

Life, the Universe and God

Six Big Ideas about Creation

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A six-part study on God's Creation in Christian Theology including:

- an overview of leading writers in eco-theology
- a range of perspectives
- questions and suggestions for discussion and prayer
- issues raised by the Covid-19 pandemic



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Photos were taken by Silvia Purdie on Lake Ellesmere
at the mouth of the Selwyn River, NZ, from a kayak.
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Introduction

Planet Earth is in a bad way. The incredible beauty and complexity of the natural world, crafted from the goodness of God, is under threat, and we have a nasty feeling it might be our fault. We fear for our survival, and for the world our kids will inherit. The multiple crises that threaten the world seem overwhelming. Faith and hope are more vital now than ever before. Yet we need more than a sense of crisis, or a determination to do something about it at a personal level; “earthkeeping initiatives will not be sustainable in a Christian context unless we are able to relate it clearly to the deepest convictions and symbols of the Christian tradition.”¹ This means doing theology in the face of environmental degradation. It means understanding with fresh eyes the gospel of salvation in Christ from the destructive power of sin, and the Christian hope for a new heaven and a new earth. Christian faith cares for the created world because of God, and God's love for all things. This is our starting point.

This six-part study is a framework for a Christian understanding of ‘Life, the Universe and Everything’, exploring six central Christian claims about the environment when seen as God's Creation, and the implications for faith and hope. Sections conclude with questions for discussion and suggestions for deepening reflection in prayer.

This study was written during the Covid-19 lockdown, and includes some ‘points to ponder’ about the connections between the pandemic and care for creation.

Footnotes at the end list references for further reading.

Comment: Peter Harris (founder of A Rocha) – “Only life in Christ”

Christians would say that as Christ takes hold of our lives, he calls us into a profound engagement with his world in all its complicated and messed-up reality. If our calling is to bring hope to the whole world then any continuing creation-blindness in the church is deeply troubling. It will be even more of an anomaly for those of us in the Christian community who claim to recognise biblical authority for what we undertake, because it is Scripture itself that brings creation into the story of redemption.

We are called to be signs, in our times, of God's coming kingdom and final redemption of all things. The transformation that will enable us to endure can only come from a renewed relationship with the Creator. Only life in Christ will release us all, rich and poor, from seeing creation as merely raw material to meet our human needs. The care of creation, like compassion for people, is the true consequence of knowing that we share a loving Creator. We care for creation because he does.²

1. God is Creator

The Bible begins, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). The Nicene Creed begins, “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.” The identity of God as Creator and the universe as Creation is the undisputed starting point of Christian theology. The foundational claim of the Judeo-Christian tradition is that God is the source, initiator and sustainer of the physical universe.

Before the act of creation time and space did not exist. There is an emerging consensus among scientists around the origins of the universe, that it began in a single moment in an explosion known commonly as the ‘big bang’, dated at 13.8 billion years ago. There is no evidence of anything existing prior to this. Theologically the significance of creation being ‘ex-nihilo’ (out of nothing) refutes the dualism (common in other religions and in some strands of Christianity) which sees God as eternally opposed to matter, and the spiritual and the physical as fundamentally different and irreconcilable. In Christian theology, spiritual realities as well as tangible realities are created by God, dependent upon God for their continued existence. The created universe is not alien to the divine but is as able to be an expression of God as the human, the spiritual or the intellectual.³

The inherent value of the universe is underlined in the Genesis 1 creation liturgy as God repeatedly declares “It is good”. “Despite everything, the created world we live in is a *good* world, and it is *good* to be alive in it ... Christians do not affirm the world because they are optimistic about the world as such, or unrealistic about all the suffering and injustice in the world. They affirm it because *God* says Yes to it ... An other-worldly religion may seem very pious but it is not Christian.”⁴ Reformation theologians such as Calvin taught a world-affirming faith, in response to the medieval monastic emphasis upon “contempt of the world.”⁵

The Old Testament emphasis on God as Creator is radically monotheistic. Nature is affirmed but not worshiped. Other ancient religions saw things such as the sun or moon, or local features such as mountains, as divine beings. The Old Testament celebrates natural things as created, as in themselves expressing in their own way worship of God.

