

# — Christian Discipleship — in the Environmental Crisis

## An exploration of ‘fullness’ as an environmental ethic

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### **Introduction**

We are facing an environmental crisis of proportions greater than any generation before us. This paper sets out the key elements of the current environmental situation and considers the biblical concept of ‘fullness’ as an ethic for Christian discipleship.

### **Earth systems in crisis**

How do we understand the vulnerability of the Earth? The Stockholm resilience centre set out nine planetary boundaries (Steffen, et. al. 2015). These are boundaries of change to earth systems such as our climate, biodiversity and land use. It is proposed that within these boundaries, there is a safe operating space for humanity; but outside these boundaries, we are in danger of damage that is irreparable. The areas at most risk are: biodiversity, as in a WWF (2018) report that there has been a 60% drop in vertebrate species since 1970; biogeochemical cycles, particularly nitrogen and phosphorus, primarily from fertilisers, which are causing whole areas of oceans to die through algal bloom (Stevens, 2019); land use change, reducing the amount of land available to wild animal and plant species; and finally, climate change where, if our current global economy continues unchecked, we are likely to see a rise in temperature at a speed unknown in the fossil record (IPCC, 2014).

How can Christians understand our faith in the light of this

crisis and how should we respond in Christian discipleship? Clearly something has gone badly wrong in our relationship with the Earth, and we have damaged and degraded the precious gift of creation that has been entrusted to us. A Christian discipleship ethic to meet this crisis needs to be a tool to restore these damaged relationships and return the Earth to its once flourishing state. The biblical concept of fullness gives us a vision, not only of what once was, but also provides a pathway to enable a restorative response.

### **'Fullness' in the Hebrew Bible**

What does fullness mean in the Hebrew Bible? The Hebrew word '*Melo*' simply means 'that which fills' or 'the entire contents'. Superficially, this implies the filling of a vessel but, when its usage is considered, there is a deeper meaning. Psalm 24 begins, 'The Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof'. In this usage the word describes the whole scope of the Earth and its life. Similarly, Psalms 50:12, 89:11, 98:7 mirror this understanding of the Earth. In these psalms 'fullness' means the whole of biodiversity and the wholeness of the Earth's systems. Fullness therefore means a completeness that belongs to God. In Deuteronomy 33:16, fullness is used to describe the abundance of creation. The setting is Moses' blessing on the tribe of Joseph, and the inference is of a blessing of fullness from the fruitfulness of the Earth. The fullness of the Earth is therefore a blessing, and provides the abundance of all that is needed for life. When Moses and Aaron are commanded to fill a pot with manna to keep for posterity, the amount is described as 'fullness' (Exodus 16:33). This reflects the totality of God's provision for his people. Trusting God and his purposes is therefore trusting in his fullness for our lives.

Moo (2010) sees the concept of 'fullness' as fundamental to understanding the intrinsic value of nature, quoting Genesis 1:31 where God describes 'all' he has made as very good. He sees humans as 'finding their appropriate place alongside all else'. The interconnectedness of humanity with the rest of creation is therefore linked to the goodness of all creation, and this is the Earth in its fullness.

Creation's purpose to give glory to God has been referred to since ancient times and Maimonides (2004) in the twelfth century cited this as its ultimate purpose derived from Isaiah 43:7. Marlow (2009) suggests a connection between fullness and glory in Isaiah 6:3: 'Holy,

holy, holy is the Lord Almighty, the whole Earth is full of his Glory'. She translates this verse as: 'the fullness of all the Earth is his Glory'. If the fullness of creation is God's glory, it is logical to conclude that any diminution of that fullness is a fundamental sin against God as it diminishes his visible glory in the world. Habel (2004) makes a distinction between the contents of the land and the landscape. He sees the biodiversity of the contents, including humans, and considers this to be fullness. Judgement, as in Ezekiel 32:15, is the removal of fullness from the land, leaving it desolate. Habel equates fullness with God's glory in Isaiah 6:3, stating that, 'The fullness of land/Earth in Isaiah is more than a life force; it is the divine life force/presence.' Following this reasoning, he proposes that the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37 is the ultimate consequence of stripping the world of its fullness and therefore of its divine presence and life force.

Fullness is a symbol of perfection in Hebrew thought. Labuschagne (2009) highlights the links between fullness and perfection using Hebrew numerology. The numerical value of the Hebrew *Melo* is seven. In Psalm 19, Labuschagne compares the fullness of God's presence in creation with the blessings of God's word (Torah). In Genesis, creation is complete with the seventh day. Following this idea means that the Sabbath is intrinsically the day of fullness, and the day of the restoration of the perfection of creation. As with the Temple, its fullness is God's glory.

Only this brief survey can be made of the meaning and use of *fullness* in the Hebrew Bible. It means all that is living and all that enables the Earth to have life. It reflects our trust in God for his provision. The fullness of the Earth has intrinsic value and is God's glory. There is an inherent link to Sabbath, and the perfection and abundance of the Sabbath day. If we destroy or diminish life on Earth, we also destroy its fullness, and diminish the glory of God on this Earth.

