

Theology of Ecology by Matt Krick

The church is called to join God in the restoration of all creation as we are led by the Spirit of the risen Christ. If we want to go about this work, we need to understand more clearly what God intended for his creation, that it is broken and that he intends to redeem it.

Creation

“Any error about creation also leads to an error about God.” – Thomas Aquinas

The story of God does not begin with sin. It is not his invention, and he calls us to remember that this is not the way it is supposed to be. We live on God’s good earth. Creation began good and remains good, broken as it may be.

Creation is a work of the communal Godhead. We see the Father orchestrating, Jesus – the Word – speaking, and the Spirit hovering and dancing over the chaos and bringing order out of it. To think about creation, we must acknowledge Jesus as the primary agent of Creation. Much later in the story the apostle Paul reflects on the creation, sharing with us that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” [Col. 1:15–17]. Creation is Christ-centered. God loves and delights in his good creation and as Christ followers, we should as well.

The creation narrative tells us that God created everything in six days. The order of creation implies a hidden ecological wisdom within the story. Humans were not created until late in the sixth day. God created everything and then created us to look like him in the world. God cared so deeply for what he had created that he knew he needed a creature like him who would love it as he loves it and care for it as he cares for it; so he created us to be like him – to image him – to his creation.

In making us like him, God created us to be relational. We were created to be in right relationships with God, others, ourselves and the earth. It is the relationship with the earth that I want to take a closer look at. Genesis 1:26–28 tells us, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’” These verses have unfortunately been misunderstood by many who believe this text to give us free reign over the creation to treat it however we want. In fact the Hebrew words for “rule” [rada] and “subdue” [kabash] could be taken that way if not carefully read within the context of the greater story of God’s love for his creation.

God is calling his image bearers to be like him in the world – to lovingly steward all he has created. God gives humans an identity as his image bearers and a mission that flows from that identity to be co-creators and caretakers who serve God and his creation. We often think the only command given to the first humans was to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but God also gave the commands to [1] be fruitful and multiply [2] fill the earth, and [3] work the earth and take care of it. Why does God want us to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth? One reason is because he does not want the earth to go unattended. Our creaturely task and original vocation was to care for creation. We are called and have the opportunity as image bearers to love and care for creation as God does.

We should take these commands seriously, but there is another command we should take seriously as well. The first command ever given in Scripture was given in Genesis 1:22, and God is speaking to the animals. He blesses them and says, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.” We need to take seriously the fact that before God ever created humans – before he ever blessed us – he first blessed the creatures of the earth and gave them the same command he gave us, except he does not give them dominion. Dominion should not be confused with domination. Animals have

been driven out of many of their natural habitats that God has not only blessed them to be in but commanded them to be in. We as the church have the opportunity to be committed to restoring ecosystems and habitats.

Genesis 1 goes on to say, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground – everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food" [vs. 29–30]. There are a few points we should reflect on in this text. Notice that the first humans were vegetarians, as were the animals. I am not suggesting that we should all be vegetarians, but we should be cognizant of the way God intended things to be and the way it will be on a restored creation. Second, God did give only humans the green plants to eat, but he also gave the animals the green plants to eat. This means that the resources of the earth are not ours to exploit, but rather are ours to protect and share with God's other creatures. To destroy ecological habitats is an abuse of God's good creation and in direct opposition to the human task he placed on us.

Genesis 2:15 says, "God took Adam and placed him in the garden to work it and take care of it." The term "work" is the Hebrew word "abad" which means to dress, to serve or to cultivate. The words "take care" are the Hebrew word "shamar," meaning to protect, attend to or watch over. God is writing something into the story about who he is from the very beginning. He is one who serves and he empowers his image-bearers to be like him, serving and protecting the creation. Today, our worldviews have moved to believing that those in power should be served by those not in power. God's view of power is that he gives power to be used for the benefit of those on the underside of power. The powerful are called to serve. God creates humans as the most powerful created beings on earth and he calls us to use that power to serve and protect the rest of his creation. This should be our proper understanding of the cultural mandate God has given us in our role as stewards of the earth. God has empowered us to be care takers, earth-keepers, co-creators and cultivators. God declared all he created to be "good" and "very good." Goodness does not imply finished, perfect or complete. We are called to advance culture, but we must do so in ways that do not adversely affect human health, the animal kingdom or the earth.

