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## Ecological Concern in Paul's Theology<sup>1</sup>

*A revised form of a paper presented at the Fifth Consultation of the Centre for Mission Studies, Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, India on 'Ecological Challenge and Christian Mission' held on 26-28 February, 1997. Dr Kanagaraj teaches at Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, India.*

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An interest in ecology<sup>2</sup> has gained momentum generally in the study of religion and particularly in Christian theological discussions since the 1960s. In 1961 Joseph Sittler, in his address to the WCC assembly, New Delhi, pointed out the then increasingly visible degradation of nature around the world and called upon the global church to seek unity in the name of the cosmic Christ.<sup>3</sup> In 1972 Elfan Rees, a member of the WCC Commission of the Churches in International Affairs, admitted that the 1972 United Nations conference at Stockholm had awakened Christendom to realize the terrible implications of the environmental problem.<sup>4</sup> Apart from several publications, the seminar held at Vellore, India in 1983 on 'Christian Perspectives on Stewardship of the Earth's Resources', the 1989 Basel Declaration that emerged from the inter-Church Consultation on 'Peace with Justice for the Whole Creation', the World Convocation which met in Seoul in 1990 on 'Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation', the 1991 WCC Conference at Canberra which adopted again the same theme, and the so-called Earth Summit held at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992 and

<sup>1</sup> I am highly indebted to my colleagues, the Rev. and Mrs. Ian Kemp, for their patience in revising this article in order to correct my English which otherwise would have appeared crude.

<sup>2</sup> The word 'ecology' comes from 'oekology' which is derived from the Greek *oikos*, meaning 'house, habitat' and thus an ecological concern refers to giving care for the world, which is our household, by perceiving the relationship that exists within this dwelling place between different organisms (i.e., plants, animals, birds, fish and human beings) and natural environment.

<sup>3</sup> As noted by H. P. Santmire, 'Toward a Christology of Nature: Claiming the Legacy of Joseph Sittler and Karl Barth', *Dialog* 34, 1995, 270.

<sup>4</sup> See R. Elsdon, *Greenhouse Theology: Biblical Perspectives on Caring for Creation* (Tunbridge Wells, 1992), 13-14.

the same to be held in New York later this year are the landmarks of the collective ecological consciousness of the Church.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of these efforts, however, Christians have been very slow in protecting the environment. They treat ecology only as an academic matter rather than an environmental concern involving relevant action against the threatening ecological crisis.<sup>6</sup> Forest ecosystems are still being destroyed causing the extinction of animals, plants, places of natural beauty, and rare species. We still face industrial and agricultural pollution, poisoning the very air we breathe and thinning the earth's ozone layer and warming the globe. The leakage of toxic gas in Bhopal in 1984, the burning of Kuwait's oil wells in 1991, and the nuclear test conducted by France in the Pacific have each caused environmental havoc and health hazards in our time. The flow of waste water in a poor sewage system in New Delhi gave birth to aedes mosquitoes causing a dengue epidemic that claimed nearly 300 lives in 1996. Indiscriminate growth of population in the two-thirds world has caused vehicular pollution and the spread of disease. New Delhi, for example, which is considered the fourth most polluted city in the world, accounts for 30% of India's vehicular population; the pollution level in Bombay due to vehicular traffic has gone up by more than 300% in the past 25 years, spreading diseases such as lung-cancer, asthma, chronic bronchial infections and heart disorders which cause the premature death of nearly 13,000 people every year. In such a situation, what is the role of the Church today? What have Christians attempted in order to restore nature from human negligence and the power of exploitation?

Past studies have shown that the root cause of the environmental crisis is the mistaken values and attitudes towards nature—attitudes which claim for the right to have as many children as one wants, to exploit nature for selfish gain, to develop unwarranted technology, and to exercise inequality in food distribution.<sup>7</sup> Sadly, some scholars maintain that it is Christians who have such attitudes. For example, Lynn White Jr. of the University of California, in his lecture on 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis' delivered in 1966, contended that since Christianity, particularly Western Christianity, holds that it

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<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in the G-7 Summit held in June 1997 at Denver the world leaders have expressed an environmental concern to reduce green house gases in order to minimise global warming and have identified three global hot spots, the West Asia, Bosnia and Cambodia, as a major step to tackle the current environmental crisis.

<sup>6</sup> L. Osborn, *Guardians of Creation: Nature in Theology and the Christian Life* (Leicester, 1993), 15–16, draws a distinction between ecology and environmentalism by stating that whereas the former is an academic discipline, the latter is a popular response to the perceived threat to the natural environment.

<sup>7</sup> See Osborn, *Guardians of Creation*, 22–23.

is God's will for humans to exploit nature for their selfish ends because of the God-given dominion over it, it bears a huge burden of guilt.<sup>8</sup> He concluded that both our present science and our technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecological crisis can be expected from them alone.<sup>9</sup> Although some Christians accept White's criticism as valid, others have not hesitated to refute his arguments on historical and exegetical grounds.<sup>10</sup>

The Church's passive attitude towards the environmental problem is attributed by R. Elsdon to the non-communication of ecological concerns to the people in the pews.<sup>11</sup> Some Christians increasingly realize that the environment is a global concern in which they individually have a responsibility.<sup>12</sup> Yet most of them seem to withdraw from involvement in programmes which promote ecological health assuming that ecological concern is secular by nature and not sacred or spiritual. They also think, of course wrongly, that there is no basis either in the Bible or in any early Christian writings to give a primary place for ecology. This postmodern tendency calls for a careful study of the scriptures to discern whether they contain any ecological concern.

