
J. Healing Creation



Human beings have spoiled or destroyed much of God's good creation. How can creation be restored, and our relationships with the rest of nature healed? How is this related to sacramental understandings? What can other traditions teach us? What are the power and the responsibility of human creativity in relation to the rest of nature, including the use of technologies? How far should efforts go to heal or improve human life? At what risks? What is at stake theologically?

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course...that may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know it.

"Warning to Humanity," issued in 1992 by more than 1600 senior scientists, including a majority of the living Nobel Laureates in the sciences

In Rwanda, the decade of development project (1973–83) was launched by a dictatorial regime that frequently violated the earth. For example, officers from the army and relatives of the dictator began cutting down the natural forest of Gishwati to get rich quickly. In the forest lived people from the Impunyu tribe who were given the derogatory name of "pygmy" by the colonial invaders. The Impunyu, who were the poorest people of the land, lived in harmony with the creatures of the forest, working with the animals to sustain life. The forest was their common home. But, as the forest was cleared the Impunyu and the monkeys lost their source of food and began to move to another forest. The forest, they said, had been contaminated. One day, in sympathy, all the elephants left together in one mass exodus to a forest in a neighboring country. They seemed to know their home had been violated and they had become victims of "development." In solidarity with their forest community they went into exile and have never returned. (Eyewitness account by Gedeon Gakindi, teacher from Rwanda)

A living creation

The account from Rwanda is but one example of the many ways in which hu-

man beings, especially in the last century, have contaminated, violated and destroyed living places on the planet. In many human communities, similar unjust treatment of life can be found. What this story illustrates is that creation is not a passive object. Creatures and creation are alive. Earth and members of the earth community respond to human acts of injustice and injury against creation.

We find the same sense of a living, responding creation in the Bible. Every creature is summoned to worship God. Fields and valleys sing for joy (Ps 65:13). Wild animals and whales, winds and forests, are called to praise the name of Yahweh (Ps 148:7–10). When disaster strikes, the land mourns (Jer 12:11) and wild animals cry to God (Joel 1:20). In fact, all of creation groans because of the bondage it feels (Rom 8:21–22).

Here you will be invited to relate to creation in a new way—not as an inanimate resource we are free to use at will, but as a living thing. All living creatures are really relatives, a community of living things, our kin. We need and support each other. Ecologists tell us that in the earth's ecosystem all living things are interdependent. This is consistent with Scripture which depicts all the life God created as linked in a common bond with the earth. We are all children of the earth as well as creations of God (See the Bible study on Genesis 2).

If we view creation as alive, as a community of living beings that respond to what others (including humans) do, then we will view what happens to the earth in a less detached manner than we may have done previously. When we see the web of life as alive, it is quite appropri-

Are there aspects of your culture, or your upbringing, that help sensitize you to "hear the voices" of the earth community? Can you hear parts of earth crying in pain? What makes this difficult or uncomfortable? What kind of ecological disasters have happened in your community that have made you sensitive to the cries of creation?

ate to speak of the wounds suffered by the earth, the injustices experienced by members of the earth community, and the pain that humans have caused creation. Humans have not only committed crimes against creation, but also have caused sicknesses that have proven fatal to many species on the planet.

The response of the elephants in the opening story about the Impunyu tribe is remarkable. These members of the earth community found a positive solution to the crisis caused by one oppressive human group and expressed solidarity with their companions in the forest community. We can describe this action as a form of healing. They sought to survive the destruction of their habitat and to save their progeny.

In focusing on “healing creation,” we must ask: What are the wounds which have been inflicted on creation? What caused these wounds? How can we discover ways for the earth or members of the earth community to respond so as to effect healing and restoration? How can we assist in this healing process?

Before we explore ways in which we can assist the healing of creation, we need to understand and counter those attitudes and theologies which have led many in our churches and society to participate in crimes against creation. How has popular theology, especially in the West, helped contribute to the current ecological evils? What kinds of teachings have led to the serious wounding of the earth? We will consider three. With them as backdrop, we will then reflect on alternatives that might contribute to the responsible use of technologies, creation-keeping, earth-honoring discipleship and sustainable earth-human relations grounded in Scripture, Luther and ancient Christian faith claims.

