

From Creation-Faith to Ecological Responsibility

for NACCE by [John G. Gibbs](#)

The North American Coalition for Christianity and Ecology was formed in 1986 to enact and encourage a dialogic cooperative mission.

We are persuaded that the creation-faith of both Hebrew and Christian scriptures and traditions speaks with powerfully effective relevance to the deepening ecological crisis, a crisis that threatens all humanity, rich and poor alike, and all life forms, human and non-human alike.

We are also persuaded that the Church is being challenged by this creation-faith to open her eyes and ears to what ecological messengers tell us about the deteriorating condition of our spaceship earth.

We are consequently committed to dialogue and cooperative action between Christianity and ecology as between two partnering communities, both of whom are in position to make distinctive contributions to the formation and fruition of environmental ethics for this twenty-first century.

Four Affirmations

The first focus of this introductory statement is the biblical creation-faith that orients our coalition, informs our dialogue, and impels us to action. This creation-faith includes in its varied expressions at least these four affirmations:

One dominion over the creation. First, there is only one "dominion" over the earth: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it..." (Ps. 24:1). "...the God of the whole earth he is called" (Is. 54:5). "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth..." (Gen. 1:1). "...look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed" (2 Maccabees 7:28). Lady Wisdom, like a "master builder," was God's agent in the work of creation (Proverbs 8:22-31).

Monotheistic Christians subsequently interpreted Jesus as this Wisdom ("Logos," or "Word"): "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him..." (Jn. 1:1-3). The singular sovereignty of Creator God over all the creation is a theme repeated in various strata and genres of biblical literature.

Special responsibility of humanity. Second, though humanity is said to have a special place within creation, it is a place not of privilege but of special responsibility to the Creator for what humanity does within and to creation. The sovereign Creator intends

that humanity shall live "in the image" of God (Genesis 1:26a), and thus exercise only the kind of "dominion" over life forms (Gen. 1:26b, 28) that enacts the will of Creator God. Psalm 8 so infers when it sets human "dominion over the works of your hands" (8:6) in the context of its opening and closing acclamation: "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (8:1, 9).

As a child represents the parents whose "likeness" he bears (Gen. 5:3), so humanity's place in the world is to represent the will of the Creator whose likeness they bear. In early Christian thought the paradigm for this "dominion" is given in Jesus' humiliation as the "slave" of all (Phil. 2:6-8), for only as this Servant was Jesus deemed worthy of "exaltation" to the place of sovereign "Lord" (Phil. 2:9-11) over all realms "in heaven and on earth and under the earth." Environmental ethics will sustain lifestyles of care, service, "compassion and sympathy" (Phil. 2:1). The pattern of Christ's life among and for us is the pattern of life for stewards of the earth.

Nothing in this conception authorizes humanity to be arbitrary, abusive, reckless, and destructive in their relation to the creation. Nothing in this thought-complex posits creation as "a commodity belonging to us." Everything in this creation-faith posits the creation as "a community to which we belong," in Aldo Leopold's memorable phrases (*A Sand County Almanac*, p. viii), and we bear special responsibility for the fate of that creation-community to which we belong. There is a fateful bond between humanity and creation.

The claim, on the other hand, that the Hebrew author and readers or hearers understood the "dominion" of humans to authorize unaccountable reckless behavior — that claim is made despite such evidence as the following:

- The human who was made "in the image of God" is a dependent rather than an independent creature;
- The Creator who pronounced the whole creation fit to serve the Creator's purpose (i.e., "good") did not give to humanity a "dominion" that was designed to reverse that creative act;
- The inclusion of land and animals along with humans in Jubilee and sabbath observances links humans to the creation in a stewardship rather than exploitative function;
- Most importantly, the sovereignty of God over and in the cosmic totality is asserted throughout biblical literature, and at no point is humanity envisioned as being authorized to compete with that prior and ultimate dominion of the Creator God.

Church-community and Creation-community bound together. Third, God's creative and redemptive works are inter-related, and never hermetically sealed off from one another. In practical terms this means that Church-community and Creation-community are bound together.

Isaiah, for instance, may speak in 49:13-23 of "the holy innocents" as the Church thinks he does, but the prophet sees them only in the context of God's worldwide sovereignty. Here is not the God of worshippers merely, but the God who is also proclaimed out there:

"Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones" (49:13; cf. Ps. 145:9, "The Lord is good to all; and his compassion is over all he has made.")

This relation between redeemed People and the creation is especially emphasized by the apostle Paul. The "cosmic liturgy" of Romans 8:19ff. assures Christians that the Lord within them is the Lord over creation, and that for this reason nothing can "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:39). At the same time "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (8:19). Creation and Community are conjoined in the labor pains of redemption (8:22-23). Frustration and meaninglessness are not intended by God to be the final destiny of the cosmic totality.

