first, it may seem that the New Testament has little reference to the care of the land; however, the motif of promise/fulfillment continues but expands because of a new understanding of who constitutes "Israel." With the expansion of the church beyond Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, to speak of the land as a geographical place became meaningless. On the one hand, those Jews who lived in the land of Israel were not in free possession of it because of the occupying Roman forces. On the other hand, new Gentile believers were far from the land of Israel, so referring to possession of the land was irrelevant to them. The early church viewed Israel not as a geopolitical entity but as the people of God who accepted Jesus as Messiah (Rom 10:12; Gal 3:28; Eph 2:13-16; 1 Pet 2:9-10). The spiritualization of the land universalized God's promises for all people and motivated believers to be faithful. Instead of referring to the land where the people of God are to

be located, the New Testament refers to all of creation to be transformed.¹⁶

The Renewal through the Kingdom

The primary way this transformation is expressed is through eschatology. Eschatology in the New Testament focuses on the coming of God's kingdom. Jesus pronounced the arrival of the kingdom after his baptism (Mark 1:15). Much of his teaching, particularly his parables, focused on explaining how the kingdom was present, would continue to grow, and would come in fullness in the future. The "not yet" experience of the kingdom indicates that it is not earthly in nature but spiritual, but somehow, it affects the present age. The kingdom is an expression of God's sovereignty over all creation. God's kingdom has broken into the present age in Jesus (Matt 12:28) and reversed the effects of Eden. When Jesus the King spoke, creation obeyed: diseases were healed, the sea was calmed, the bread and loaves were multiplied, and the dead were raised. His ministry was holistic because he was sovereign over creation. When the kingdom broke into decaying creation, creation's transformation began. To pray for God's kingdom is to anticipate new creation.

An example of the link between the kingdom and creation can be found in the Beatitudes. Although Jesus does not mention the word "kingdom" in the Beatitudes, the whole Sermon on the Mount focuses on how disciples ought to live as citizens of God's kingdom. The third Beatitude found in Matthew 5:5 connects the spiritual quality of meekness with the promise of inheriting the earth. This verse echoes Psalm 37:11: "But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace." All of the Beatitudes emphasize spiritual qualities, but this particular one puts earthly living in a new perspective. It is difficult to know how literal Jesus meant by "earth," but it shows a reversal of the pattern begun with Adam and Eve. Meekness (*praeis*) is humble dependence upon God and the opposite of sin. Meekness is the result of mourning over our self-sovereignty and coming to realize that we need God more than anything else.

¹⁶ The only place where the phrase "land of Israel" occurs in the New Testament is in Matthew 2:20-21.

Two key events of Christology confirmed the power of God's kingdom and moved creation closer to the promises of the Old Testament. The first was the *Incarnation*: the Almighty, immaterial, and spiritual God became part of what he created to show his plan for this creation. Christian environmentalism must begin with the phrase, "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14). Second, Jesus' *resurrection* brought the full reversal of death as the power of sin and the decay death brings to creation. His resurrection is the guarantee that creation will be restored and God's kingdom will reach its fulfillment (1 Cor 15:24, 54-56). His physical body, destined to return to the earth like all other descendants of Adam, became the first of creation to experience the transformation of the kingdom's fulfillment (v. 20; Col 1:18). The promise of new creation will be fulfilled in the resurrection of believers to the same imperishable (*aphtharsia*) and spiritual (*pneumatikon*) bodies (vv. 42-44) fit for a creation no longer bound by death.

Longing for the Restoration of Creation

The restoration of creation is integral to God's plan of salvation for humanity. The New Testament expresses a longing for this restoration in multiple passages. For example, in Romans 8:19-22, creation is personified as groaning for release from its "bondage of decay" that has bound it since the fateful decision of Adam and Eve. The word "futility" (*mataiotēti*, v. 20) expresses creation's hopeless cycle of deterioration as it suffers the effects of death. Creation joins humanity (v. 17) in suffering and groans and struggles to find liberation from death's hold. Creation's destiny is connected to the spiritual bondage of humanity; so long as humanity remains bound by death, so also will creation. The groaning of creation is a prelude and announcement that renewal is coming.