“Heavenism”

In many churches, we sing hymns that focus our faith on a gleaming land above. This land is holy, pure and free from want or woe; it boasts a shining citadel with celestial choirs and a high holy God enthroned in glory. This land is heaven. By comparison, earth is considered a rather pathetic place—as “evil,” a place for pilgrims and strangers who “journey here below” on their way to that “golden shore.” And so we have sung: “*Guide me O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land.*”

Through such imagery, and in sermons and teachings that reflect the same vision, the earth is devalued, viewed as material, this-worldly, inferior and corrupt. Earth is a “barren land,” the place where Satan reigns and tempts us. Heaven is portrayed as spiritual, otherworldly, superior and pure. It is where God dwells and waits for us. Earth is characterized by trials and tribulations; heaven is a domain of endless bliss. The negation or devaluing of earth to uphold the spiritual superiority of heaven has been designated as “heavenism.”

As Christians, we believe that through faith in Christ we will rise and enjoy eternal life. When, however, we equate eternal life with a place called heaven and portray it as far superior to earth, we have a problem. Earth then becomes less important in our lives; our ultimate goal is heaven. What happens to earth is relatively insignificant in the grand scheme of things. An attitude of heavenism can lead churches to avoid the crisis facing earth. Why worry about earth when our real home is in heaven? Why spend our time healing the wounds of earth when this domain is considered

Does your church tend to avoid dealing with the wounds and suffering of earth? Does it have a “heavenism” tendency in its theology and worship? What other factors are involved?

inferior, material and “barren”? Why try to understand the suffering of earth, when we believe that life in this earthly realm is characterized by suffering?

Dominion theology

The tradition of “dominion theology” also has influenced Christians to avoid facing the pains and injustices experienced by the earth. This tradition is based on the familiar “mandate to dominate” found in Genesis 1:26–28. According to this theology, we are commissioned to rule, to dominate and to subdue the rest of creation. Over the course of time, in many parts of the Christian church, this text has been taken out of context, isolated as the *locus classicus* (the normative text) for how humans should relate to creation. After the Enlightenment, philosophers and other thinkers assumed that human beings were superior to nature. That superiority rested especially on the mind or reason, something which the rest of nature did not possess. Some even identified human reason as equivalent to the image of God.

How has the concept of dominion over creation been expressed in your community? What kind of injustices to earth tend to be perpetuated as a result of this dominion theology? Is it possible to keep the language of “being stewards” or “having dominion” and still treat earth justly?

One result of this theology was an assumed dualism, a fixed gulf that separated humans from nature. According to the French philosopher René Descartes (CE 1596–1650), humans are the “lords and masters of nature” who are expected to dominate and control the forces of nature with their reason.¹ Francis Bacon (CE 1561–1626), his contemporary, goes so far as to say that in order to gain rational knowledge, humans need to “torture nature.”² This ten-

dency can be traced back to classical thinkers like Cicero (106–43 BCE) who writes “we are the absolute masters of what the earth produces.”³ In popular language this was translated into expressions like “harnessing nature” and “mastery over nature.”

Dominion theology and its attendant worldviews tend to devalue earth as a domain God created expressly for humans to use and exploit as they gained increased mastery over the mysteries of nature. Injustices to earth are easily viewed as a necessary part of the progress of humans, the superior rational beings of creation. Even those who speak of humans as being “stewards,” tend to do so on the basis of the idea that humans are representatives of God over creation rather than as servants of creation.

