

A Study on the Environmental Crisis and COVID-19

By

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Introduction

Like many people, members of my Charismatic Evangelical church are becoming increasingly concerned about the condition of the earth's environment and the inadequacy of humanity's efforts to protect it. This concern is reflected in the amount of discussion around the subject, and the enthusiasm with which they have adopted sustainable lifestyle choices, such as electric vehicles and renewable energy. Our church is now considering adding sustainability to our parish strategy, so it seemed to be a fruitful subject for study. Certainly, environmental care has been a topic close to my heart since my teens, and recent developments have reinforced that view. It also has a strong connection to the Church of England's Fifth Mark of Mission (Richards, 2017).

The aim of this study is to reflect on the theology and praxis around sustainability and climate change, considering the COVID-19 pandemic. Given my intuitive views on this topic, it is an opportunity to explore the scriptures and academic sources more deeply, to challenge my assumptions and strengthen my theological grasp over it. Specifically, it incorporates a survey to gauge the opinions on this topic of members of my local church context (Open Evangelical/Charismatic), and to discern the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's attitudes. Where do they resonate with theologians, and where are the opportunities for further discovery? It also offered an opportunity to compare perspectives from different churches. My final goal is to reflect on to how to inform discipleship, mission, and ministry in my own and other parishes, specifically to form the basis of a series of Bible studies.

This briefing intentionally goes into some depth on theological background, to present a holistic theology where Creation belongs to Christ, whose incarnation demonstrates his passion for it. Humans are part of this created order, though called and equipped to join with Jesus in caring for it. And I consider the situation through the new lens of COVID-19, confirming the opportunities for the church: 1) to use an enforced economic hiatus to reflect on how to rebuild more optimally; 2) to lead in sharing a message of hope.

My literature review is followed by a short description of my research methodology, and then a discussion of the survey results, which show participants generally aligned with the theology described above. They will also demonstrate broad agreement with respondents from a Modern Catholic church in 2018, around Covenant, the Incarnation and role of humanity, but differences in opinion on the roles of the Sabbath and human sinfulness, and particularly on Eschatology. I will show that participants in my survey are conscious of a role COVID-19 has played in raising ecological awareness. The ideas that resonated with them the most were how Christ's incarnation

demonstrates God's concern for creation, and that of human 'stewardship'. I will conclude with a brief reflection on utilizing these insights to develop Bible study material, framed around the five Marks of Mission.

A review of Biblical, traditional, and academic sources on care for creation and COVID-19

Much has been written about humanity's relationship with creation and its implications for what the behaviour of Jesus' disciples should look like, not least by Pope Francis (2015). To inform this study, I will review several key texts to identify their shared key themes, which I would summarize, loosely in the order in which they appear in scripture, as Creation (including the community of creation), Sabbath, the Fall, Covenant, Jesus' Incarnation, Eschatology, and drawing them together with a review of humanity's role within creation. I will follow with a look at how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced these perspectives. The related questions from the survey which follows are noted in the section headings.

Creation (Question 1)

It seems logical to start at the beginning, in Genesis 1-2. As Bookless (2008, p.19) notes, Christians have long argued over the interpretation of these chapters in terms of how God created all things. But that is beyond the scope of this study. My focus is on God's view of creation and what that means for us. Firstly, Moltmann (1985, p.73) explains the cosmos is created, rather than inherently divine. But it is 'good': Deane-Drummond (2008, p.86) reminds us that the broad sweep of the Hebrew bible emphasizes the goodness of creation and fruitfulness of God's ongoing creative pursuit. The Eastern Orthodox and Celtic Churches established positive views of creation (Hodson & Hodson, 2008, p.82-83) as an outworking of God's nature, sanctified through Christ.

Not all theologies take this positive view. Second-generation Greek urban Christians, swayed by the Neo-Platonic concept of a dualism between soul and body (Hodson & Hodson, 2008, p.80), developed a negative understanding of creation. These ideas came to the fore with the Renaissance (Hodson & Hodson, 2008, pp.85-86): human supremacy and potential were celebrated, and nature came to be regarded as intentionally unfinished and unrefined, specifically for humans to improve it.

But Psalm 24 says '*The earth is the Lord's...*'. Drawing on this and other texts such as Deuteronomy 10.14 and Leviticus 25.23, Bookless (2008, pp.28-30) emphasizes the idea that the earth and all its creatures belong to God and, more specifically, his Son (Colossians 1.16b): they '*find their purpose in him*' and '*reveal God's glory*' (Marlow, 2008, p.7). Moltmann (1985, p.72) says God created it as an act of will, the Father creating heaven and earth '*through the Son in the Spirit.*' (p.94).