The Biblical basis for ecological concern has been pointed out by several scholars. The Creation story in the Old Testament and the idea of a cosmic Christ in the New Testament have been used to evoke ecological awareness. Evidence for caring for nature has often been traced in Jesus' teaching.<sup>13</sup> Although Santmire has categorically stated that John's Gospel is predominantly anti-ecological in tone and that John has negative connotations towards the cosmos,<sup>14</sup> the positive attitude of John's Gospel towards a theology of nature has been

<sup>8</sup> L. White, Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', in F. A. Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man-The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton, 8th print., 1977), 107. Cf. A. Veeraraj, 'Christianity and the Environment', in O. P. Dwivedi (ed.), *World Religions and Environment* (New Delhi, 1989), 39-40. Similarly, Ian L. McHarg points out the irresponsible use of Gn. 1:26,28 which encourages the most exploitative and destructive instincts in people rather than deferential and creative instincts—see John Stott, 'Our Human Environment', in his *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Bombay, reprint., 1988), 117.

<sup>9</sup> White Jr., 'Historical Roots', 114; Veeraraj, 'Christianity and the Environment', 40.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Osborn, *Guardians of Creation*, 30-31; Stott, *Issues Facing Christians*, 117-18.

<sup>11</sup> Elsdon, *Greenhouse Theology*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> See on this K. C. Abraham, 'Ecology and Mission', in J. R. Chandran (ed.), *Third World Theologies in Dialogue: Essays in Memory of D. S. Amalorpavadass* (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, 1991), 115.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Elsdon, *Greenhouse Theology*, 140-49; Osborn, *Guardians of Creation*, 95-96.

<sup>14</sup> Cited by Osborn, *Guardians of Creation*, 98-99.

pointed out with considerable care by Osborn<sup>15</sup>, L. Nereparampil<sup>16</sup> and R. Keitzer<sup>17</sup>. A. Y. Collins, in her brief and admirable study of the physical world in the Book of Revelation, has demonstrated how the spiritual life of human beings affects the entire system of the physical world, either for good or for bad, due to the fact that human life and the physical world share the same source and the same destiny.<sup>18</sup> Few scholars who have worked on the Pauline perspective of nature have ignored Rom. 8:19–23 and Col. 1:15–20.<sup>19</sup> However, not much attention has been paid to Paul's ecological interest according to other Pauline passages. If God's cosmic mission includes ecological health as well, then does Paul, a pioneer of world mission, reflect a concern for ecology? Do we find traces of eco-theology in Paul's speeches during his missionary journeys? If so, how are they related to his Gospel? What implications does this have for us today?

### **Pauline Perspective of Eco-Theology I. The World is the Creation of God and Therefore . . .**

Paul categorically states that all things in the world were created by God. The heaven and the earth and the sea and all things in them were brought into being by the living God. He makes this clear in his proclamation at Lystra during his very first missionary journey (Acts 14:15) and at Athens during his second missionary journey (Acts 17:24; cf. 1 Cor. 8:6a; Eph. 3:9).<sup>20</sup> Peter's speech in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14ff.; 3:12ff.) as well as in Cornelius' house (Acts 10:34ff.) and Stephen's speech (Acts 7:1ff.) do not have the ecological tone of Paul's speeches in Lystra and Athens. Though the reason can easily be attributed to

<sup>15</sup> Osborn, *Guardians of Creation*, 98–99.

<sup>16</sup> L. Nereparampil, 'An Eco-Theology Foreshadowed in the Gospel of John', *Bible Bhashyam* 19, 1993, 188–204.

<sup>17</sup> R. Keitzer, 'Creation and Restoration: Three Biblical Reflections', in D. G. Hallman (ed.), *Ecotheology: Voices From South and North* (New York, 1994), 57–61.

<sup>18</sup> A. Y. Collins, 'The Physical World in the Book of Revelation', *Bible Today* 26, 1988, 156–59.

<sup>19</sup> See particularly J. A. Rimbach, '“All Creation Groans” Theology/Ecology in St. Paul', *AsiaJournTheol* 1, 1987, 379–91; C. B. DeWitt (ed.), *The Environment and the Christian: What Can We Learn From the New Testament?* (Grand Rapids, 1991), 25–71, 137–43; K. C. Abraham, 'Ecology and Mission', 116–19.

<sup>20</sup> E. Norden, who first denied the Pauline authenticity of the speech at Athens as recorded in Acts 17:22ff., admitted later the possibility that Luke correctly reproduced the contents of the genuine—speech of Paul see F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, reprint, 1981), 354 n. 32. C. J. Hemer, 'The Speeches of Acts: II. The Areopagus Address', *TynBull* 40, 1989, 243–59, argues that the Athenian speech reflects Paul's situation and theology. Also, the language used in Acts 14:15–18 resembles the ideas expressed in other Pauline passages, 1 Thess. 1:9f. and Rom. 1:20.

the pagan audience of Paul, we can hardly deny that nature had taught him to think in ecological terms during his voyages on land and sea and to use them in his speeches. His missionary journeys must have taught him to realize the bond that exists between nature and humankind as both orders belong to one family. For Paul the one God, who possesses all creation, lives for ever and because he is the living God, the things which he created have abiding validity. When the people of Lystra mistook Paul and Barnabas for gods and were ready to give them cultic honour due to God alone, Paul was quick to say, 'Men, . . . we also are men of like nature with you.' At that point he introduced God as the One who created the things in heaven, on earth and in the water. Thus Paul rightly upholds the ownership of God over creation, including humans, and indicates the unworthiness of any human, even apostles, to take the place of God. The ownership of God is reiterated by Paul in the Areopagus speech when he says that the God who appointed the Man Jesus for human welfare gave life and breath and everything needed for humanity (cf. 1 Tim. 6:13,17); he caused humankind to descend from one common ancestor, Adam, and after forming and furnishing it, gave them the earth to dwell in (Acts 17:25,26).<sup>21</sup>

