

***Missio Dei or missio Creator Dei:***

Witnessing to Christ in the Face of the Occurring Ecological Crisis

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Human attitudes towards the Earth will determine the future of life on planet Earth. Deforestation, air and water pollution, land degradation, uncontrolled population growth, global warming, and many other ecological predicaments that are adversely affecting our planet are some of the negative effects of irresponsible attitudes towards God's Earth. Since most of these attitudes are religiously conditioned, Christian mission can be instrumental in changing human perceptions of nature.

The belief that the natural world exists solely for human use is a product of modernity and in some Third World countries, by Enlightenment influenced protestant mission theories. Although this belief influenced how Christian mission was understood in the nineteenth century, the perception that Earth's natural resources (hereafter referred to as "natural goods")<sup>i</sup> can be exploited indefinitely for human use is slowly becoming a fallacy. Unfortunately, this Western worldview (which is rooted in the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and eighteenth-century economic theories) still dominate our mission activities. Yet it is putting the planet in jeopardy.<sup>ii</sup>

There is a compelling body of scholarly literature that documents the connection between contemporary policies inspired by this nineteenth century theory and the negative ecological effects wrought on much of the planet.<sup>iii</sup> Sadly, while some effects of this theory are felt in the West, the poor and millions of nonhuman species suffer the most. For this reason, witnessing for Christ today demands addressing the pending ecological disaster!

### **Christian Mission as *Mission of the Creator God***

The shift from ecclesiocentric to the theocentric (*missio Dei*) conception of Christian mission should redirect missiological thinking to ecological liberation. Although it is tempting to consider humanity (*imago Dei*) as the sole beneficiary of *missio Dei*, God's mission is holistic. Indeed, the sidelining of nonhumans in God's mission is partially due to the 20<sup>th</sup> century context in which the concept was born.

David Bosch's book, *Transforming Mission*, is an excellent tool in understanding how the concept came about. Bosch argues that advancements in science and technology, growing secularism of the West, the two World Wars, the growth of the Church in the global South, the spreading of other religions, the subjugation of the poor and people of color, the ever growing global economic inequalities, and the birth of local theologies created a crisis for modern mission and led to a paradigm shift from Church centered to God centered mission. Although the concept of *missio Dei* has dominated mission literature, Bosch warned that this shift "is not the first shift the world (or the Church) has experienced. There have been profound crises and major paradigm shifts before. Each of these paradigms constituted the end of one world and the birth of another, in which much of what people used to think and do had to be redefined."<sup>iv</sup>

If Bosch's observation about paradigm shifts is true, then the ongoing ecological crisis demands another shift in Christian mission. Just as the concept of *mission Dei* aided the advancement of human rights across the world, the new ecological paradigm of mission should address human responsibility towards creation, one another and future generations of life.

The emphasis placed on humanity (*imago Dei*) as the major focus of *missio Dei* underestimates the value of God's creation. No doubt humanity is the beneficiary of God's mission, but participating in the *missio Dei* implies sharing God's love towards every creature. In short, the mission of the Creator brings "the good news of liberation or salvation for all creation."<sup>v</sup> Theologically therefore, God's eschatological grace carries a universal or cosmic application (Romans 8:21-22; Isaiah 11:6-11). In this regard, the missional Church should take ecological liberation and reconciliation as the expression of wholistic *missio Dei*.

### **The Death of Earth, Death of the Poor**

In sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the world, the on-going ecological crisis has poor person's face. Eco-theologians have observed a direct link between the liberation of the poor and that of nature. Eco-feminist theologians have equally identified a direct link between the exploitation of nature and women in the male dominated world. Aside from countless species threatened with extinction, the ongoing destruction of the Earth is death penalty for the people whose livelihoods depend on the land. Most of these people are pushed out of their indigenous lands or simply lose their land after they have become dumping sites for industrial and commercial wastes. In developing countries, however, women are the ones who have to walk long distances in fetch of firewood or drinking waters.