A false dualism has been a prevalent error within the church for centuries. This dualism at best places "spiritual" things high above the physical and at its worst values only the "spiritual" and dubs the physical to be evil. It is a belief that this physical world will one day be annihilated and all that will remain is a spiritual existence. This is a denial of God's good creation which he has declared "good" from the beginning and continues to declare good [1 Tim. 4:4–5]. We have the opportunity to reclaim the goodness of the earth.

The Fall

"It is hardly too much to say that most Christian organizations are as happily indifferent to the ecological, cultural, and religious implications of industrial economics as are most industrial organizations ... Our predicament now, I believe, requires us to learn to read and understand the Bible in the light of the present fact of Creation." – Wendell Berry ["Christianity and the Survival of Creation" in *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* 94].

"We Christians must learn to read the Bible with new eyes – open to its hidden ecological wisdom – and we must come to know and appropriate our own traditions, with their oft hidden ecological insights" [*For The Beauty of the Earth* 69].

When the first humans chose to sin, creation's groaning began. The earth's groaning continues because of that first sin and because of ongoing destructive human choices. Creation is groaning – literally. With the advent of climate change, we are seeing the reality of a groaning creation more and more. Many believe the oceans are warming up, causing stronger storms and killing both humans and wildlife. Glaciers are in catastrophic retreat; and groaning into oblivion and for the first time on record, scientists are finding polar bears that have drowned because ice is melting. The deserts are expanding, rainforests are being destroyed

at an unprecedented rate to feed Western consumerism [among other reasons], and ecosystems across the globe are quickly being destroyed.¹

The church must not miss the fact that we will not be successful at advocating or pursuing social justice apart from actively pursuing environmental justice. The current ecological crisis affects the poor first and affects them more than anyone else. It is to feed a consumeristic lifestyle that degrades the creation and therefore affects the poor. For example, the West continues to have a large appetite for beef. To feed this appetite, rich cattle ranchers in Central and South America drive poor peasant farmers out of the rain forests, and then proceed to rip down and burn the rain forests in order to raise more cattle. The rain forests are necessary to keep the earth's climate balanced, and burning them puts more carbon in the air, as does the emission from all the cattle. Then there is the processing of the beef, water usage, packaging and shipment that all contribute to the degradation of the earth while leaving the poor without a land to call their own and without a means to provide for their families. Another example can be seen in the effects of deforestation. Over ninety percent of landslides occur because of deforestation. A recent landslide in the Philippines completely wiped out a village of poor Philipino peasants, leaving no survivors. Studies concluded that the landslide was caused by deforestation. Pollution in the cities affects the poor living in congested urban areas more than anyone else. Notice this one example recently reported:

The U.S. EPA has failed to conduct environmental-justice reviews to make sure low-income and minority neighborhoods get equal eco-protection to other communities. The reviews have been required since 1994, but a survey by the EPA inspector general's office finds that 60 percent of EPA regional offices and program departments have never conducted one, while 87 percent said they haven't even been asked to do so. And since no reviews have been done, "the agency cannot determine whether its programs cause disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority and low-income populations," says the IG report [*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, Associated Press, H. Josef Hebert, 19 Sep 2006].

Paul says in Romans 8:20, "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." The creation was subjected to frustration, but not by its own choice. We are at fault. We chose autonomy from God, and the results were devastating not only to humanity but all creation.

After Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, they were removed from it. The call to fill the earth and care for it was still upon them, but not long afterward sin had increased so much that God brought a great flood. This story is often read with eyes attuned to God destroying the world because of the increase of sin and rescuing Noah because he was righteous. While this is not untrue, there is also a whole lot more going on here.

We must realize that it was man's sin that increased; the animal and plant kingdoms were innocent, but they suffered because of man's sin. God not only rescued Noah but also seven of every clean animal and two of every unclean animal "to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth" [Gen. 7:3]. God was not going to abandon his good creation. Water is a cleansing agent, and another way of looking at this story is that God was cleansing the earth of its wickedness and starting over with Noah's family and a group of animals. God was not abandoning his creation; rather he was starting anew. We see this new beginning in God's words after the flood. He told Noah to bring the animals out of the ark "So they can multiply on the earth and be fruitful and increase in number upon it [Gen. 8:17]." These are the same words God spoke to the animals in Genesis 1. God also speaks to Noah and says, "As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it" [Gen. 9:2, 7]. Here again we see the language of Genesis 1. The same command God gave to Adam and Eve he gave to Noah and his family. God was starting over. The text goes on to talk about Noah being a man of the soil and planting a vineyard. He continued to do what humans were called to do from the beginning – cultivate the earth, tend it and care for it.

