All creatures

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Critical Essay

by Norman Wirzba
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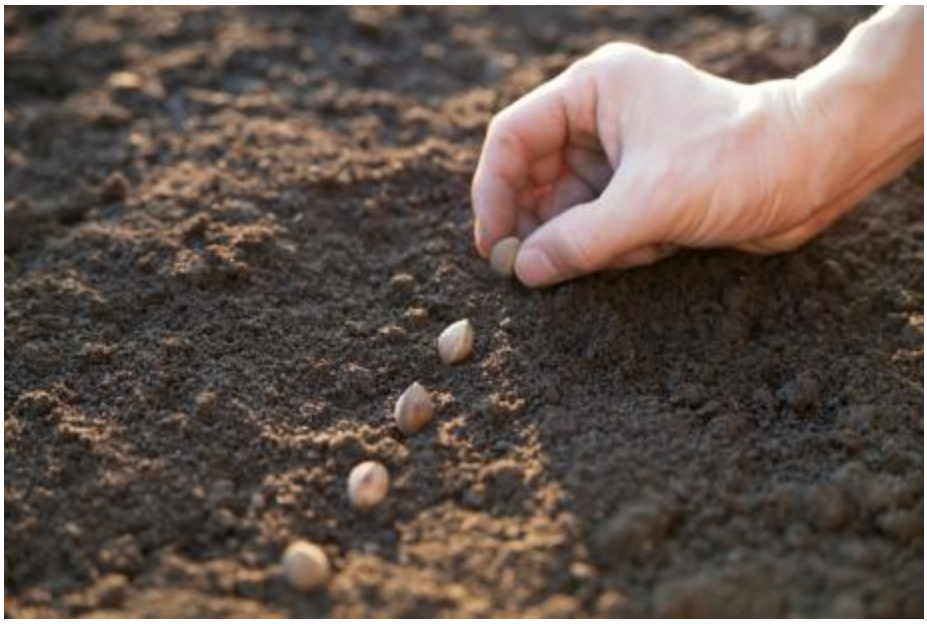

Christians have come lately and weakly to the causes of environmental healing and restoration. When environmental activists in the 1960s noted that Christianity bore a major responsibility for our environmental crises, the vast majority of Christians remained unmoved. In the curricula of leading institutions of theological education in the 1980s, ecological concerns barely made an appearance. Now, roughly 30 years later, it's still not uncommon to find Christians who are either in denial or fail to see how the environmental problems of our day are distinctly theological concerns.

How can this be? How can one affirm God the Creator and at the same time degrade the health and vitality of God's creation? We can offer many reasons to explain this contradictory state of affairs, but I believe that our problem goes to the manners and methods of theological practice itself, so that even when theologians turn their attention to ecological concerns, they often have considerable difficulty finding anything helpful to say other than "Come on, people. It's time to take care of creation!" In other words, the problem is theology's inadequate form and function. The destruction of the earth is, among other things, a theological catastrophe, and Christian apathy is a sign that theological reflection has lost its way.

There are two aspects of theological education that are troubling. First, too much of theological education is anthropocentric in its aim and scope. At its worst, it's all about "God and me." In its more progressive forms, it's still almost exclusively about humanity and God—as if only human flourishing matters. I am not opposed to human flourishing. But I am opposed to the dangerous and naive anthropology that underlies so much of this work.

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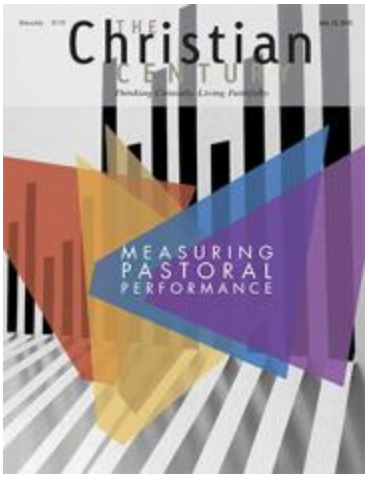

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It's ridiculous to talk about human flourishing if the land, water, and air along with microorganismic, plant, and animal creatures are not flourishing at the same time. People do not float through life in the bubble that is their skin. We are porous, vulnerable, grounded, and dependent beings (what Old Testament scholar Carol Newsom calls "soil animals") that live through, and not merely among, the lives and deaths of others. There simply is no humanity without humus, period, which means that an honest anthropology must always include an ecological sensibility.

