

The Implications of Integrity of Creation for Theological Education and Evangelisation

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Other papers have been presented at this conference on the topic of the “integrity of creation”. I wish to summarise my own views on this topic in relation to the teaching curriculum of our theological colleges, and the task of evangelism in Melanesia.

The Integration of creation

All of creation is related to its Creator. “God, who made the world, and everything in it, is the Lord of heaven and earth” (Acts 17:24). The beginning of the Christian view of nature, is the concept of creation that God was there before the beginning, and God created everything out of nothing. The true Christian mentality is that everything rests upon the reality of creation-out-of-nothing by God. All things, including man, are equal in their origin, as far as creation is concerned. Now, how did He create? On the side of His infinity, there is the great chasm. He creates all things, and He alone is Creator. Everything else is created. Only He is Infinite, and only He is the Creator; everything else is the creature and finite. Only He is independent; everything else is dependent. So man, the animal, and the flower, in the biblical viewpoint, are equally separated from God, in that He created them all. It is from this dependent state of creation that we can talk about its integrity, or wholeness.

Evangelical Passiveness Towards creation

Dr Lynn White Jr; a professor of history at the University of California, Los Angeles, in his article called, “The Historical Roots of our Ecology Crisis”, published in *Science Magazine* (March 19, 1967), argued that the crisis in ecology is Christianity’s fault. He says that Christianity had a bad view of nature, and so, this is carried over into the present-day, post-Christian world. He bases his allegations of a “bad view of nature” on the fact that Christianity taught that man had dominion over nature, and so man has treated nature in a destructive way. In my opinion, this allegation is partially true, in a sense that not all Christians treat nature as such. However, the distressing thing about this is that evangelicals often really have had no better sense in this area than

unbelievers. Many evangelicals, then, ought to acknowledge their passiveness, and lack of proper stewardship, toward God's creation.

The Disintegration and Reintegration of Creation

Any discussion, which ignores the dependence of creation on its Creator, to talk of creation as an independent entity, would be untrue to the biblical picture of creation as pointed out in my introductory comments. And this discussion would not be able to take seriously the fact that the essence of sin is precisely "independence" from God. The failure to recognise that the disintegration of creation is the result of a broken relationship with God, can only lead us away from the central message of the Bible, which is about salvation, and the glory of God. The restoration of mankind, and the rest of creation, is only accomplished through the restoring work of the cross of Christ. And, according to scripture, this "integrity" of creation is an eschatological expectation.

The Gospel and the Integration of Creation

It is our desire, in theological education, and in evangelism, to place, as our priority, the fact that God is not only Creator, but also Redeemer. One cannot enter into covenant relationship with the Creator until one receives His personal offer of redemption. Without the perspective of the resurrected Christ, and the power of His resurrected life, there can never be a truly holistic concern for God's creation. An understanding of how to enter into a covenant relationship with God, and how to live within that covenant relationship, is a necessary prerequisite to understanding how to live in relationship with the rest of creation. The work of evangelism is to call people into that covenant relationship with God, through Christ. They may then relate to the rest of creation, and also value it properly, with the same integrity. Lynn Smith, a non-Christian, has said that the solution to the ecological crisis is rooted in religion.

What people do about their ecology, depends on what they think about themselves, in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature, and our destiny – that is by religion.¹

Men do what they think. Whatever their worldview is, this is the thing, which will spill over into the external world. A regenerated mind gives one a

¹ *Science Magazine*, March 19, 1967.

proper view, and a truly holistic concern, for the rest of creation. For God values everything as He made them. God deals with a plant as a plant, with an animal as an animal, with man as a man, not violating the orders of creation. He will not ask the plant to behave like a man, neither will He deal with man as though he is a plant. God treats His creation with integrity; each creature in its own order, each the way He made it. For a Christian, the value of a thing is not, in itself, autonomous, but due to its relationship to the Creator. A restored covenant relationship with the Creator does bring a healing, here and now, through the church's ministry and stewardship, and the promise of complete healing for the whole of creation (Rom 8:18-25).

