Co-redeemers: a theological basis for creation care

The Nepal Himalayas provide the necessary water to irrigate dry farmland (photo Dr John Sleggs)

John Weaver

1. The theological basis – an introduction

Our starting point is a model of God, who is both transcendent creator and immanent sustainer of the whole universe. This God has created and is creating (Genesis 1:1-2:3): his character is 'creativity.'[1] This is the God who declared that the created world was good (Genesis 1:31), and through rebellion and destruction, made a covenant with the renewed world after the Noah Flood (Genesis 9:9-11).

Human beings are created *imago Dei* – in the image of God, sharing God's creativity and God's care of the planet (Genesis 2:15). But things didn't work out too well, selfishness and wanting to play God got in the way, and still does. The result is that God had to redeem human beings and the planet. God has done this in Christ (Colossians 1:20); and redeemed human beings, *εν Χριστω* 'in Christ', are to be channels of God's redeeming love for all creation (Romans 8:19-21). This is summarised in the diagram below:

In the Image of God	*In Christ*
co-creators	co-redeemers
channels of creativity and care	channels of redemption and reconciliation
marked by stewardship	marked by restoration and transformation
Genesis 1 & 2	Romans 8:18-22

[1] So Kaufman interprets the description of God in John 1: 1-5. Gordon D. Kaufman, *In the Beginning...Creativity* Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2004

2. The reality of the situation – Nepal, a case study

The picture in Nepal is one snapshot of a world in crisis. Global warming has led to changes in precipitation patterns, with longer periods of drought and periods of more intense precipitation, which give rise to increased frequency of floods and landslides. Warmer temperatures increase the water holding capacity of the air, which results in increased evapo-transpiration, reduction in soil moisture, decrease in ground water reserves, and a reduction in river flow[2]. In addition, increased temperatures reduce the growing season, and therefore productivity, and reduced river flow affects hydropower generation and the aquatic ecosystem. Reduced water resources may also lead to conflict between users.

Water supply is crucial to livelihoods, power generation, and the economy of Nepal. 63% of agricultural land depends on rainfall; 93% of Nepal's workforce is in agriculture; and 91% of Nepal's electricity comes from hydropower plants. As temperatures rise, the volume of glaciers will reduce, with a decreased storage of fresh water, which is vital for domestic use, irrigation, and hydropower for people. It is estimated that 86% of the glaciers and 58% of the ice reserves will be gone by 2050 with no further increase in global surface temperature, and a warming of 0.06^0C/year will see no glaciers left in the Nepal Himalayas by 2070.[3] Decreasing water supply results in a reduction in levels of agricultural production leading to increases in poverty, famine and starvation.[4] This may lead to a large percentage of the

[2] Narayan Prasad Chaulagain, *Impacts of Climate Change on Water Resources of Nepal* (Aachan, Shaker Verlag, 2007) p.2

[3] Chaulagain, *Impacts of Climate Change*, p.83

29 million population of Nepal becoming environmental refugees.

How should these changes of crisis proportion be addressed?

It is recommended that there be:

i) adaption to water shortages with the management of water resources and rainwater harvesting.

ii) adaption to extreme events recognising risk areas and the relocation and settlement of those in areas of high risk.[5]

The impact of global warming is greatest in the developing world, especially in Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America. Jesus explained to the teacher of the law that the whole of the Old Testament scriptures were summed up in two commands, which together sum up our relationship with God and with each other and the whole of creation (Matthew 22:37-39).

3. A Theological Reflection – channels of God's redemption

a. The basis

Why should we be concerned for the environment?

- God created it; God ordered it; God loved it; and God was pleased with it. This is the message of Genesis 1 and 2. This is why we, who claim to worship God, should be concerned.
- But then human beings decided that they wanted to be like God, and know all the answers. Then they became jealous and violent and the killing started. They believed that they had no need of God and God's wisdom as creator at all. This is the message of Genesis 3, 4 and 5. This is why we, who think we know all the answers, should be concerned.
- God was disappointed; God regretted; and God destroyed all but Noah, his family, and the animals God ordered him to preserve. God made a covenant with Noah and all creation. This is the message of Genesis 6, 7, 8 and 9. If God cares, if God is concerned, if God has declared this covenant of faithful love, then so should we.
- But sadly we have built our 'tower' of industrial development, committing the sin of idolatry as we do. We seek to become 'world-creators,' claiming for ourselves that which belongs to God. This is the message of Genesis 11.