Traditionally ‘God the Father’ has been equated with ‘God the Creator’. However many theologians now draw attention to the inherent relationality of God as Trinity, from before time, in the beginnings of the creation of the universe, and continuing in creation in the present. Our theology of creation begins from “The triune God’s resolve to create ‘in the beginning’, ‘out of nothing’, or better, out of the overflowing love of God.”⁶

South African theologian Conradie suggests that “knowledge of God’s character is what enables us to look at the world in a different light, in the light of the Light of the world. Then we recognize that the soil on which we are standing is holy ground.” Worship enables Christians “to look at the world through new eyes, having been trained to see it through God’s eyes, with compassion, mercy and justice, as something so valuable that it is worth dying for (John 3:16).”⁷

Comment: Ernst Conradie – “The universe as God’s child”

“An image worth exploring is to see the universe as God's beloved child. Christians are used to thinking about themselves as God's children. But what if the universe itself is God's child – which requires nourishment, formation, education, respect and wonder from the parent? Consider the agony over a sick, injured or a lost child. ... the mission that is proclaimed here is that the world is being embraced by God's love. The message is not primarily the imperative that we as humans should embrace God's creation (for we are part of that), but the gospel that the world only exists in God's embrace.”⁸

1. **Discuss:** What is your understanding of God as Trinity? Is ‘God the Father’ the same as ‘God the Creator’? How are Christ and Spirit involved in creation?

2. **Explore** what the Bible says about God, ‘maker of heaven and earth’. When the Bible affirms God as Creator, why is this important? What flows from this?

3. **Sing The Doxology:**

Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise him all creatures here below
Praise him above, ye heavenly host
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Spend time in prayer with each line, offering your praise and worship to God.
If any of the words in the Doxology jar for you, re-phrase it.



2. Creation declares God's glory

The apostle Paul believed that just looking around at creation should be enough to convince people of the existence of God. "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." (Romans 1:20, NRSV). In a multitude of ways the Bible describes the ways in which the created universe reveals the glory (as Paul calls it, the 'eternal power and divine nature') of God. "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." (Psalm 19:1, NRSV). All living things are capable of praising God, even the fish and the sea itself; "Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them" (Psalm 69:34).

The Christian mystical tradition has a rich appreciation for the voice of the natural world in expressing the divine. This has been sung in many a song, and been the theme of many a poem, one of the most famous being St Francis' Canticle of the Creatures.⁹ Within Luther's writings is a theme of awe for the glory of God found in the natural world. He depicts God as being "with all creatures, flowing, and pouring into them, filling all things" and insisted that "the power of God...must be essentially present in all places even in the tiniest leaf."¹⁰

Six decades ago theologian Joseph Sittler invited a deeper vision of creation. He sought to express the "inner nature of things", language to evoke "a sense of the grace of creation."¹¹ This demands a very different stance than triumphalist or rationalist theologies; it involves "kneeling down on the earth before the lilies of the field in gentle contemplation, beholding them, withdrawing any claims driven by will-to-power, waiting and watching and wondering in abject spiritual poverty, to catch some sight of "the dearest freshness deep down things".¹²

Environmental theology in the 21st century is very aware of threats to biodiversity and the increasing rate of species extinctions. Each creature, every river, has its own unique 'song to sing'. People naturally find it easy to treasure the big and the beautiful, but eco theology values little creatures and unregarded swamps as well. We grieve for those being lost and we work to protect what we can. The theological conviction is that all of creation is precious because God has made it, and so every living thing, rock and cloud can proclaim the beauty and grace of God.



Poem: “God's Grandeur” by Gerard Manley Hopkins

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

*And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.¹³*

- 1. Discuss or journal:** Describe a moment when you could almost hear the voice of creation “telling the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1). What did you notice? How did it touch you?
- 2. Pray:** Take Joseph Sittler’s advice and kneel on the ground to have a good long look at a flower (or any little thing that catches your eye) in “gentle contemplation”. How does this humble living thing express something of God in its simple existence?
- 3. Get creative:** Use any form of creativity at your disposal to express something of nature’s revealing of God (from the mathematical formula of leaves to the invisible movement of air to the colours of a sunset).
- 4. Find out:** Look up an animal which is on the endangered species list. Find out where it lives, and how. What is special and unique about this creature? Pray for it and the people fighting to save it.
- 5. Enough?** What do you think about Paul’s argument in Romans 1:20 that seeing the beauty and glory of the universe should be enough to spark faith in God?