Paul's ecological awareness comes into focus in his conspicuous statement that it is God who gives rains and fruitful seasons (Acts 14:17) and allotted periods (Acts 17:26) to satisfy his people with food and happiness. By using the term 'from heaven', Paul emphasizes that the rain that brings fertility and a healthy environment is sent by God. When seasonal rain causes crops to ripen, human hearts are gladdened because of the assurance that they have their food. What does God's lordship show? We may draw at least four observations:

- i. There is a clear interdependence between humankind and the natural world, because the origin of both is the same, i.e., God.
- ii. The whole eco-system is meant for the total welfare of all humans, making it impossible to separate spiritual need from the physical.<sup>22</sup>
- iii. The very purpose of God in providing times and seasons for Paul is to enable humans to perceive the 'existence, power and goodness of the Creator'<sup>23</sup> and to relate with him (Acts 17:27).
- iv. As Paul regards humans as having got their breath from God along with everything else, they have a distinctive role in the creative

<sup>21</sup> Bruce, *Book of Acts*, 358, cites J. H. Moulton who shows that as the Greek verbs in Acts 17:26 suggest, the determination of human home *preceded* their creation in the divine plan.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. A. Y. Collins, *The Physical World*, 156-59, who reads in the Book of Revelation the idea that the spiritual world and the physical world are aspects of the same reality and that in fact the spiritual world transforms the physical environment.

work of God to use natural resources for the common good. Destroying creation means rebellion against the Maker.

## II. God has Revealed his Character in Nature

In Paul's theology, God not only created the world and so is the Lord over it, but he also reveals himself to people in what he created. While this is implicit in his speeches in Acts 14 and 17, it is explicit in Rom. 1:20:

Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.

Paul brings out the universal character of God's self-manifestation by showing that all human beings have sinned and therefore are under God's wrath and that God, in his righteousness, has revealed his salvation to them all. Paul argues in 1:18ff. that God has revealed his will and character both to the Jews who have the Law and to the Gentiles who do not possess a prescribed law. This he did in the things which he has made and therefore humans have no excuse before God.

Paul emphasizes that the invisible God (Rom. 1:20; Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17; cf. Jn. 1:18; Heb. 11:27) voluntarily reveals himself to human beings. However, this does not mean that his divine personality as a whole is revealed. According to Paul, 'what can be known about God' has been manifested (Rom. 1:19a). Only that which is knowable about God is revealed to the human world. C. E. B. Cranfield concedes this by stating that God, in so far as he is knowable, is truly manifested to human beings.<sup>24</sup> This is solely an act initiated by God (Rom. 1:19b). Since God shows himself at the level in which one can experience him, this divine act involves both hiddenness and revelation. He is still hidden, because God by nature is invisible and the power of human apprehension also is limited. He reveals his nature and properties, his eternal power and divinity, only to the extent that they can be grasped by us humans. But the sphere in which God demonstrated his divinity, at least in part, is in created things (Rom. 1:20). The term 'power' is understood in v. 20 as a periphrasis for the divine Name (cf. Mt. 26:64 par.)<sup>25</sup> and as 'a way of speaking of God's self-revelation and creative energy both in the singular (Wisd Sol 7:25; Mark 14:62; cf. Acts 8:10)

<sup>23</sup> I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester/Grand Rapids, reprint, 1984), 239.

<sup>24</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary in the Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. I (Edinburgh, 2 impr., 1977), 113.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, 115.

and in the plural. . . .<sup>26</sup> This means that creation in its totality has always been revealing God's character.

Several questions arise in this context. Does the apprehension of God in nature denote intellectual perception or physical sight or both? Should it be understood in the sense of Stoic pantheism or in the Platonic sense that the visible world is a copy of the heavenly world? If God is knowable in nature, though in a restricted degree, can we claim that God and nature are one in the advaitic sense? What nature of God is to be clearly perceived in his handiwork?

Terms such as 'to perceive' (*kathorao*), 'divine nature' (*theiotes*), 'eternal' (*aidios*), and 'what is made' (*poiema*) used in Rom. 1:19–20 are more familiar words in Greek thought than in the New Testament. Therefore the experience of seeing God in creation at the intellectual level cannot be ruled out. J. D. G. Dunn brings out this point when he translates Rom. 1:20 as: 'For his invisible characteristics from the creation of the world are perceived *intellectually* in the things which have been made, both his eternal power and deity.'<sup>27</sup> Both NEB ('to the eye of reason') and JB ('by the mind's understanding') underline the intellectual perception of God. However, physical sight also is not excluded as the verb *kathorao* shows. F. F. Bruce maintains that the verb *nooumena* refers strictly to the intelligence and *kathoratai* to physical sight.<sup>28</sup> If so, we can say that nature declares God's character and that it can be seen in two levels: intellectual and physical.

To the question whether Paul contributes to the advaitic philosophy which believes that the creation is the same as the Creator we should answer in the negative. For Paul argues in Rom. 1:23,25 that the glory of the immortal God, who created all things, cannot be identified with the images of the creatures. While one can see with naked eyes the presence of God in the things created, the related intellectual perception prevents the seer from identifying them with the Creator and thus keeps that person away from idolatry.<sup>29</sup> Paul's ecological interest does not lead him to compromise with pantheism or with advaita. If so, again the question remains: how does creation reveal God's eternal power and divinity?

The underlying idea in Rom. 1:19,20 can better be understood in the light of Wis. 13 which also refers to the perception of the Creator in the created things and to the danger of assuming that the created things are gods (Wis. 13:3,5).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (Dallas, pb UK edn., 1991), 58.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 57.

