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## THE THREE BIG QUESTIONS

Can Christianity provide an effective response to the need for human care of creation? It depends on the answers we give to the big questions. These are the three big questions we must ask in this global-crisis if we confess that Christ is the Creator and the Great Integrator and Reconciler of all things:

1. Is Jesus Christ Lord of Creation?
2. Is Creation a lost cause?
3. Who are we following when we follow Jesus Christ?

### **Big Question 1: Is Jesus Christ Lord of Creation?**

Through Jesus Christ, God created the world, holds everything together, and reconciles all things.<sup>1</sup> Followers of Jesus Christ have known this remarkable teaching of Colossians 1:15-20 from the beginning. The depth and significance of this passage is there for all to see:

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, . . . all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

We observe three things about this passage of Scripture. First, Christ is the Creator of all things (*ta panta*), the Author of all things. Not only did he create all things, but all things were created for him. Second, in Christ all things (*ta panta*) hold together. Everything derives its integrity from Christ and without him things would fall apart. Christ is Sustainer and Integrator of all things. Third, God reconciles all things (*ta panta*) to himself through Christ by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. So Christ is Reconciler and Harmonizer of all things.

The scriptures makes clear that the claims of Jesus Christ on the world are thoroughly comprehensive. It is the claim made by the one who made the world, holds the world together, and reconciles the world. The comprehensive claims of Jesus Christ on the world derives from his being its Author, Integrator, and Harmonizer.

Second Corinthians 5:15 brings us further in our understanding of the consequences of this claim of Jesus Christ on the world. There it states that "he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." This has a remarkable consequence, namely, that living in Christ, we no longer regard Christ or anyone else from a worldly point of view. In Christ we are a new creation and live as his ambassadors, committed to the message of reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> What then does it mean to be Christ's ambassadors? It is inconceivable that those who are in Christ and who themselves have been made new creatures should find themselves in opposition to Christ's work of creation, integration, and reconciliation. Can we honor our Creator without respecting his creation? Can we honor our Creator and despise his magnificent works? Can we thank God for

loving the world, and not care about it?

My purpose in all of this is to help enlarge our understanding of the Lordship of Jesus Christ so that we appreciate that Jesus Christ is Creator, Sustainer, and Reconciler. My conclusion is this: Jesus Christ **IS** Beautiful Savior, but more than that, Jesus Christ **IS** King of Creation. Have we dismembered our Creator into Savior on the one hand and Maker of the material world on the other? Have we separated the spiritual from the material? Are we treating the great gallery of our Creator in a way that expresses our love and respect for our triune God?

### **Big Question 2: Is Creation a Lost Cause?**

Because of the degradation human beings have brought across the face of the earth, we are tempted to ask whether creation is a lost cause. I use the word "tempted" here deliberately, for it is in fact a temptation to consider giving up on Creation altogether, and many have done so. The temptation that entices us is this, that we should live as best we can for now and pin our hopes on the life to come. Yielding to this temptation may bring us to a position where we do not care about the material world at all. We would profess not only that matter does not matter, but that matter in the material world is ugly, perhaps even evil.

It is devastating to ourselves and to God's world when we yield to this temptation. We should be put on guard by the warning of Revelation 11:18, where in the last judgment, following the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the proclamation is made that "the time has come for destroying those . . . who destroy the earth."<sup>3</sup> On the positive side, there is God's love for the world, God's love for the cosmos, a love so great that God takes on material flesh. There is also the powerful taking on again of the flesh in Christ's resurrection. So we must not yield to this temptation, since to God incarnate, matter matters!

### **Kuyper on the Material World**

Abraham Kuyper has a contribution to make here. It comes by way of an exposition he gave in 1903 on John 3:16 ("For God so loved the world"), over half a century before our recognition of a crisis, even before any popular understanding of ecology or "the environment."

God so loved the world, that He gave it His Only-begotten Son. . . . God loves *the world*. Of course not in its sinful strivings and unholy motions. . . . But God loves the world for the sake of its origin; because God has thought it out; because God has created it; because God has *maintained* it and *maintains* it to this day. We have not made the world, and thus in our sin we have not maltreated an art product of our own. No, the world was the contrivance, the work and the creation *of the Lord our God*. It was and is His world, which belonged to Him, which He had created for His glory, and for which we with that world were by Him appointed. It did not belong to us, but to Him. It was His. And it is *His* divine world that we have spoiled and corrupted.

