



# FUTURE SHAPE



Caring for God's creation

*Mission studies for ministers on creation care*

## 2 Creation care is biblical mission (part 1)

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***“Over one billion people still lack access to safe water and nearly two billion people lack safe sanitation. More than three million still die every year from avoidable water-related disease.”***

*([www.creationcare.org/resources/sunday/facts.php](http://www.creationcare.org/resources/sunday/facts.php))*

***“Sewage is the largest source of contamination by volume of the oceans of the world... the poor living in coastal communities, least able to deal with the multiple consequences of global warming, are the hardest hit.”***

*[www.creationcare.org/resources/sunday/facts.php](http://www.creationcare.org/resources/sunday/facts.php)*

***“The rural poor depend directly on the natural resource base. This is where their pharmacy is, this where their supermarket is, this is in fact their fuel station, their power company, their water company. What would happen to you if these things were removed from your local neighbourhood?... Therefore we really cannot afford not to invest in environmental conversation.”***

*(Dr Stella Simuyu)*

### Introduction

In this second mission study we're talking about creation care as 'biblical mission'. And that's the least we can do because if it isn't 'biblical', it certainly isn't 'mission.' But we need to know the extent to which creation care figures on the biblical agenda. Does it merit serious biblical attention? Does it have a place in key biblical teaching? Does it belong anywhere near the heart of the biblical 'story'? Does it relate in any way to the mission of Jesus or is it something which appears in the first two chapters of Genesis and then 'silence'?

### Two sessions

We can't do justice to the biblical material in one session and these notes have been prepared with two sessions in mind. Hopefully, it will work well if we look in turn at four statements, taking two of them per session. This will allow us to develop our theme ('creation care is biblical mission') and bring into play a good range of biblical teaching.

- ☑ God is a creator God with an active concern for all he has made.
- ☑ God has created us in his own image to be responsible stewards of his creation.

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- ☒ The New Testament attributes to Jesus an active and sustaining role in creation which we, as his disciples, are to honour.
- ☒ The climax of all things (consummation) includes the whole of creation.

## **God is a creator God with an active concern for all he has made**

*“The seas roar, the forests clap their hands, eagles fly, mice squeak, geese honk, pigs grunt and flowers bloom, perhaps their whole life long, unseen by any human eye – and this chorus of praise ascends to God, unmediated by any human interference... It is here that missionary earth-keeping begins and ends. The first obligation of every living creature is towards the Creator...” (Peskest & Ramachandra, The message of mission, p 252; see also Matthew 6: 26, 28-31)*

Let’s take a good look at Psalm 104. This psalm is a brilliant combination of worship, teaching, faith and prayer; a powerful example of what is known in the trade as ‘theological reflection’. Its focus is on the nature and purpose of creation and it seems to work in partnership with Psalm 105 which attempts its own ‘theological reflection’ but in terms of ‘history’ rather than ‘creation’.

Unlike the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2, human beings do not head the parade in Psalm 104 although we are integral to it. In verses 14-16, we follow the cattle and precede the trees! In verses 21-23, we are linked to the lions in terms of work, food and rest. In verses 27-30, we are one with the whole of creation in our dependence on the sustaining God, the same sustaining God who provides for ravines, animals, birds, mountains, earth, grass, trees and for us as we search for wine, oil and bread (Psalm 104: 10-18).

A consideration of Psalm 104, (and some chapters of Job), leads us to the God of Israel whose covenant faithfulness to his



people is central to our understanding of his righteousness (or justice). He made covenants with Abraham (Genesis 15: 18), Moses (Exodus 19: 5-7), and Joshua (Joshua 24) but, before all of them, there was Noah. And it fits our theme perfectly to note the Lord’s unforgettable covenant of environment with Noah (Genesis 9: 8-17). This is a crucial covenant as far as creation care is concerned, renewing and extending the creation covenant of Genesis 1: 26-30. It develops into a three-way covenant between God, humankind and “every living creature”, a phrase used five times in the space of a few verses (Genesis 9: 10, 12, 15, 16, 17). If God embraces the whole of creation in the same way that he embraces us, we who are made in his image should reflect his care for the same creation.

If you have time, don’t miss the chance to compare all this with God’s relentless interrogation of Job which runs from Job 37: 14 – 41: 34, and especially Job 38-39. Here is another compelling mystery tour which surveys the masterpiece of creation to highlight how the Lord sustains what he has made. It’s a daunting set of questions for Job: “brace yourself... I will question you and you shall answer me” (Job 38: 3; 40: 7).