<sup>28</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, reprint., 1979), 84.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Wis. 13:8 says, in a tone similar to Rom. 1:20b, that those who trust in the things created are not to be excused.

For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator (Wis. 13:5).

This makes it clear that the greatness and the beauty of creation reveal God's character. Wis. 13:3 shows that the beauty of created things was so charming that people were misled to treat them as gods. Creation is beautiful, because the 'author of beauty' created it (Wis. 13:3c; cf. Gn. 1 which repeatedly says that God saw that what he made was good<sup>31</sup>). It is probable that the Wisdom motif was in the mind of Paul when he wrote Rom. 1:18ff. Now the corollary is that in Paul's theology anyone who spoils the beauty of creation spoils the beauty of God and also hinders his self-communication with humans.

The preposition *apo* in 1:20a should be understood in a temporal sense, as RSV, NEB and JB rightly translate it as 'ever since',<sup>32</sup> thus implying the *continuous* act of God's self-revelation in creation.<sup>33</sup> This shows that for Paul the experience of seeing God's beauty in the beauty of Creation is an on-going process in human life. Since humans owe their existence to nature at all times, they should continue to love, cultivate, nourish and develop it for an ecologically healthy life.

### III. Christology Enriches Ecology

Paul sets christology in an impressive way in the framework of ecology. The three major doctrines of Paul—creation, redemption, and consummation—are described in association with his ecological interest.

#### 1. Christ and Creation

As a Pharisaic Jew, Paul had known that the world was created by the Word of God (Gn. 1). At the same time, he, like the Fourth Evangelist, identifies the Word as Jesus Christ 'through whom are all things' (1 Cor. 8:6b) and in and for whom 'all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible . . . ' (Col. 1:15–16). He uses three prepositions when he speaks of Christ and the creation *in toto*: in (*en* + dat.), through (*dia* + Gen.), and for (*eis* + acc.), indicating respectively the 'sphere' within which the work of creation took place,<sup>34</sup> the 'instrument' through which the universe came into existence (cf. Pr. 8; Wis. 9:4), and, uniquely for Paul the 'goal' towards which all

<sup>31</sup> Note that Gn. 1 LXX uses the Gk. word *kalos* which literally means 'beautiful'.

<sup>32</sup> See C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge, 2 edn, reprint, 1988), 72–73, though he does not cite Rom. 1:20.

<sup>33</sup> Cranfield, *Romans* I, 114. The present tense of both *nooumena* and *kathoratai* confirms God's continuous act.

<sup>34</sup> Thus E. Haupt and F. F. Bruce maintain—see P. T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, 1982), 45.

creation moves (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6, where God is described as the origin and goal).<sup>35</sup> By calling Christ the 'First-born of all creation' (Col. 1:15), Paul presents Christ not only as unique, but also as prior to and supreme over the whole creation. In this sense, the Christ of Paul is the cosmic Christ who cares for humans, animals, birds, plants, water, fish, air, sun, moon, stars, ozone layer and all other natural elements. Donald Guthrie rightly maintains that the whole ecological problem of the wasting of resources and the pollution of what remains conflicts directly with the New Testament view of creation as made 'for' Christ.<sup>36</sup>

Since everything was created in, through and for Christ and since they are all held together in Christ (Col. 1:17), one can argue that the substance of God's revelation in creation is Christ himself. Because of this Paul put together the two expressions 'he (i.e., Christ) is the image of the invisible God' and '(he is) the first-born of all creation' in Col. 1:15, highlighting the fact that creation owes to Christ its origin, sustenance, and expression. The word 'image' (*eikon*) denotes Christ's relation to God, both functional and ontological, in his pre-existence and in his act of revealing the Father.<sup>37</sup> This means that the Pauline Christ has been revealing God in creation even from his pre-existent state and that it is Christ's beauty which is expressed in God's creation. Without Christ, the Head, creation remains imperfect. This puts Christians in a position of greater responsibility to preserve and nurture the natural environment in which they live. It is probably in order to show the intimate connection that exists between the Church and the creation that Paul puts 'he is the image' parallel with 'he is the beginning (of a new humanity, the Church)', and 'the first-born of all creation' with 'the first-born from the dead' in Col. 1:15,18. There is also a formal connection between 'And he is before all things' of v. 17 and 'And he is the head of the body, the Church' of v. 18.<sup>38</sup> The existing link between the Church and creation is further confirmed by Eph. 1:4 which affirms that Christians were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world.

<sup>35</sup> See C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge, 1962), 59; Ralph Martin and O'Brien observe that the goal of all creation finds no parallel in any Jewish materials including the Jewish Wisdom literature see O'Brien, *Colossians*, 47.

<sup>36</sup> D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester, reprint, 1985), 179.

<sup>37</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians*, 43-44.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, 36-37,50. Scholars (e.g. C. Masson, H. J. Holtzmann, C. R. Bowen) argue that Col. 1:15-20 is a non-Pauline composition. But the observation that several phrases used in this hymnic passage appear in other Pauline epistles argues more in favour of Pauline authorship for the whole hymn see Moule, *Colossians*, 58-62; O'Brien, *Colossians*, 40-42; see N. T. Wright, 'Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20', *NTS* 36, 1990, 464-65, who concludes that in form, background and theology the Colossian hymn reflects the essential hallmarks of Paul's thought: monotheism and election, redefined by means of christology.