We recognise the counterpart of this tragic story at Pentecost, the birth of the church as a restored and redeemed community, modelling to the world the possibility of a new humanity on Christ.[6]

b. Co-creators and Co-redeemers

Human beings are created *imago Dei*. They share God's creativity, which is demonstrated in human skills, research, and technological development. But sin, injustice, and the destruction of creation are the trade marks of human activity, our greed and selfishness demonstrated in the exhaustion of earth's resources and a lack of desire to share God's good gifts with the whole world.

When we speak of stewardship we need to understand this in terms of God working through us, rather than of God as an absentee landlord. Stewardship can be understood in terms of:

- to be *imago Dei*, in the image of God
- to become children of God
- to be *εν Χριστω*, in Christ

We recognise that Christians are involved in the *missio Dei* – God's mission in the world. God the creator, who is love, creates a world with freedom, lives with the pain of human rebellion, and seeks to redeem a broken world.

"An adequate theology of the environment therefore involves God, the human person and nature; thus problems concerning the environment cannot be resolved in purely socio-political terms."[7] There is often the danger of the ecology label being used by people who wish to promote their own products and markets, for example the nuclear lobby, or the production of some bio-fuels.

We are helped in this understanding of Christian discipleship through Paul Fiddes' exploration of the Trinity and pastoral practice.[8] For Fiddes our participation in the life of God affects the way we do theology: we are not observers but are involved in the energy and patterns of the divine life. When we ask how we live and move and have our being in God, Fiddes' image of dance helps us to move away from rational doctrines to a participation in movement (*perichoresis*), which I would express as being in the Spirit. Such participation has freedom to respond and is the outworking of God, who in love allows us to be. However, God always seeks to encourage us in his desire for our life.

In the Bible we recognise that the Creator is the Covenant God and Redeemer God, who became

[4] Chaulagain, *Impacts of Climate Change*, pp.117-118

[5] Chaulagain, *Impacts of Climate Change*, p.120

[6] I am indebted to Simon Woodman's observations based on thoughts of Vinoth Ramachandra given in an address to the Baptist Assembly, Blackpool, May 2008

[7] Paul Haffner, 'A Christian Ecology' in Robert Whelan, Joseph Kirwan & Paul Haffner, *The Cross and the Rain Forest: A Critique of Radical Green Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996, p.126

[8] Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral doctrine of the Trinity* (London, DLT, 2000)

incarnate in Jesus Christ. In union with Christ, Christians are invited into fellowship and partnership in God's mission in and for the world. It is in this role that Christians may become co-creators and co-redeemers with God. It is not that human beings are able to create or to redeem, but in co-operation with God, the Holy Spirit works through human beings.

In bringing creation and redemption together, Michael Northcott maintains that a Christian environmental ethic requires as its source and guide the knowledge of God as creator and redeemer of all life which is definitively revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word.[9] He stresses that

> 'The cosmic Christ is not only Lord of the lives and bodies of Christians but Lord of the whole created order, and the implications of the resurrection extend beyond the lives of Christians to reveal God's intention to restore the righteous peace, or *shalom*, of the whole of creation.'

So we affirm that it is in the original purpose of material life, and creation's original relatedness to God that we find ourselves in the rest of the natural order. Without this affirmation our human response to the event of resurrection, even though enabled by the indwelling Spirit of Christ, would find no echo or correspondence with our life as embodied and reasoning humans, and this would leave us in the Gnostic position. It would leave us with a Christian ethical project which was dangerously detached from the location of the Christian life in the time and space and bodies of this material world.[10]

Northcott notes that the prophets saw Israel's exile and the ecological degradation of the land as consequences of their failure to keep the covenant which God had made with them, and on which the care and fertility of the land depended. (Isaiah 5:8-10; 24:1-6)

Here we see a connection between human injustice in terms of the equal sharing of creation's gifts, especially in the exclusion of the poor and through environmental degradation. God's character of righteousness and justice are also writ large in the material and moral framework of the creation which God has made, and with which God remains in continuing relationship. Here we see the ecological nature of God and God's created justice.[11]Northcott maintains that we cannot limit the implications of Jesus' command to love our neighbour as ourselves to other persons. We are called to love creation, to love nature, because we share with nature in the restoration which is promised in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

[9] Michael S Northcott, 'Ecology and Christian ethics' in Robin Gill (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics* (CUP, 2001) p.213-5

[10] Northcott, p.216

[11] Northcott, pp.221-2

c) celebration of the Lord's Supper as our participation in the redemption of the created world

We should envisage sacraments drawing us deeper into the heart of the interweaving flow of relationships in God. Our theology and worship give us the prophetic words to proclaim. The celebration of the Lord's Supper brings our Sunday and Monday worlds together. It is thanksgiving to God for everything that God has accomplished in creation, redemption and sanctification, and for God's work of bringing the Kingdom to fulfilment in spite of human sin.