For example:

- “Do you know how God controls the clouds?” (37: 15)
- “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?” (38: 4)
- “Do you give the horse his strength?” (39: 19)
- “Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom?” (39: 26)
- “Do you have an arm like God’s?” (40: 9)
- “Can your voice thunder like his?” (40: 9)

## God has created us in his own image to be responsible stewards of his creation

The most important biblical statement in this respect forms the climax of the first Genesis account of creation (1: 1 – 2: 4). Genesis 1: 26 describes the creation of men and women in the image of God and verse 28 summons man (*male and female*) to an awe-inspiring partnership: “...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 statements give rise to two questions which are fundamental to the purpose of God for the world and our human response to him:

*“Men, women and children, created in God’s image, also have a unique responsibility for creation. Our actions should both sustain creation’s fruitfulness and preserve creation’s powerful testimony to its Creator.”*  
(see “An Evangelical declaration on the care of creation”: [www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php](http://www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php))

### ☐ The image of God

What does it mean for us to be made in the image of God?

Without moving into deeper theological waters than we need at this stage, we can acknowledge a reasonable consensus of scholarly opinion that the core meaning

of creation in the image of God refers to our capacity to live in relationship with him; a spiritual dimension to our existence which sets us apart from everything else in creation. This gift of God’s own likeness assigns to humanity a specific role in creation which is a powerful blend of responsibility, privilege and opportunity. The Lord (‘Yahweh’) has entrusted his world to us; wonderful yet fragile and often finite resources which we are to handle with extreme care, we who have grasped that this is what it means to be truly human. (See Wright, *op cit* p 421ff)

We note in passing that creation in the likeness of God establishes a vital link between creation care and human justice. “Who is my neighbour?” Creation in the image of God means that we owe to each person (specifically “male and female”) equal value, respect, dignity, consideration and opportunity in life to that which we seek for ourselves. All of which raises the big question for every community: “How do we treat each other?”

*“How do those of us **with** power, resources, influence and awareness take action on behalf of those who are **without** power, resources, influence and awareness?”*



## ☐ Stewards of creation

How can we be good stewards of creation?

We'll return to this concept in the session 'Creation care is ethical mission' but we need to take some account of it now.

*"Humanity was put on this earth with a mission – to rule over, and to keep and to care for the rest of creation. This enables us to see ecological concern and action as a valid part of biblical Christian mission."*  
(Wright, *op cit*, p 425)

Chris Wright offers a helpful explanation of the two Hebrew words used in Genesis 1: 28 and translated by the NIV as "subdue" and "rule." These words are strong in meaning because they imply exertion and effort but they can never be used to justify violence or exploitation. (Wright, *op cit*, p 425) Similarly there is "no licence for the unbridled exploitation and subjugation of nature" (Peskett & Ramachandra, *op cit*, p 44).

In other words, Genesis 1: 26-28 assigns to us a unique role, as a result of which we are accountable to God for our exercise of a major and ever-increasing responsibility for the welfare, or otherwise, of his creation; biblical teaching which Peskett & Ramachandra regard as "startlingly revolutionary" (*op cit*, p 36). Clearly, with power comes responsibility.

*"It seems clear that what God is doing here is passing on to human hands a delegated form of God's own kingly authority over the whole of his creation ... Whatever way this human dominion is to be exercised, it must reflect the character and values of God's own kingship."*  
(Wright, *op cit*, p 426)

*"We commit ourselves to work for responsible public policies which embody the principles of biblical stewardship of creation."*  
(See "An Evangelical declaration on the care of creation": [www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php](http://www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php))

*"I was never so devout as when I was at work on 'The Creation'; I fell on my knees each day and begged God to give me the strength to finish the work."*  
(Joseph Haydn, 1732-1809)





# 3 Creation care is biblical mission (part 2)

## The New Testament attributes to Jesus an active and sustaining role in creation which we, as his disciples, are to honour

We will be familiar with Jesus' exciting interaction with creation in parable (Matthew 13), miracle (Matthew 8: 23-27, 14: 13-33) and healing (Matthew 9: 27-38) but we're moving now to an aspect of his work which receives much less attention despite the fact that it was a vital part of early Christian reflection. More than once, the New Testament takes some of the key attributes of God and ascribes them to Jesus, of which the most important may well be his role in creation.