3. Creation is entrusted to human care

In Genesis 1:28 God blesses the first human beings and says to them, “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 air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (NRSV). How people have understood the word ‘dominion’ has had vast implications for human impact on the natural world. In 1967 Lynn White wrote an essay arguing that the idea of human dominion over creation led to the assumption that nature exists only to serve human needs. He accused Christianity of legitimating exploitation of the environment, and being partly to blame for the modern ecological crisis.¹⁴ Responses to White’s argument have sharpened Christian thinking about humanity’s role in relation to the planet.

Theologians such as Douglas John Hall re-defined ‘dominion’ in terms of ‘stewardship; creation “is entrusted to humanity, who are responsible for its safekeeping and tending.”¹⁵ Stewardship is a biblical concept, rooted in Genesis 2:15: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (NRSV). The word ‘till’ is more about ‘serving’ than digging, according to Calvin DeWitt, in a mutual way a ‘con-serving’. The word ‘keep’ “conveys the idea of keeping the dynamic qualities of the thing being kept ... a rich, full, and fulfilling ‘keeping’.”¹⁶ The word ‘steward’ is equivalent to Jesus speaking about ‘tenants’, ‘servants’ or ‘slaves’ in his parables which emphasise human responsibility to God for caring for the land and the gifts they have been entrusted with (e.g. Matthew 25:14-30, Luke 20:9-19). Hall describes stewardship as “the vocation that God intended and intends for the human creature in the midst of God’s good creation.”¹⁷

DeWitt proposed four biblical ecological principles:

1. The “earthkeeping principle”: just as the creator keeps and sustains humanity, so humanity must keep and sustain the creator’s creation.
2. The “sabbath principle”: the creation must be allowed to recover from human use of its resources.
3. The “fruitfulness principle”: the fecundity of the creation is to be enjoyed, not destroyed.
4. The “fulfilment and limits principle”: there are limits set to humanity’s role within creation, with boundaries set in place which must be respected.¹⁸

The idea of stewardship has not always been used in a biblical way, however, and has come under critique, beginning with Niebuhr who suggested that ‘stewardship’ had become a justification for private ownership and the use of natural resources for financial gain.

Comment: Clint Le Bruyns – a critique of ‘Stewardship’

The churches sanctify the economic attitudes and resources of its members without ethical critique. There are serious problems for the churches in contemporary society as they seek to relate responsibly to all of creation. It is of great concern that members uncritically accept the political and economic order without question and that they show little or no regard for how their resources are generated and its public impact. They tend to embrace their resources – even though it belongs to God – as their ‘moral right to possession’ since they reason that ‘if God has given charge of goods to certain people, then those people have both the right and duty to maintain that wealth’. ... Basically, stewardship thinking

makes stewardship a matter for the resourced (the wealthy, the powerful) with no meaningful role for the under- or anti-resourced (the poor, the excluded and powerless).¹⁹



Covid-19 Comment: D.B. Ryen – “Enforced sabbath”

What’s the world coming to?! A grinding halt, that’s what. The Covid situation has caused an involuntary worldwide Sabbath. Whether we like it or not, we’re being forced to honor God’s fourth commandment.

The Bible tells us repeatedly to honor the Sabbath, reserving it as a special day (Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Isaiah 58:13). It was made for our benefit, not as a burden (Isaiah 58:14; Mark 2:27). It’s supposed to be a big deal, since punishment of not observing it was death (Exodus 31:14-15). After years of not honoring the Sabbath, God expelled Israel so the land could finally rest. One of Nehemiah’s great cultural reforms was simply to re-institute the Sabbath. Let’s not forget that one of the curses of disobeying God’s laws was pestilence and disease! (Deuteronomy 28:21-22)

Yes, Covid has brought the world to its knees. God says that one day every knee will bow to Jesus. Maybe it’s time to willingly yield to his principles (i.e. the Sabbath) before the world falls apart. This is a year of jubilee, of sorts.²⁰

1. **Discuss** Calvin DeWitt’s 4 biblical principles of stewardship. Think of a practical example of each.
2. **Reflect** on ownership and stewardship. Make a rough list of the things that you own and the resources you control, e.g. property you own or rent, clothes or things you value. What does it mean to you to ‘own’ these things? Do you believe that they ultimately belong to God? What difference does this make?
3. **Remember** back to the Covid-19 lockdown. Was this a ‘sabbath’ time for you? How do you keep sabbath habits of regular rest in your life?
4. **Pray with open hands** for God to lead you, guide you, and work through you in care for Creation. Give thanks. Offer what you hold to the Lord.