Arguably, negative views of creation rely on an incomplete consideration of scripture. If we consider the whole Bible, we find a material creation intentionally made for Jesus, to reveal God's glory, and to demonstrate his loving nature and creative qualities. Further, Bauckham (2010, pp.64-102) synthesizes the scriptural material into a picture of a '*community of creation*'; all creatures (and plants!) have their own purpose and worship God in their own way. Humanity is, though unique in some ways, 'of the dust' (adamah) and an integral part of this community, dependent on it and called to share in it. I will reprise this theme later, but first will consider the apex of creation: the *Sabbath*.

Sabbath (Question 2)

Sabbath rest is integral to God's creative design. Quoting Genesis 2.2, Hodson & Hodson (2008, p.159) describe the Sabbath as part of creation's fabric. Deane-Drummond (2008, p.96) identifies the Sabbath (not humanity) as the pinnacle of creation, and Moltmann (1985, p.6) agrees. The Torah repeatedly states the Sabbath is '*to the Lord*'. As the crown of creation, which belongs to God, Sabbath is his too. Per Deuteronomy 5.14, Sabbath provides rest for all, free people and slaves, aliens, and livestock. It is collective and egalitarian, articulating a sense of justice, the responsibility of the powerful to provide for all in their care.

Sabbatical laws are clearly important spiritually as part of our relationship with God, but what practical use are they? Bauckham (2010, pp.26-27) says the Sabbatical institutions are about '*keeping the economic drive in human life within its place and not letting it dominate the whole of life*'. Most importantly, Sabbatical instructions include allowing a time of regeneration for the land (Leviticus 25.1-7). So, they underpin sustainability. Deane-Drummond (2008, pp.95-96) summarizes this by saying Sabbath encourages '*a way of being with the world... conducive to eco-justice...*'. This resonates with Wells' (2015) assertion that God would be with us – calling humanity to enjoy him and his work. But this constructive relationship has been sullied by the fall.

The Fall (Question 3)

Creation groans – and we groan inwardly (Rom 8.22-23). The fall manifests itself as broken relationships. Authors agree that it is about more than just humanity's relationship with God. Bookless (2008, p.37) says, '*it is... about how all the good relationships that God created have been spoiled.*' Snyder & Scandrett (2011, p.68) name these '*spiritual, psychological, social, and environmental alienations*' '*the ecology of sin*'. Two things result.

Spencer & White (2007, p.83) say, '*throughout the Old Testament there is a connection between human obedience and the fertility of the land.*' But is this due to divine or human action? Firstly, there is the direct consequence of human exploitation. Hodson & Hodson (2008, p.53) say, '*eating of the tree (of knowledge of Good & Evil) symbolized material indulgence.*' This selfishness leads to ecological abuse and decay (Jeremiah 12.10-11, Isaiah 24.4-6). I would argue that this ecological decay described is indeed a prophetic prediction of the physical result of

greedy exploitation of the land. Hodson & Hodson (2008, p.56) describe this as *'the felling of creation by human activity'*.

Secondly, Hodson & Hodson (2008, p.55) understand *'natural environmental stress'* in terms of the spiritual *'curse on the ground in Genesis 3'*. So, we identify two results of the fall: a spiritual curse, or *'natural evil'*, equating to God's withholding of abundance from an ecosystem, and *'direct'* decay due to human overexploitation of the land, which itself results from our spiritual rebellion. Bookless (2008, p. 58) says, *'if the ecological crisis is ultimately a spiritual crisis, then the cure is also a spiritual one.'* I would add that the outworking of that cure is both spiritual, through divine action, and physical/practical, through a godly human response. Such a response requires a covenant.

Covenant (Question 4)

A covenant is a contract between two parties. God's first covenant, with Noah (Genesis 9.1-17), is notable in that it is with *'all creatures'* (Hodson & Hodson, 2015, p.57). It recognizes the rights of animals, resonating, as Bauckham (2010, pp.133-134) notes, with Levitical guidelines (Deuteronomy 25.4). And it places humanity inside creation, not over it. Importantly, it is pragmatic (Bauckham, 2010, p.119), *'to regulate violence of the world, not extirpate it'*. Towner (1996) expresses this:

'Our proper relationship to nature is not to twist it into a perfection of our own imagining, which would... be another form of oppression, but rather humbly seek to live in harmony with it in a way that prefigures the covenant of peace that only the Creator can bestow.'