The very early Christian confession of faith that Paul quotes approvingly in I Cor. 8:6 is an exceedingly compact statement [notice the prepositions] that God is both source and goal of creation, and that Jesus Christ the Lord is Mediator of both creation and redemption: "...for us there is one God, the Father, *from* whom are all things and *for* whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, *through* whom are all things and *through* whom we exist." Here creation ("all things") and Church ("we") are inextricably linked, as they are also linked in the Colossian Christological Hymn (Col. 1:15-20) which presents Christ as sovereign in both creation (1:15) and redemption (1:20).

Ethical consequences. Fourth, there are ethical consequences of these relationships. On one hand, humanity's sinfulness does not image the God of the covenant, and thereby it is repeatedly destructive to the creation. "The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant" (Is. 24:5; cf. Rom. 8:19ff.).

On the other hand, sabbath and jubilee safeguarded both the poor and the land from the destruction of unrestricted wealth accumulation and its concomitant cancerous spread of poverty. Not only every week, but also every seventh year there was a sabbath rest. Then "...you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard," for "it shall be a year of complete rest for the land" (Lev. 5:4-5). Whatever "volunteers" grow on the land are to be shared with strangers and kin, also with animals, both domestic and wild (Lev. 25:6-7). The redistribution of wealth in every fiftieth or Jubilee year aimed to narrow the sinfully widening gap between rich and poor (Lev. 25:10ff.), for God's people are no more than temporary tenants on the land.

Christianity and Ecology Conjoined

Though biblical creation-faith includes much more than these four themes (among them: the place of creation in worship, the wealth of Jesus' references to plants and animals and the creation), this much suffices to orient the direction of our thought and motivate our actions to conjoin Christianity and ecology.

Rediscovering ecological sensitivity. In light of this creation-faith we urgently encourage the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church to rediscover the ecological sensitivity that pervades authentic Jewish and Christian spirituality, and call others to

celebrate it with us. Let the Church become reacquainted with our desert fathers and mothers, whose ascetic renunciations freed them to risk everything for the sake of compassion ... toward human and non-human neighbors alike.

Let the Church be liberated by the cosmic Christ, who accomplishes personal redemption not in an individualistic vacuum, but only in the context of a humanity being redeemed and a whole world being recreated.

Let the Church question any construal of "economic progress" that allegedly could not afford the "costly good" of a clean environment, for alternatives are yet more costly. Let the Church do so on the basis of her creation-faith that calls humanity to responsible accounting before the Creator for the effects of human actions, both individual and collective, on any and all other creatures, including land and air and water.

Challenging false dichotomies. The light of this creation-faith demonstrates that no "redefinition" of biblical traditions is prerequisite to contemporary Christianity's critique of such false dichotomies as these:

- either social justice, or ecological ethics
- either social justice within developing nations that cannot afford ecology, or ecological ethics within affluent nations that are not challenged by social injustices
- either environmental degradation or "free economies" that alone "make sound ecological stewardship available to ever greater numbers"
- either individuality and private property, or community and collective action
- either traditional faith or ecological responsibility through socio-political action

Living out what faith requires. To such untenable antitheses we respond: Christian faith requires our concurrent commitment to both social justice and ecological ethics, and that in both developing and affluent nations. That is the case to the extent that social injustices abound in all nations, and to the extent that all humanity, rich and poor alike, and all life forms, both human and non-human, are gravely threatened by the deepening ecological crisis. Within the ecumenical community we affirm that the integrity of creation, peace, justice, and the equality of women are all interconnected.

Christian faith does not require fidelity to any one economic system, including the capitalist "lassier-faire" system with its supposedly "free" markets. In particular, this faith does not exalt capitalism's works of environmental stewardship at the expense of challenging humanity's ubiquitous addictions to acquisition and pollution. No economic structure has thus far been free of that ubiquity.

Christian faith sees humanity as existing both in individuals and in collectives. In agreement with biblical insight, this faith sees the supremacy of human rights over property rights, and the necessity for collective action (as by governments) to safeguard human rights in a market economy based on "the bottom line" of business corporations.

Christian faith requires that we be free enough from ideological rigidity that we can see, and act upon, the facts of our ecological condition as they unfold before us.

It is by no means self-evident within scientific ecology that "fears of destructive manmade global warming, overpopulation, and rampant species loss" are "unfounded" or "speculative," as [The Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship](#) charges.

To the contrary, as George Hunsinger succinctly summarizes the ecological situation: "Whether the human race will survive the next century is not clear. What is clear is that the means and mechanisms of self-extinction already exist. Ecological destruction is the slow version, while the quick version is nuclear war and its military analogues, and the intermediate version is overpopulation and the gross maldistribution of resources." ("Doctrine as guide to social witness," [The Christian Century](#), April 19-26, 2000, p. 456)

All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (© copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

About the Author

Rev. John G. Gibbs, PhD (Princeton Theological Seminary, 1966) has written *Creation and Redemption: A Study in Pauline Theology (Supplements to Novum Testamentum, XXVI; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971)*, and articles published by scholarly journals in USA, Canada, Scotland, Netherlands, and Italy. He is listed in the 3rd edition of [Who's Who In Religion](#). At present retired near Park Rapids, MN, he remains active within both ecological and ecumenical communities.