4. Creation is marred by human sin

The poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins expresses vividly both the glory and the suffering of creation. In his famous poem 'God's Grandeur' (included in Study 2 above) he asks why humanity fails to heed ("reck") God's rule ("rod"), which is expressed in human-inflicted damage to the natural world;

"And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod."²¹

The metaphor of the soil being stripped bare, smeared with oil, and trampled underfoot by boots is a powerful one. Since this poem was written 150 years ago humanity has invented more and more ways to 'blear and smear' the earth; his hope that "nature is never spent" is in our day being sorely put to the test. Hopkins also points to the loss to humanity when 'foot cannot feel' the soil. The poem suggests this as a form of broken relationship, which can yet be restored by the grace of God.

We describe these things theologically in our language of sin, fall and broken covenant. The Bible includes the created universe in the covenant relationship of God and humanity; the earth is not mere the backdrop for the saving work of God but an active partner in covenant. The Genesis 3 story of Adam and Eve's 'fall from grace' initiates broken relationship between people and the earth; "cursed is the ground because of you" declares God (3:17, NRSV), and the initial harmony between humans and other creatures is lost as animals are killed for their skins (3:21). Yet the Bible continually reaffirms God's hope for the world, beginning with the first covenant, the rainbow covenant of Genesis 9:9-11, which God makes not only with Noah and his family but with all the animals as well.

Scripture is a long complex story of promises made and broken. God's covenant relationship with the people of Israel was smashed (literally, in Exodus 32:19) even as it was being formed. The continuing rebellion of Israel as they turn aside from God to other gods has devastating implications for the earth. The prophet Isaiah expresses this powerfully in chapter 24; "The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant." (Isaiah 24:5, NRSV). God uses natural disasters (including plagues) to try to get through to the people, as in 2 Chronicles 7:12-14. The natural world, in the Old Testament, is an agent of God's action, a means of God's communication, part of God's covenant, and a victim of human sin.

In the New Testament God's covenant relationship is extended to all humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The natural world witnesses to this new covenant, e.g. the rocks who would cry out if the people did not, and the sun darkening during the crucifixion. Paul's vision glimpsed the suffering of creation, which he describes as the cries of birth-pains, as though the whole universe is deeply involved in the process of salvation. The pollution and degradation of our world is far beyond any destruction the biblical authors experienced, but it's not hard to imagine what Jesus or Paul would have had to say about it.

In contemporary terms, the covenant within which life is sustained is described by scientists as “planetary boundaries”. This framework identifies nine aspects of human impact on the earth and uses the biblical word ‘transgression’ to describe the ways in which human action is harming the natural balance. “Transgressing one or more planetary boundaries may be deleterious or even catastrophic due to the risk of crossing thresholds that will trigger non-linear, abrupt environmental change within continental- to planetary-scale systems.”²²

Comment: Ernst Conradie – “The plot of this drama”

“This plot is best captured by the Christian symbols of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For Christians, especially in the Protestant tradition, the plot of this drama is essentially one of creativity, radical distortion and redemption, of creation and new creation, of construction, destruction and reconstruction, of freedom, oppression and liberation, of relatedness, alienation and reconciliation, of life, death and new life. The core predicament is not merely one of survival in a hostile environment, of finding food and shelter, or of overcoming pain, sickness and death. It is certainly not merely one of ignorance which may be resolved through better education, information and insight. It is also not a problem which can be resolved merely through self-help therapy. Instead, it is one of coming to terms with the destructive legacy (evil) of what Christians call human sin. To ignore or to underplay the problem of sin is to offer a shallow, superficial and unpersuasive account of the plot of this drama. Indeed, history is to be understood as “a permanent syntax of guilt and atonement, and the cross as the most essential life form of the kingdom of God in history. The environmental crisis, seen from this perspective, is one contemporary manifestation of the legacy of human sin, alongside and reinforced by domination in the name of differences of race, class, gender, culture, education and sexual orientation.”²³



Covid-19 Comment: Silvia Purdie – “The pangolin that gave us coronavirus”

One explanation for the origins of Covid-19 is that it was released into the world by a pangolin. Pangolins are (normally!) harmless scaly creatures, about the size of a kiwi, who, like the kiwi, snuffle about at night on the forest floor. Unfortunately for them they are worth a lot of money on the black market, prized for their meat and their scales, which are ground into medicinal pills.²⁴ The Covid-infected pangolin may have been captured by pouchers in the south of China near Burma, after being shot on by virus-carrying horseshoe bats. It was put in a cage and trucked nearly 2,000km to the market in Wuhan, where it was sold and killed. The virus it carried is devastating the world.

