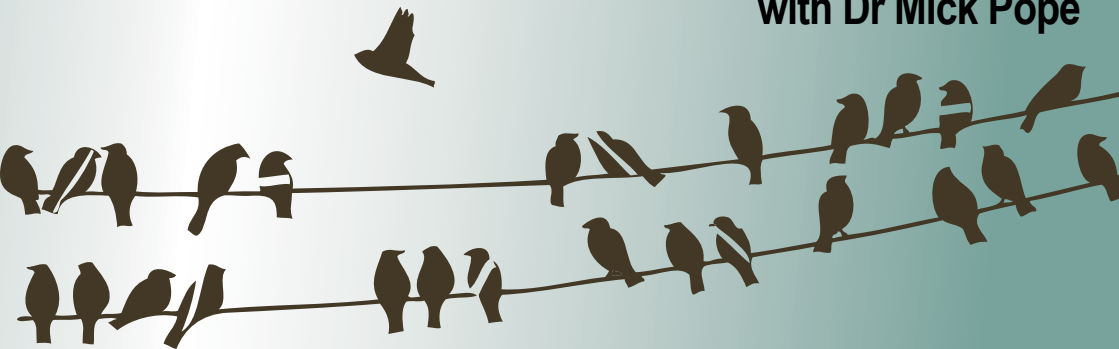




# Preaching to the Birds?

The Mission of the  
Church to the Creation

with Dr Mick Pope



**MORLING**  
COLLEGE

## Dr MICK POPE

Dr Mick Pope has a PhD in meteorology from Monash University and is currently enrolled in a Masters in Theology. Mick is the coordinator of an environmental think-tank for Ethos: EA Centre for Christianity and Society ([ethos-environment.blogspot.com](http://ethos-environment.blogspot.com)); he also advises TEAR on climate change and eco-theology, is involved in a working group to establish A Rocha (Christians in Conservation) in Australia, and is a Fellow of ISCAST, the Institute for the Study of Christianity in an Age of Science and Technology.





# Preaching to the Birds?

The Mission of the Church to the Creation

Dr Mick Pope

9 May 2013

Morling College

Tinsley Annual Public Lecture



# Preaching to the Birds?

## The Mission of the Church to the Creation

**Dr Mick Pope**

### **Abstract**

Eco-missiology sees mission in terms of reconciliation at all levels. It recognises that the God who creates is also the God who redeems all that he has made. This holistic mission includes both eco-justice for the poor as well as care for creation for its own sake. This talk will develop an eco-missiological framework based upon a narrative reading of the Bible, including reflections on eco-praxis such as holistic mission and dialogue with environmentalists.

### **We're on a mission from God**

With apologies to The Blues Brothers I'd like to introduce myself. I'm on a mission from God. But also with apologies to Amos, 'I am not a missiologist nor am I the son of a missiologist, for I am a meteorologist and a teacher of students' (Amos 7:14). I never intended to study missiology as a theology undergraduate. Having spent many years pondering overseas mission and deciding I was neither suited nor called to it, I decided that I didn't need missiology. However, as Frost and Hirsch have stated, the church is not truly the church unless it is missionally shaped. Like many others, I had become comfortable with Christendom, comfortable with the attractional model of church, and kind of lazy.

My journey to being an aspiring eco-missiologist is a long one, and has gone through four stages. Firstly, from a young age I developed a growing awareness of and delight in the natural world, spawned by natural curiosity, education and the right sort of television. A second important stage was a growing awareness of our impact upon the natural world, which has been ongoing with the emergence

in the popular mind over the past few years of an awareness of climate change/global warming. This represents the beginning of what Pope John Paul II called an ecological conversion. Yet because humans are meant to minister rather than exercise absolute lordship over creation, ecological conversion can only occur properly after conversion to faith in the Lord Jesus. What seems to be missing in the experience of many Christians is the fourth stage: recognition of our connectedness to the rest of creation and our responsibility as God's image. This is the subject of eco-missiology and the theme of this talk.

## **Whose mission? Which mission field?**

Thus far I have assumed eco-missiology is a sensible theological concept without defining it. According to Ross Langmead, eco-missiology sees mission in terms of reconciliation at all levels. The gospel is broader than 'me and Jesus' because God is involved with the whole of creation, not just human beings. Eco-missiology is concerned for creation because God saves us *with* and not *from* creation. Eco-missiology is also a matter of eco-justice, since it is the global poor who face the worst effects of environmental degradation; and includes eco-spirituality, which represents a new way of seeing creation, because it views caring for creation *in its own right* as a form of mission.

Traditional evangelical theology has had difficulty in accommodating an eco-missiology given its views of salvation. Leon Morris identifies *euangelion* as a Pauline word meaning 'the news of what God has done in Christ for man's salvation'. Langmead observes that many Christians hold a rather apocalyptic and dualistic view where we are saved *from* and not *with* the creation; the emphasis is on going to heaven when we die, being raptured and the earth burned up. He suggests that this is due to an overemphasis on divine transcendence and Christ's atoning work, as opposed to divine immanence and Christ as creator.

Many Christians are wary of involvement in environmental issues due to a fear of syncretism and suspicion of the 'green agenda'. However, the church cannot afford to ignore mission that encompasses more than the human sphere. We live

in an age known as the anthropocene, where humans represent a geological force. We have become so powerful through technology that we can remove entire mountains, desolate large stretches of ocean, pollute our atmosphere, change weather patterns, and precipitate mass extinction. Sea-level rise due to global warming is already threatening some island communities such as the Carteret Islanders and the Tuvaluans. Bangladeshis are steadily losing land to sea-level rise and upstream water usage. Diseases like malaria are spreading into highland areas where previously they had been unknown. The global poor are those most sensitive to climate change; however, the developed world also seems poorly positioned to cope with the impacts as rising temperatures are likely contributing to weather extremes across the globe.