In mission studies, the exploitation of the poor and women has received some missiological attention. However, the exploitation of nature is still understudied. But as Dana L. Robert argues, "the vulnerability of God's Creation, combined with the

vulnerability of the world's poorest people, together create a strong motive for cross-cultural mission in the twenty-first century.”<sup>vi</sup>

### **Witnessing to Christ as Safeguarding the Integrity of Creation**

The reality that the Earth is under threat due to human irresponsibility and the realization that we are not the last generation to exist on Earth should force us into challenging human attitude towards the cosmos. Witnessing to Christ would mean addressing population growth, pollution, species extinction, climate change and human responsibility towards future generations. In other words, the instrumental view of the natural world, which dominated early missionary activities and still influence our economic theories, should be replaced with “holistic approaches” that honor the interconnectedness of creation.<sup>vii</sup> In this case, the *missio Dei* should be understood as the mission of the Creator (*missio Creator*) revealed in the cosmic Christ, under whose authority, care and influence Earth and heaven now exist. Thus, all environmental issues are subjects of mission studies.

In addition, since the mission of God cannot be separated from the reign of God, ecological injustices are matter of critical importance to the missional Church. Of course, those who met in 1910 could not have seen the urgency of addressing the occurring ecological crisis. After all, the exploitation of the Earth was part of the modern era in which their missionary theories and activities were conceived. However, in the face of the ongoing ecological crisis and the exploitation of the poor by the capitalistic economic system, mission theology beyond Edinburgh 2010 can hardly advocate justice, love, and peace for the world without addressing the occurring ecological crisis. In his book,

*Loving Nature*, ethicist James Nash argues that love and justice carry with them great ecological implications, which are essential for “an adequate Christian ecological ethic.”<sup>viii</sup> The same can be said about Christian mission.

### **Mission of the Creator in the Cosmos**

Accepting experience as a foundation of Christian mission suggests that we seriously consider addressing the ecological context in which human experience occurs. The incarnation (an expression of mission of God in the person of Jesus) comes to us from a specific natural environment. Although there is a tendency to view mountains, trees, lakes, rivers, fish, snakes, wheat and many other natural phenomena in the bible as of little value to the mission of the Creator, an ecological reading of the Bible suggests otherwise. In biblical terms, God’s mission is not devoid of ecological relationships.

The Goal of God’s mission is to bring about shalom to the entire created order. Although Darrell L. Guder argues that “Shalom envisions the full prosperity of a people of God living under the covenant of God’s demanding care and compassionate rule,” biblical witness emphasizes holistic peace and justice on Earth. ”<sup>ix</sup> In fact, biblical shalom is inclusive; in the coming Kingdom, lions, humanity, snakes and other species will live in perfect harmony (Is 11:6-9; cf. 65: 25). Like any other biblical theme, the consummation of Shalom carries strong ecological implications.

In addition, human understanding of the origin of creation can enforce ecological Christian mission. Across religious traditions, creation is said to be the product of the Creator Spirit. . In most religious traditions, the Supreme Being and other spiritual beings can manifest in natural phenomena. In this regard, the sacredness associated with Earth

in Native American religions, African traditional religions and Asian religions (which early missionaries dismissed as evil) can aid interfaith ecological initiative and dialogue

Although such understanding can be characterized as nature worshipping, Christianity mystics and missiologists have related to nature in a similar manner. Despite sharing the tradition that valued the doctrine of *Imago Dei*, Saint Francis of Assisi viewed nature as the vehicle of divine grace. For Francis, God's love was inclusive of all created order.

Long before the ecological crisis gained momentum, Albert Schweitzer, a missionary to today's Gabon, argued that every creature has intrinsic value. In 1936, Schweitzer wrote:

The important thing is that we are part of life, we are born of other lives; we possess the capacities to bring still other lives into existence. So nature compels us to recognize the fact of mutual dependence, each life necessarily helping the other lives which are linked to it. In the very fibers of our being, we bear within ourselves the fact of solidarity of life. Our recognition of it expands with thought. Seeing its presence in ourselves, we realize how closely we are linked with other [biokind].<sup>x</sup>

We should realize that we are part of Earth and like any other part of creation, we belong to the Creator God. An argument can therefore be made that human beings and nonhumans are equal audiences of the *missio Dei*.

The occurring crisis demands that we abandon what Sallie Mcfague calls "apartheid thinking;" the falsehood that human life is more valuable than that of other species in the universe.<sup>xi</sup> In fact, the argument that non-humans have intrinsic value is theologically sound; the Creator declared creation good (Gen 1: 31). The goodness of creation, Christopher J.H. Wright notes, is theologically and chronologically "affirmed before humanity was around to see it."<sup>xii</sup> Furthermore, if the goal of creation is to "declare the glory of God" (Ps 19:1), then creation is not just intrinsically good but a true witness of the Creator's glory.