Was it the pangolin’s fault? Is Covid-19 the revenge of all animals misused by people for profit? Theologically it goes back to the ‘fall’, back to Genesis 3. Human sin has dragged the humble pangolin into the curse of the snake, the “enmity” between creature and people: “he [humanity] will strike your head, and you will strike his heel”, declares God (Genesis 3:15, NRSV).

1. **Discuss:** What ways do you see Creation being ‘seared’ and ‘smeared’ today? What particularly grieves you or worries you?

2. **Find out** more about the Planetary Boundaries model of understanding what is happening to our planet. How might we understand this from a point of view of Christian theology?

3. **Discuss** the Christian story as described by Ernst Conradie. What do you think of his suggestion that the cross is “the most essential life form of the kingdom of God in history”?

4. **Find out** about pangolins and the trade in live wild animals. How do you view this from a Christian perspective?

Given the vast impacts flowing out from that single event, how do you feel about the virus-carrying pangolin and the supply chain it was part of?

5. **Pray** a prayer of confession, asking for God’s forgiveness for our collective damage to Creation. Try ‘Reconciliation of a Penitent’, in the Anglican Prayer Book, p.750 (available at www.anglicanprayerbook.nz/750).²⁵

5. People are part of Creation

Ever since Jesus said of his disciples that “they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world” (John 17:16, NRSV), Christian theology has had an ambivalent relationship with planet earth. On one hand we share God’s love and respect for creation and all living things, including our own bodies.²⁶ On the other hand we are not fully at home in human society or physical embodiment, but are “citizens of heaven” (Philippians 3:19-21). “Throughout Christian history, tendencies to body-spirit dualism have struggled continually with more positive valuations of human embodiment. Official Christianity has in most cases condemned extremely dualistic positions, but ambivalence about the body and nature generally has remained a strong current in both popular and academic theologies.”²⁷ In recent centuries, through ‘enlightenment’ and ‘modernity’, Christian theology has supported the rise of western capitalism by setting people over and against nature, and seeing the natural environment as resources to be managed or exploited.²⁸

More recent thinking, however, emphasises interconnection and human dependence on God-given natural ecosystems. Feminist theologians have pointed out that valuing ‘spirit’ over ‘body’ is inextricably linked to valuing men over women. They have led the way in ‘incarnational theology’. Sallie McFague proposed that we see the world as ‘the body of God’, and argued that humans are not just spirits who happen to be in bodies but ‘inspired bodies’ within the larger body of creation.²⁹ Terra Rowe argues that “a better worldliness begins to emerge where God and world, self and other, economy and ecology communicate in graceful interplay.”³⁰ She suggests that “there is no more important task before humanity in the twenty-first century than to rethink models of relationship and exchange among humans and between humans and other-than-human matter.”³¹

Our theology about our place in creation affects our spirituality. NZ minister Bob Eyles writes about the heart-level connection that he believes is an essential part of the Christian faith; “Few of us have the capacity to feel the pain of our planetary ecosystem – perhaps that is possible for God alone. We can begin to move in this direction, however, by starting with our family, our garden, our bush, our district..., by gradually learning to observe and appreciate its web of life, not from the outside as an observer, but from the inside, as a participant.”³²

Comment: Silvia Purdie – “We’re related”

A Maori perspective on Creation is fascinating, and central to the story of who we are here in Aotearoa. In Maori understanding it is totally obvious that people are part of creation. Of course people don’t own the land, as it were something separate to us. Land belongs to those of us alive at the moment but just as much it belongs to those who have gone before us and those who will come after us. We are all connected through whakapapa. Maori link back through ancestry to the land itself and all other living things in this land. As a Pakeha, I link back through my ancestors who chose to come to this land and were welcomed here by Maori. Through our Christian faith we link back through the Jewish heritage into covenant with God. Biologically we link back to the birth of the universe through every element making up our bones and brains. We are related to all things, spiritually and physically. We are people-in-relationship, not just here and now but through time. We are a link in a long chain. We belong because we are all family.