All creation, including humanity, suffers on the journey to new creation. The "yet" of suffering reminds us that as long as we live in the "land," we are dependent upon God's grace. New kingdom life begins while we are still in the "land," but we know that this is not our destiny. Our new home of promise is something greater than this decaying earth. The redemption we experience now through Christ is the "firstfruits" and promise of the full redemption of creation. The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, whom we are given now as God's precious gift of his grace, is the assurance that

all the promises of God will be fulfilled in Christ (v. 23; 2 Cor 1:20-22). Believers are given a foretaste now of what new life in God's kingdom will be like.

Paul recenters all of creation, including humanity, *in Christ* and what he has done and will do. Christ is the source, sustainer, and fulfillment of all physical and spiritual existence. Among many terms and descriptions, Paul uses the phrase "new creation" (*kainē ktisis*) to embody the hope of God's plan for the full restoration of his creation. Second Corinthians 5:17 summarizes Paul's theology in one concise statement. It begins with an open invitation to *anyone* but with the condition of being *in Christ*. The very reason humanity and everything else exists is to find purpose in relationship to Christ. For those who choose to embrace the offer of God's grace, the result is *new creation*. Recreation is not done by human power but requires the human responses of faith and obedience. The result is a removal of the control of the powers that dominate this age while we await the full coming of the new age of God's kingdom.

The "new creation" of Galatians 6:15 refers to the new life in Christ demonstrated by fully trusting in his supremacy (2:20) and guided by obedience to the leading of the Holy Spirit (5:24-25). The Spirit transforms us into the likeness of Christ because we have allowed him the position of Lord (2 Cor 3:18). A new type of existence began "in Christ" that is not bound by this creation but affects all of creation. New life in Christ reverses the effects of sin and offers the promise of resurrection victory over the power of sin and its enslaving power of selfish pride (Rom 6:5-11). By solving the core human problem of sin that has also plagued creation since Adam and Eve (represented in the "ground" of Gen 3:17), Christ began the process of restoring all creation to its intended purpose of acknowledging his lordship (Phil 2:9-11). Paul was optimistic about the power of God's grace to bring about this change not only in the human spirit but in all of creation.

Colossians 1:15-20 brings the two doctrines of incarnation and resurrection together and shows their impact on creation. Paul centers all creation in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the full representation in the creation of the invisible God. Christ became one with creation to experience the death that seeks to destroy it. His resurrection nullified death's power and began the reversal of the curse suffered by creation since Eden. New

creation began with Christ's resurrection. Humans can participate in this "newness of life" by identifying in faith through baptism with Christ's death and resurrection (Rom 6:4). Russell comments, "The life, death, and resurrection of Christ not only set in motion on the salvific process for those who believe but also initiated the process by which Christ would ultimately reclaim his entire creation."¹⁷ He notes, "The passage in verse 18 thus moves from creation to new creation and finally in v. 20 to creation restored to its proper place under Christ as its head."¹⁸ Lohse adds, "This peace which God has established through Christ binds the whole universe together again into unity and underlines that the restored creation is reconciled with God."¹⁹ Christ's incarnation continues through the ministry of the church, his body, which is to carry out his mission of reconciliation through the power of his resurrection. Experiencing the new self in Christ opens our eyes to creation's longing for restoration and inspires us to do all we can through the power of the Spirit to usher in God's kingdom, even in this present evil age.

Earth Care and the Optimism of Grace

Providential Grace

New life in Christ is not only a spiritual journey but should impact every aspect of who we are. John Wesley articulated an optimism that the promises of the Bible are true and that we can experience God's transforming power on this side of the grave. He also studied nature and was interested in science, as demonstrated in his five-volume natural philosophy called *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*. Wesley believed that God's goodness is present everywhere in creation. As Creator, God knows all the properties of the beings he created and preserves and sustains all that he

¹⁷ David M. Russell, *The "New heavens and New Earth": Hope for the Creation in Jewish Apocalyptic and the New Testament* (Studies in Biblical Apocalyptic Literature; Philadelphia: Visionary Press, 1996), 185.

¹⁸ Russell, *New Heavens*, 183.