### **Fullness in the New Testament**

When we move into the New Testament we find the usage of fullness (*pleroma*) is focused on Christ: his infilling as a full part of the Godhead, the infilling of the Church and individual Christians in Christ, and the restoration of the fullness of creation through Christ. In Colossians, the concept of fullness lies at the intersection between Christology, ecclesiology and creation. Fullness is not directly used in connection

with creation but is a key part of 1:15-20. Here the relationship between Christ and creation is described alongside Christ's fullness. The implication is that creation has its fullness in Christ, who 'holds all things together' (1:17), and who 'reconciles all things' (1:20). Moreover, as the fullness of God dwells in Christ (1:19) and since Christ's reconciliation of all things has been made through his blood shed on the cross, we can conclude that the atoning work of Christ restores fullness to all of his creation and his church. Christ, creation and the Church are reconciled and filled in this new redemptive age.

Henderson (2007) explains that in first century Jewish thought and in the Septuagint, *pleroma* was used to emphasise God's filling of the world, not just at creation but in the present to sustain and direct all things. The filling of Christ and the Church comes from the active will of God and makes them 'the bodily staging ground for God's work in creation'. He also compares 'the concept of fullness with God's larger agenda, which is the renewal of the created order' (p.172). It is this renewal that leads to the reconciliation of all things.

In Ephesians, there is also a strong connection between the filling of creation and the filling of the Church in Christ (1:22-23). Foster (2007), suggests a link between the filling of creation, the filling of the Tabernacle and Temple (as Exodus 40:34) and the filling of the church. Seeing the Temple filling as God's Glory or *Shekinah*, he concludes: 'If the author of Ephesians viewed *pleroma* in terms of glory in 1:23, then the use in both 1:23 and 3:19 remains consonant with the Jewish Scriptures, which views God's glory as both filling the whole Earth (and heaven) as well as specifically filling the sanctuary of God. The difference in the letter to the Ephesians revolves around the fact that the glory that fills everything now fills the *ecclesia* as the sanctuary of God' (p.96).

The concept of glory filling creation illuminates the teaching on Christ, the Church and creation in Romans 8. Verses 9-11 speak of the filling of Christians with Christ through the Holy Spirit. Creation waits in expectation of the revelation of the 'children of God' to be liberated from decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God (8:19-21). Redemption of creation is linked to the redemption of Christians, and God's glory is revealed through the restoration of creation and through the Church.

Finally, the synergy between creation, Christ, and the Church, with the concepts of fullness and glory, can be seen in the prologue to John's Gospel where all things were made through Christ (1:3), who is

full (*pleres*) of grace and truth (1:14). It is out of his fullness (*pleroma*) that we have received grace (1:16).

When considering fullness in the New Testament we can therefore see how creation, redemption, Christology and ecclesiology are interconnected through *pleroma*. The Earth (and cosmos) was infilled and full of God's glory at creation, and groaning creation is looking forward to release and a new infilling for God's glory. This redemption has been won through Christ on the Cross and will be revealed as the Church (children of God) is revealed.

### Fullness and Kenosis

It is important to explore the relationship between Christ's self-emptying (*kenosis*) found in Philippians 2:7, and *pleroma*. Did *kenosis* involve giving up *pleroma*? This passage uses *kenosis* in connection with the incarnation. In John's description of the incarnation, he declares Christ 'full (*pleres*) of grace and truth' (John 1:14). Reid (1949) stated that 'Pleroma refers to the Person and the Kenosis to His deed, His action in history. The Person, being who He was and what He was, expressed Himself in the Kenosis...Kenosis far from being impossible to the immutability of God was necessitated by it, was a declaration of it. The Kenosis was the self-expression of the fullness of God' (pp.161 & 164).

There are two places in the New Testament where fullness is related to the Law: in Matthew 5:17, Jesus affirms that he has not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. Here the meaning of fulfil or complete is the most common translation. It could also be translated as 'bring the Law to fullness'. Similarly, in Romans 13:8-10, love is given as the ultimate fulfilment of the law. In Matthew, the context is the Beatitudes and in Romans it is a reflection on the command to love one's neighbour as oneself. If we receive fullness through being in Christ, then our actions should be those of self-giving love. This brings the Law to fullness.

### Fullness and Transcendence

Fullness was highly developed in the theology of the Gnostics, especially that of Valentinus, where it was used in a platonic context, looking toward an ultimate release from this material world. Overfield (1979) investigated the Gnostic use of *pleroma* with reference to its use

in Ephesians and Colossians. He concluded that New Testament usage of the term did not follow the technical (and transcendent) use in the Gnostic literature but had non-technical (and material) associations. Teilhard de Chardin, in seeking to synthesise evolutionary thinking with eschatology, hypothesised an 'Omega point' when all things would find transcendent fullness in God. This concept has been taken up more recently in *Laudato Si'* (2015), where all creatures are foreseen as moving to a common point of arrival in Christ (p.61). However, this use of ultimate fullness is immanent in seeing the fullness as already achieved in the Eucharist (p.71). If the New Testament use of *pleroma* is considered in the context of the Hebrew Bible use of *melo*, then usage is both incarnational to this created order but also charged with significance and pointing towards the New Creation. If this creation is groaning and waiting to be released into glory, then the New Creation, far from being fully transcendent, is a renewal of our present cosmos.