1. How do you picture God, earth and humanity?

Draw a simplistic diagram with a stick figure for people, a big ball for earth, and a big heart shape for God. Are they separate or overlapping?

Now take some time to draw or write a more complex picture of how you see the relationships. Write any any key words or Bible verses that come to mind. What feelings come up for you as you do this?

2. **Discuss** the central Christian idea that those who follow Jesus are 'in the world but not of the world'. What does this mean to you?

3. **Bodies:** Discuss the suggestion of feminist theologians that the world is 'God's body' and that our bodies are essential to who we are, in 'graceful interplay' with the rest of creation. How does your body connect you with your physical environment, for good or ill?

Covid-19 threw the world into a vast human health crisis. How does our physical health relate to the health of the natural world?

4. **Family:** Do you feel connected to the environment? Can you relate to the Maori belief that people have *whakapapa* (family tree) connection to the land, water and other living things?

5. **Pray:** Sit quietly with your picture of earth, God and humanity. Ask God how he feels about the world, and all the people and other creatures within it.



6. The story leads to Re-Creation

So far so good; the key theological ideas discussed thus far raise plenty of issues for debate but could be affirmed by many if not most Christians today. The doctrine of ultimate hope for creation, however, is highly controversial. Different strands in the church hold divergent convictions and expectations, with significant impacts on how local churches understand and engage with ecological mission. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex debate, it is possible to picture this as a continuum; at one end is a highly apocalyptic theology, which could be described as a “The End is Nigh” perspective, and in the opposing corner is a perspective which could be described as “There is no Plan B”.

The ‘no plan B’ position is expressed vividly by the indomitable Thomas Berry who (aged 92!) argued that “the planet Earth is a onetime endowment. Earth came into being as a moment that will never occur again ... if the life process is wantonly extinguished, then the brilliant sequence of transformations will never again be available.”³³ Theologians such as C.J.H. Wright advocate a vision of eschatology which is fully incorporated into life on earth: “heaven is not a place in the sky, but rather God’s dimension of what we think of as ordinary reality. God’s people must be ‘new-creation people here and now, giving birth to signs and symbols of the kingdom on earth as in heaven’ – God’s agents participating in God’s mission in the renewal of the present.”³⁴ Nicola Hoggard Creegan emphasises the embeddedness of humanity in the natural world: “To find hope for and in and with nature we need more than stories that have an ending, more than a messiah who comes from afar. The stories we tell must resonate with life and matter.”³⁵

At the other end of the spectrum is the ‘End is Nigh’ perspective promoted by conservative American church leaders. This point of view is that “our present planet is not that significant and is ultimately slated for an abrupt (and for many, imminent) end, either because it is abandoned and/or destroyed once divine judgment occurs and all people are either in heaven or hell, or because it has been miraculously transformed through divine power and become the eternal home of the righteous.” Compared to the cosmic drama of the ‘end times’, “catastrophic climate change and environmental deterioration do not effectively compete for concern.”³⁶ Hence, trying to address carbon emissions or climate change is pointless, a distraction from the truly important issues of personal salvation and eternal life.

Inbetween these positions is a range of theology about the ultimate Christian hope and the destiny of Creation, such as:

- “The Bible is emphatic – there will be an end to this age,”³⁷ initiated by the return of Jesus. “The Bible speaks of a new heaven and a new earth which merge into one and in which God will dwell with his people.” For Mark Keown this will be “this world restored after it has been purified.”³⁸
- Ernst Kasemann calls for a “radical and urgent hope” of “the apocalyptic gospel of revolutionary judgment and the call to solidarity and service in the world.” This is “nothing short of the liberation of the cosmos from the powers of Sin and Death.”³⁹
- Barbara Rossing advocates for the importance of imagination for Christian hope for “a new creation that is both transcendentally new and yet in continuity with this creation, since it is the renewal of this world.”⁴⁰ She explores diverse biblical pictures of the future of Creation and argues that these do not need to be harmonised.

What we hope for shapes what we work for. “If our vision of the future is a rather vague disembodied state that has no place for trees, flowers, mountains, lakes, and fascinating animals and insects, then it is likely that we will not attach much value to them in the present.”⁴¹ Despite differences, Christian theology points beyond the destruction and suffering of present experience to a future of hope in which God’s good creation is restored, redeemed and renewed. Eco-theology calls for a robust hope in the rich diversity of God’s purposes for Creation and for the inclusion of all living things in God’s intentions for the Age to come.

