

CHRIST, CREATION, AND CHRISTIAN MISSION

by Rick Faw, Education Director for A Rocha Canada
Colossians 1:15-20

“For what aspect of the Christian life do you have a particular burden?”

How would you answer that question? Perhaps alleviating physical pain and suffering; improving education for the poor and marginalized; or introducing people to Jesus for the first time. A few years ago, a professor posed this question during a lunch-time seminar and the answer that sprung to my mind was this:

When it comes to Christian discipleship, living as Christ followers, most Christians I know simply ignore creation – how one interacts with everything that God has made is not an aspect of faith. I feel a burden to change that understanding. This realization eventually led me to work with A Rocha, an international Christian conservation organization.

“For what aspect of the Christian Life do you have a particular burden?”

A Rocha’s mission is to show God’s love for all creation, and we live out this mission through a variety of activities including on-the-ground conservation projects, environmental education, organic gardening, and student internships. My primary role with A Rocha has been to encourage Christians to explore how the non-human creation fits into their walk with God. The setting for this conversation can be a classroom, a backcountry excursion, a workshop, a conference, a meal, or even, occasionally, a pulpit.

Today I’d like us to investigate a passage from Paul’s epistle to the church at Colossae that extols the glory of Christ and affirms His reconciliation of all things. But first I want to remind us of the larger story in which this ‘hymn to Christ’ is sung.

Biblically speaking, life is all about relationships. We are created for relationship. Relationship with God; relationship with each

other; and relationship with the rest of creation – but our rebellion against God has warped and disfigured all three of our primary relationships.

The prophet Hosea, among other Biblical writers, implores God’s people to recognize that these relationships are central, that they are interconnected, and that human rebellion is the fundamental cause of brokenness in each case. Let’s look briefly at Hosea 4:1-3. First, there is our corrupted relationship with God:

¹ Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites, because the LORD has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: “There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land.

Corrupted inter-personal relationships are a result.

² There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.

And lastly, there follows the corruption of the created world around us:

³ Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying.

HOSEA 4:1-3 (NIV)

¹ Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: “There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land.

**ALIENATION
FROM GOD**

² There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.

**ALIENATION
FROM
OTHERS**

³ Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying.

**ALIENATION
FROM THE
REST OF
CREATION**

SUMMARY OF THE BIBLICAL STORY:

We are created for relationship with...

- God
- Others
- The Rest of Creation

CHRIST, CREATION, AND CHRISTIAN MISSION

The prophet links rebellion against God, societal evils, and environmental degradation. Human sin is understood as the root problem in all three areas.

The Biblical story is about God pursuing us and, at great cost, making a way for each of these relationships to be healed. This is the healing that Jesus brings.

In Christ, God's new creation has begun. We will consider the implications of that new creation for the restoration of our relationships with God, with each other, and with creation itself. So now let's look at this 'Christ hymn' in Colossians 1.

COLOSSIANS 1:15-20 (NIV)

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God the **firstborn** of all **creation** ¹⁶for in him were **created** all things in heaven and earth things visible and invisible whether thrones or dominions whether rulers or powers all things have been **created** through him and for him.

¹⁷ And he is before all things and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the **church**.

He is the beginning the **firstborn from the dead** so that he might come to have first place in everything ¹⁹for in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell ²⁰and through him God was pleased to **reconcile** to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Creation and New Creation

The first thing to notice about the passage is that it has two distinct themes; creation (v. 1-18a) and the new creation (v. 18b-20). We know this because of the vocabulary (the red-highlighted text): the word 'creation' is repeated in the first half while 'church', 'from the dead', and 'reconciliation' are used in the latter part.

Christ is initially identified as the firstborn of 'all creation' and later as the firstborn 'from the dead'. The main point is that the God who created the world is the same God that will renew it (the green text).

The Creator-Redeemer God is Jesus

Secondly, the passage constantly refers to 'he' or 'him' (**highlighted red**), and we know from the preceding passage that we're talking about Jesus, the King. Paul is claiming that Christ, 'the Son'

that 'the Father loves', is the means by which the entire creation...
came into being
is sustained day by day
and is being renewed and reconciled.
(green highlights)

Jesus Christ is the divine agent through whom God created, sustains, and is reconciling the entire cosmos. The Colossians are already captivated by the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Paul is now affirming that this same person is the God of the universe!

I think we rarely feel the force of this claim. Remember, for many people at that time, Jesus was simply a man who, in recent memory, was born, raised, lived and died in the imperial backwater known as Judea; was a wandering prophet respected by only the poor and disreputable; and was a Jewish carpenter executed as a criminal of the state. It is this same person that is now being hailed as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the whole world!?!

Not only that, but somehow, this redemption, this peace that he brings, actually comes about through his crucifixion (v.20 "peace through the blood of his cross"). Unlike the deceptive peace that Caesar bought with military and economic oppression, Christ's peace is bought with selfless sacrifice. Undoubtedly, this was mind-boggling for the Colossians and surely, it should be for us too.