Do We Need an “Integrity of Creation” Theology?

It is necessary, in our theological colleges, to teach skills, which will enable students to interact with social and ecological issues. It is this interaction, which will be important in the development of their own theology. Yet, theology should not become too relative to social and ecological issues. For every Christian theology, irrespective of its cultural roots, is grounded, firstly, in the universal Christian truths of God as Creator and Redeemer. So, I wish to emphasise, again, that when we speak of creation as an “integrity”, it can only truly be so through the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is not possible, otherwise, to put together the broken pieces of creation.

After attending the 1988 WCC Consultation in Norway, on the subject of the “Integrity of Creation”, Dr Margaret Guite, in a recent article, questions whether or not we need a new theology, to confront the ecological issues. Her answer is a resounding “no”. After arguing against the popular claim that the Judaeo-Christian theological tradition is largely to blame for the ecological crises, Dr Guite concludes:

We do not need either a new theology, nor an over-compensatory, one-sided interpretation of our tradition, if we are to undo the damage of false emphases in the reading of that tradition in previous centuries. With the grace of God, we can go back to the old theology, and get the balance right.²

If our theology does not need readjusting, to address the social and ecological issues, then, perhaps, neither does the teaching curriculum in our theological schools need adjustment. Raising student awareness of

² Margaret Guite, “The Integrity of Creation: Do We Need a New Theology?”, in *Anvil* 7-1 (1990), p. 21.

contemporary issues, through seminars, workshops, and practical assignments, in which “the old” theology is applied to these issues, is what we probably need more of.

We are thankful for the report of Paul Roche on his recent participation in the WCC Convocation on Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation (Korea), and for the publication of this report in *Catalyst* (20-1 (1990), pp.72-82). The faculty in our theological schools must be aware of these issues, and interact with them in the classroom.

The Present and Future Integration of Creation

While I have said that the integrity of creation is an eschatological expectation, we believe that the kingdom rule of God is now present in and through the church. The church, then, is a witness in the world to total integration in the future, and to what a covenant relationship with God means. The ramifications of that relationship on creation is also both present and future. God’s calling to the church is that, we should exhibit a substantial healing, here and now, between man and nature, and nature and itself, as far as Christians can bring it to pass. There has, correctly, been a renewed emphasis in theological education and evangelism, in the last few decades, on the holistic ministry of Jesus, and the need for the church to emulate His example. The “evangelicals” owe something to the “ecumenicals” for this renewed emphasis. And so, we have talked much about the integrity of Christian witness and ministry. But we should also take note of the recent warning of Dr Emilio Castro, the WCC General Secretary:

The global vision of God’s kingdom to come could lead astray in two directions: “falsely eschatological”, inviting passiveness, and “falsely activist” inciting radicalism, in which ideological convictions are made sacred, and too easily substituted for the kingdom to come.³

Both tendencies are to be found among the churches of Melanesia, and in the theological colleges, which serve those churches. It is good that our churches and colleges represent a diverse range of interests, in regard to the total work of mission. Yet, we should all agree on the theological basis for social justice, and working for the integrity of creation. Irrespective of hermeneutical presuppositions, the biblical message, which bases the integrity

³ Quoted from Dr Fidel Castro, “Address to the World Council of Church’s Commission on World Mission and Evangelism”, in Susan Perlman, “An Evangelical Perspective on the San Antonio Conference”, *Missiology* LXXVIX-313 (1990), pp. 6-16, 13.

of creation on the creative and redemptive work of our God, is a common starting point for those within the Christian faith. And this must be our starting point in theological education and evangelism. Given this firm basis, the church can participate in God's restorative work, and, itself, be an example of creation reintegrating, in the form of proper stewardship, in anticipation of God's own complete restorative work.

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