☐ **Hebrews 1** is essentially a comparison of the angels and Jesus. The whole letter was written to a group of faltering Christians, urging them not to give up. And in the very first chapter, the unnamed author writes with courageous boldness when he takes powerful Old Testament worship and offers it to Jesus. Probably the most significant verse for our purposes is Hebrews 1: 10. The writer quotes from Psalm 102: 25: "In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands" – and refers it to Jesus.

*"Surely a Christ whose hands had shaped the universe and summoned the galaxy of stars into being could hold these Jewish Christians in days of testing..."*  
(Brown, *Christ above all*, p 30)

☐ **I Corinthians 8: 6** is as 'shocking' as Hebrews 1. The apostle Paul takes the majestic Jewish confession of Deuteronomy 6: 4 – "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" – and re-writes it in order to put Jesus at its centre: "Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but

one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live."

☐ **Colossians 1: 15-20** is a hymn in praise of Jesus with two distinct themes (1: 15-17, 1: 18-20). The hymn may be original to Paul or he may be using a source he had discovered already in existence (his early church hymnbook, 'Apostles praise?') Either way, it's wonderful stuff with some daring theological reflection into the bargain. The first half (1: 15-17) celebrates the role of Jesus as creator, destiny and sustainer of the world – "for by him all things were created... all things were created by him and for him... He is before all things and in him all things hold together." The Greek word translated as "all things" ('panta') occurs in its various Greek forms no less than six times in verses 16-20. As God is creator of all things, so Jesus' redemptive achievement on the cross encompasses all things. The second half of the hymn (1: 18-20) portrays Jesus in terms of resurrection and reconciliation by virtue of which he has established his authority in the world (similarly, Ephesians 1: 7-10).

☐ **John 1: 1-3** forms part of the celebrated prologue to the fourth gospel – surely one of the most exciting pieces of missionary writing ever to hit the

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world. But that's another story. The important point for us is that John's attempt to do justice to Jesus takes him back to the beginning of Genesis ("in the beginning God...") to re-tell its story with reference to Jesus, "in the beginning was the word ... through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."

This 'logos-hymn' of John 1, like the opening verses of Hebrews (1: 1-5), is almost certainly influenced by the Proverbs hymn in praise of God's wisdom. At the heart of that hymn is a startling announcement portraying 'wisdom' as the personification of an attribute of God

*"I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began... I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep..." (Proverbs 8: 23, 27)*

Schnackenburg (*The gospel according to St John, vol 1, p 228*) believes that John has conceived his logos-hymn along the lines of wisdom speculation and makes the point that an active role in creation is one of three recurrent themes of wisdom literature. He draws attention to Proverbs 3: 19 ("By wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place") and to non-biblical wisdom literature (notably Wisdom of Solomon 7: 24-27; Wisdom of Ben Sirach 24: 3-9).

*"The logos-hymn, like Hebrews 1: 10ff, transfers God's creative activity to the pre-existing Christ... The affirmation cannot be restricted to the world of man... All realms of creation owe their existence to the Logos..." (Schnackenburg, op cit, p 238).*

#### **In summary:**

*"...we best understand the significance of the Logos poem contained in the Prologue of John if we examine it first of all as a Jewish hymn which originally had as its focal point the Wisdom of God." (Kreitzer, The gospel according to John, p 300)*

#### **The Navajo Blessing Way Prayer**

*In beauty may I walk.  
All day long may I walk.  
Through the returning seasons may I walk.  
On the trail marked with pollen may I walk.  
With grasshoppers about my feet may I walk.  
With dew about my feet may I walk.  
With beauty may I walk.  
With beauty before me, may I walk.  
With beauty behind me, may I walk.  
With beauty above me, may I walk.  
With beauty below me, may I walk.  
With beauty all around me, may I walk.  
In old age wandering on a trail of beauty,  
lively, may I walk.  
In old age wandering on a trail of beauty,  
living again, may I walk.  
It is finished in beauty.  
It is finished in beauty.*

*"Wisdom like the Word was an active agent in creation." (Brown, The gospel according to John, p 522)*

Hopefully, we have done enough to show that this approach of John is remarkably similar to those of Hebrews 1 and 1 Corinthians 8: 6!

It's tempting to dismiss all this as potentially inspiring for those with appropriate academic interest but seriously short of relevance to the practicalities of daily living in general and care for the environment in particular. But that would be to miss the point and then to lose the plot! Three apparently unrelated New Testament writers (John, Paul and the author of Hebrews) have so pondered the significance of Jesus that they have come one by one to see him as central to the act of creation, vital to its sustenance and key to its ultimate reconciliation. A natural consequence of their conclusion is that we who claim to be followers of Jesus have no option but to regard our treatment of 'creation' as a big issue for both personal discipleship and corporate mission. He has called us to watch over the whole of creation, holding us accountable for the way we treat his unique handiwork.