The scope of God's creation and reconciliation is enormous

But what, exactly, is being reconciled in him? According to Paul the answer is "ALL THINGS". In these 6 brief verses the Greek word translated 'all things' or 'everything' is repeated seven times!

- All things are created by Christ, through Christ, and for Christ
- All things hold together in Christ
- Christ is supreme over everything in both creation and resurrection
- All things are reconciled through Christ's blood

Invariably, this sort of repetition in Scripture means the author expects the readers to sit up and take notice. It's the First Century version of bold or italics font, so don't miss this: the scope of God's creation and reconciliation through his Son is enormous. In fact, it couldn't be any bigger. The entire created order will be transformed due to Christ's triumph at the cross

Christ's servant love is central

Clearly though, we're not there yet. God's plan is to reconcile ALL THINGS. Christ is the 'firstborn' of the new creation (v.18), or as Eugene Peterson renders it "Christ leads the resurrection parade". However, one glance at the newspaper confirms there's a long way to go. So where do we find this new creation, the Kingdom of God?

Believe it or not, it's the church (v.18). Collectively, we are the in-breaking presence of God's new reality. Through the Spirit, God dwells in us in order to bring the grace and peace and hope of Christ to all creation, human and non-human.

Christ is the image of the invisible God (v.15). Christ's love and self-sacrifice on the cross show us the heart of God, His character, but, as we know, we are made in God's image. We're created to be like God, to imitate his servant heart, his self-giving character. And, once again, Christ shows us what that looks like since "He is the head of the body, the church." (v.18)

So, in Christ's loving service we discover BOTH what God is really like and what it means to be truly human. When we ask the Spirit to make us more Christ-like, we're asking God to breathe life into us, and to inspire and enable us to live the way we're designed to live. That's the Christian life in a nutshell.

Christian discipleship is allowing the Spirit to transform us to be like Christ. As a disciple, I invite the Spirit to transform me so that my relationships better reflect Christ's selfless love. Now, I know all of this in my head, but I often struggle to believe it. Can Jesus really change me? Can he really redeem this world?

The Colossians epistle promises transformation in all three relationships.

First of all, in our relationship with **God**. I'll call this the theological dimension of Christ's healing work. It entails a conversion in us, from people who reject Christ's authority in our lives, to people who embrace it.

Paul's conversion is an example of the extraordinary transformation that's possible. As we all know, one day he hated Jesus of Nazareth and killed his followers, and a few days later he was an apostle of Jesus! It's hard to imagine a more dramatic turnaround. The Spirit transformed Paul and made him more Christ-like, more fully human, so that he could be who he was created to be. So that he could truly LIVE.

Second, transformation is equally possible in our relationships with **others**. This aspect entails a conversion from pride and selfishness to love and service. Paul spells this out later in his letter, especially chapter 3, where the social dimension of Christ's

healing work is illustrated in the everyday interactions of spouses, family members, masters and slaves.

The depth of the transformation he has in mind is remarkable. You'll recall that one of the people delivering the letter to the Colossian church was named Onesimus. Onesimus was a runaway slave that had met Paul and became a follower of Christ, but here's the catch: the Colossian church met in the house of Onesimus' owner – named Philemon. Can you picture the stir when Onesimus walked through the door? In his letter to Philemon, Paul asks the Christian slave-owner to forgive both Onesimus and Paul – for both running away and for harbouring a runaway slave, both of which were very serious offences under Roman law. Don't underestimate the significance of this; Paul is asking the Colossian Christians to reject both a foundational element of Roman society and the Empire's economic engine – the owner-slave relationship – in favour of a new way of relating: as brothers in Christ. He's calling them to set aside their own interests in order to lovingly serve each other.

And there are some hints that imply forgiveness was, indeed, granted. For one, the small, seemingly unimportant, letter to Philemon was included in the canon. Additionally, an ancient non-biblical text suggests Onesimus may have become a bishop! From runaway slave to bishop - now that's transformation! The Spirit transformed the hearts and minds of Onesimus and Philemon and made them more Christ-like, more fully human, more ALIVE.

But what about the **third** relationship I mentioned? The **ecological** dimension of Christ's healing work – our relationship with the **rest of creation**. What about the need for redemption: "Because the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying"?

What about caring for the planet?

Christ is reconciling all creation and, therefore, part of our vocation as Christ followers is to join him. We're familiar with the first two relationships—the vertical and horizontal—but one of the things we learn from Hosea and others is that, Biblically, we can't separate these three relationships from each other; they are interconnected. It's simply illogical for me to claim "I love Jesus" and "I love people", while simultaneously vandalizing God's handiwork, and jeopardizing, or even destroying, the life-support system of God's people.