Redemption reductionism

A third factor that has led many Christians to ignore the plight of creation, is the tendency to reduce the scope of God redemption and reconciliation to human beings. We have rightly emphasized that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ so that all who believe in him might have life and salvation. In Lutheran circles, we have emphasized that salvation—or justification—is for humans by grace through faith alone (for a different interpretation see the chapter here on “God’s Healing Gift of Justification”). This emphasis has meant paying relatively little attention to the fate of the rest of creation. If salvation is by faith, it hardly applies to animals or plants. If salvation requires faith in Christ, then it would seem that mountains and rivers are not part of the plan of salvation. But is that true? Does redemption involve more than mortals? Have we reduced redemption to the spiritual and ignored the material, the whole of creation?

Christian teachings on the fulfillment of all things at the end of time has

tended to focus on the deliverance of humans. We even speak of the end of the world, and of earth being destroyed by fire. We tend to think of earth as disposable; it eventually will disappear and be replaced by a new spiritual realm. Many hymns reflect a similar theme: “That day of wrath, that dreadful day, when heav’n and earth shall pass away.” Where heaven is simply the physical expanse of the sky, that part of creation that will “shrivel like a parched scroll.” For hymns and preachers with this orientation, we are living in the last hours before this physical universe comes to an end. It is corrupt, disposable, under judgement. Its condition is terminal.

Given this orientation, why bother preserving and healing the planet? Such actions will, at best, merely defer the inevitable. If earth is disposable, why expect it to be redeemed? Why bother to heal it? A few nuclear blasts, holes in the ozone layer or devastating droughts can all be viewed as portends of the earth’s final annihilation.

How have you heard these tendencies expressed? How does your church view the scope of redemption? Is it limited to humans? Or is there also a sense of a mission to heal creation? Is there a belief that earth, after all, will disappear so that trying to restore it is a waste of time?

Technology and the healing of human life

Instead of having a “mandate to dominate” the world, our human role is to be “God’s creating, restoring, sustaining ‘hands’ on this earth.” Metaphors matter. The first model of human vocation privileges men, glorifies independence and elevates the status of humanity to a position over the rest of God’s creation. The

second model of human vocation is gender neutral, acknowledges interdependence and stresses that God cares for the rest of creation through human beings’ faithful service. It makes a difference whether we see ourselves as “masters of the universe” or as “God’s loving hands.”

These metaphors influence human creativity and guide our use of the technologies we produce. It is not hard to see how a “master of the universe” mentality has wreaked havoc on earth through gender inequality, ecological degradation and the horrors of war. Guided by this mindset, the technologies we have developed have arguably produced more harm than good.

In the face of this history and the power of human arrogance, many are concerned about the dangers posed by new developments in molecular biology and biotechnology. For example, various means of gene therapy present us with the ability to identify and treat a growing number of genetic disorders. At the same time, stem cell research has great therapeutic potential to prolong and enhance the quality of human life. The “third wave” of research in agricultural biotechnology is aimed at improving the nutritional level of basic crops as well as the development of inexpensive foods that would provide protection from various diseases that plague the lives of the poor and malnourished.

There are many ethical issues related to the development of this knowledge and its related technologies.

- One set of issues revolves around the use of embryonic cells in stem cell research. For some, this is an unacceptable assault on the sanctity of human life, while for others stem cell research offers a means to improve the quality and dignity of human life.
- Another set of issues revolves around our ability to anticipate

the consequences of genetic intervention. Sometimes our technological abilities outpace our ecological sensibilities. Similarly, we experience a tension between a need to respect the virtue of prudence (and thus be cautious), while honoring the virtue of courage (and thus take some risks for the sake of improving health).

- Yet another set of issues revolves around the norm of justice. It matters who controls these technologies and who benefits from them. At this point, there is little reason to believe that this new scientific understanding and technology will benefit those who are poor as much as those who are wealthy. Just as we probed the secret of the atom and misused that knowledge in the last century, the stakes are even higher at the dawn of this new millennium as we manipulate the very process of life itself.

How should we as a communion of churches be responding to these ethical issues? How might human ingenuity be directed to more noble and just ends? How might we use such technologies to heal creation rather than to harm it? How can molecular biology and biotechnology be seen as means by which God is working through human ingenuity to care for and redeem creation?