Meanwhile, we have entered into a post-Christendom phase of history in the West, one which Tom Wright describes as a pagan world much resembling the first century. The rising ecological consciousness has been accompanied by a growing interest in Eastern religions and alternate spiritualities. Since the publication of Lynn White's 1966 lecture,<sup>1</sup> Christianity stands accused of being anthropocentric and the cause of environmental abuse in the West. While his thesis has been critiqued many times, the view remains in the popular imagination, and not without some cause. My own dialogue with some deep ecologists has typically been aggressive and dismissive of Christianity. Even in the academy, some theologians want to sideline or even ignore 'grey texts' like Genesis 1:26–28.

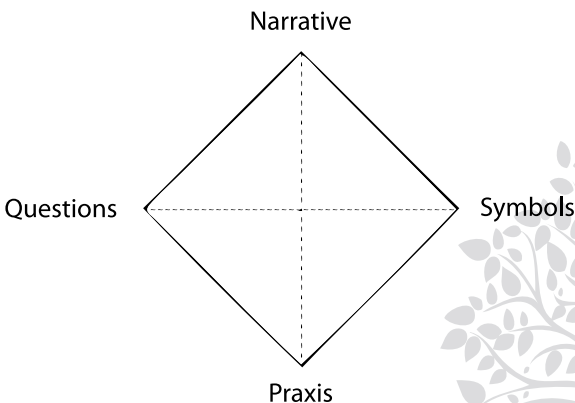
Therefore, the missional church needs to address these concerns in its theology and praxis by rediscovering the holistic nature of the biblical narrative. In this way, we avoid falling prey to what C. S. Lewis called 'Christianity and', the wedding of our own pet causes to the faith. Likewise, in developing a thick biblical narrative, we seek to avoid tokenism or our eco-mission being viewed as absurd as St Francis' preaching to the birds.

---

1 Lynn Townsend White, Jr, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", *Science*, Vol 155 (Number 3767), March 10, 1967, pp. 1203–1207.

## Once upon a time — mission and eco-narrative

Worldviews, according to Wright,<sup>2</sup> are the pre-cognitive, pre-suppositional stages of culture that often go unexamined because they are hidden from view. Worldviews consist of four key ideas. *Narratives* or stories are the way in which we view and understand the world around us, be they religious or secular. Think, for example, of the role the story of the ANZACs plays for some Australians. From these stories we are able to address the basic *questions* of life such as: Who are we, why are we here? What is wrong with the world and how do we fix it? Australians, for example, often think of themselves as stoic battlers, braving the elements and hardships of life, in the ANZAC spirit. Thirdly, worldviews provide us with *symbols* such as events (think national holidays like ANZAC Day) and artefacts such as flags and anthems. Such symbols define communities, acting as boundary markers. Finally, *praxis* is the way of being in the world, the sorts of actions that a community performs, reflecting the worldview. Australian generosity is grounded in our belief of the stoic battler needing a hand from time to time to help them stand on their own two feet again. Each of these four elements interacts with and informs the other as is schematically shown below.



The way in which we as Christians understand issues such as the environment is critically dependent on the way we read Scripture. A US statement published by Southern Baptists declares that they could take no position on global warming

---

2 N. T. Wright. *The New Testament and the People of God*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

since they had no special revelation. Roger Olson<sup>3</sup> notes that many conservative evangelicals approach Scripture as a source of propositional statements. Often they can equate their own tradition's formulation of those statements on a level close to Scripture, and form their theology as a bounded set. If there are no appropriate propositional statements for an issue, 'thou shalt/shalt not's, then an issue can be ignored.

In contrast, Olson sees the Bible as a narrative. A narrative theology of Scripture is post-foundational in that it does not seek to abstract the propositions from the narrative of Scripture to construct an indubitable, timeless set of doctrines but, instead, emphasises the transformative nature of Scripture, and recognises that such transformation does not occur solely via the transfer of information. Wright has developed a 'five act' hermeneutic of Scripture as narrative, consisting of Creation, Fall, Israel, Jesus, and the Church.<sup>4</sup> He likens this model to a long-lost Shakespearean play where the first four acts survive intact, but only the start and the end of the fifth act are extant. What is required is an imaginative improvisation based on the available information. A careful reading of Scripture shows how each of the acts supports an eco-missiological reading. Below I trace out such a reading, with particular emphasis on the first and fifth acts.

## **Creation**

In *The Lost World of Genesis One*,<sup>5</sup> John Walton recognises that Genesis 1 is ancient cosmology, with a very different ontology to the one moderns use to understand the world. Consider, for example, the difference between the ontology of a chair and that of a business. While the ontology of a chair is largely material, i.e., it involves a consideration of the materials used to make it, the design and manufacturing process, what is the ontology of a company? When does it exist?

---

3 Roger E. Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

4 N.T. Wright. *Scripture and the Authority of God*, (SPCK: 2005).

5 John H. Walton. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*, (IVP: 2009).



A company exists when it exists legally and begins to do business, i.e., when it is performing its function as a company. Or consider a marriage. A marriage is not physically constructed as much as legally recognised and relationally constituted. Walton argues that the best way to understand the creative acts of God in Genesis 1 is using a functional ontology.

One of the things this function/functionary model does is it ties human culture to our understanding of creation, as opposed to the reductionist perspective of science. Michael Welker notes creation is not to be simply identified with nature but includes it. This is evident, for example, in the role that lights in the sky play in marking out days, seasons and years (Gen 1:14). The heavens are the place where natural forces determine life and culture. Human beings are central to the plot, not a distraction from it. This warns us against the extremes that say large sections of the world should be set aside as ‘wilderness’ where humans are not allowed (though the idea of reserves or world heritage areas is a valuable one) and yet as we shall see below, we need also to avoid ideas of unfettered usage.