At this point, it is reasonable to ask: What does a reconciled relationship with the non-human world look like? If God makes apostles out of bounty hunters and bishops out of slaves, what sort of transformation does he have in mind in this third dimension?

As the bearers of God's image, as followers of Christ, we are called to join the Spirit's redemptive action in bringing healing to

all our distorted, broken relationships, including our relationship with creation. God, through the Spirit, wants to transform my heart and mind, my desires and habits, my devotion and worship, in radical ways. Even though I often resist and complain, He wants me to really live as I was created to live. This is worship, is it not? Worshipping God isn't limited to singing songs in church. Rather, worship involves bringing our entire lives under the lordship of Christ. Put another way, every aspect of life is an opportunity for worship. But how do we do that?

In relationships with God and other people, we probably know where to start, but what about our relationship with creation? How do we worship God in our relationship with plants and animals, soil and water? Or, more precisely, how does the Spirit change my heart and mind so that worshipping the Creator includes caring for creation?

For me, this process is ongoing. I'm constantly trying to figure it out. In my better moments, I'm sensitive and responsive to the Spirit's prodding; there are also many times when I must rest in Christ's grace and mercy. Of course, this is a familiar dynamic that we all experience in our relationships with God and other people. So, what can we do?

Well, for starters, you are invited to learn from folks at A Rocha, and others, who are trying to live this out. Come and see for yourself what's happening at our Field Study Centres in South Surrey, Southern Manitoba and around the world. Secondly, what if we uncovered some new ways to worship? Or, more precisely, what if we understood already-familiar activities as worship?

For instance, as I mention a few aspects of our relationship with creation, I encourage you to invite the Spirit to remind you of how you already worship God in these areas and to suggest worship opportunities you may have overlooked...remind and suggest...

- "Where does my food come from?"
- "Wherever it was grown, how was the land treated?"
- "How were the farmers treated?" (another way to say this might be, "I am constantly, directly and indirectly, using bits of creation in order to live and move and have my being. How are these bits treated in the process?")
- "Where does my garbage go?"
- "How does the local treatment plant, landfill and incinerator affect the surrounding water, soil, and air?"
- "When I shop, how much energy is required to make the disposable packaging?" (another way to say this might be, "I am constantly discarding, in one way or another, the bits of creation that I use directly. How does this disposal pro-

cess affect other aspects of creation? Do I really need all the things that I buy? How could I reduce my household waste?)

- "Are the goods that I purchase produced locally?"
- "What kind of gas mileage does my vehicle get?" ("For some trips, could I walk, bike, bus, or carpool instead of driving my car?")
- "Does the location I've chosen to live enable me to use alternate forms of transportation when I go to work? To the grocery store? On vacations? To church?"
- "When I vote, either in the ballot box or with my wallet, how are my choices shaped by God's call to care for all his creatures?"
- "What kind of earth will my grandchildren inherit?"

I could go on, but that's enough to spark our imaginations. I usually hesitate to offer this sort of 'list' because it's all too easy to succumb to yet another form of crushing legalism. The Good News here is that all of life is, or can be, an expression of worship, and yet, in grace, God doesn't ask more of me than I can manage. Instead, Christ transforms my heart and my desires as I draw nearer to Him.

In conclusion, our Christian mission calls us to "incarnate" or "to live out" the reconciliation begun at Christ's resurrection. As the bearers of God's image and followers of Christ, we are to join the Spirit as we seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God to bring healing and restoration to all our distorted, broken relationships.

Accordingly, this vocation—our worship—has three parts:

- 1) A theological dimension that will include activities such as praising God, prayer and the study of Scripture;
- 2) A social dimension that will involve, among other things, evangelism, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, resisting injustice and alleviating suffering; and
- 3) Our Christian vocation, our worship, has an ecological dimension that may consist of everything from planting an herb garden and taking transit, to resisting consumerism and supporting endangered species legislation.

In other words, we live out the ecological dimension when we work with the Holy Spirit to bring healing, restoration and peace to all of life, and bring the reconciliation of Christ to all aspects of His groaning creation, so that every creature may sing praise to God.

CHRIST, CREATION, AND CHRISTIAN MISSION

I'll leave you with a question and a challenge. Consider how Christ's influence in your life and the Spirit's work in your heart and mind has transformed your relationships with God, and with your family, friends, and neighbours.

How might God's Spirit transform your relationship with the created order in a similar fashion? How might your behaviour and attitudes, your choices and priorities, your ministry and work, be affected if you grasped more fully the implications of Christ's reconciliation of ALL things?

My challenge for you is to ask this question: "God, how do you want to start reconciling my relationship with your world?" Of course, in every dimension of the Christian life, we have little hope for transformation apart from Christ, but with the Spirit all things are possible. With the Spirit of Christ we can expect miracles for God's glory, for the sake of the world, and for our joy in Him, Amen.