¹⁹ Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 59-60.

created.²⁰ In the beginning, God created each creature for good, and everything existed in harmony, in “ecological balance.”²¹

God gave Adam and Eve the freedom to love, but with that freedom came the potential for sin. Adam and Eve apostatized from God and chose death instead of the way of love.²² Creation now exists in a fallen state because of human pride and idolatry. Sin has distorted the goodness of creation and taken with it the lost condition of humanity. Creation is now always broken, though the goodness of God is still evident (Rom 1:19-20). Creation remains good despite human sin because God continues to create. This goodness is an aspect of providential grace. Metz writes, “Divine providence may be defined as that activity of God by which he conserves and preserves his creation and cares for and directs all things to their final destiny.”²³ Although God gives grace to all people and sustains “brute creatures,” he has a special dispensation for those who believe in Christ.²⁴ This special grace is experienced as restoration in God’s image.

The Divine Image

Wesley spoke of three aspects of the *imago Dei*: natural, political, and moral. The natural image is the “spiritual nature and immortality of the soul” that gives humans understanding, will, and liberty.²⁵ Humanity bears the “political image” of God regarding nature. Wesley based his idea on Genesis 1:26-28. Humanity has the special responsibility as caretakers of creation and serves as co-governor with God but under his authority. We are called to be good stewards and realize that temporal things are not ours to dispose of as we please. This aspect of the image must seek the good of

²⁰ Wesley, *Works*, 2:539.

²¹ Runyon, *New Creation*, 10.

²² Wesley, *Works*, 2:399.

²³ Donald S. Metz, “Providence,” *Beacon Dictionary of Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1983), 427; also referencing Acts 17:25, 28; Rom 11:36; Col 1:17.

²⁴ Wesley, *Works*, 2:543.

²⁵ Wesley, *Works*, 2:409.

creation as channels of God's goodness, blessings, and grace.²⁶ However, this aspect of God's image has been corrupted by sin. One way Wesley saw this in his day was through cruelty to animals. The goal of the political image is to serve in the world like God since we are created in his likeness. The same way God treats nature is how we ought to treat it. Wesley states, "Thus we are to use our understanding, our imagination, our memory, wholly to the glory of him that gave them."²⁷

To renew the political image, the moral image must first be renewed. Sin has marred the moral image and ruined our relationship with God and, subsequently, with creation. The cause of Adam and Eve's fall was a moral failure to obey. Therefore, the moral problem must be resolved in order to live out God's mission for humanity in creation. Runyan writes, "It is only as 'we become, as it were, a member of the family [of nature]'; it is only as we receive the world anew from the hand of the Creator—and that means, only as God becomes again *our* Creator and we become the true image—can we be genuinely empowered."²⁸ Life, both present and eternal, is only possible because of God's grace and continual creation. All grace is a manifestation of God's love for us in Christ. Runyan summarizes, "Grace is manifested in three ways: in our creation, in God's forgiveness, and in our transformation or re-creation."²⁹

***Missio Dei* in Christ**

The mission of God in the world through humanity can be only accomplished through God's grace and is best accomplished through transformation in Christ. The sanctifying process begins with the new birth and progresses through the power of the Holy Spirit. Wesley states succinctly that "gospel holiness is no less than the image of God stamped upon the

²⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 2:240.

²⁷ Wesley, *Works*, 2:283-84.

²⁸ Runyan, *New Creation*, 206.

²⁹ Runyan, *New Creation*, 26.

heart.”³⁰ The teleological fulfillment of God’s plan for humanity is summarized in the word “sanctification.” Sanctification is the ultimate experience of God’s grace in this life, leading to pure love. Wesley looked at sanctification from two perspectives. He writes, “It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul.” He adds, “For as long as love takes up the whole heart, what room is there for sin therein?”³¹

Perfect love comes only in Christ and never from ourselves. We can love only because God has first loved us (1 John 4:19). God’s will for us in Christ is to be renewed in the image of God. Love is an extension of the work of God’s grace in Christ transforming us. Every person is “created in the image of God, and designed to know, to love, and enjoy his Creator to all eternity.”³² The renewal of the image of God in humanity should begin to usher in the transforming power of God’s kingdom through the renewal of creation. Our goal ought to be to return to the ecological *shalom* that existed when Adam and Eve had pure hearts of perfect love.

As we grow in God’s love, we reflect this love toward all other creatures.³³ The love of God “shed abroad in our hearts” ought to result in a concern for justice for all people.