Comments: two very different but equally dramatic comments from writers predicting that we are now in an ‘end times’ situation: one from a ‘complexity science’ perspective and one from a ‘right-wing evangelical’ perspective.

Covid-19 Comment: Kang Hao Cheong and Michael C. Jones - “Four Horsemen”

*The convergence of four broad but easily identifiable networked conditions, or “Four Horsemen”, are hurtling civilization towards potential self-destruction triggered by the current pandemic. The “Four Horsemen” of overpopulation, globalization, hyperconnectivity, and increasingly limited and centralized supply chains underly the probability space of catastrophe in an increasingly fragile, volatile, hyperconnected world. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed critical pathologies lurking within the dynamical global system of commerce, governance, and public health. From the standpoint of decision making, as long as these conditions are not resolved, catastrophe should be considered an inevitable endpoint from the nonlinear dynamics. A proper understanding of this explosive risk landscape points toward a solution: a massive change of global course based on the precautionary principle and informed by biological principles.*⁴²

Covid-19 Comment: Gerald Flurry – “Pestilence and Apocalypse!”

*The biblical book of Revelation is primarily about “things which shall be hereafter”. In Revelation 6:1-8, God inspired John to discuss the “seven seals” that lead up to Jesus Christ’s Second Coming. The first four seals are commonly called the “four horsemen of the apocalypse.” These horsemen symbolize the end-time culmination of the most devastating woes endured by mankind because of his rebellion against his Creator! In his description of the fourth horse and its rider, John writes: “I looked, and there was a pale green horse! Its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed him ...” (verse 8; ISV). This symbolizes catastrophic disease epidemics. The other three riders represent religious deception, war and famine ... These are not dusty old prophecies. They are mostly for our time today! They are dramatic, dire prophecies whose fulfillment lies directly before us! Multiple millions of people are prophesied to perish from sickness and disease! So we should expect diseases like this new Wuhan coronavirus to get worse, and to eventually spread like medieval pandemics and kill millions of people!*⁴³

1. **Stand:** Drawn an imaginary line across the room. At one end is the 'No Plan B' position, where you believe that the earth we have is all there can ever be. At the other end is 'The End is Nigh' position, where you believe that God will utterly transform the earth in ways we cannot imagine. Choose a place to stand on this continuum.

Explain what you see from where you stand.

What do you want to say to people who stand at a different place from you?

Experiment with standing at a different point on the continuum. Can you find anything in that position that you can relate to?

2. **Catastrophe!** Discuss the two very different versions in the Comment boxes of imminent global catastrophe. Do you hear these kinds of views being expressed? Are they biblical? What effect do these ideas have? Do you agree with either?

3. **Imagine** what Creation would look like if it was "set free from its bondage to decay" into glorious freedom (Romans 8:21). Spend some time picturing this in as much detail as you can.

4. **Pray:** (Revelations 21:5-6)

Christ, seated on the throne of heaven, says

"Look! I am making all things new.

I am the Alpha and the Omega,
the beginning and the end.

You who are thirsty – here is the gift,
water outpouring, the water of life, flowing from the spring."

From the deep at the dawn of creation
to the spring of life making all things new.

Come, Lord Jesus, come renew the face of creation.



Conclusion: So what?

This study has explored six themes in Christian theology that flow from the foundational conviction that the universe is made by God. Christian faith understands the natural world in which we live to be inherently valuable, with an important place in God's great loving purposes. What are the implications of this for daily living, ethics and mission? How do we express our faith as individuals, families, local churches and communities? A faith perspective seeks the face of God while at the same time opening our eyes to the realities of living in our time and place. Looking around at the state of God's creation is not for the faint hearted. There are many serious problems facing planet Earth, and much that we value is threatened. Eco-theologians are calling the church to greater involvement in caring for Creation, through sustainable living, practical ecology, and a commitment to 'Creation priorities' at every level of decision making and planning. How Christian people respond in action will be an expression of what we know of God. "Today's new ventures in sustainable living within the Earth are not just practical ways of avoiding extinction, they are also adventures into the incredible life of God."⁴⁴

Calling:

What is God calling you to attend to in your own home and work, choices and family life in order to care for Creation?