¹ For a fuller grasp of the current ecological crisis, read Chapter 2 "What's Wrong With the World?" in *For The Beauty of the Earth* by Steven Bouma-Prediger.

As we look through the biblical story, a key theme is that of covenant. After the flood there was a covenant given which is traditionally known as the Noahic Covenant. This could probably be named better to include the fact that the covenant includes all creatures and all the earth. Beginning in chapter eight of Genesis, God says, "Never again will I curse *the ground* because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy *all living creatures*, as I have done" [v. 21]. In chapter nine, God established the covenant with Noah, his family and the whole earth [vs. 8–17]. Look at how many times God mentions the animals or the earth in the covenant: "I now establish my covenant ... with every living creature that was with you – the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals ... every living creature on earth [v. 10] ... never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth [v. 11] ... every living creature with you [v. 12] ... I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth [v. 13] ... all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life [v. 15] ... everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth [v. 16] ... This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth [v.17]." It is very clear how important it is to God to protect his good creation. As his image bearers, we are called to honor this covenant as well and live out this covenant to protect the earth.

Even though this was a new beginning, there was a marked change. In Genesis, God gave the green plants as food for humans and animals; God was allowing humankind to eat meat, and fear falls upon the animal kingdom [Genesis 9:2–3]. It seems that a reason God gave humans meat to eat is because there was not enough vegetation after the flood, so they need to eat meat to survive. Another reason why God had them bring seven of each clean animal was to ensure that the animals would not go extinct as humans used them as food. Eating meat today is no longer a necessity for most humans. Given the impact on the earth from our large consumption of meat, it would seem that we should be willing to eat far less meat than we have conditioned ourselves to consume. Again, I am not suggesting we should all be vegetarians. I am suggesting we become more aware of the impact of our food choices and ask the question, What changes might God be calling me to?

Redemption

"What's striking, once more, is the persistence of God's grace. God refuses to let the shipwreck happen ... Jesus Christ came to put right what we human beings had put wrong by our sin." – Cornelius Planting Jr. [*Engaging God's World* 76].

All throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, there is the theme of the land. Humanity was expelled from the Garden because of sin, but God chose a people and promised to bring them into the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey – an Eden-like land. God made this promise to Abraham, and it was passed on through Isaac and Jacob. Israel ended up in a land not their own, and 400 years later they were enslaved, working the land of a foreign oppressor without even a Sabbath rest to enjoy the land and its fruits. So they called out to God, and God heard their cry, bringing them out of slavery and again promising a land they could call their own. Here, they would work and care for the land with the purpose of being a light to the world as they reflect the one true God. When the Israelites called out to God, he not only brought them out and spared their lives but also rescued their animals and instructed them to bring the work their hands produced from the earth – the dough – to make unleavened bread [Ex. 12:38–39]. This care for the land, for its fruits, and for animals continued through laws given at Sinai which taught the Israelites to live in the land and care for it.

Sometime later in the story, we find Israel not being faithful to her calling to be a light to the nations. So God called Jonah to fulfill this calling specifically in Nineveh. He, like the rest of Israel, was not interested in fulfilling this mission. Well, we know how this story goes: there was a boat, a storm and a big fish; finally, Jonah went to preach to Nineveh. When they heard his message, they repented and God extended his mercy to them. Jonah, however, was angry and showed his protest by sitting outside the city. God provided a vine to give him shade, followed by a worm which caused the vine to wither. Again Jonah got angry, but God said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" [Jonah 4:10–11]. The book abruptly ends there. We don't know if Jonah got over his anger or not. What we do know however is that God's loving redemptive purposes extended not just to the Israelites, but to a foreign people;

not just to a foreign people, but to their society, their “great city”; not only to the people and their city, but also to the animal kingdom – their “many cattle.” This text is clear that God cares about all his creation. As the results of the fall moved from humanity to society to the earth itself, so God’s redemptive purposes moved to include humanity, society, the earth and all its creatures.