The ordering of functions and functionaries in creation ends with God resting on the seventh day (Gen 2:2; Exod 20:11). In the Ancient Near East, temples were built so that deities could rest and exercise their divine rule. This is the subject of Psalm 132, where God’s resting place is identified with the Ark and Zion, where he sits enthroned. Likewise, in Isaiah 66:1–2, heaven is God’s throne and the earth his footstool. Walton concludes that Genesis 1 recounts the establishing of the function of a cosmic temple from which God can rule. Some reflection of this is found in the construction of the Jerusalem temple, with the water basin reflecting the sea and the pillars possibly pillars of the earth (1 Kgs 7). The Hebrew word for light used in connection with the tabernacle lamp (Exod 25:6) is the same used for the celestial bodies on the fourth day of creation.

So God rules from his cosmic temple, and it is here again that we see the important role given to humanity — not to serve mother earth but God himself

as his representatives. Rikk Watts<sup>6</sup> notes there are close parallels with the account of the formation of human beings from the dust and the breathing in of the divine breath in Genesis 2 and how ancient and modern idols are made. The key to eco-mission is to recognise that creation is the temple-cosmos in which everything has a function. Our function as the *imago Dei* is to carry out the *eco-missio Dei*.

In the temple-cosmos, the non-human creation has its role in praising God. Trees in particular are given a voice (Isa 14:8, 44:23), but God is glad in all of his works (Ps 104:31) be it birds in the trees or Leviathan sporting in the sea. So long as creatures are free to do what it is they are meant to do, they fulfil their role. Psalm 104 is careful to affirm that humanity is part of, not separate from, the rest of what God has done. This Psalm therefore both affirms the value of human existence and economic activity, and the value of the rest of creation to God, and provides us with a theology of wilderness and God's care for those creatures that lie entirely outside the economic order.

## **Fall**

The Fall (Gen 3) clearly marks a break in human-divine relationships, the repair of which is the focus of much atonement theology. Likewise chapters which follow illustrate the breakdown of human relationships in a pattern of violence and murder. Furthermore, the story of Babel illustrates the corporate nature of sin, idolatry, rebellion and the misuse of technology. What is less often emphasised is the break in relationship between humanity and the environment in the form of a curse of the ground (Gen 3:17). The culmination of this curse is the uncreation of the flood, and yet the ark represents not only the salvation of humanity but also of a selection of the non-human creation. This is a theme that Paul echoes in Romans 8, to which we will turn shortly.

---

6 In his chapter in John G. Stackhouse (ed), *What Does It Mean To Be Saved? Broadening Evangelical Horizons of Salvation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

## ***Israel***

The call of Abram was God's plan to undo the Fall by choosing a people for himself among whom he could dwell (Exod 29:45) and bring blessing to the whole world (Gen 12:1–3). God led his people through the Exodus (Exod 13:18ff), and dwelt among them within the Tabernacle above the mercy seat of the Ark (Ex 25:22), which found a permanent home in the temple built during the rule of Solomon (1 Kgs 8:1ff). However, God could not be contained within creation, let alone the Jerusalem temple (1 Kgs 8:27), therefore, God's concern for all of creation is not limited by his particular relationship with a covenant people.

Land is a central theme of the Old Testament: God's people, in God's place, under God's blessing. While much of how the land is described is in terms of agricultural fertility, there are texts that treat it in a more holistic way. As well as laws covering the treatment of livestock (Deut 23:4) and their Sabbath rest (Exod 20:10), the Sabbath year (Exod 23:10–11) includes the wild animals. Furthermore, Michael Northcott notes that there is a close connection between ecological disasters and exile on one hand, and unfaithfulness to the laws and worship of Yahweh on the other in passages like Jeremiah 5:22–28. There was a direct connection between empire building and the pursuit of pagan idols of fertility, injustice and failure to keep Sabbath economics and ecology. Under such circumstances, ecological collapse was 'natural' and inevitable.

## ***Jesus***

Many years ago I heard a debate at Monash University between ethicist Peter Singer and a pastor. Singer maintained that Christianity was not a useful basis for environmental ethics because Jesus cursed a fig tree to wither and die, and caused the death of a herd of swine. If we go looking for a 'thou shalt plant trees' command from Jesus, we will be disappointed. Instead, we need to understand where Jesus saw himself with regards to God's unfolding narrative.

When Jesus proclaimed the gospel, what did he mean? Was it inclusive of eco-mission? *Euangelion* is found in the Greek Old Testament in passages such as

Isaiah 40:9 and 52. In Isaiah 40, the heralding of the good news is proclaiming the forgiveness of sins (vv.1, 9), the coming of God (vv.3–5), and the gathering in of his flock, Israel (vv.10–11), i.e., the return from exile. Israel's exile was the result of breaking the covenant with Israel's God (Deut 28:63–68) by committing idolatry. Isaiah therefore reaffirms the superiority of the God of Israel over pagan idols (v12ff, especially vv18–20). Wright<sup>7</sup> suggests that

many first-century Jews thought of themselves as living in a continuing narrative stretching from earliest times, through ancient prophesies, and on towards a climactic moment of deliverance which might come at any moment,

and that 'this continuing narrative was currently seen, on the basis of Daniel 9, as a long passage through a state of continuing "exile"'. Be it Roman or Persian, if Gentiles were in charge, God was not truly king.