The Lutheran understanding of sin reminds us to expect that human beings will be inclined to use all technologies to help themselves and to harm their neighbors. In many respects our tradition advises us to hope for the best in people but encourages us to anticipate also the worst. Is it possible to combine this hard-eyed view of human nature with our calling to serve as “God’s loving hands” in creation? How can we shape moral character and devise regulation to control the

use of biotechnology so that it can contribute to the “healing of creation?”

Lutheran perspectives for healing creation

Within the Lutheran tradition, Christians are called to reflect on and revise theological understandings that have obscured or betrayed the good news of God’s boundless love for this good creation. What resources can we bring to the task of challenging and reforming theologies that have justified human degradation of non-human creation? How can we counter the attitudes about creation reflected in popular theologies? How can we more faithfully understand God’s relationship to creation and human beings’ role in it? As Luther confronted damaging beliefs of his time, how might we do the same in ours?

These questions invite us to bring Scripture and our theological heritage to bear on one of the most perilous crises that humankind has faced—the possibility that our species is destroying the earth’s capacity to regenerate life as we know and love it. For a tradition that takes Scripture seriously, one key will be an insistence that all of Scripture, not just a few texts, be considered in probing the relationship of humanity to the earth. We consider first the relationship between God and creation, and then humankind’s role in creation.

God and creation

We need to challenge the popular belief that God’s primary reason for creating the earth was to provide humans with a home and a resource. Rather, earth exists as something good, in and of itself. In the first chapter of Genesis, before God created humans, God discovered that the world was good and declared it so. God



took Job on a journey through the various realms of the cosmos and challenged him to grasp the wonders of creation operating quite independently of human interests and beyond human ken. Earth exists as a mystery, in and of itself.

Furthermore, earth is a sanctuary where God has chosen to dwell. Some biblical texts seem to suggest that God dwells somewhere in the sky. However, many texts stress that God is not detached from the earth but present in earth, indwelling it.

Consider the words of the seraphim who appeared to Isaiah: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa 6:3). This song proclaims that the visible presence of God “fills” all the earth. In other words, earth is God’s dwelling place. God is present in all creation, not just in some place in the sky. (For more on the “face” and the “glory” of God in creation, see the Bible study on Ps 104)

Christian traditions throughout the ages are rich with the claim that God dwells not only with, but also within earth’s creatures and elements. While often obscured by “dominion theology” and “heavenism,” this claim has not been silenced. Luther insists that God is present not only in human beings but in all created things:

Nothing can be more truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power.⁴ God exists at the same time in every little seed, whole and entire, and yet also in all and above all and outside all created things.⁵ ... everything is full of Christ through and through⁶ all creatures are ... permeable and present to [Christ].⁷ Christ ... fills all things Christ is around us and in us in all places....he is present in all creatures, and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope, for he certainly is there⁸ ... the power of God ... must be essen-

tially present in all places even in the tiniest leaf.⁹ God is ‘present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being’¹⁰ God ‘is in and through all creatures, in all their parts and places, so that the world is full of God and He fills all...’¹¹

While in Luther the scope of redemption and of the moral universe unfortunately is limited to the human, the scope of God’s blessed creaturehood—*in whom God dwells*—and of revelation, is cosmic.¹²

If we speak of earth as God’s home and as part of Christ’s body, with a “voice” of praise and proclamation, how should we view the acts of pollution and devastation we have committed on the earth, God’s “sanctuary?” What are the implications of Luther’s claim that God is “in, with and under” creation? Where in your community or country is creation suffering and groaning? Can you, in faith, discern Christ suffering there?

If indeed the earth *bears* Christ, then it bears the crucified and living Savior. Just as the theology of the cross teaches that Christ suffers with human beings who suffer, so too Christ suffers with the groaning creation where it has been abused, wounded and violated. Just as Christ is crucified when human beings are brutalized, so too Christ is crucified in the brutalized earth. Christ is not detached from creation’s suffering, but rather is “in with and under” it. In Luther’s words, “the finite bears the infinite.”