Eating is the daily reminder of this fact. Each human body is a site for the material exchange of countless organisms and ecosystem processes. We're fooling ourselves if we think we can succeed for long by living at the expense of fellow creatures and their habitats. The flourishing of humanity depends on the flourishing of the whole creation; when we do damage to the land we do damage to the people, especially to the world's poor. The sinister belief that we can exploit now because there will be other land tomorrow is an arrogant attack on all life.

But more than arrogance is at work here. I'm talking about what Willie Jennings calls a diseased theological imagination. From the beginning until its end, scripture is clear that God's covenant is with all creatures. God looks daily upon the land and all its creatures (even the ones of no direct use to us), provides for their every need, and welcomes their worship. God calls human beings to live with these creatures in nurturing, healing, and celebratory ways.

One of the clearest signs that people are in faithful relationship with God is that they are taking care of each other and the land upon which all depend. Injustice is not simply about injustice among people. When the logic of oppression goes to work, its expression extends

beyond humanity to include the land and all its inhabitants. Tar sands development in northern Alberta is not only a demonstration of contempt for First Nations people and their land. The climate consequences that will follow show contempt for all people and every land.

Put another way, the scope of God's creating, nurturing, and reconciling ways has never been confined to human beings. The Christ hymn in Colossians makes the point in a most astounding way: after saying that Jesus is the one in whom, through whom, and for whom all things are created, and that through him all things hold together, the hymn then says that through the love Jesus unleashes in the world all things "on earth and in heaven" are being reconciled to God. Those who want to follow this Jesus must participate in this ministry of reconciling the whole world (cosmos). Yes, Christians are making progress by focusing on the reconciliation of people of different traditions, races, sexual orientations, and socio-economic contexts. But if we focus only on humans, we have not gone far enough.

None of us knows exactly what it means to speak of the whole world being reconciled to God. Our love and our imaginations are too small to appreciate all that's involved and what practical skills are needed—which is why we need to ask for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. What we do know is that we must repudiate the false teaching that says Christian faith exists to transport individual souls to an ethereal heaven. Scripture does not end with disembodied souls escaping creation and ascending to some faraway place. It ends with God descending to creation to take up residence with mortals. We need to ask: Are Christians attending to the life-beautifying, life-perfecting Spirit so as to make this earth a home suitable for God?

A second troubling issue is that "professional" theology is so much an enterprise in the transmission of information. People are encouraged to master an increasingly vast data set that covers a smaller and smaller slice of learning and experience. This divides theology neatly into various silos. What's often lost in this specialization is a sense for the larger questions and contexts that encourage and require theological learning and reflection. What's lost is our understanding that a diverse curriculum (biblical, historical, ethical, theological, and ministerial studies) can serve a common purpose or goal. I sometimes feel that those of us in theological education are involved in a massive, exhausting effort to acquire as much data as we can, as if one day we will be declared the winners of some theological shopping spree.

I am not opposed to specialization per se. My concern is that when ecological concerns do show up on the campus of a theological school or church, they're relegated to the category of special interest. "Your interest is the environment? Cool. My interest is the problem of racialized, industrial incarceration." As if these two are not related! My worry is that we are losing the ability to connect the dots and thus unable to see how a logic of domination and exploitation runs through all the issues that we take up. Embedded within this worry is the tendency to pigeonhole something like ecological concern in this or that specialty, instead of responding as if all branches of theological learning have a role in helping us address these concerns.