And God's love is rooted in this: that He will repair and renew this world, His own creation, His own work of wisdom, His own work of art, which we have upset and broken, and polish it again to new luster. And it *shall* come to this. God's plan does not miscarry, and with divine certainty He carries out the counsel of His thoughts. That world will once again stand before God in full glory: a new earth and a new heaven.

But the children of men meanwhile can fall out of that world. If they will not cease to corrupt His world, God can declare them unworthy of having any longer part in that world, and as once

He banished them *from Paradise*, so at the last judgment He will banish them from this earth . . . . And therefore whoever would be saved with that world, as God loves it, let him accept the Son, Whom God has given to that world in order to save the world. Let him not continue standing afar off, let him not hesitate.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, then, creation is not a lost cause. God expresses his eternal love for the world by giving us his Son. Reflecting on this gift in the context of what we have learned from Colossians 1:15-20, we are struck by the fact that God's gift to the world pre-exists the world. God's gift to the world, Jesus Christ, is before all things. Yet he comes in the flesh. The Creator takes on created matter as part of himself. The material creation matters to God.

Beyond the incarnation is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In it we have the conclusive answer to the question of whether creation is a lost cause. It is through the resurrection in particular that creation is vindicated. Evangelical ethicist Oliver O'Donovan puts it this way:

We are driven to concentrate on the resurrection as our starting-point because it tells us of God's vindication of his creation, and so of our created life . . . .

The meaning of the resurrection, as Saint Paul presents it, is that it is God's final and decisive word on the life of his creature, Adam. . . . It might have been possible, we could say, before Christ rose from the dead, for someone to wonder whether creation was a lost cause. If the creature consistently acted to uncreate itself, and with itself to uncreate the rest of creation, did this not mean that God's handiwork was flawed beyond hope of repair? It might have been possible before Christ rose from the dead to answer in good faith, Yes. Before God raised Jesus from the dead, the hope that we call 'gnostic,' the hope for redemption *from* creation rather than for the redemption *of* creation, might have appeared to be the only possible hope. 'But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead...' (15:20). That fact rules out those other possibilities, for in the second Adam the first is rescued. The deviance of his will, its fateful leaning towards death, has not been allowed to uncreate what God created.<sup>5</sup>

The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that the creation is not a lost cause. Creation is affirmed by its Creator.

We continually confront in the Church the devilish temptation to reduce the Lord of creation to one who merely saves. Under the continuing influence of the Gnosticism that infected the early church, some have reduced God to the one who saves us out of creation. This separation of Savior from Creator goes so far that belief in the Creator is reduced to empty words. As art critics might somehow find it acceptable to trample Rembrandt's paintings while honoring Rembrandt's name, some people praise the Creator while trampling on his creation. Regrettably, some God-praising people have comfortably neglected creation's evangelical testimony,<sup>6</sup> and even assist in about bringing creation's degradation.

Saving people "out of creation" is not a biblical idea, of course. Instead it is rooted in the Platonic notion that physical nature is a source of ignorance and evil and a snare to the soul. When joined with the idea of human transcendence, this resulted in a theology which "laid most stress on the salvation of the *soul*, and which tended to dismiss as insignificant the body and the creation of which it was a part."<sup>7</sup>

### Big Question 3: Who Are We Following When We Follow Jesus Christ?

We sometimes sing, "Christ shall have dominion, over land and sea." Jesus Christ, the Lord of creation, is our model for dominion, but what is that model? The Apostle Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Philippians (2:5-8):

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus,  
Who being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God  
something to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!"

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. Even more so we, the followers of Jesus Christ, should not view ourselves equal to God or Jesus Christ. Far from being equal with God, we must confess our total dependence upon God in every aspect of our lives and vocations. The example of Jesus Christ, our model of dominion, helps interpret for us the dominion material in Genesis 1:26-28. Taken in the context of the example of Jesus Christ, this passage helps us understand our responsibility toward the Lord's creation. The passage reads as follows:

26 And God said, Let us make man in our **image**, after our likeness: and let them have **dominion** over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

27 So God created man in his own **image**, in the **image** of God created he him; male and female created he them.

28 And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and **subdue** it: and have **dominion** over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth (KJV).