According to Haupt, the phrase 'in him' in Col. 1:16 has the same force as in Eph. 1:4, which describes God's choice of the believers in Christ.<sup>39</sup> If so, both the act of creation and the election of the believers has taken place 'in Christ' and therefore the creatures do not and cannot function independent of human beings, particularly of those who belong to Christ. Indeed the relationship between nature and humans is strengthened in Christ. That is why Paul uses 'all things (*ta panta*)' and 'we' (i.e., we who believe in Christ) interchangeably in his confession of monotheism:

Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are *all things* and for whom *we exist*, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are *all things* and through whom *we exist* (1 Cor. 8:6).

The same mutual relationship between creation and God's chosen ones is expressed in Paul's statement that the creation is longing for the revealing of the sons of God and is groaning for their final redemption (Rom. 8:19,23). This does not mean, however, that the animate beings are essentially one with humans, for the latter are created in the image of God, as Christ himself is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4). This implies a specific responsibility which humankind holds over the created order. Gordon Fee, commenting on 1 Cor. 8:6, writes that not only is God the One to whom we are ultimately heading along with all creation, but also our very existence is for his purpose.<sup>40</sup> He further comments that Paul's concern thus is not with philosophical theology but with its practical implications.<sup>41</sup> Fee does not specify what those practical implications are, but, in my view, they include the different ways of our involvement in appreciating and preserving the environment. For in the creative activity of Christ ('in Christ'), we find our obligation to create, nurture, protect, and develop the natural species and elements just like God in Christ is doing. In this sense we are the co-operators with God in maintaining the ecological resources which are vital for life on earth. The Old Testament concept that having dominion over the earth is not to destroy, but to preserve and produce fruits is thus confirmed by Paul.

## 2. *Christ and his Redemption*

Christology embraces ecology not only because everything was created in and through Christ, but also because everything was redeemed in

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<sup>39</sup> See O'Brien, *Colossians*, 45.

<sup>40</sup> G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1987), 375.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

and through him. When Adam disobeyed God's command, sin became a domineering force on humanity (cf. Rom. 5:12) and the filial relationship that had been existing between humanity and the natural world was stained. The curse was so pronounced on creation that frustration, corruption, pain, enmity, and, above all, destruction came upon humankind and the natural world (Gn. 3:14-19). It is only after the fall that humans misunderstood God's intention for them to fill the earth and subdue it, as a licence to exploit nature for their own comfort and benefit. Instead of using the natural resources they started exploiting them 'to satisfy the greedy and ever-growing appetite of consumerism'.<sup>42</sup> L. Wilkinson rightly observes that it was nothing but the fall in the temptation to say 'I am God' which brought environmental problems.<sup>43</sup> Paul also agrees that human sin has subjected creation to futility, groaning, pain, and decay (Rom. 8:20-22).

Nevertheless, for Paul the consequence of the first Adam's disobedience has radically been reversed by the obedience of the second Adam (Rom. 5:12-21; cf. 1 Cor. 15: 21-22). The Jews, as the Genesis story shows, believed that there exists a three-fold relationship between humans, the world, and God and that obeying God includes a caring and beneficial relationship with others and with the cosmos.<sup>44</sup> Thus they recognized human beings holistically and in filial relationship with one another and with nature. Paul, the Jew, uses this tradition in his Adam Christology by which he brings out the cosmic implications of the work of the two Adams: while Adam's sin affected his relationship to the rest of humankind and the cosmos, the obedience of Christ, the second Adam, has a broader effect to bring redemption to individuals and a right relationship with others and with creation.<sup>45</sup> In Rom. 5:12-21 Paul argues that just as condemnation (death) and a cursing of the three-fold relationship (God, humans, and the cosmos) came into the world because of the disobedience of the first Adam, so also by the obedience of the second Adam there came cosmic well-being (*shalom*), the restoration of household affinity, and fullness of life.<sup>46</sup> Paul thus implies that the ecological crisis, caused by the broken

<sup>42</sup> See J. G. F. Collison, 'Biblical Perspectives on Stewardship of Earth's Resources', *BangTheolForum* 18, 1986, 15. See on this subject the useful study of John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians*, 11-15.

<sup>43</sup> L. Wilkinson, 'Christ as Creator and Redeemer', in DeWitt (ed.), *The Environment*, 42.

<sup>44</sup> See R. Manahan, 'Christ as the Second Adam', in DeWitt, (ed.), *The Environment*, 45-56.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, 53.

<sup>46</sup> The word 'righteousness' in Rom. 5:17 can be understood in the light of Ps. 72:2-3 as 'prosperity' or 'well-being' (i.e., *shalom*)—see Manahan, 'Christ as the Second Adam', 54, 139 n. 22; cf. R. C. Van Leeuwen, 'Christ's Resurrection and the Creation's Vindication', in DeWitt (ed.), *The Environment*, 65.

relationship between God, humans, and the cosmos, is averted in and through Christ and his work. The redemptive work of Christ cannot be confined to the spiritual sphere alone, but it has a cosmic dimension which includes the right relationship with nature. Therefore those who are in Christ cannot ignore their relationship with one another and with the creation and they should exercise more care in preserving the beauty and the prosperity of nature.