Later covenants (Hodson & Hodson, 2015, pp.58-60) underpin the link with the land (Abrahamic) and establish frameworks for living ethically (Levitical) and leading responsibly (Davidic). These covenants collectively regulate humanity's role in caring for creation to God's agenda. Hodson & Hodson (2015, pp.61-62) note that their culmination is the new covenant in Jesus, God's incarnate Son.

Incarnation (Question 5)

The writers I have reviewed seem to agree on the importance of Christ's incarnation in contextualising these covenantal relationships. Commenting on Colossians 1.15-20, Bauckham (2010, p.154) says, *'The Christ who created all things and for whom they were created, ... is the Christ who can and does reconcile all things.'* Bauckham (2010, p.156-158) says this means the restoration of harmony in creation. He notes that a holistic view of creation is *'in relation to the crucified and risen Jesus.'* And Bookless (2008, p.63) affirms Jesus as the source, sustainer and saviour of creation. Deane-Drummond (2008, p112) agrees, noting Christ's affirmation of material creation through becoming incarnate. So, Christ's birth confirms the world matters to God and his death and resurrection are to redeem not just humanity, but the whole of creation. But what of his second coming?

Eschatology (Questions 6, 7)

Many Christians, particularly Western Evangelicals (Hodson & Hodson, 2008, p.201f), understand the end times in terms of earth and heaven being destroyed and re-created, so environmental care is pointless. But Hodson and Hodson (2008) and other authors agree a more comprehensive reading of scripture points more to renewal than replacement. Discussing 2 Peter 3, Bookless (2008, pp.80-85) draws a parallel between Noah's flood (*'the world perished'* – cleansed through water) and a purification (not destruction) through fire at Christ's second coming. The flood did not destroy but purged and renewed the world. Similarly, the fire Peter mentions will be one of purification. And Bauckham (2010, p.175) draws a parallel between 2 Corinthians 5.17 *'if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation'* and Revelation 21.3,5, asserting that Paul is talking about renewal, not replacement, of creation. Spencer & White (2007, p.94) agree: *'God is not going to make all new things, but he is going to "make all things new".'* They summarize (p.93):

'When Christians look forward eagerly to the return of Jesus, then, it is not to their escape from earth, but to their reconciliation with it and with all things...'

If a new Christian is a 'new creation', the same person sanctified, renewed in Christ and on a discipleship journey of improvement, then these parallels suggest the 'new earth' could certainly be our earth undergoing the same godly transformation. Reason indeed to care for it now, and for a good understanding of people's role in that change.

Humanity's role (Questions 8, 9, 10)

I lack space to review the plethora of sources on humanity's place in creation. But broadly, two themes are common, those of human 'dominion' and 'stewardship'. Below I will argue for a contextualized stewardship model. First I will address dominion theory, which draws on Genesis 1.28-29 (Kulikovsky, 2009), to emphasize humanity's status as *'the pinnacle of God's creation,'* called to *'fill the earth and subdue it'* and to *'have dominion over'* all living creatures. It asserts the prioritization of human needs over those of the rest of nature. Famously, Lynn White (1967) critiqued Christian thinking, including that which has informed modern anthropocentrism (including Communism), as based on a 'dominion' view of humanity taken to extremes, leading to disregard for nature's conservation. And Snyder and Scandrett (2011, p.44) agree that American Evangelicals undervalue nature and 'commodify' it. Bookless (2008, p.34) refutes White's thesis on the grounds that i) non-Christian countries also abuse the environment and ii) it disregards Biblical teaching that creation is *'for God'*. But it seems to me that White is not critiquing the Bible, but the incomplete way it is used; and (correctly, I suggest) locating Christianity in the sequence of historical events that led ultimately to disregard for the environment, whether 'Christian' or 'secular'. In proposing Francis of Assisi as a *'patron saint for ecologists'* he appears to point in the same direction as contemporary theologians on this topic.