One of the great merits of Pope Francis's recent encyclical *Laudato si'* is that he does not fall into this pigeonholing trap. He develops an integral humanism that is also an integral ecology, and grounds both in an expansive theological vision that will be a helpful guide moving forward.

What is theology for? What makes knowledge distinctly theological? We don't ask these questions often enough. One of the central tasks of theological education and reflection is to develop habits of attentive and affectionate regard so that our encounters with anyone and anything happen under the inspiration of God. Theology exists so that we can learn to appreciate what new creation in Christ looks like and thus lead a life in which people no longer see anything from a human point of view but with the eyes of faith (2 Cor. 5:17). To be "in Christ" is to find oneself in a transformed world, a new creation, a world that is being transfigured by God's love. This new way of seeing, feeling, and engaging reality changes everything. The radical nature of the change becomes apparent when we are told that in the New Jerusalem there will no longer be need for a sun or moon because everything will be perceived through God. Now the whole world will be encountered and engaged in terms of the love of God. Sight and sympathy will come together, as will attention and affection. Theology is the discipline that flows in and out of this fundamentally new place.

To have eyes of faith is to see each thing as a creature, which is how God sees it. This is no small thing. How many of us know what it means to name anything "a creature"? We are hampered in our efforts because we are deficient in understanding what it means to narrate our world as God's creation. Too many people think creation is primarily a teaching about the mechanics of how the world began. This is a mistake. Indeed, I would argue that this focus has contributed to a perceived irrelevance of the doctrine of creation in much of the theological curriculum. Without a robust doctrine of creation we will significantly misunderstand salvation, Christology, the Trinity, eschatology, and the nature and mission of the church.

Creation names a way of speaking, feeling, and perceiving that understands everything to be in relation to a loving, healing, and nurturing God. To contemplate creation is to operate with a transformed imagination in which all people and all creatures are encountered and engaged as God's love variously made visible, tactile, fragrant, audible, and delectable. Underlying this understanding is a model of theological reflection that has as its aim the knowing of everything *through* God rather than simply knowing *about* God. It presupposes practical modes of engagement that draw us more deeply into the world and to each other.

This can sound rather abstract, but we see what it means practically in the ministries of Jesus. Jesus perceives each creature as God's love made material and thus worthy of a fulfilling and abundant life. When he encounters people who are languishing because of alienation, oppression, hunger, illness, or demon possession, Jesus liberates them from their malady so that they can share in the hospitable, celebratory love that exists in God's own triune life. In the life of Jesus we discover that theological reflection is the work that enables

people to perceive everything and every place as loved by God. With it people can learn the daily discipline that inspires relationships governed by wonder, respect, affection, care, and celebration.

What does ecological wisdom have to do with any of this? I'm not proposing that we ask theological students to take a course in the science of ecology (as good as that would be). I'm defending ecological *wisdom*, which comes from a patient, attentive, and skilled engagement with others and the world, giving people an appreciation of the many relationships that make life possible. The point is not simply to have more facts about the world, but to be able to move within it in a way that reflects appreciation of the conditions and relationships (with sky and soil and everything in between) that enable mutual flourishing. It is to cultivate the disciplines and skills—in food production, peacemaking, habitat restoration, urban planning, energy infrastructure, building design, and health provision—that enable people to see what needs to happen so that God's new creation can move into the specific places of our lives. The point is to be able to know precisely how our engagement with a neighborhood, region, building, field, factory, or bird nurtures and celebrates the love of God at work in them, or not.

The habits of being that make up ecological wisdom can lead us more deeply into the world so we can perceive both creation's groaning and Christ's work of liberating creatures (Rom. 8:18–23). We have yet to fully develop the theological tool kits that will better position us to care for other creatures. But a theological education that is attuned to ecological wisdom is a crucial first step because it will enlarge our theological imaginations so that we see the whole world as the home place of God's concern and attention. Inspired by Jesus Christ, we can then learn to dwell and build among fellow creatures in ways that are blessings to each other and that bring glory to God.

This essay was presented at Candler School of Theology as part of a panel on creation and care of the earth.