The right relationship of humans with the whole eco-system that is involved in Christ's redemptive work is also envisaged in the Pauline idea of reconciliation. According to Paul, in Christ God was reconciling the world (*kosmos*) to himself (2 Cor. 5:19) and hence the reconciling work of Christ includes all things. The use of the word 'new creation' (*kaine ktisis*) instead of 'new human being' (*kainos anthropos*) in 2 Cor. 5:17 and of the word 'all things' (*ta panta*) in 2 Cor. 5:18 indicates that Paul perhaps meant by the word 'world' the whole creation which has been reconciled to God through Christ.<sup>47</sup> True that Paul's major focus in 2 Cor. 5:17-21 is on humankind which is the object of reconciliation, but the inclusion of other creatures too in the benefits of reconciliation proves that Paul saw the work of Christ as having ecological impact. If Paul is using in 2 Cor. 5 the Old Testament passages such as Is. 43:18-21 and Is. 65:17, as Van Leeuwen justly argues,<sup>48</sup> then the divine act of the new creation has a direct connection with the universal order of rivers, beasts, birds, etc. That the reconciling work of Christ includes all things is also mentioned by Paul in Col. 1:20: 'And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.' In fact all the works of Christ, creation, atonement, resurrection, redemption, and reconciliation, are skilfully inter-woven in Col. 1:15-20.<sup>49</sup> Since all things were created in and for Christ and human sin brought a broken relationship between God, humans, and creation, God's reconciliation made through Christ also involves all things. The benefit of peace (*shalom* = total well-being which includes right relationship) is bestowed by Christ on all things, both things on earth and in heaven.

It is precisely because Christ's redemptive work has cosmic impact that his mission is a cosmic mission. If Christ's mission has been a cosmic mission, then in Christ the church's mission also has cosmic and hence ecological implications.<sup>50</sup> Commenting on Rom. 8:19-22 that since the corruption of creation was integrally related to the

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<sup>47</sup> See Van Leeuwen, 'Christ's Resurrection', 67-68.

<sup>48</sup> Manahan, 'Christ as the Second Adam', 68.

<sup>49</sup> Van Leeuwen, 'Christ's Resurrection', 65-67, argues that Paul describes resurrection and the life of the world to come within the context of the entire creation.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. K. C. Abraham, 'Ecology and Mission', 116, who observes that one of the chief characteristics of God's cosmic mission is to care for earth.

human fall, the redemption of humankind naturally leads to the redemption of God's universe, O. M. Rao maintains that the ecological issue is thus brought within the gambit of our missiological emphasis.<sup>51</sup> The Church's mission should today be understood in a wider term as having both anthropological and ecological dimensions. That is, our mission today includes combating deforestation, industrial pollution, the extinction of species both in water and on land, poor sewage systems, consumerism, wastage of food, water and oxygen, the destruction of the ozone-layer, etc. Participation in what is called the 'Green Movement' by encouraging tree plantations and all programmes which seek to produce and preserve a healthy environment; and sharing our economic resources with our fellow beings is all part of our mission today.

Therefore Santmire is certainly right when he affirms that rightfully construed, christology embraces ecology and that christology issues in an ethic of self-giving care for the whole creation.<sup>52</sup> The christology which Paul paints enriches ecology and both complement each other. In Pauline thought, then, eco-christology occupies an important place, addressing, indirectly but firmly, the environmental crisis which we face nowadays.

### 3. *Christology and the Final Consummation*

Paul also describes resurrection and the life of the world to come within the context of the entire creation. By raising the questions, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?', he argues that the whole creation—grains, seeds, animals, birds, fish, sun, moon, stars, and humans—has its own body and glory, and its own goodness and value in the present age. He goes on to say that each one of them will attain even greater glory and value in the final resurrection (1 Cor. 15:35–44). As a guarantee, Christ has been raised from the dead and became the first fruits of those who are dead. Paul describes the eschatological scene as the final triumph of Christ, the Son, who will deliver the Kingdom to God the Father after destroying the earthly rulers and authorities. This will also be the moment when God will subject all things (*ta panta*) to the Son so that God will rule in every respect and in every quarter (1 Cor. 15:20–28; cf. Eph. 1:22). The word 'all things', in the light of vv. 24–26, may refer to every rule and every authority and power, including death. However, in view of the use of

<sup>51</sup> O. M. Rao, 'Healing of the Creation', *Bible Bhashyam* 19, 1993, 207; cf. K. C. Abraham, 'Ecology and Mission', 118–19; A. P. Nirmal, 'Ecology, Ecumenics and Economics in Relation: A New Theological Paradigm', in D. D. Chetti (ed.), *Ecology and Development: Theological Perspectives* (Madras, 1991), 27–28.

<sup>52</sup> Santmire, 'Toward a Christology of Nature', 279.

Ps. 8:6 in v. 27 we could say that 'all things' (*ta panta*) denotes the whole creation. In Paul's thought the consummation of redemption made possible in Christ includes the whole sphere of creation.<sup>53</sup>

The inclusion of the whole eco-system in God's redemptive purposes in Christ is undertaken by Paul also in Eph. 1:9–10, where such an eschatological fulfillment of God's plan of salvation is called the 'mystery'. The word which is used for God's plan in Eph. 1:10 is *oikonomia*, a cognate of 'ecology'. This word, having an active force here, implies God's stewardship in ordering and administering the universe.<sup>54</sup> Paul presents this stewardship of God as the summing up of all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. God will sum up and bring together the diverse elements of the cosmos in Christ, the focal point. God purposed to restore all creatures, which had become disintegrated because of sin back to the place of original harmony.<sup>55</sup> Paul says that towards this common goal the humans and the things in heaven and on earth are moving in Christ. However, in the light of the word 'mystery', which is used in Col. 1:26,27; 2:2; 4:3; Eph. 3:3–6,9,10; 5:32; 6:19, the content of the mystery refers to a present reality as well. Eph. 1:21 also shows that Christ's exaltation over all powers is not only in this age but also in that which is to come. The summing up of all creation in Christ has already taken place, but at the same time it is moving forward to the final goal.<sup>56</sup> The word 'in Christ' in this context points to the incorporation of the believers into God's gracious decision about Christ which goes beyond simple humanity to embrace the whole created order.<sup>57</sup> This implies that those who are 'in Christ' share in God's gracious plan in bringing the whole eco-system into harmony with God's original intention. Paul's deliberate use of the word *oikonomia* here betrays his ecological concern in the sense that the believers participate in God's stewardship of administering the whole creation in two ways: (i) by sharing their economic resources together; and (ii) by taking care of creation with which they are moving towards the culmination of human history. How is it that believers in Christ have more accountability to nature? W. B. Gulick argues that for Paul the empowerment of the Holy Spirit enables people to do good (Gal. 5:22–23), which includes a concern for ecology; he concludes, 'Clearly the fruits of the Spirit, which Paul

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Fee, *Corinthians*, 760.