### **African Christology and Ecology**

The Creator's glory revealed in creation can inform Christian Christology. Among Africans for example, "nature is sacred" and "wild animals are the most pure expression of God's power."<sup>xiii</sup> Although ancestors and the Supreme Being manifest and sometimes reside in nature, they are also "the guardians of the land."<sup>xiv</sup> Africans believe that the Earth was originally given to the ancestors as a "sacred trust." Although the living can use the Earth's natural goods for their wellbeing, they also have a moral obligation to hand over this Earth to future generations. Destroying the Earth is an attack on the ancestors and by extension on the Supreme Being.

From this perspective, the African Christological title of "Christ as our ancestor" carries ecological motifs. African theologians have generally accepted Jesus as an ancestor. John S. Pobee, writing from an Akan perspective, views Jesus as *Nana*, "the Great and Greatest Ancestor."<sup>xv</sup> Charles Nyamiti, views Jesus as "our brother-Ancestor." François Kabasélé adds that Christ is an elder brother-ancestor. For Bénézet Bujo of the Congo, however, Christ is the proto-ancestor, healer and master of initiation.<sup>xvi</sup> Of Late, Gift Makwasha developed an ancestral Christology that links Jesus to family, tribal and national lands in Shona cosmologies.<sup>xvii</sup> Although these titles are indicative of the multi-functional roles of ancestors in African cosmologies, theologians have limited the role of ancestors to economic and socio-political issues. The ecological implication of these Christologies is still understudied. Sadly, the cult of ancestors is an earthly cult with strong ecological overtones.

The ecological ancestorship of Jesus is attested in the bible, where Jesus is the "origin" of creation and "the first born of all creation" (Col 1:17). In African cosmology,

however, ancestors are considered to be the first born of the human lineage. Yet ancestors find their origin in the Supreme Being. Due to their ontological position, ancestors are by default “guardians of the land.” Theologically, however, by being the source of all life including the ancestors, Jesus becomes the “Supreme Guardian of the land.”

The ecological significance this Christology is immense. Aside from the fact that the crisis threatens Earth, which is the arena or mission field of God’s mission, Earth belongs to Jesus who is both the Creator and the first born of all creation (ancestor) as proclaimed in the New Testament (Col. 1:15-20).

The supremacy of Christ over all life does not only suggest the interconnectedness of life through Christ but also the ecological ancestorship of Christ. The triune God is directly involved in Creation, hence God’s mission encompasses the Earth. Therefore, protecting Earth from human abuse is a fundamental faith issue in which the Church is called to participate.

Although ancestors are guardians of the Land, the Supreme Being is the Creator of the universe, the belief that is also found in the Bible. According to the Bible, the first human being was created from the dust or clay of Earth (*adamah* the Hebrew for clay (Gen 2:9). This is reiterated in the story of the Fall, at the end of which God reminds humanity of its relationship with Earth: “For Earth you are, and to Earth you will return” (Gen 3: 19).

The belief that Earth came into being by God’s own love and care is, in fact, a biblical given. Biblical writers were careful not to treat Earth or humanity as above God. Doing so would be considered idolatry. Neither did they present Earth as something outside God’s realm. It is for this reason that Yahweh’s covenant at the end of the Flood

story is not just with humans: it is with Earth and all living creatures, including humanity; it includes God's promise not to destroy Earth again (Gen 9:11-13). Just as God cares for humanity, the Creator cares for every creature, big and small. In the Psalmist's words, "The heavens are yours, Earth also is yours, the world and all it contains, you have founded them" (Ps 89:11 cf. 1Cor. 10:26).

The Old Testament conviction that Earth is the Lord's is carried over into the New Testament, creation is viewed as the product of the Christ (Jn 1:1-2). The epistle to the Colossians identifies the Christ as the Creator of all things "in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible" (Col. 1:16). Through the blood of the Christ shed on the cross, God was pleased to bring reconciliation to all creation on Earth and heaven (Col 1: 20).