Christian ecological stewardship is controversial. Hodson & Hodson (2008, p.42) describe it as a relationship ‘*in which humans are partners with God in caring for his world.*’ And Bookless (2008, p.34) states ‘*humanity is... made in God’s image to care for the earth.*’ But Bauckham (2010) critiques stewardship, saying it fails to acknowledge the agency of God and leaves the door open for human exploitation of creation. He also decries it as an inferred theology, so lacking Biblical context. Palmer (2006) agrees with these points, adding that stewardship focuses on the relationship between God and humanity, deprioritizing nature. Are these criticisms valid? ‘Steward’ means ‘*one who superintends another’s affairs*’ (Chambers, 2003). There are numerous references to such roles in the Bible, such as Joseph (thrice! – Genesis 39-41), Daniel (Daniel 2.48) and in Jesus’ parables (e.g., Luke 12.42-48). In these situations, the ruler sets the agenda, and the steward manages things to that purpose. Christians are called to be co-heirs (e.g., Titus 3.6-8) with Christ as the firstborn (Romans 8.29). Drawing this together with the dominion model (Genesis 1.28), we have a picture in which humans are indeed ‘to rule’, but with God to *his* plan, not our own. I contend that the stewardship model works when brought into a discipleship context: creation is primarily for Jesus, and as his servants, humans are to look after it with him.

Further, as Bauckham (2010, pp.34-36) says, part of our role is to enhance creation, to use our God-given hands and creativity to generate things that God chose not to produce naturally, such as art, gardens, and cooking. I always marvel at simple dishes, like lemon-meringue pie: the way the ingredients complement each other seems miraculous. God put all that potential into the plants and animals involved, but it needed the people he created to bake it. The pie does not ‘improve on’ nature but enhances it.

When we use our talents like this it is as if we are ‘singing’ in multi-faceted voices. I propose an orchestra as a helpful picture: God is the conductor and creatures are the instruments making music to the Lord. Humans, with our voices, are the singers, part of the orchestra, dependent on it – and the conductor – to make music, but distinct in ability and role.

Summary

In summary, environmental theology is complex and any way forward must respect a spectrum of viewpoints. But I venture to outline an emerging theology underpinning a sustainability rationale: God cares about his good, creature-filled creation. The crown of creation is the Sabbath, to enable nature to regenerate, and check overexploitation by humanity, whose sinfulness undermines God’s created harmony. But humans are integral to creation, though commissioned to rule with God, as servant disciples, to care for nature according to God’s will under his covenant with humanity and all creatures. The whole is sustained and redeemed through the incarnate Christ; it is indeed being renewed right now in anticipation of his return. Into this mix we throw the hand-grenade that is COVID-19. How does that alter our view?

Relation to COVID-19 (Questions 11 – 15)

Authors have quickly penned reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic in this context. Concerning its cause, Heugh (2020), whilst recognising trans-species viruses as ‘natural evils’ stemming from the fall, identified it as ‘*a disaster of our own making*’ and Brueggemann (2020, pp.17) noted the possibility of viewing God’s role in COVID-19 as:

‘a “quid pro quo”; we reap what we sow..., (or) “mobilization of the negative forces of creation” to perform the intention of... God..., (or an opportunity to) pause before God’s “raw holiness” in a world untamed’

I would agree with his refusal to draw sharp lines here and be held by the mystery.

The immediate impact of the pandemic is akin to an exile, although there has been an accompanying increase in solidarity and kindness. Valerio, et al., (2020 p.11) note another ‘benefit’ as reduced environmental impact from curtailed economic activity. They also recognize (p.15) the resonance with ‘*creation groaning*’ (Rom 8.22) and the link (p.14) with social justice. The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on BAME communities is well documented (Kirby, 2020).

Valerio et al. (2020, p.15), recognize past pandemics often drove societal ‘improvements’ such as the Black Death leading to a market economy replacing the feudal system. They note it is perhaps too early to tell if COVID-19 will produce similar developments. But the hiatus in economic activity allows us to reflect on opportunities to ‘*build back better*’ (Valerio et al. 2020, p.19): to unite people, value life over productivity, address both domestic and global poverty, and reconsider ecological conservation and global heating.

Overall the pandemic, though, has been an opportunity for the church to shine (Heugh, 2020) and the evidence is many have stepped up, bringing Christ’s love and hope to their communities (Valerio, et al., 2020, pp.14-15, Matthew 25.35-36, Ephesians 4.12). And Brueggemann (2020, pp.29-32) identifies it as an opportunity to lead – in unbending hope and to God’s steadfast love: ‘*in the midst of abandonment, God has not abandoned.*’ He challenges us patiently to anticipate the resumption of life’s celebrations, whilst waiting courageously and with honesty about the situation.