Hence, *euangelion* carried with it a world of meaning: God's forgiveness, end of exile and political oppression, and the blessing of Israel's God. Paul's contention is that the salvific promises made to Israel are fulfilled in the gospel of Jesus. To suggest that Jesus (Mark 1:14–15) or Paul (Rom 1) somehow 'spiritualise' the word *euangelion*, emptying it of all political meaning, beggars belief. The contemporary secular usage is illuminating:

... a savior for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere ...; the birthday of the god [Augustus] was the beginning for the world of the *glad tidings* that have come to men through him ... (emphasis added)<sup>8</sup>

The value of this broader view of the gospel for eco-mission is firstly that people are not saved from the earth but expect to be renewed with the earth: God's people in God's place. Any well-thought-out resurrection theology should also make this clear. Secondly, the gospel challenges all empires, and empires tend to be inherently destructive of the environment, be they Rome or profit-driven,

---

7 Tom Wright, *What St Paul Really Said*, (Lion Books: 1997).

8 Wright, *What St Paul Really Said*.

multinational, petroleum companies.

Related to this understanding of the gospel and the kingdom of God is the model of the atonement known as *Christus Victor*. As N.T. Wright notes in his *Evil and the Justice of God*,<sup>9</sup> this is the view that, on the cross, Jesus has won a victory over the powers of evil. The view of evil presented is non-dualistic in that it recognises with Solzhenitsyn that:<sup>10</sup>

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

Further, evil is not simply individual but can be corporate and systemic. The path that led to the cross was a downward spiral of evil, from the ever-present Roman empire as discussed above, to the corruption of Israel and her temple, and the shadowy, supra-personal powers of darkness lurking in the background. These powers of darkness could enter into Judas, or be personified in attitudes like Peter's to Jesus' vocation. In dealing with evil, Jesus identified with Israel, warned her of the consequences of her actions and stood in her place, and in the place of all of humanity on the cross. Wright is worth quoting at length here:

Jesus suffers the full consequences of evil, evil from the political, social, cultural, personal, moral, religious and spiritual angles all rolled into one, evil in the downward spiral hurtling towards the pit of destruction and despair. And he does so precisely as the act of redemption, of taking that downward fall and exhausting it, so that there may be new creation, new covenant, forgiveness, freedom and hope... The call of the gospel is for the church to *implement the victory of God in the world through suffering love.*<sup>11</sup>

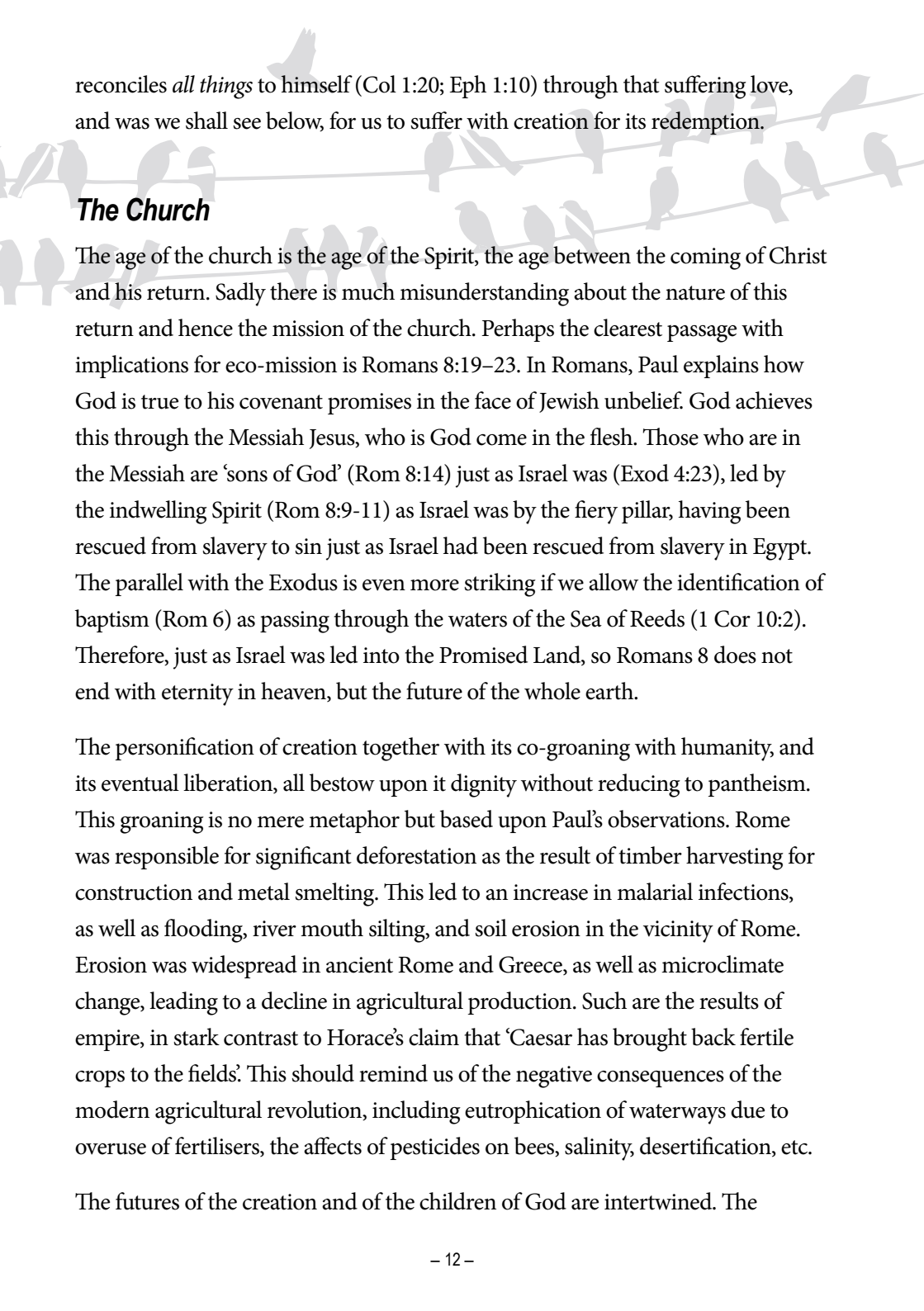
It is this view of the cross that makes it easier to affirm with Paul that Christ

---

9 N. T. Wright. *Evil and the Justice of God*, (SPCK: 2006).

10 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956*, various editions.