*“Because we await the time when even the groaning creation will be restored to wholeness, we commit ourselves to work vigorously to protect and heal that creation for the honour and glory of the Creator – whom we know dimly through creation, but meet fully through Scripture and in Christ. We and our children face a growing crisis in the health of the creation in which we are embedded and through which, by God’s grace, we are sustained. Yet we continue to degrade that creation. These degradations (‘pollutions’) can be summed up as land degradation; deforestation; species extinction; water degradation; global toxification; the alteration of atmosphere; human and cultural degradation.”*

*(See “An Evangelical declaration on the care of creation”:  
[www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php](http://www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php))*



## **The climax of all things (consummation) includes the whole of creation**



### **Romans 8: 18-25**

This is nowhere near a comprehensive study of our Christian hope. But we can take some account of what is, arguably, the greatest chapter of Scripture and a particularly moving passage which offers to the church in Rome the reassurance of living faith. It is here, in Romans 8: 18-25, that Paul pictures the whole creation as subjected to frustration and groaning but only while it waits to be freed from bondage to decay and brought into the amazing freedom of complete redemption.

*“A variety of explanations of what Paul meant by ‘the creation’ here has been suggested... but the only really probable explanation is that he meant the sum-total of sub-human nature both animate and inanimate.” (Cranfield, Romans, a shorter commentary, p 194)*

And we who are human share this groaning and this hope as we too “wait

eagerly (impatiently) for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8: 23). Meanwhile, we enjoy “the first-fruits of the Spirit” (Romans 8: 23).

Further to Paul’s hope of a restored creation in Romans 8, the book of Revelation presents the stunning vision of a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21, so Isaiah 66: 22). In his book, *Surprised by Hope*, Tom Wright makes the point that we need to focus attention on this “major, central, framing question” of “God’s purpose of rescue and re-creation for the whole world, the entire cosmos” (*op cit*, p 197).

*“We encourage deeper reflection on the substantial biblical and theological teaching which speaks of God’s work of redemption in terms of the renewal and completion of God’s purpose in creation.”*

*(See “An Evangelical declaration on the care of creation”:  
[www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php](http://www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php))*

This is a question which would re-direct us to the issues of creation care as part of the way in which we, in Christ, become truly human – “reflecting his powerful, healing, transformative love into the world” (*op cit*, p 197). Wright defines the challenge in these words, “to focus... on the question of how God is going to redeem and renew his creation *through human beings*” and then to re-read Romans and Revelation in light of the question (*op cit*, p 198).

It is clear, even from this single passage of Romans 8, that the Christian hope includes a vision for liberation, peace and ‘shalom’ – new creation – which is portrayed as liberation, peace and shalom for the whole of creation, a vivid exercise of what Walter Brueggemann has called “prophetic imagination” and a particular feature of the hope of Isaiah (Isaiah 11: 1-9, 35: 1-10, 55: 12-13, 65: 17-25).

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### **Books referred to in the course of this study:**

Brown, Raymond ***Christ above all: the message of Hebrews***, IVP, 1982  
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Brown, Raymond E ***The gospel according to John (I-XII)***,  
*The Anchor Bible, Volume 29, Doubleday, New York*. 1966 ISBN: 978-0-38501-517-2

Cranfield, CEB ***Romans: a shorter commentary***,  
*T & T Clark, Edinburgh*, 1986 ISBN: 978-0-56729-118-9

Kreitzer, Larry ***The gospel according to John***, *Regent’s Study Guides, Regent’s Park College, Oxford*, 1990 ISBN: 978-0-95181-040-8

Peskett, Howard & Ramachandra, Vinoth ***The message of mission: The Glory of Christ in All Time and Space***, IVP, 2003 ISBN: 978-0-85111-326-5

Schnackenburg, Rudolf ***The gospel according to St John, volume 1***,  
*Burns & Oates*, 1968 ISBN: 978-0-86012-105-3

Wright, Christopher JH ***The mission of God: unlocking the Bible’s grand narrative***,  
*IVP Academic*, 2006 ISBN: 978-0-83082-571-4

Wright, Tom ***Surprised by hope***, SPCK, 2007 ISBN: 978-0-28105-617-0



**For some practical suggestions for action by government, the local church and the individual, see the small group material associated with this study.**