A Quantitative Survey of Members of a Charismatic Evangelical Church

As noted above, to inform my Charismatic Evangelical church’s ongoing dialogue, discernment for praxis and development of catechetical material around creation care, I wanted to understand the views of church members on the theology of environmental sustainability, considering the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, I wished to avoid bias where possible (especially given my own strong opinions on this topic), and to compare my results with those of similar recent studies to gain deeper insight. So, I selected a quantitative survey.

There already exist several sociological techniques for evaluating the connection between underlying human beliefs and ecological awareness; a commonly used example is the ‘New Environmental Paradigm’ (NEP) (Dunlap, et al., 2000), but this does not consider faith values. Drawing on NEP, Howles (2018) defined a focused set of questions, whilst adding theological themes, to conduct a survey in an Anglican church in the Modern Catholic tradition. To minimize bias in question development, I decided to use ten of Howles’ fifteen questions – verbatim (questions 1-10), to allow direct statistical comparison in the results between two different churches. Such analysis would not be valid for non-verbatim responses. However, I did add five of my own questions related to COVID-19 (questions 11-15). I wanted to limit the number of questions to fifteen, to ensure good user experience, which also maximises the survey completion rate.

The statements tested in the questionnaire, grouped into themes, are shown in table 1.

Table 1 – Full Set of Themed Questions Used in the Survey

Theme	No.	Statement
Creation	1.	All creation worships God, including plants and animals; humans are merely one part of this larger tapestry.
Sabbath	2.	One of the reasons God instructed there to be a “Sabbath” was to enable the Earth itself to rest and recuperate.
The Fall	3.	The present ecological crisis (for example, the phenomenon of “climate change”) is directly related to human sinfulness.
Covenant	4.	God’s promises are directed not just to humans, but to plants, to animals and even to the Earth itself.
Christ’s Incarnation	5.	The incarnation of God through his Son, Jesus Christ, shows us that He regards His entire creation as important.
Eschatology	6.	The present world will come to an end: we should not worry excessively about the ecological crisis - it is part of God’s plan.
	7.	Heaven does not mean going up to become spiritual beings: we will have physical bodies and live on this Earth transformed.
Humanity’s Role in Creation	8.	Humans were created at the apex of God’s creation: they have the right to take charge of the Earth and use its resources freely.
	9.	God told humans to “fill the earth and subdue it”; thus the material world is primarily for the use and enjoyment of humans.
	10.	Humans are the “stewards” of God’s creation, which means they have a special responsibility to care for the Earth.
Relation to COVID-19	11.	The COVID-19 pandemic has made you more aware of wider ecological issues.
	12.	The COVID-19 pandemic has its root causes in humanity's careless exploitation of the earth's resources.
	13.	Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the church has a vital role to play in creating a more equitable society.
	14.	The COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call from God that we need to look after his creation better.
	15.	Following the COVID-19 pandemic, we should reframe our relationship with all people and the whole of God's creation.

To score the responses, I used the Likert scale (Likert, 1932), a five-point scale allowing respondents to articulate their degree of agreement with a specific statement (from ‘strongly agree’: 5, via ‘neutral’: 3 to ‘strongly disagree’: 1). This is easy to understand and it facilitates quantitative comparison between data sets. Making the survey anonymous also improves the results, as it ‘protects’ the respondent’s identity, encouraging them to respond honestly. But I did allow respondents to add comments in a free-text field. The survey was coded into ‘Microsoft Forms’ and sent electronically to my parish’s email list in November 2020. Participation was optional, and subjects were able to opt out once started.

Project constraints imposed several limitations on this survey: it omits personal information such as gender, age, occupation, or politics, due to insufficient space to analyse the effects; neither is there any information on faith position, although all respondents were contacted through a church mailing list, so some belief in God or sympathy to Christian values can be assumed. The total population is small, so it is impossible to survey a statistically representative sample according to standard market research protocols. The mailing list contained 700 names, of whom about 350 regularly engage. There were 102 responses: 14% of the total population and therefore approximately 28% of the ‘engaged’ population. This gives a 10% margin of error on any data point (CheckMarket, 2013). However, there is sufficient data to perform paired comparison tests. Finally, the statements used are generalized: participants may have responded differently if they had gone into more specifics, such as global heating, habitat destruction or food and water availability.