Isaiah spoke of the restoration of all things as well. Isaiah 61 makes clear God’s purposes to heal the brokenhearted and to set captives free. The text goes on to speak of the restoration of cities and places: “They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations” [v.4]. This was a calling on Israel; it was also the mission of Jesus. As followers of Jesus, we are called to embody the mission of Isaiah 61 in all its fullness, which includes the restoration of places. We are called to restore the land in the place where God has called us to dwell and to join in the restoration of other places – whether wild or domesticated. We must rediscover a theology of place.

When Jesus arrived on the scene, God’s redemptive purposes for all creation continued to come into view more clearly. As mentioned above, many in the church have relegated the physical reality to that of a necessary evil, but we see that the Son became flesh in Jesus. He took on a physical body and dwelt among us on the earth he had created. He talked about the earth and its animals in the stories he told, he cared about the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, and he spoke of a future day “at the renewal of all things” [Mt. 19:28] when he will complete his work of putting the world back to rights. How did Jesus talking about the renewal of all things end up being translated as human souls going to heaven forever? How have we forgotten so easily that there will be a physical resurrection and that we will dwell on the physical earth on which heaven has mysteriously and gloriously fully entered?

In Colossians, Paul pointed out that Jesus is the agent of both creation and redemption and that redemption is far-reaching; that is, it encompasses all of heaven and all of earth. “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” [Col 1:19–20]. The work of the cross brought peace and reconciliation between all things and Christ. It is right for us to talk about being reconciled as humans to God, but we must also talk about God’s purposes to redeem the entire creation. At creation there was Shalom between God and humans, others and the earth. With the fall, Shalom was shattered, breaking the relationships we were created for with God, others, self and the earth; but in Christ that Shalom has been restored. We eagerly await its fulfillment. Jesus has and is redeeming our relationships with God, others, self and the earth. Jesus died to redeem all things, and he rose again to conquer death. In Jesus’ death and resurrection, he reversed the curse and brought hope to a broken creation.

As Bouma–Prediger says:

Because of who Christ is and what Christ does, there is gospel for us and the earth. Because Christ is the one in whom all things hang together, we know that the world is a cosmos and not chaos. Because Christ took on human flesh, we believe matter matters. Because Christ died on a cross, we eschew domination and, by contrast, rule by serving others, including the earth. Because the resurrection is the vindication not only of Christ’s work but of creation’s goodness, we fearlessly bear witness to the way of the cross and affirm the goodness of earthly life. Because Christ is the first fruits of the harvest, we are confident that God’s good future will come. And because in Christ the restoration and renewal of creation has begun, we yearn as aching visionaries for that day when God’s good future of shalom will be fully realized [*For the Beauty of the Earth* 125].

As the Church, we are called to join Jesus in his restoration project. It is what the Jews call *takkum allam*, the healing of the world. The call on the Church is to join God in the restoration of all creation. This begins when we let go of our consumeristic ideals and greed and leads us to become a people of hope who tread lightly on God’s good earth.

Hope and a Restored Creation

"One who hopes is one who imagines ... we shall hope not only for ourselves but also for people we must struggle to understand. We shall hope for people we may never have met ... Biblical hope has a wide-angle lens. It takes in whole nations and peoples. It brings into focus the entire created order – wolves and lambs, mountains and plains, rivers and valleys. When it is widest and longest, biblical hope looks forward toward a whole "new heaven and new earth," in which death, and mourning, and pain have passed away [Rev 21:1, 4], and in which the Son of God receives the treasures of nations who parade into the city of God [Rev. 21:22–26] ... Christian hope centers on Jesus Christ, the Lord of the whole cosmos." – Cornelius Plantinga Jr. [*Engaging God's World* 11, 13, 14]

"Christ's work is as wide as creation itself. It is nothing short of the restoration and consummation of all creation." – Steven Bouma-Prediger [*For the Beauty of the Earth* 124]