<sup>54</sup> A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas, 1990), 31–32.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, 33.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, 34–35, argues mainly for the realized eschatology in Eph. 1:9,10 particularly in the context of worship, though he adds that the total completion of God's purpose is anticipated. However, in the light of Eph. 1:21 and Rom. 8:19–23 we should say that the final consummation of all created things lies in the future.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, 34.

enumerates, are qualities that would enhance an ecological spirituality.<sup>58</sup> It is in this sense that Christian spirituality is ecological spirituality and that Christians have a responsibility to bring ecological healing to our planet.

The eschatological participation of humanity and creation in the integration of all things in Christ is known by Paul as 'the revealing of the sons of God', 'the glorious liberty of the children of God' and 'adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies' in Rom. 8:19-23, a passage which appears in the context of the future glory. According to Paul, the creation is so joined with humans that it finds its own freedom from bondage, corruption and travail in the final redemption of God's children and until then both creation and believers are groaning (Rom. 8:23). In other words, the things created and humankind share the same experience, the same hope, and the same goal at present in such a way that whatever we do affects the whole creation. Just as the corruption of creation was caused by human sin, its liberation is dependent on human redemption. Because humanity and sub-human things thus share common values in God's decision, we cannot devalue and destroy anything in nature. Therefore the message of liberation has cosmic dimension and our mission today should take the whole cosmos seriously. That is, ecology, enriched by christology, calls for an active response in our missiological enterprise.

#### IV. Paul Seems to Attack Consumerism

Hitherto our concern had been focussed on the non-human beings which form an integral part of the universe along with human beings constituting one family. We have argued that Paul, as a Jew, discloses the ever-existing three-fold relationship between God, humans, and other created things and thus displays an ecological concern in his mission and theology. This natural relationship calls for total responsibility, which becomes more visible in our incorporation in Christ. Therefore the followers of Christ are more responsible to nurture and protect the natural species such as animals, birds, fish, and plants. Now we turn our attention to see what Paul has to say on the economical dimension involved in ecology.

The words ecology, economy, and ecumenism originate from the same Greek word *oikos*.<sup>59</sup> In that case, the human relationship with one another, particularly in the area of managing economic resources, is an important aspect of ecology. Granberg-Michaelson calls this the

<sup>58</sup> W. B. Gulick, 'The Bible and Ecological Spirituality', *TheoToday* 48, 1991, 192.

<sup>59</sup> See W. Granberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality: The Call to Redeem Life on Earth* (San Francisco, 1984), 152.

'Church's ecological economy' by asserting that the Church's economy of managing its household (world) must flow from its ecology, i.e., from its understanding of its relationships within itself and with creation.<sup>60</sup> According to him, Paul's ecological concern is portrayed in his Head-Body imagery (1 Cor. 12), for the Body of Christ was to display an ecumenical economy by sharing its financial resources with the household in its need; and the guiding feature of this economy of the Church is love (1 Cor. 13).<sup>61</sup> Paul's injunction to the churches in Corinth to practise ecological economy is clearly envisaged in 2 Cor. 8 and 9, where he highlights the Church's responsibility to supply the *wants* of the saints. He uses ecological language in describing the Church's generosity in giving, when he argues that the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly and that the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. He goes on to assure the Church that he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply their sowing, and increase the harvest of their righteousness (2 Cor. 9:6,10). Paul's ecological awareness is striking in this context. He argues for equality in enjoying the resources by stating that those who have abundance should get rid of their consumer attitude and supply others so that they might have 'enough of everything' (2 Cor. 8:14,15; 9:8). He indeed had believed that ecology prompts a response for sharing the economic resources ecumenically to meet the need, and not the greed, of the people. Paul's concern for ecological economy is envisaged in his open attack on the Corinthian Church for their economic separation and contempt for the poor (cf. 1 Cor. 11:20ff.). The congregation in Corinth had been divided sociologically into 'haves' and 'have-nots' and that became visible during the Lord's Supper.<sup>62</sup> When Paul confronts the Corinthians by stating, 'For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk' (1 Cor. 11:21), he seems to combat the consumer attitude of the rich, for the verb 'goes ahead with' (*prolambanein*) may mean something close to 'consume' or 'devour'.<sup>63</sup> Although the

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, 158–59. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians*, 115, asserts that we, humans, have a responsible dominion over the earth prompting us to provide the produce of the land for our needy neighbours.

<sup>61</sup> Granberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality*, 155.

<sup>62</sup> Scholars argue that Paul's enslavement to all particularly by becoming weak to the weak in 1 Cor. 9:19–23 suggests that the Corinthian church was consisted of people some of whom had superior social status and majority of whom were in low social status (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26–29). This social disparity existed not only in terms of birth, education, and social class, but also in terms of wealth—see the socio-political reading of 1 Cor. 9:19–23 by S. C. Barton in his 'All Things to All People': Paul and the Law in the Light of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23', in J. D. G. Dunn (ed.), *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck] Tubingen, 1996), 271–85, esp. 280–82.