In this passage, the Hebrew word "*radah*" is translated "have dominion" (KJV) or "rule" (NIV). An even more forceful word is "subdue," a translation of the Hebrew, "*kabash*." Without the example of Jesus Christ, one might conclude that this passage suggests "anything goes."<sup>8</sup> However, Jesus Christ brings us to see this dominion as service rather than as a license for ungodly behavior.

It also is clear from the requirements for kings in Deuteronomy 17:18-20 that those to whom God gives dominion must fully reflect God's will in their rule. They must reflect God in the way they relate to their subjects—mirroring, representing, reflecting, and imaging God's will and God's relationship to creation.<sup>9</sup> Thus, God's proclamation through Ezekiel, "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds . . . but do not take care of the flock. . . . You have ruled (*radah*) them harshly and brutally" (Ez. 34:2-4).

The Lord shows by divine example what should be done: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them (34:11). I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the

settlements in the land . . . . I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord (34:13b,15). I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak; but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd my flock with justice" (34:16).

Lest people take the mandate to subdue the earth as a license to serve self rather than God and creation, God judges between those who use creation with care and those who abuse it. "Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?" (34:18-19).

What then is dominion in biblical and Christian terms? What does it mean to subdue the earth? It is serving God and creation. It is reflecting God's love for the world, God's law for creation, and God's justice for the land and creatures. Without this responsibility, we might have little reason other than pragmatic and utilitarian ones for keeping creation. We might work to save and nurture only what is useful or attractive to us. But as Noah in his obedience to God's will worked to perpetuate the fruitfulness of endangered species, so we must think not only of the animals which Noah kept, but of the other creatures as well.

### **Two kinds of dominion**

Dominion as domination is forbidden. Dominion as stewardship is required as a God-given responsibility for all people. Human dominion, however, is exercised across a broad spectrum, one end of which is dominion exercised in behalf of self and the other dominion in behalf of creation. Dominion at the first extreme can be called domination; dominion at the other extreme can be called stewardship. More specifically, in relation to creation, domination is service in behalf of self at the expense of creation; stewardship is service to creation in behalf of the Creator. Thus, we can distinguish between two kinds of dominion: domination and stewardship.<sup>10</sup>

Much of Genesis 1-11 is addressed to the wrongness of domination. The scriptural view is that seeking first one's own selfish interests at the expense of creation and its creatures is sinful domination worthy of punishment, even death. Thus, Adam and Eve's pressing into service the forbidden fruit to know good and evil is domination; its consequence is their own death and degradation of the ground. The murderous domination of Cain over Abel results in Cain being cursed by God, made restless, driven from the land, and the ground no longer yielding crops for him. The corrupting of creation by human society brings with it the deluvian destruction.<sup>11</sup> The rebellious event at Babel, where people "undertook a united and godless effort" to make for themselves "by a titanic human enterprise," a worldwide reputation and renown through which they "would dominate God's creation," results in their scattering across the earth.<sup>12</sup> In scriptural language, domination, defined as seeking first ourselves at the expense of creation, is "missing the mark," it is failing to meet the Creator's expectations for us, it is sin.

The Scriptural view is that seeking first to do the will of God with respect to creation is the right exercise of dominion. We have seen from Genesis 1-11 what stewardship is not; from Genesis 2:15 we can learn something of what it is. Here we learn that Adam and his descendants are expected to *serve* and *keep* the garden. The word "*keep*" is a translation of the Hebrew word, "*shamar*," which is also used in the Aaronic blessing given in Numbers 6:24: "The Lord bless you and *keep* you," a blessing very widely used in Jewish and Christian congregations to this day.<sup>13</sup>

When we invoke God's blessings to keep the assembled people, we are not praying merely that God

would keep them in a kind of preserved, inactive, uninteresting state, like one might keep a museum piece, a preserved specimen, or pickles in a jar. Rather, God would keep them in all of their vitality, with all their energy and beauty. This keeping is one that would nurture all life-sustaining and life-fulfilling relationships—with family, spouse, and children, with neighbors and friends, with the land that sustains human life and the living creatures, with the air and water, and with God. "*Shamar*" is an extremely rich word with a deeply penetrating meaning that evokes a loving, caring, sustaining keeping.