Scripture pushes us yet further. God, it seems, has called upon creation not only to be God’s own dwelling place and body of Christ, but also actively to praise and proclaim the one true God! “The heavens are telling the glory of

What are the implications for you of the claim that God holds earth in such high esteem that Christ came to redeem all creation? If God has been reconciled to creation through Christ, how should we be working towards a healing of relations between humans and creation?

God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 19:1). (See also Rom 1:20; Ps. 148:7–10)

Just as Luther’s sacramental, incarnational sense of creation calls us to counter the idea that earth is disposable and hence not worth redeeming, so too does Scripture. A close study of Paul’s letters reveals that God becomes incarnate to effect reconciliation (healing relations) not only with humans and between humans, but also with the entire cosmos, in all its physical and spiritual dimensions.

... that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom 8:21).

Consider also the implications of the first chapter of Colossians. The special value of creation—all things in heaven and earth—is that the entire cosmos bears the stamp of Christ. Christ is intimately linked with creation by being named the firstborn of all creation (Col 1:15–16). Through Christ, who is God dwelling in the very matter of creation, God reconciles to God’s self “all things, whether on earth or in heaven” (Col 1:19–20). All creation is reconciled to God; relations between God and creation have been healed through Christ. In God’s eyes, creation is worth redeeming. “According to biblical faith, God’s cosmic plan of restoration includes the whole creation, not just individual souls.”¹³

The redemption of creation by Christ suggests that in God’s plan creation is no more disposable than humans are. As the Bible studies on Revelation suggest, the future vision of creation is not its elimination, but its transformation, restoration and total healing. In this transformed creation, the heavenly resides in the midst of earth, the spiritual “in, with and under” the material.

Humans and creation

Given the nature of creation as God's dwelling place, the role of creation in revealing and praising God, the work of Christ reconciling all things in creation, and the character of creation as a living reality, what is the role of humans in creation? Who are we in relationship to the rest of creation? Clearly, the idea that humans are the rulers of creation who can treat it as a mere resource—like a team of servants at humans' bidding—is no longer acceptable. The high value that God places on creation and the cosmic significance of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ have an ethical corollary: humankind is to relate to creation in terms of its relationship with God's love as manifest in Jesus Christ.

In recent decades, scientists have discovered a truth long known to mystics: in the marvelous and mysterious web of creation, every piece has its part to play and is dependent on other parts of creation. Humans are part of life's ecosystem, not outside or above it. More startling, we are a dependent species; by nature, we depend on countless other species for our survival. The earth and its life-forms could survive well (and better) without us, but not we without them. The web of creation is a living community, a family, a household (*oikos*).

All things living and all things not living are products of the same primal explosion and evolutionary history, and hence interrelated....we are distant cousins to the stars and near relations to the oceans, plants and all other living creatures on our planet.¹⁴

There is a deep, aboriginal kinship, since all is stardust. All the "createds" are "relateds." *We all are kin.*¹⁵

The Bible is rich with kinship imagery.

Psalm 104 treats humans (verse 23) as one of the many kinds of living creatures for whom God provides. It depicts the earth as a shared home for the many kinds of living creatures....¹⁶

Creation worships God (Ps 148). "In this context, our place is beside our fellow creatures as fellow worshipers."¹⁷ Within this kinship, one species alone has the knowledge and power both for massive destruction and massive restoration, and the choice of which path to follow. "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live" (Deut 30:19).

Especially since the mid-twentieth century, the role of our species in earth's ecosystem has been destructive. While human life depends on the health of the earth's life-systems, "every natural system on the planet is disintegrating"¹⁸ and we are the cause of it.

How might humans honor other parts of creation, rather than dominating, devaluing, or exploiting them? Consider first who we are in the web of life, then the role we currently play in it and finally the roles we could play.