11 Wright. *Evil and the Justice of God*.



reconciles *all things* to himself (Col 1:20; Eph 1:10) through that suffering love, and as we shall see below, for us to suffer with creation for its redemption.

## **The Church**

The age of the church is the age of the Spirit, the age between the coming of Christ and his return. Sadly there is much misunderstanding about the nature of this return and hence the mission of the church. Perhaps the clearest passage with implications for eco-mission is Romans 8:19–23. In Romans, Paul explains how God is true to his covenant promises in the face of Jewish unbelief. God achieves this through the Messiah Jesus, who is God come in the flesh. Those who are in the Messiah are ‘sons of God’ (Rom 8:14) just as Israel was (Exod 4:23), led by the indwelling Spirit (Rom 8:9-11) as Israel was by the fiery pillar, having been rescued from slavery to sin just as Israel had been rescued from slavery in Egypt. The parallel with the Exodus is even more striking if we allow the identification of baptism (Rom 6) as passing through the waters of the Sea of Reeds (1 Cor 10:2). Therefore, just as Israel was led into the Promised Land, so Romans 8 does not end with eternity in heaven, but the future of the whole earth.

The personification of creation together with its co-groaning with humanity, and its eventual liberation, all bestow upon it dignity without reducing to pantheism. This groaning is no mere metaphor but based upon Paul’s observations. Rome was responsible for significant deforestation as the result of timber harvesting for construction and metal smelting. This led to an increase in malarial infections, as well as flooding, river mouth silting, and soil erosion in the vicinity of Rome. Erosion was widespread in ancient Rome and Greece, as well as microclimate change, leading to a decline in agricultural production. Such are the results of empire, in stark contrast to Horace’s claim that ‘Caesar has brought back fertile crops to the fields’. This should remind us of the negative consequences of the modern agricultural revolution, including eutrophication of waterways due to overuse of fertilisers, the affects of pesticides on bees, salinity, desertification, etc.

The futures of the creation and of the children of God are intertwined. The

creation longs for the future revealing of the sons of God (Rom 8:19) and groans in birth pains while we groan for our sonship (v 23), because when we are revealed as the children of God, the creation will find its own liberation (v 21). Just as humanity was given over to sin (Rom 1:18–32) and now in Christ through the Spirit hopes for resurrection (8:23–24), so the creation was subject to futility in hope (v 20). We have the first fruits of the Spirit as those who will be raised by the one who raised Christ. The creation co-groans with the sons of God, for as the first fruits we prefigure a greater harvest which includes all things. There are hints of the pneumatological groaning as well. The Spirit groans for us in our weakness as we groan for redemption, and the creation groans for its redemption too, tied up with ours. It seems then that there is a sense in which the Spirit that hovered over the waters of creation (Gen 1:2) even now groans with it.

Because only the God who subjected creation to frustration can liberate it from that frustration, what does this say for our eco-missiological task? Firstly, we should groan with creation, empathetically feeling its suffering and the suffering that others experience as a result of our misrule. This includes a sense of mourning and of contrition. Secondly, we are called to live in hope; hope that God will return and put everything to rights, including the state of the creation. This hope energises action instead of leading to apathy. Likewise, while we are to feel appropriate guilt, we are not to be paralysed by it nor motivated solely by it. Hope is our watchword, as we live proleptically in the light of the redemption that creation will share with us. And this hope informs our sense of justice as we see human and natural ecology out of shape, and work to alleviate the suffering of others who suffer because of environmental degradation. As one day God's shalom will extend to all things, we should seek peacemaking with each other and with the creation now.

## **Reframing our symbols and questions**

We can see from the preceding discussion that we can re-frame some of the classic questions of Christian theology in light of this more holistic view of mission.

*Who are we?* We are created in the image of God to bear this image to the rest of creation, ruling over it and caring for it as his servants in his temple-cosmos. Human flourishing relies upon maintaining good relationships with God and with each other and carrying out our responsibilities to care for creation. The bestowal of the *imago Dei* implies the carrying out of the *eco-missio Dei*.

*What's the problem?* The Fall represents broken relationships with God, each other and the creation, leading to its groaning under our misrule as we either treat it as divine or disposable. As a result, human and natural ecologies are warped out of shape.

*What's the solution?* The cross, where Jesus defeats evil in all of its forms and reconciles all things to himself.

*What time is it?* We live not in some Edenic past, nor some heavenly future, but in the age of the Spirit where all creation groans, awaiting Christ's return and the revealing of the children of God. Until that occurs, individual and corporate greed and idolatry lead to human and non-human suffering.

*What are we to do?* The great Commission calls us to make disciples of all nations so that the people of God may be formed out of every nation, tribe and tongue. This discipleship includes not only instruction of right belief and practice in personal virtues, but peace, justice and wise rule over creation. We live proleptically in light of a future where the whole creation finally attains to its divine telos.