This is also the thrust of Genesis 2:15. When we act on God's will and charge to keep the garden, we make sure that the creatures under our care are maintained with all their proper connections with members of the same species, with the many other species with which they interact, and with the soil and air and water upon which they depend. The rich and full *keeping* that we invoke with the Aaronic blessing is the kind of rich and full keeping that we should bring to the garden of God, to God's creatures and to all of Creation. As God keeps those who invoke divine keeping, so those whom God keeps, keep creation. Human beings should be engaged in the care and keeping of creation, with all the richness and fullness this implies.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to recognizing the fullness of the meaning of "*shamar*" in Genesis 2:15, it is also helpful to our understanding of stewardship to attend to the preceding word, "*abad*." In Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible<sup>15</sup> the passage is rendered: "And Jehovah God taketh the man and causeth him to rest in the garden of Eden, to *serve* it and to keep it." Here "serve" is a translation of the word "*abad*." For those who have heard this translated "cultivate," "till," or "dress," this may come as a surprise. The word "*abad*" is also used in another famous passage: "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. . . . But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." A search of the use of "*abad*" will show that it is translated "serve," as in Joshua 24:15, except when it is applied to agriculture. No matter how one deals with the proper translation of the text, however, whether as translated with agricultural language or literally as "serve," the idea of service comes through clearly.

While serving the Garden or serving creation might sound peculiar to modern ears, we might consider what the Garden of Eden consisted of. The scriptures say that it was planted by God (Gen. 2:8), which makes us wonder how God plants things in creation. In God's garden, hoe, shovel, and plow might simply have been out of place, especially if it was more like the gardens of some tropical peoples where interplanting and high diversity are the rule. Perhaps it was a tropical garden not amenable to turning over the ground, but still open to service. Whatever the case, to understand the meaning of stewardship one must ponder the meaning of service.

The biblical expectation that human beings will "serve the garden" means that our dressing, tilling, and tending are done as acts of service. With the prefix *con*, this can be applied to indicate *service with*, as with the word con-serve. We may take this to mean that as the garden serves us, so we should provide reciprocal service. The biblical expectation, I believe, is con-service. As stewards of a creation, whether our stewardship is over a small garden or the whole biosphere, we are expected to be about the business of con-servancy. Conversely, when human beings fail to serve and instead abuse the garden or Creation, they should expect payment back in kind. Intended abuse of creation can have severe consequences, as we know full well. Unintended abuse of the garden can also have severe consequences, but if we are committed to tending the garden, the repercussions of such abuse can be part of our stewardship education. The key to proper service always is to consider our service as Christ's service. Our service should reflect God's love for the world.

When dominion is taken as license to do whatever meets one's self-interest, it is a misappropriation of the image of God and a failure to follow the example of Jesus Christ. Responsible appropriation of this

image is to seek first not self, but the Kingdom of God. To image God is to image God's love and law. To be made in the image of God is to be endowed with dignified responsibility to reflect God's goodness, righteousness and holiness. It is to use our intellectual powers, natural affections, and moral freedom to reflect the wisdom, love, and justice of God. It is to commune prayerfully with God through Jesus Christ and to anticipate the ultimate fulfillment of all things in the way we live our lives.

We conclude from all of this that human beings are distinctive with respect to other species in their exercise of dominion over creation. To the extent that being made in the image of God confers upon human beings what is distinctive with respect to other species, the exercise of dominion is part of the consequence of their being made in the image of God. Failure to seek God's purposes in creation leads to a perverted and sinful dominion, a domination whose goal is serving self rather than the Creator or creation. The proper exercise of dominion by human beings who seek truly and fully to mirror God's wisdom, love, and justice, is stewardship. So human beings should make every attempt to overcome the forces that would compel them to dominate creation, and, by diligently seeking creation's integrity, vigorously and prayerfully pursue a life of stewardship with God's Kingdom as its goal.

Resorting to the idea of stewardship does not eliminate the symptoms but it does address the problems at their root. People can mislead themselves and each other—through selfish intent, ignorance, or denial—by confusing symptoms with the underlying causes of environmental problems. A sound understanding of the idea of stewardship will help us appreciate the difference.