Results and Discussion

The results of the survey are shown in table 2. Below I will briefly comment on the key findings from the results, before comparing to a similar survey (Howles, 2018) run in a Modern Catholic church, and then reflecting on the impact COVID-19 has had on opinions. Then I will discuss the implications in terms of ministry: – walking together through a time of shadow, mission: – the opportunities that come to light, and finally discipleship: – pointers to the development of related Bible Study materials.

Firstly, although a quantitative survey with fixed statements avoids some sources of bias, it does impede a nuanced engagement with some of the conceptual relationships, and this needs to be borne in mind in what follows. Secondly, I note that the level of engagement with this survey was good, within the typical range of 5-30% (Willott, 2019). And the general trend in the responses was towards support for a link between theology and environmental sustainability. For me this is reassuring, given my backing for such a link. It could be a source of bias, however, as respondents (within the target cohort) self-selected, possibly based on their sympathy to the cause. But it does resonate with the general level of enthusiasm for the environment I witness in the church’s culture, and it chimes with the tone of casual dialogues on the topic of creation care I have had with church members, and with many comments submitted to the survey. One member said:

‘There is a complex interplay between God, creation and mankind. Humans were given the right to use the earth, but responsibly. Selfishness and carelessness have characterised man's relationship with the Earth. We need to learn how to live more lightly and simply.’

Approximately two-thirds of participants ‘agreed’ with the first four propositions, on Creation, Sabbath, the Fall and Covenant. A clear majority would concur with the summary I made from the literature review above, locating humanity within creation, agreeable to Sabbatical regeneration, accepting human sinfulness as a cause of ecological degradation and including other creatures in God’s Covenant with us. That number increases to 87% in agreement with statement 5, that Christ’s bodily incarnation shows he views his creation as important. This is most encouraging and indicates a potential starting point for ongoing discussion with members (at least of my church).

The next two proposals were about eschatology. Three-quarters of respondents disagreed with the idea that we should not worry about the environment. This could be because people believe in a ‘renewed’ rather than ‘totally new’ earth. But the ambivalent response to the second statement, that we will live on a transformed earth, suggests otherwise: one third were ‘neutral’ suggesting uncertainty, with a slight balance to disagreement. Perhaps, as could be assumed for an evangelical church, participants believe in a ‘replacement cosmos’, but do not consider that a reason to neglect the current one. There is insufficient information to say, but this could be a fertile topic for further discussion.

Table 2. The Survey Results (page 11)

Table 2. Notes on the Survey Results

- It is customary to show the number and percentage of participants selecting a particular response. However, given 102 surveys were completed, I report only the number, which is very similar to the percentage.
- Mean score is derived from assigning a linear scale to the responses from 1: ‘strongly disagree’ to 5: ‘strongly agree’. So, the difference in the mean score from 3 (‘neutral’) indicates the overall strength of feeling in either direction.
- The final three columns are to facilitate comparison to a similar study in a ‘Modern Catholic’ Anglican church (Howles, 2018):
 - The mean score from Howles’ study is shown.
 - The ‘P’ value signifies the probability two scores are the same:
 - $P > 5\%$ indicates the difference is statistically insignificant and we accept the ‘null hypothesis’, treating the means as the same.
 - $P < 5\%$ indicates the difference is significant and we reject the ‘null hypothesis’: the means are statistically different.