There are also a number of symbols or boundary markers of the Christian life that need to be understood in a broader context. Two that Wright refers to are baptism and the Eucharist or Lord's Supper. In the case of the former, water is a symbol of the inner cleansing of the Spirit, an outward visible sign of an inward invisible grace as Anglicans would say. Scripture attests not only to the purifying but also the life-giving nature of water (e.g. John 4). As the universal solvent for life, and a potentially future scarce resource with changing rainfall regimes and contamination, God's people should value water more and employ its symbolism



in more imaginative ways. Christians should affirm, if somewhat tentatively, Loren Eiseley who said ‘If there is magic on the planet, it is contained in Water’. The Eucharist or Lord’s Supper is often a performance and a fast-food version of kingdom table fellowship. The reality that we are the children of God awaiting our adoption is expressed in the celebration of a corporate meal that remembers that this adoption was purchased at great price. As God’s new body politic on earth, we corporately practise all that the new creation will entail: peace, justice and harmony with the created order. This harmony will entail just eating, the proper consideration of the impact of our diet on the environment, and the justice or otherwise of the economics of the food consumed. Missiologically both to creation and our multicultural neighbours this may include halal and vegetarian or vegan meals. It should almost certainly include home-grown produce, attempting to heal the rift between garden and table that urbans often experience. Perhaps too, associations of harvest festival with Pentecost could be more strongly drawn, especially in less liturgically based communities.

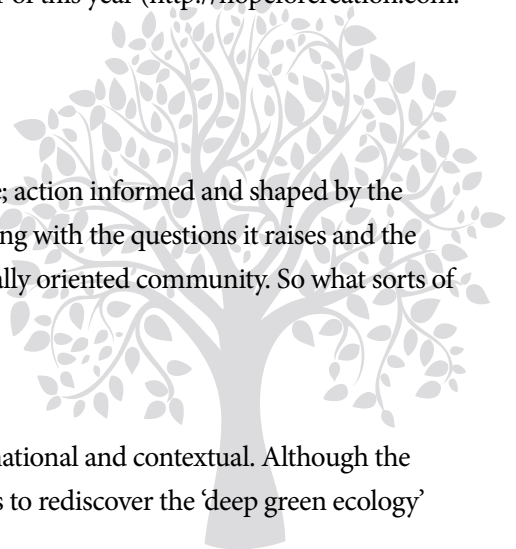
Finally, prayer and worship, as defining features of any Christian community, should go a lot further in recognising the role the creation plays doxologically. Likewise, in lament, confession and petition, creation should receive due attention, and I draw attention to Hope for Creation, a day of prayer on climate change which will happen in September of this year (<http://hopeforcreation.com.au>).

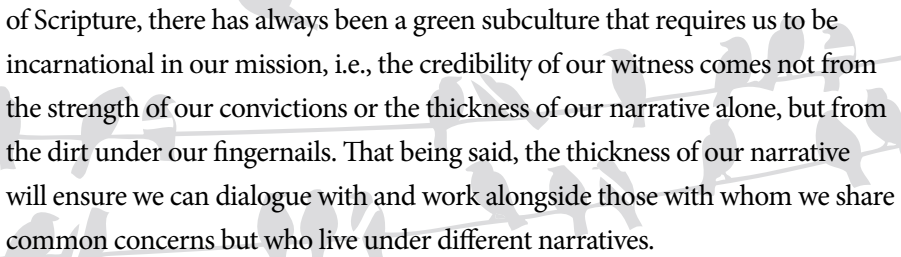
## **Eco-praxis**

Eco-praxis is eco-missiology in practice; action informed and shaped by the holistic narrative described above, dealing with the questions it raises and the symbols that define an eco-missologically oriented community. So what sorts of things might this involve?

### *Dialogue*

The sharing of the gospel is to be incarnational and contextual. Although the present environmental crisis requires us to rediscover the ‘deep green ecology’





of Scripture, there has always been a green subculture that requires us to be incarnational in our mission, i.e., the credibility of our witness comes not from the strength of our convictions or the thickness of our narrative alone, but from the dirt under our fingernails. That being said, the thickness of our narrative will ensure we can dialogue with and work alongside those with whom we share common concerns but who live under different narratives.

On the one hand, we need to recognise the warnings of Romans 1 and the dangers of idolatry. Creation will not be saved either by seeing it as divine as some eco-pagans do, or as disposable as the dualistic end of Christianity does. To engage in eco-mission will mean taking flak from both sides. To one reader of my blog, [ethos-environment.blogspot.com](http://ethos-environment.blogspot.com), I am pagan for suggesting Christians should recognise Earth Hour. To an environmentalist blogger, I am supposed to keep my religion out of the discussion of environmental issues. The church and its adherents have done too little, too late and stand condemned of ecocide! At various times and places this charge may stick. Tim Flannery once recounted how the efforts of Baptist missionaries in PNG to end pagan beliefs in a sacred grove led to a decline in bird of paradise numbers in an area. The narrative I have offered could both demythologise nature but still recognise it as God's sacred cosmos-temple filled with creatures valuable to him. The narrative that led to the grove's destruction is anaemic compared to this vision.