The biblical imperative then is for stewardship in behalf of God's Creation no matter what its condition. Christian environmental stewardship is not crisis management, but a way of life. God's call to serve and keep the garden is our calling no matter whether it is our vegetable garden or the whole of creation, and no matter if it is being degraded, staying the same, or improving. Caring for creation is much like caring for families—in sickness or health, in riches or poverty, in crisis or harmony. And this caring must be done wisely. Care-takers must be ever aware, alert, and vigilant in a sinful world, alert even to our own sinfulness.<sup>16</sup> We must face squarely the human predicament,<sup>17</sup> and also be ready to give a response in word and deed for the faith that is within us.<sup>18</sup> We need not have all the data, but we must be dedicated to imaging God's love for the world in our lives and landscapes. Responsible stewardship is not an option, but a continuing privilege and responsibility.<sup>19</sup>

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### Endnotes

1

See Colossians 1:15-20. All scriptural references are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Colorado Springs, CO: International Bible Society, 1984).

2

See 2 Corinthians 5:16-20.

3

Revelation 11:18.

4. Abraham Kuyper, *Keep Thy Solemn Feasts*, pp. 70-71.

5

Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 13-14, as cited by

Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Christ's Resurrection and the Creation's Vindication*, in Calvin B. DeWitt, ed., *The Environment and the Christian* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1991), 61-62, and as given in *Resurrection and Moral Order*, Second Edition (1994), 13-14.

6

See Romans 1:20, Psalm 19:1, and Acts 14:17 for passages describing Creation's testimony to God. Consider too that Creation's telling of God's glory and love is echoed by Scripture: God lovingly provides rains, cyclings of water and food for the creatures, fills people's hearts with joy, and satisfies the earth (Psalm 104:10-18; Acts 14:17). It is through this manifest love and wisdom that Creation declares God's glory and proclaims the work of the Creator's hands (Psalm 19:1; Rom 1:20). Creation's evangelical testimony is so powerful that everyone is left without excuse (Rom 1:20).

7

Quote from Loren Wilkinson, 1992. That all Christian thought does not make this unbiblical distinction between the physical and the spiritual and does not espouse a salvation which turns people away from creation, see *Earthkeeping in the Nineties: Stewardship of Creation* (Loren Wilkinson, ed., Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1982, pp. 299-306.) For a theological study of the importance of matter and of Creation, and of the unbiblical hatred of Creation by Marcion and Greek and Gnostic leaders, see Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Christ's Resurrection and the Creation's Vindication," in C.B. DeWitt, ed., *The Environment and the Christian: What Can We Learn from the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1991, pp. 57-71.

8

See Theology, Science, and Creation: Extending the Horizon of Science and the Christian Faith. *Faculty Dialogue* 1995(24) for other reasons it cannot be interpreted as "anything goes."

9

Creation here, as elsewhere, must be understood in the biblical sense of being comprised of all things created, including human beings.

10

For a more detailed treatment see *Extending Horizons*.

11

For a description of Noah's faithfulness in relation to this see DeWitt, C. B. 1989. The price of gopher wood. *Faculty Dialogue* 1989(12):59-62.

12

This and the following paragraph are taken directly from *Extending the Horizon*.

13

This paragraph is based upon *Extending the Horizons*, and the next two paragraphs are taken from it directly.

14

That "care and keeping" was recognized before our time is evident in a prayer published

in 1566: "Finally, O Lord, wilt Thou take us and our dear ones and all that concern us into Thy care and keeping" (from "A Prayer for all the Needs of Christendom, from the *Psalter* by Petrus Dathenus published in translation in the *Psalter Hymnal*, Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1976, p. 183). That the connection is made in this prayer with Numbers 6:24 is indicated in its conclusion which is a recitation of the Aaronic Blessing: "Jehovah bless thee, and keep thee; Jehovah make his face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee; Jehovah lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace. Amen."

<sup>15</sup>. Revised Edition, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1953. Emphasis on the word, "serve," in this and the following quoted text from Joshua has been added.

<sup>16</sup>

Romans 3:23.

<sup>17</sup>

See Romans 7:7-25.

<sup>18</sup>

See 1 Peter 3:15.

<sup>19</sup>

This paragraph is taken from my piece to be published in the October issue of the *Christian Research Journal*.