[T]he relationship of the human world to the rest of earth changed fundamentally and dramatically from the onset of the twentieth century to its close. Techno-economic power sufficient to destroy the material conditions of human and other life is the hallmark of that change, together with the explosion of both human numbers and consumption.¹⁹

Luther's understanding of sin, applied to us as a species, can help here. Luther understands sin as *se incurvatus in se* (self turned in upon self), the human proclivity to do everything for the promotion of self, out of concern for self, and using resources claimed as one's own rather than as gifts of God.

What should be our role in creation? Since its battle against various forms of gnosticism, orthodox Christianity has claimed that we are players in a cosmic

story from creation to final judgement....a moral drama....the history of everything....culminating in the calling to account of every creature for what they have done in God's world.²⁰

If our part in that story is not to destroy and exploit, then what is our role? As beloved creatures of God and as Christ's body on this good earth, we are to be God's creating, restoring, sustaining "hands" on this earth. In Luther's words: We are God's "hands." In fact, according to Luther, God "wants" us to work with God:

[God] is able to help everyone....God does not want to do it alone (but) wants us to work with God...wants to work *with us and through us*.²¹

Creation is an interdependent web of being in which the human species is largely dependent. In light of this scientific understanding and the theological recognition that God calls upon non-human as well as human elements of creation to do God's work, we realize that humans do not play this role alone. Humans, hairy wombats and rain forest vines are all alive, all are related and all have voices. These voices may not be human voices,

but they are the voices of our kin. As humans we are called to respect our relatives and love our other-than-human neighbors as ourselves. We are called to honor them as those who also praise God (Ps 148), witness to God (Deut 30:19), proclaim and reveal God (Ps 19:1).

Healing creation

How can we as human beings help in the healing of creation? What are the steps we need to take to help heal the wounds that humans have inflicted on the earth? How can we work with and learn from the other-than-human creation?

In light of the preceding discussion, consider taking the following steps:

- Acknowledge and confess the ways in which we humans have treated earth unjustly and wounded creation. Such an acknowledgment involves both identifying specific wrongs—local and global—that we have committed against creation and making communal confession in worship.
- Become sensitive to the groaning of creation: cries for help, laments over wounds, voices of hope and songs of healing. This involves relating to earth and the earth community as living realities rather than passive resources. It also involves discerning how Christ suffers with a suffering creation.
- Recognize processes of healing already at work in creation. By living as kin with earth's beings, rather than rulers of earth, we begin to ask how we can serve creation and assist in the healing process. The

What to you is strange about this way of viewing the place and responsibility of humans in relationship to the rest of creation? Are there ways in which this is compatible with perspectives in your culture? Share traditional stories or customs that illustrate this, especially from the perspectives of women and/or indigenous cultures. How is earth's bounty understood? How do you relate to the trees, birds or rivers? How could you see that relationships shift to reflect the kinship of all creation as praising and serving God?

Bible study on Psalm 104 describes how God is already at work restoring and healing creation. Our task is to see where healing is already taking place, and how we may play our role as co-healers with creation and with Christ.

- Participate in the “healing of creation” through community action. This may involve forming or joining an environmental action group that is relevant to your location. Reflect on how you relate to creation through your group so that such actions become an extension of your faith and worship, not just another chore. Consider community action on the levels of household, locality, nation and global community. Consider varied forms of action: lifestyle changes, public policy work, witness through protest, ecological education, restoration projects, “green” technologies and more.

What would you add to the above suggestions? What are you doing in your church and community? What are the particular challenges you face in your culture or society? What risks are entailed in seeking the “healing of creation”? How might these and other theological understandings help empower you?

Environmental guidelines

Furthermore, give attention to the “Environmental Guidelines” that have been developed in 1997 for program implementation through the LWF Department for World Service. How might some of these guidelines be applied to or adapted in your situation? What should be the role of the churches, and the LWF, in promoting and developing these and other such guidelines?

Imagine what it would mean for the worldwide Lutheran communion to make and seriously follow through on the commitment to seek the healing of creation as an integral aspect of our lives and faith. What might we do, as a communion of churches and in partnership with others? What initiatives should be taken by the LWF and the member churches, beginning with this Assembly?

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