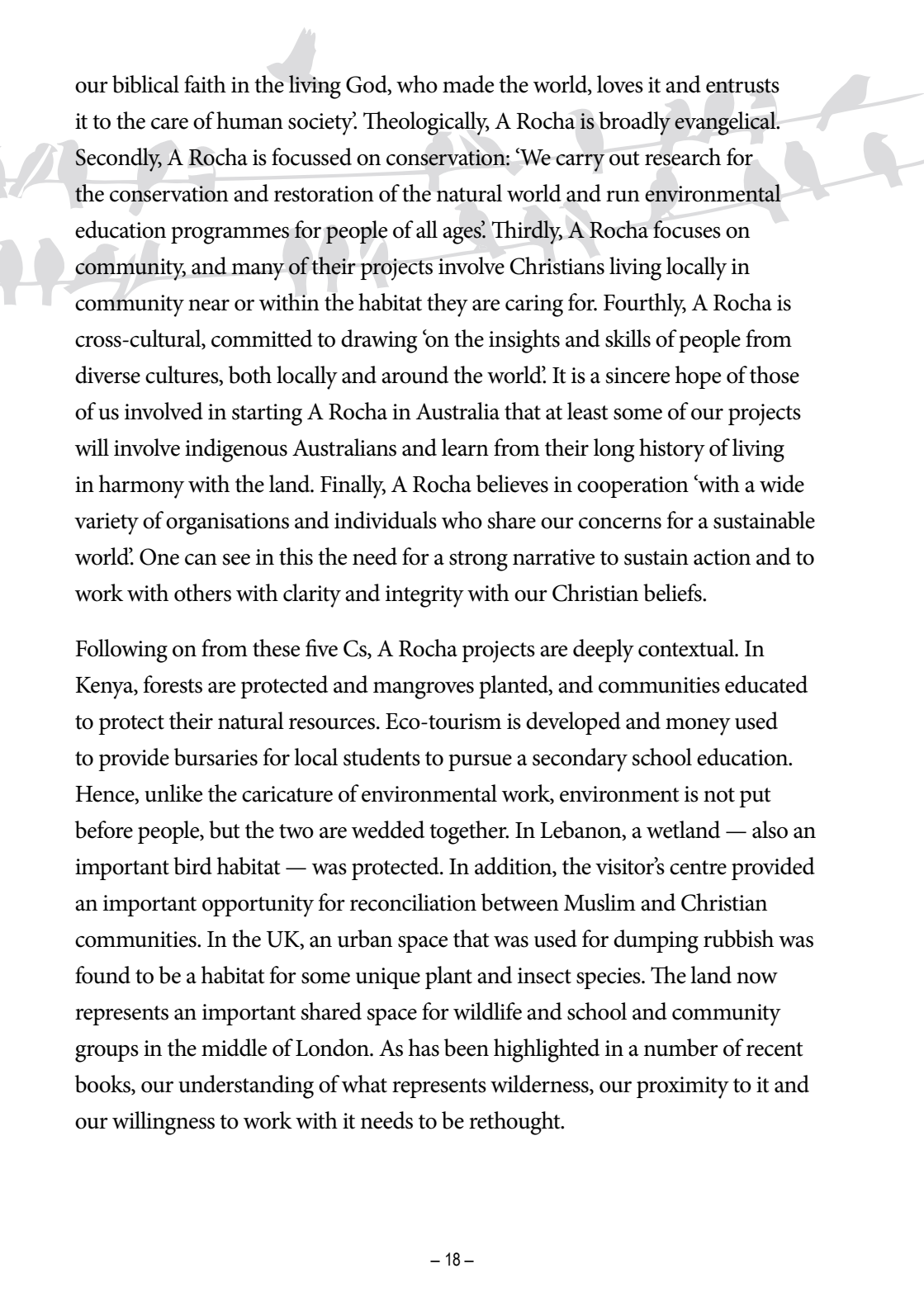
Therefore, while we recognise the uniqueness of the gospel and the dangers of idolatry, we need to seek fruitful dialogue, and Acts 17 provides a useful model. In seeking a close connection with nature, some environmentalists are following their God-given inclinations to seek him out. What is required is to show that Jesus is the creator of all they value, and that he too values it and died so that we might be reconciled to the triune God, and as a result with each other and the creation. We should be slow to speak and quick to listen to critiques of the church's role in past creation abuse. Likewise, there may be much that we can learn from others in how to value nature.

Gardening provides an opportunity to connect gospel, community and creation

together in a holistic fashion. In an excellent paper presented at the Australian Association of Mission Studies Conference in 2011, Miriam Pepper provided a number of examples where Australian churches have become involved with local communities. The traditional model of mission has been attractional, where seekers are invited into our space on a Sunday morning or evening. The rest of the week, church facilities are largely unused. A church garden that invites community involvement provides a shared space that is both attractional and incarnational. It is a space of dialogue, of shared interest and activity. Church-run community gardens are not merely a front door into the real business of church; they are church. These gardens are gospel-centred communities where the biblical narrative is re-enacted, and where reconciliation is modelled on all levels. They provide the opportunities to form relationships and share the gospel through conversations while tilling the soil. Yet such shared tasks of earth care, organic food growing and reconciliation with the soil are sharing the gospel message in all its fullness. The connections that can then be drawn via fetes and festivals such as harvest festivals and the broader community close the gap between 'Sunday and Monday'.

As Pepper notes, garden-based eco-missiology is deeply contextual; there is no one-size-fits-all. In some settings, community gardens provide opportunities for local migrants to connect with each other and others in their community, providing language and social skills. In others, food produced is provided for those living with HIV/AIDS. In others still, gardens provide community hubs for artists, schools, musicians and indigenous Australians.

A final example is the work of A Rocha ([www.arocha.org](http://www.arocha.org)). A Rocha describes themselves as 'an international Christian organization which, inspired by God's love, engages in scientific research, environmental education and community-based conservation projects'. A Rocha's name comes from the Portuguese for 'the Rock', named after their first initiative begun in 1983, which was a field study centre in Portugal in an important wetland. They are now in over 19 countries, with a small group of us trying to establish it in Australia as well. A Rocha bases their work on five Cs. The first is Christian, stating that 'Underlying all we do is

A decorative background featuring several birds perched on a thin branch that runs horizontally across the top of the page. The birds are rendered in a light, semi-transparent style, blending into the white background. The overall aesthetic is clean and nature-themed.