Table 2 – Survey Results

Theme	No	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean Score	Mean (Howles, 2018)	P value	Null Hypothesis
Creation	1	All creation worships God, including plants and animals; humans are merely one part of this larger tapestry.	24	41	19	15	3	3.67	2.81	2%	Reject
Sabbath	2	One of the reasons God instructed there to be a “Sabbath” was to enable the Earth itself to rest and recuperate.	23	45	23	8	3	3.75	2.85	1%	Reject
The Fall	3	The present ecological crisis (for example, the phenomenon of “climate change”) is directly related to human sinfulness.	24	43	18	13	4	3.69	1.54	0%	Reject
Covenant	4	God’s promises are directed not just to humans, but to plants, to animals and even to the Earth itself.	33	38	19	9	3	3.87	3.92	100%	Accept
Christ’s Incarnation	5	The incarnation of God through his Son, Jesus Christ, shows us that He regards His entire creation as important.	52	37	9	3	1	4.33	4.12	31%	Accept
Eschatology	6	The present world will come to an end: we should not worry excessively about the ecological crisis - it is part of God’s plan.	3	6	14	40	39	1.96	1.12	0%	Reject
	7	Heaven does not mean going up to become spiritual beings: we will have physical bodies and live on this Earth transformed.	10	18	33	32	9	2.88	1.92	0%	Reject
Humanity’s Role in Creation	8	Humans were created at the apex of God’s creation: they have the right to take charge of the Earth and use its resources freely.	7	24	12	36	23	2.57	3.00	18%	Accept
	9	God told humans to “fill the earth and subdue it”; thus the material world is primarily for the use and enjoyment of humans.	3	21	14	38	26	2.38	2.50	74%	Accept
	10	Humans are the “stewards” of God’s creation, which means they have a special responsibility to care for the Earth.	72	26	0	1	3	4.60	4.38	41%	Accept
Relation to COVID-19	11	The COVID-19 pandemic has made you more aware of wider ecological issues.	13	51	15	22	1	3.52			
	12	The COVID-19 pandemic has its root causes in humanity’s careless exploitation of the earth’s resources.	14	36	22	22	8	3.25			
	13	Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the church has a vital role to play in creating a more equitable society.	37	52	12	0	1	4.22			
	14	The COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call from God that we need to look after his creation better.	23	36	22	18	3	3.59			
	15	Following the COVID-19 pandemic, we should reframe our relationship with all people and the whole of God’s creation.	30	49	17	6	0	4.01			

Questions 8-10 relate to humanity's role within creation. About 60% disagreed with the statements aligning with a 'dominion model' that places humanity at the apex of creation which is for our use and enjoyment. But, overwhelmingly, 96% agreed with the notion of stewardship. The idea that we are to care for creation, with no license for exploitation, is clearly one that resonates. Again, given the perceived vagueness discussed above around these as theological concepts (particularly stewardship), digging deeper into scripture and people's thought-processes would be a productive subject for small Bible groups.

Before discussing the impact of COVID, I turn to the comparison with a survey conducted in a Modern Catholic church in 2018. Note, the 'null hypothesis' is that the means are statistically the same. 'Rejecting' the null hypothesis means we adopt the 'alternative hypothesis' that they differ. It is interesting that responses from the two churches aligned on the statements about the Covenant, Incarnation and humanity's role. The two groups appear to agree Jesus cares for his entire creation and with the notion of human stewardship, not dominion (although the Modern Catholic church was marginally 'more neutral' on the 'dominion' proposition, the difference was insignificant).

Of perhaps more interest are the areas where the responses were different. The Modern Catholic church was broadly neutral to the statements viewing humanity as part of Creation and supporting Sabbatical regeneration (whereas the Charismatic Evangelical church tended to agree with them). But it strongly disagreed with the notion that the current crisis is related to human sinfulness. I would concur with Howles' (2018) surprise at this result, his confidence in a strong scriptural link affirmed by Romans 8.20-22, and Genesis 3.17, and his recognition of the theme as a fertile source for ecological principles. And curiously, the Modern Catholic church members disagreed with both statements about eschatology. They all felt we should worry about the crisis, but 69% do not look to a future transformed earth. To my surprise, this apparent inconsistency was more marked – people, including myself, to be honest, might 'assume' evangelicals more likely to look forward to a more literally 'new' creation.

There are too many confounding factors to discern the causal relationships here, such as churchmanship, time, and place. I mention time because a number of events have occurred since Howles' (2018) survey, including the broadcasting of *Blue Planet 2* by the BBC, Greta Thunberg's climate change campaign, *Extinction Rebellion*, and COVID-19. Polling suggests these are raising awareness and concern (Todd, 2019). It is possible these will have influenced theological opinions on ecological care too. It would be instructive to test this, for example, by running the survey again in Howles' Modern Catholic church – and those with other churchmanship. But certainly COVID-19 has been a key influence in 2020.

Generally, respondents affirmed linking COVID-19 to the crisis: at least 50% 'agreed' with all except one of the statements. Curiously, fewer people connected COVID-19 with resource overexploitation than those connecting the ecological crisis with sinfulness. One member commented:

'COVID-19 is but one pandemic. There have been several others in the past.'

My personal view is closer to accepting the complexity Brueggemann (2020) described, open to multiple views of God's action, but this certainly contributes another rich discussion point. 60% of participants agreed with the proposals about COVID-19 acting as an alarm and awareness raiser – but some disagreed because they were already aware:

'I have been a 'green' Christian for about 50 years, so I don't think the pandemic has changed my attitude to environmental issues very much.' (Church member)

But the highest agreement was with the statements about action – the church's role and a need for relationship reframing. This indicates an opportunity for the church to lead in addressing the impact of the Fall: – broken relationships.