<sup>63</sup> See Fee, *Corinthians*, 542,568.

primary meaning of *prolambanein* is 'to anticipate', it can also mean 'to seize beforehand',<sup>64</sup> carrying the idea of violence (cf. Wis. 17:16 LXX, where *prolambanein* in passive form is used with the meaning 'to seize' in a context which speaks of violence). In view of Paul's admonition for not maintaining equality in community life, we should infer that some were vehemently seizing their own food. Such a turbulent action is the same as consuming others' rightful share. Therefore Paul exhorts the rich to mind the poor in the congregation when they come together to eat (1 Cor. 11:33). That is, the 'haves' among the believers should not devour the 'have-nots', but should share their resources with them with due respect. Paul himself was giving sufficient care for the needy by carrying the contributions from one place to another (1 Cor. 16:1-4), because he was mindful of Jesus' words, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20:35). Also, the 'pillars' of the Jerusalem church had motivated Paul to remember the poor in his mission to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:10). Thus Paul's ecological concern in terms of an ecumenical economy was an integral part of his missionary activities. No wonder, then, that 'ecojustice', to use the word of William Gibson, was one of the concerns of Paul in his mission and theology.<sup>65</sup>

### Conclusion

We are living in an age in which ecological health is threatened both at the global and the national level mainly because of human ignorance about the existing internal relationship between humankind and nature. There is rapid growth of environmental pollution because of the destruction of forests, extinction of animals, plants, and rare species, poor sewage systems, traffic hazards, industrial and agricultural wastes, leakage of toxic gases, burning of oil wells, and so on. We have observed that Christians, at least in part, seem to be responsible for the present environmental crisis primarily because of their misunderstanding of Scripture. In this situation, it is appropriate for us to raise the question: what does the Bible as a whole and the New Testament in particular teach about ecology? More sharply, does Paul, the pioneer of Christian mission, betray an interest in ecology? An analysis of a few Pauline passages show that he uses ecological references in his message of salvation.

Paul, as a Jew, believed that all things in the world were created by God and he is the one who has given life, breath and everything needed

<sup>64</sup> See H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, New edn, reprint., 1968), 1488.

<sup>65</sup> W. Gibson maintains that ecojustice involves a bifocal vision of economic and environmental justice—cited by Manahan, 'Christ as the Second Adam', 56.

for human existence. In Paul's theology God reveals, though in a limited degree, his eternal power and divine nature in creation. In the beauty of the things made by God one can see, both intellectually and physically, the beauty of God. However, Paul does not identify the creatures with the Creator, but assures us of the mutual dependence of the whole creation and human beings, just like people who belong to the same family depend upon one another for their life. Since humankind holds filial relationship with God and his creation, they have the responsibility to protect and nurture the environment in which God has placed them.

Paul places his christology within the framework of ecology in such a way that the former enriches the latter. For he presents Christ as the sphere, instrument and goal of creation. Since he also describes God as the origin and goal of creation, we can say that the divine beauty which is revealed in creation is the beauty of Christ. The three major doctrines of Paul—creation, redemption, and consummation—clearly reflect his ecological interest, for the benefit of the works of Christ—creation, atonement, resurrection, redemption, and reconciliation—goes beyond humanity to embrace the whole created order. Thus the Christ of Paul is the cosmic Christ and what he did has cosmic and hence ecological implications. If so, the Church's mission also is a cosmic mission in the sense that it calls for human response to the environmental problems we face today. That the Church has more responsibility in preserving nature is also known from the fact that both creation and the election of the believers took place 'in Christ'. The inter-dependence between creation and the Church thus attains special significance in Christ. It is also a reminder to the Church that we are partners with Christ in the ongoing creative work of God. Ignoring this responsibility means dishonouring the Creator and destroying that vital part of human life, the environment.

The three-fold relationship between God, humanity and creation is described by Paul in the eschatological context in Rom. 8:19–23. Both human beings and non-human beings are moving towards the same goal: the final redemption and the adoption as children of God. Here too Paul's focus is on the believing community which needs to have a special awareness of ecological integrity and responsibility. The same ecological tone is to be realized in Eph. 1:9–10, 21–22, which exhibits God's comprehensive purpose to sum up all things (*ta panta*) in Christ. Paul's deliberate use of the term *oikonomia* in this connection reiterates his ecological concern in a double sense: (i) those who are incorporated in Christ share in God's stewardship by protecting and recreating the whole phase of creation; and (ii) they participate in God's administering the ecological economy by sharing their resources with the needy among their fellow-beings. Thus Paul's ecological concern

carries ecojustice which involves the well-being of humans and the well-being of nature and is enriched and facilitated by his christology. If Paul, as a pioneer of the Gentile mission, presented Christ as the cosmic Christ whose beauty is to be seen in the cosmos and if he has conveyed, either directly or indirectly, the ecological importance in his mission and theology, the mission of today's Church also has cosmic concern rather than a narrow anthropological concern and its whole-hearted action in bringing ecojustice is an integral part of its missiological enterprise.

### **Abstract**

God, for Paul, has so ordered the eco-system that it should provide all the necessities for human life. Creation is the sphere in which God is revealing his beauty, the beauty of Christ in, through and for whom everything was created. Therefore anyone who destroys the environment spoils the beauty of God and hinders his self-communication to humankind. Paul's major doctrines—creation, redemption, and consummation—show beyond doubt that human beings and nature are intimately linked as one family. In Christ this relationship is clearly affirmed, for in him God chooses and redeems his people. Therefore Christians have a greater responsibility to maintain ecological health on earth. By emphasizing what is called the 'ecological economy', Paul condemns the consumer attitude of the rich in churches. Such ecological concerns of Paul prompt today's Church to combat in her mission the current ecological crisis.

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