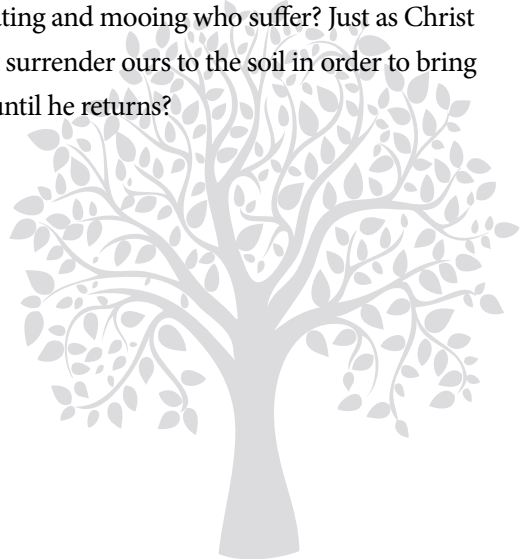
our biblical faith in the living God, who made the world, loves it and entrusts it to the care of human society.’ Theologically, A Rocha is broadly evangelical. Secondly, A Rocha is focussed on conservation: ‘We carry out research for the conservation and restoration of the natural world and run environmental education programmes for people of all ages.’ Thirdly, A Rocha focuses on community, and many of their projects involve Christians living locally in community near or within the habitat they are caring for. Fourthly, A Rocha is cross-cultural, committed to drawing ‘on the insights and skills of people from diverse cultures, both locally and around the world’. It is a sincere hope of those of us involved in starting A Rocha in Australia that at least some of our projects will involve indigenous Australians and learn from their long history of living in harmony with the land. Finally, A Rocha believes in cooperation ‘with a wide variety of organisations and individuals who share our concerns for a sustainable world.’ One can see in this the need for a strong narrative to sustain action and to work with others with clarity and integrity with our Christian beliefs.

Following on from these five Cs, A Rocha projects are deeply contextual. In Kenya, forests are protected and mangroves planted, and communities educated to protect their natural resources. Eco-tourism is developed and money used to provide bursaries for local students to pursue a secondary school education. Hence, unlike the caricature of environmental work, environment is not put before people, but the two are wedded together. In Lebanon, a wetland — also an important bird habitat — was protected. In addition, the visitor’s centre provided an important opportunity for reconciliation between Muslim and Christian communities. In the UK, an urban space that was used for dumping rubbish was found to be a habitat for some unique plant and insect species. The land now represents an important shared space for wildlife and school and community groups in the middle of London. As has been highlighted in a number of recent books, our understanding of what represents wilderness, our proximity to it and our willingness to work with it needs to be rethought.

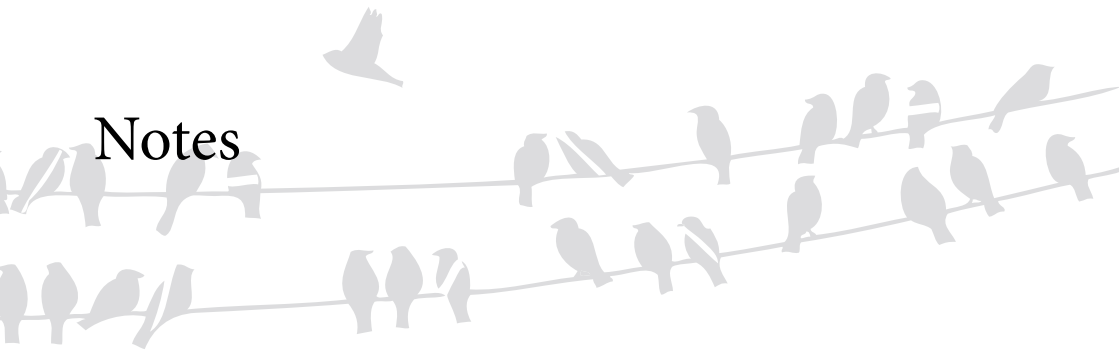
## Questions and challenges

Hopefully I have been able to demonstrate that the concept of eco-mission runs deeply through the biblical narrative and is more substantial than greenwashing the gospel in the name of relevancy, and more lucid than ‘preaching to the birds’. Eco-mission leaves us with questions and challenges for mission in theory and in praxis. Given the environmental challenges we face in the twenty-first century and the crisis of narrative that modernism in its faith in progress has produced, and then the confusion and return to paganism that post-modernism has followed, how will we respond? How can we revision our theology, from our understanding of the Godhead to the nature of the atonement to address these issues, to be the church incarnate in the world and yet be true to the biblical narrative. Indeed, how do we resist the ever-present challenge that paganism presents? We will be critiqued strongly from within our own ranks as addressing Yahweh as my Baal (Hosea 2:16) and from without as being hopelessly part of the problem.

The challenges to praxis will be to learn how to leave the four walls of our churches to embrace soil and community. Will we be willing to move church services from inside the buildings to Clean Up Australia activities, to invite others into our open spaces to till and toil, giving up some of our autonomy to the wishes of others? Are we willing to chain ourselves to trains or trees in the service of the gospel, to take up the plight of the bleating and mooing who suffer? Just as Christ surrendered his hands to nails, will we surrender ours to the soil in order to bring healing? Will we groan with creation until he returns?



# Notes



# Notes





The Tinsley Annual Lecture is presented by  
the Tinsley Institute Morling College and  
Global InterAction.

[www.morlingcollege.com](http://www.morlingcollege.com)



**MORLING**  
COLLEGE



**GLOBAL | INTERACTION**