### Fullness in the New Creation

We can now see fullness portrayed in the passages describing the New Creation. Isaiah 11:4-12 portrays harmony in creation, in a world filled with all creatures at peace. The Earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (11:9). This image is repeated in Isaiah 65:16-25 – the classic passage about the New Heavens and Earth. It again gives a picture of abundance on Earth that has fruitfulness from human farming and harmony between domestic and wild species. Hodson (2011) argued that this provides an environmental ethic that sanctioned human intervention in the environmental crisis with actions that promote biodiversity and enable environmental sustainability. Isaiah 27:6 states that 'Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit'. Though this is using a metaphor, it implies a very positive view of nature's harvest. There is a role for the people of God in aiding the fruitfulness and therefore restoring the fullness of the Earth.

Several Gospel passages use *pleroma* or *pleres*: Matthew 14:20 and 15:37, Mark 6:43 and 8:20, describe the miraculous feeding of the crowds. Full is used to describe the pieces left over: the twelve and seven baskets both have symbolic meaning, pointing towards the fullness of the People of God and the fullness of Creation. Finally, Matthew 13:48 uses *pleres* to describe the nets full of fish in a parable of the Kingdom. All these references arguably point toward the New

Creation where these things will be given their ultimate fullness. In Revelation 21 and 22 there is a description of the New Heaven and Earth. It is a description of fullness with monthly crops of fruit, abundant water and vegetation.

### **Fullness, Discipleship and Environmental Crisis**

We can now bring these thoughts together and understand why fullness is a powerful environmental ethic for our age. In the introduction we considered planetary boundaries and noted that we are already beyond safe limits on some of these boundaries. Our overuse of the planet's resources is stripping it of its God-given fullness. This is damaging nature and is a denial of God's glory. If we continue, then the inevitable consequences are dire for humanity as well as for biodiversity and the Earth's systems. Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (37:1-14) is a sobering image and perhaps especially in 2020 (see postscript). It follows his description of the removal of fullness from the land, leaving it desolate (32:15). If we continue to use God's creation in this way, we may yet experience a modern realisation of 2 Chronicles 36:21: 'The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfilment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah'.

Christian discipleship at this time of environmental crisis demands a complete rethink of our lifestyles, our theology, our ecclesiology and mission. The Protestant Reformation put emphasis on the first part of Romans 8; now we need a new 'Environmental Reformation' to place emphasis on the later part of Romans 8. Creation is groaning and it has been stripped of its fullness by humanity. As Christians we are called in Christ to act to enable fullness once more. To do this is to give glory to God. If we are secure in our own fullness in Christ, we will have the courage to follow Christ and take up a lifestyle that is self-giving to the Earth as well as to humans. If our soteriology and eschatology lead us to understand a redemption and renewal of the Earth, then our actions should point towards that, in living in a way that is restorative of creation.

This should impact not only individual Christians but also church denominations and structures. Whether that means becoming carbon neutral, or planting trees for baptisms and confirmations, there are plenty of ways in which we can rethink our church society to live out this message of fullness. We also need fundamentally to rethink

our theology to understand fully the place of care for creation in our Christian discipleship and mission. Finally, a call to embrace fullness as an environmental ethic is also a call to be a restorative agent in society and in our communities. If the feeding of the 5,000 pointed towards the fullness of the New Creation and the love of Christ that brings everything to fullness, then every project to support the homeless, the hungry, endangered species, or to restore degraded land, also points towards Christ's redemptive love and the hope of New Creation. Actions by churches to support mitigation of climate change or prevention of habitat loss are missional actions that enable restoration.

As we look at our damaged and degraded world, we can remember the words of the Psalmist 'The Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof' (Psalm 24:1). In our theology we should remember that the Earth belongs to the Lord; and in all our actions we should seek to enable the Lord to restore fullness to his creation.

### **Postscript**

At the time of writing (March 2020), the world is beginning to experience a global pandemic from the Covid-19 virus. This is thought to have originated in bats and to have entered the human population via another animal that may have been part of the wildlife trade for bushmeat. It is too soon to reflect fully on the pandemic as an aspect of the environmental crisis, but loss of habitat through land-use change and factory farming may all have been significant factors in transmission (Spinney, 2020). Understanding our discipleship in the context of our relationship to God's creation has never been more urgent.

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### Questions for Discussion

1. Has Christian theology been too focused on humans and neglected the rest of God's creation? How might we enrich our Christian faith by gaining a deeper theological understanding of the natural world?
2. The Covid-19 pandemic is a global human health crisis. How might its origins in the environmental crisis affect our response as Christian disciples?
3. Climate change is an overarching threat to the future of humanity and the present world's biodiversity. Response to the crisis by governments has not yet been sufficient to avoid a severe climate crisis this century. How might churches and denominations make a missional response?

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