The Incarnation in history demonstrates God's clear identification with the created world of space and time. The celebration of the Lord's Supper with its backward look to the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and its forward look to the hope of the consummation of the world in God's eternal kingdom, celebrated in the physical elements of bread and wine, embraces the whole of life and human existence.

We recognise that the Lord's Supper extends beyond the church congregation to the whole world. We understand God to be present in all human life, and beyond this to his work in sustaining the whole environment. We understand that God is immanent in the whole of creation, and that in the incarnation declares his solidarity with the whole of the created order. We recognise that redemption and restoration of the poor, weak and vulnerable includes the atmosphere, biosphere and ecosystems of the world we inhabit.

This is the love and ministry of the servant Christ in which we share and in whose mission we participate.

d) repentance and restoration

Christians have a contribution to make. God created and entrusted the earth, and will redeem the whole of creation (Rom.8:19-22). We learn to think and act ecologically. There is a need to be re-awakened to the Gospel ethic, and recognise that human greed is at the root of the environmental crisis. Understanding and perceiving the situation and moving to a change of heart or mind is *metanoia* – repentance. There are steps that we should take in sustainable consumption, which involves ethical choices in our buying and lifestyle. We will need to recognise our ecological footprints on the earth – our impact on our local and global environment.

For western Christians there is also a need to develop a global perspective that recognises the impact of our lifestyle choices, and our economic, trade and industrial decisions on the rest of humanity. In accepting our relationship with the developing world, we must actively seek to address the issues of justice and poverty, which are an integral part of global environmental concerns. We identify the links of the increased consumption of fossil fuels, and

global climate change, with starvation and water shortages in the developing world. We also recognise the unfair distribution of resources, and restrictive practices in international trade that are a factor in increasing environmental destruction in parts of the developing world.

Christians must learn to think and act ecologically; articulate the Gospel with relevance; speak prophetically and relevantly to the environmental and social issues of our day; and rediscover a holistic doctrine of creation.

4. Co-redeemers - the challenge of discipleship

God's covenant with Noah marks a new beginning after the flood. Bernard W. Anderson points out that this is "fundamentally an ecological covenant that includes not only human beings everywhere but all animals – 'every living being [*nepeš hayyâ*]' ... [and] the earth itself."[12] He also emphasises that this is an 'everlasting covenant' or a 'covenant in perpetuity' which shows "God's absolute commitment to the creation."[13]

This is a covenant that neither sets restrictions to the species nor limits on time. It is inclusive for all time.

Non-human creation, as depicted in the Bible, has a role in giving glory to God and in teaching human beings about God's ways (Ps 19:1; Proverbs 6:6; Ps 104:1-10). The Apostle Paul tells us how the whole creation is groaning and waiting to be set free to share the 'freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Rom 8:21). The call of Christ is expressed as 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' (Mark 8:34).

This is a different sort of life, a Christ-like life, a life that is 'in Christ'. It is to deny self – move away from a selfish materialistic life style; take up the cross-shaped life of sacrificial love – sharing God's good gifts of creation with all; and follow Jesus – in his compassion for others and for the world. The call is to join in Christ's redemptive mission.

So to be co-redeemers – for Christ's redeeming love to flow through us, in the power of the Spirit we must:

Deny self: live more simply, use less of the world's resources; treat the created order with care.

Take up the cross: live sacrificially for the sake of others; give up our greed; sacrifice our wants

Follow Jesus: see the created world as an expression of God's order and love; see everyone as equally valued by God; take special care of the poor and the outcast; and love our neighbour as ourselves.

We have a God who is intimately involved in creation, whose desire is to see the redemption of what was a good creation, and who invites human beings to share in God's creative and redemptive activity.

The response of those who would follow Christ is to be what we can become through the Holy Spirit – true children of God through whose Christ-like activity the earth might be redeemed.

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This is an edited version of a paper given to the Baptist World Alliance Theological Educators Conference in Prague 26-29 July 2008.

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[12] Bernhard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 156, quoted in Helle Liht, *Restoring relationships: Towards Ecologically Responsible Baptistic Communities in Estonia* (unpublished MTh thesis, 2008)

[13] Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation*, pp.156-158

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