Jesus is the first fruits of the resurrection. He was raised to life with a physical body. Many scholars believe that Christ's resurrection is the beginning of the new creation. The creation story begins in a garden, and the new creation story begins in a garden with Mary seemingly mistaking the risen Christ for the gardener. After all, he is the true gardener. Jesus died to restore everything, not only human souls. God loves his creation and he has no plans of abandoning it to utter destruction. Theologian Earle Ellis talks about how there are eight meal scenes in the book of Luke. The seventh is the Last Supper; the eighth is in Emmaus – post-resurrection. The seventh meal scene is a picture of the last day of creation where God rested, and the eighth meal scene is a picture of a new day, the beginning of a new creation.²

The first meal scene in the Scriptures is in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve ate the fruit God commanded them not to eat. The eyes of Adam and Eve were opened, and they realized they were naked. When Adam and Eve's eyes were opened, they felt fear, guilt, shame and despair. In the meal scene at Emmaus, one of the last meal scenes in the gospels, the eyes of the two were opened in the breaking of the bread, and they recognized Jesus. They felt joy and delight; their hearts were burning and their despair had become hope and expectation. A new day had dawned and they saw that Jesus was the fulfillment of all that was to come, and he was beginning to recreate all that had gone wrong in the world, including the brokenness of the earth.

Looking again to Romans 8, we see that the creation itself is longing for liberation [v.19], God is hoping for the day that creation will be fully redeemed [v.20], and we are longing for our bodies to be redeemed [v.23]. Redemption is indeed cosmic in scope. The hinge pin to all of this is hope. The hope is this holistic, all-encompassing salvation [v.24], and we are called to wait for it patiently [v. 25].

There has been a misconception within the Church that when we die we will go to heaven, our true home, and spend eternity with God. We will finally be free from this world of sin and enjoy heavenly bliss. This theological error has eroded the consciousness of Christ's followers to a place of feeling like living on earth is a cross to bear rather than a movement to joining Christ in bringing heaven to earth. We have lost the cosmic scope of the gospel: Jesus died for all creation.

When we make heaven the focus of the next life, we are bound to be let down when we get there. There are some unnatural components to the current reality of heaven. When we die and go to heaven, there is a terrible wrenching apart of one's body from the soul. The soul goes to heaven, but the body remains with the earth from which it was created. The breath of life, the spiritual component, goes to heaven. This is not the way it is supposed to be. We were created holistic: body and soul. God did not create death, and he grieves this unnatural tearing apart of body and soul. So, one of the unnatural elements of the current reality of heaven is that our souls are separated from our bodies, and while in heaven we will be longing for the day that our souls will be reunited with our resurrected, glorified bodies [1 Corinthians 15].

Another unnatural reality of heaven's current state is that those who have died in Christ are separated from the earth. We were created for the earth to work it and take care of it. We were given the human task of worshipping God through our cultivation of the good earth. Our separation from that which we were created

² Ellis, E. Earle. *The Gospel of Luke*. Nashville and London: Nelson, 1966.

for will cause us to long for the day when we will be reunited with the earth to continue engaging in the human activity of earth care.

Don't get me wrong. Heaven is an amazing place where one is in the very presence of God, experiencing a level of intimacy with God that we cannot yet imagine. We are free from the corruption of a fallen world and are experiencing the beauty and holiness of God; yet this is not our final hope. Our hope is to experience these things and far more on a restored creation, where heaven unites with earth and we dwell with God forever.

The book of Colossians is clear that by the work of Jesus all things are being reconciled to him "whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" [1: 20]. Jesus is in the process of making all things new, both in heaven and on earth.

Many in the Church are confused by this and believe that God will destroy everything with fire. The text that alludes to this in 2 Peter needs to be revisited. There is a connection between God's destruction of the earth with water in the time of Noah and God's future destruction of the earth with fire. We need to understand that God did not annihilate the earth in the time of Noah; in fact, as we saw earlier it was like a new creation. The earth itself was cleansed and God preserved human life, animal life and plant life alike. The day is coming when something similar to the flood will happen again, only this time it will fire rather than water. Fire, like water, is a cleansing agent; for example, when a forest fire occurs it is often a good thing for the ecosystem. It cleanses the woods, allowing fresh vegetation to grow, which feeds animals. In fact, there are pine trees that drop cones which never release their seed unless they are subject to extreme heat. When a fire sweeps through, the cones release their seeds, and new trees spring up, creating a beautiful, renewed forest over time. I have seen this first-hand in the fires that swept through Yellowstone National Park in 1988. Thousands of acres were burned, leaving what looked like devastation in many areas. The primary tree that was burned in that fire was the lodgepole pine. The lodgepole pine is one of those trees whose seeds are only released under extreme heat. I was in Yellowstone National Park again in the summer of 2006 and saw these forests springing back to life with vibrantly restored ecosystems. This seems to be a picture of what God will do to restore the entire creation. God does not plan to abandon his creation and annihilate it; rather he plans to refine it with fire, burning away the evil that has contaminated the good creation and making it new again. This time, however, complete Shalom will return to God's good creation. Unlike the time of Noah when fear and dread fell upon the animals and sin increased again, this time Shalom will pervade God's world. Isaiah gives us a picture of this Shalom through his prophetic imagination in Isaiah 11:6-9:

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,
and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.
They will neither harm nor destroy on my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

The Bible spends very little time talking about heaven as it is now. It spends more time talking about a restored creation and the way things will and ought to be. We as humans are always trying to go up and get to God and into heaven, but God is always about coming down to us, bringing heaven to earth. He walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden, he met with the patriarchs, he met with Moses at Sinai, he dwelt in the tabernacle and the temple, and ultimately he dwelt among us in the flesh through Jesus. He then sent his Spirit to dwell in us, his Church. God is always coming down and bringing heaven to earth, and the Church is called to join him in that work. The day is coming when God will come down yet again, Jesus will return, heaven will invade earth, the two will be one, and in Jesus they will be restored [Revelation 21 + 22].

It may be helpful to understand the New Heaven and New Earth in terms that Paul uses of individuals who enter into the way of Jesus. He says, "If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has passed away and the new has come" [2 Corinthians 5:17-18]. God does not utterly destroy and annihilate those who come to Christ and then make a brand new person out of them; rather he destroys and burns away the sin in us and recreates us to be renewed in the image of Christ. The creation itself will be renewed, free from the bondage of corruption.

Even in the new creation, we see that healing will continue and that creation will be an agent of healing. In Revelation 21 and 22, we see a restored creation. We see the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. The New Jerusalem is a garden city with the "river of life" and the "tree of life" on either side. The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. What has been centuries of bitter war and strife between nations will now be healed in Christ, and in some way creation plays a role in that. Christ will reign and his Shalom will permeate every area of creation.

We long and hope for the day when redemption will see its completion. We long to experience life with God on a restored creation. We hope for his Shalom to permeate creation and for Christ to return and bring the world to rights. It is good and right to do so; yet we must not make this our sole dwelling or obsession. When we dwell only on the next life, we are forsaking the calling placed on us in the here and now. We are called to join Jesus in restoring our relationships with God, others, ourselves and the earth. We are called to bring heaven to earth in our everyday lives. This is what we are praying for when we follow the example of Jesus in how to pray. We are called to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" [Matthew 6:10]. This is an acknowledgement that things are not as they are supposed to be, and it is a longing for heaven to unite with earth, to bring the world to rights, to restore the broken areas of creation.

The healing of relationships begins with repentance. At its core, repentance is a turning from one attitude and action to another. When we are not in right relationship with God or others, we need to repent, own up to what our responsibility is, and seek reconciliation. When it comes to the earth, repentance is needed as well. 2 Chronicles 7:14 says, "If my people, who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land." This passage implies the healing of relationships with God and others, yet it is telling that God says he will heal the land. As humanity goes, so goes the earth. If we understand that a core sin of humanity is greed and an over-abundance of consumption, we can immediately draw the connection to its effects on the earth. We need to turn. We need a change of attitudes and actions. Jesus says that it is the meek who will inherit the earth [Matthew 5:5].

We must care for creation because God is the Creator and all creation praises him. When we destroy creation we allow the destruction of that which praises God. We need to actively care for the creation for the sake of God and his love for creation, for the sake of the poor, God's non-human creatures, future generations, and the world. We also need to care for creation for our own sake; it is our God-given human task. When we do not care for the earth, we are depriving ourselves of something we were created for. This should not be a burden but rather a gift. God has given this gift of earth-keeping to all humans, and he is calling the Church to live this out in beautiful and imaginative ways by the power of the risen Christ in us. May we be a people of humility who pray and seek God's face, and may he heal us and the land.