As is often quoted from Wesley, “The Gospel of Christ knows no religion, but social; no holiness, but social holiness. Faith working by love is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection.”³⁴ Those most affected by the abuse of creation are the poor. The term “eco-justice” seeks to capture how “caring for the earth and caring for humanity,

³⁰ Wesley, *Works*, 2:194.

³¹ Wesley, *Works*, 2:160, 167.

³² Wesley, *Works*, 2:397.

³³ Wesley, *Works*, 4:295.

³⁴ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (ed. by Thomas Jackson, 14 vols., Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press 1979), XIV:32).

particularly for the poor and marginalized, are inextricably linked together.”³⁵ In the spirit of James 1:27, one way to care for widows and orphans is to ensure they have a good environment that can support them. Love for God and love for others replaces love for self that sees the world as a resource for pleasure. Wesley states, “It is in consequence of our knowing God loves us that we love him, and love our neighbour as ourselves. Gratitude toward our Creator cannot but produce benevolence to our fellow-creatures.”³⁶

New creation begins when Christ is honored as sovereign, and we are filled with God’s love through the power, presence, and leading of the Holy Spirit. The new life continues to grow and change as we allow the Holy Spirit to teach us the mind of Christ, which is the very purpose for why we have been created. The good news of Christ brings change when we fully embrace it through consecrated and committed living. The good news of Christ brings change when we fully embrace it through consecrated and committed living. The Spirit applies the ministry and mission of the Son to our hearts.³⁷

Our actions ought to be determined by the primary value of this kingdom, which is love. Paul gives three core values of the kingdom in 1 Corinthians 13:13, “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” Since these qualities are eternal and the kingdom is breaking into this age, we, as followers of Christ, ought to develop these and emulate them in all we do. Love will be expressed by compassion to our fellow creatures, beginning with our neighbor, inclusive of our enemies, and extended to all of God’s good creation. As an extension of Christ’s incarnation, we are his ambassadors of reconciliation in this new creation (2 Cor 5:17-21).

³⁵ Taikan Oki and Shinjiro Kanae, “Global Hydrological Cycles and World Water Resources,” *Science* 313, no. 5790 (2006), 1068-72.

³⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 4:67.

³⁷ Wesley, *Works*, 1:75; 2:191; 4:284.

Conclusion

Colossians 1:20-21 reminds us that reconciliation comes because of Christ's death on the cross and victory over this death through resurrection. The battle with sin and death has already been fought and won. Creation is restored in and through Christ. This process begins now, in this present age, through his ambassadors and stewards. We should no longer live in Adam, who turned his back on love to follow his own desires, but as Christ who "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:6-8).

We can trust that God's grace is still at work in creation through his providential grace. Because all grace comes through Christ, the grace in creation becomes sanctifying grace for humanity as God's special representatives. The doctrine of entire sanctification is not only spiritual but should impact every aspect of our existence, including the care of the earth. Douglas Hall writes, "If Christology is our foundational premise both for theological . . . and anthropological . . . doctrine, then 'dominion' as a way of designating the role of *Homo sapiens* within creation can only mean stewardship, and stewardship ultimately interpreted as love: sacrificial, self-giving love (*agape*)."³⁸ Michael Northcott notes: "Green consumerism, ecocracy, even environmental protest movements, ultimately cannot succeed in radically changing the direction of modern civilisation so long as they avoid the moral and spiritual vacuum which lies at its heart."³⁹

The reality of sin and its effect upon creation should push us to seek God's restorative grace, not only for our own individual eternal destinies but for the creation longing for its restoration to the *shalom* of Eden. We can begin to live out God's promises and blessings on the whole earth as

³⁸ Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 186.

³⁹ Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: University Press, 2001), 312.

the land of promise for God's people. As believers who are being transformed *in Christ*, we participate in the liberation and restoration of creation when we put ourselves under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Our hearts are transformed from self-centered survival of the fittest to others-focused unconditional love. This love sweeps up our neighbors, enemies, and the creation which we are called to steward. The writer to the Hebrews understood this hope well. A Sabbath day's rest in the promised land of spiritual peace remains for those who cast off their sin and look to Jesus in faith for full salvation (Heb 4:9-11; 12:1-2).