What environmental issue do you feel a sense of urgency about? What will you do about it? What piece of Creation has God entrusted to you to look after?

How might your church better live out its faith and mission in relation to Creation?



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³ Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine: Teachings of the Christian Church* (Richmond, VI: CLC Press, 1968).

⁴ Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, 159 (emphasis in original).

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- ⁵ Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology An Introduction (3rd ed)* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001). Quote from Thomas a Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*. “There is a dialectic in Calvin’s thought between the world as the creation of God himself, and the world as the fallen creation. In that it is God’s creation, it is to be honored, respected and affirmed; in that it is a fallen creation, it is to be criticized with the object of redeeming it”, 299.
- ⁶ Ernst Conradie, “The Earth in God’s Economy: Reflections on the Narrative of God’s Work.” *Scriptura* 97 (2008): 13-36,13.
- ⁷ Ernst Conradie, “Creation and Mission.” *International Review of Mission*, WCC, vol. 101, issue 2 (Nov 2012): 339-344, 344.
- ⁸ *ibid.*
- ⁹ This is sung in the well-known hymn “All creatures of our God and King.”
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- ¹² *ibid*, 523, quoting Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem, “God’s Grandeur”.
- ¹³ Written in 1877, originally published in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (1913).
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- ¹⁶ Calvin B. DeWitt, “Biodiversity and the Bible.” *Global Biodiversity*, vol. 6, issue 4 (Spring 1997): 13-16, 13.
- ¹⁷ D.J. Hall, quoted in Clint Le Bruyns, “Re-placing Stewardship? Towards an Ethics of Responsible Care.” *Religion and Theology*, vol. 16 (2009): 67–76, 72.
- ¹⁸ McGrath, 304.
- ¹⁹ Clint Le Bruyns, “Re-placing Stewardship? Towards an Ethics of Responsible Care.” *Religion and Theology*, vol. 16 (2009): 67–76, 69.
- ²⁰ D.B. Ryen, “Coronavirus has caused an involuntary worldwide sabbath. Let’s embrace it.” *Premier Christianity* website blog, 25 March 2020, accessed 7 April 2020. <<https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/Coronavirus-has-caused-an-involuntary-worldwide-sabbath.-Let-s-embrace-it>>
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- ²³ Ernst Conradie, “The Earth in God’s Economy: Reflections on the Narrative of God’s Work.” *Scriptura* 97 (2008): 13-36, 27.
- ²⁴ Pangolin scales are made of the same stuff as our fingernails, but have become used (with no scientific basis) in Chinese medicine to treat any number of ailments.
- ²⁵ *A New Zealand Prayer Book: He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa* (London: William Collins, 1989), 750-753.
- ²⁶ Augustine challenged his own highly dualistic early convictions with a deep respect for creation. “All creation, including the human body, is a revelation of God’s goodness, he wrote in his *Confessions*, because God created “the earth which I walk on” as well as the human body – the “earth which I carry” (*Confessions* 12.2).” However, for Augustine, “While the body is not innately evil, it is ephemeral and therefore subordinate to the eternal soul. More generally, all earthly goods are trivial in comparison to the supreme good of eternal life with God in heaven.” Anna Peterson, “In and Of the World? Christian

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²⁷ Peterson, “In and Of the World?” (2000), 242.

²⁸ This was critiqued by Lynn White’s influential essay in 1967. “Especially in its western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen.” Lynn White Jn, “The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.” *Science*, 155 (March 1967): 1203-1207, 1206.

²⁹ Sallie McFague, *God’s Body: An Ecological Theology*, (MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

³⁰ Terra Schwerin Rowe, *Toward a Better Worldliness: Ecology, Economy, and the Protestant Tradition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2017), xlv. Terra Rowe interprets grace as mutual gift-giving-and-receiving. She argues against the linear human-centred understanding of much of Reformed thinking, in which God dispenses free grace from an untouched divine isolation to people who are then free to use the rest of the universe as they choose.

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³⁸ *ibid*, 85.

³⁹ Ry O. Siggelkow, “Ernst Kasemann and the Specter of Apocalyptic.” *Theology Today*, vol. 75, issue 1 (2018): 37–50.

⁴⁰ Barbara R. Rossing, “Reimagining Eschatology: Toward Healing and Hope for a World at the Eschatos”, in Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster (eds.) *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women’s Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice* (Augsburg Fortress, 2017), 325-348.

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