So, to summarise, we have a broad picture reflecting some diversity in views on theological background, with more consensus on a basis for action. The cohort surveyed says creation is not for humans to exploit or ignore (although neither does it look to a 'transformed' earth). It appears aligned with the theological framework I summarised in the literature review above, and it acknowledges COVID-19's role in raising awareness of ecological issues. But the topics that most resonated were Christ's incarnation demonstrating the importance of creation to God, and that of human 'stewardship'. A large majority of participants also saw the reframing of our relationship with creation as important and recognized the church's role in achieving this. I find this very encouraging.

As mentioned in the introduction, one of my objectives was to reflect on the theological basis for Bible study materials on this topic. The resource would have a practical objective – to help leaders facilitate disciples on a common learning journey as described by Heywood (2017), involving space to learn, corporate theological reflection and developing practical '*communities of mission*'. For my charismatic evangelical church, the strong resonances identified offer a secure way into discussion, for affirmation (and challenge!), and reflection into their underlying meaning and implications. The more ambivalent points offer an opportunity for collective exploration, through exposure to a balanced and comprehensive set of scriptures and traditional sources, avoiding the imposition of strong opinions (like my own).

I believe a strength of this topic is that it touches all five Marks of Mission (Richards, 2017), including '*teach, baptise and nurture new believers*' as discussed in the preceding paragraph. I would propose it as a context for '*responding to human need*', by inviting church members to 'groan' together (Romans 8.22) in the '*thorns and thistles*' (Lennox, 2020, p.40) of a broken creation, of which the COVID-19 crisis is a particularly apposite example. Such mourning can be cathartic – and inspirational. As Clifford (2017) notes, '*climate change* (along with other ecological damage) *is a justice issue*', so is welded to the fourth mark.

As noted above, a principal outcome of the learning would be communal outworking of ‘ecological mission’ – taking a prominent lead on sustainable lifestyles and creation care initiatives. This resonates with Bonhoeffer’s postmodern mission in community: ‘a way of service rather than domination’ (Spencer, 2007, pp.168-170). I would extend this to say the church exists not just ‘*for humanity*’, but for the whole creation. So, a connection to the fifth Mark of Mission is obvious. With environmental ‘stewardship’ at its core, outworked in a context of discipleship, it appears as a form of ‘Missio Dei’ – recognizing Christ as the principal actor sending the church (Spencer, 2007, p.9). In doing these things to Jesus’ plan, the church will indeed be proclaiming the Good News!

Conclusion

Whilst the scope of this project has necessarily been narrow, it has been a valuable opportunity to broaden and deepen my understanding of environmental theology. It has strengthened my conviction that creation care should be front and centre of the church’s mission and ministry over the next twenty years.

Like other topics, ecological theology is complex, but I have argued for a perspective recognizing God’s concern for his creation, which is ‘good’ and contains, amongst other creatures, humans, who are uniquely gifted and called to ‘tend the garden’ in cooperation with Christ the Lord. Sabbath rest and regeneration for all things is baked into God’s blueprint, but sin has damaged the harmony, both directly, through the effects of greedy exploitation, and indirectly, through ‘natural evil’. God’s covenant with us to regulate our relationship with nature extends to all creatures. The definitive version of that covenant is manifested in the death and resurrection of Christ, who is renewing the earth ready for his return. The COVID-19 pandemic has enabled us to sharpen our focus on nature, demonstrating God’s love for all with a message of hope, that he is still with us despite all.

Respondents to an opinion survey were broadly aligned with this picture, and themes that strongly resonated with them were the importance of Christ’s incarnation in demonstrating God’s love for his creation, and, pointing towards praxis, a ‘stewardship’ model of humanity’s role. These are powerful starting points for communal study material but given the ambiguity around some of the concepts (like stewardship), care would be needed to ensure a comprehensive and balanced consideration of the whole Bible. A further resonant theme for the material is the COVID-19 pandemic, which opens up the opportunity to mourn together and reflect (penitently!) on the noxious effects of human sinfulness, both directly through abuse and neglect, and through divine withholding of blessings.

Whatever platform Christ’s body, the church uses to reflect, it strikes me on considering all this that Jesus is calling us, as servant disciples, into a practical mission to bring justice, equity and stewardship together to work purposefully to care for his garden and restore it, under his Lordship, to a new Eden.

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Biography



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