The Christ, who is the firstborn and redeemer of creation, is connected to creation by virtue of being one with the Creator. That said Christ becomes the ecological ancestor as well as a relative of all that exists on Earth. In other words, it is through him, in him, and for him that all things exist. In this regard, the interconnectedness of creation is founded on the power of Christ, who is both the Creator and the vital force behind creation. He is that link that connects the Earth community to the Creator Spirit.

The eschatological *telos* of creation is also hereby pronounced. Whereas outside Christian thought (and sometimes, unfortunately, within Christian thinking) it is assumed that creation exists for humanity, in Colossians, creation exists for the Christ who is both the Creator and the *telos* of creation.

The declaration that Jesus Christ is both the source and goal of life finds expression in other biblical books as well. Writing to the Romans, Paul argues that "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things" (Romans 11:36). Likewise, he

argues that “for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him (1 Cor. 8:6).

This biblical conviction is important in developing mission theology of Earth. Christ is not only the origin of human life; he is the life of all that exists (cf. John 1:4). Thus, the assumption that Earth exists solely for its instrumental value, fails to address the eschatological significance of creation in Christ.

### **Witnessing for Christ: African Earthkeepers**

Missiologists should not abandon Earth to the environmental movement. Our conviction that “The Earth is the Lord’s” should propel us into ecological responsibilities and actions beyond our faith traditions. The tree-planting experiences of African Earthkeepers in Zimbabwe (led by a son of a missionary Marthinus Daneel) that saw the planting of more than 3 million trees and conservation of wildlife in Zimbabwe can inform cross-cultural mission. To Earthkeepers, trees have intrinsic value accorded to them by the Creator.<sup>xviii</sup>

African Earthkeepers applied *missio Dei* encourages dialogue and ecumenism. For instance, despite the enmity and theological differences that characterize African traditionalists and African Independent Churches in Africa, the ecological crisis has acted as a catalyst to ecumenism and dialogue. Like any other crisis, addressing the occurring ecological crisis can aid missionary endeavors to dialogue with other faiths. After all, we are all agreed that Earth belongs to the Creator Spirit. In short, a well understood Earthkeeping theology can aid the mission of God in this broken world.

### **Earth's Integrity as a Foundation of Mission**

The worsening ecological crisis deserves missiological responses. The growth of the Church in the global South is celebrated as indicative of the success of *missio Dei*. Yet it is in the global South where the ecological crisis is worsening every passing day. This situation underscores the value of developing missiological reflections that address the growing numbers of Christians on one hand and the Earth's death on the other.

Finally, as the occurring crisis continues unabated at both local and international levels, local initiatives such as African Earthkeepers can easily be dismissed as a drop in the ocean. But as Marthinus Daneel rightly argues, Christian ecological mission springs from a "spiritual mandate" to heal, liberate and care for Earth after the pattern of the loving Creator. In this regard, the mission of the Creator compels us "to reach out in mission regardless of the disheartening realities of the global situation."<sup>xix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> "Resources" is the most common term for Earth's natural benefits that are available for human (and often for nonhuman) use, and are extracted by humans as individuals and industrial corporations. The usage follows that of John Hart, who in *Sacramental Commons* uses "Earth goods" or "natural goods" in place of "resources," without elaboration. John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 150.

<sup>ii</sup> Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 117.

<sup>iii</sup> Séverine Deneulin and Masooda Bano, *Religion in Development: Rewriting the Secular Script* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2009); Jeffrey Haynes, *Religion and Development: Conflict or Cooperation?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Kirkpatrick Sale, *Dwellers on the Land: the Bioregional Vision* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2000); Paul Hawken, *The Ecology of Commerce: A Declaration of Sustainability* (New York: Harper Business, 1993).

<sup>iv</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, fourteenth printing, 1999), 4.

<sup>v</sup> Martinus L. Daneel, *African Earthkeepers: Wholistic Interfaith Mission* (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 2001), 276.

<sup>vi</sup> Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 112.

<sup>vii</sup> Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim, eds., *Edinburgh 2010: Witnessing to Christ Today*, Volume II (Oxford, Regnum Books International, 2010), 81.

<sup>viii</sup> James A. Nash, *Loving Nature, Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1991), 179.

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<sup>ix</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, 1998), 91.

<sup>x</sup> Albert Schweitzer, "The Ethics of Reverence for Life." Originally published in *Christendom* 1. (1936): 225-39. <http://www1.chapman.edu/schweitzer/sch/reading4/html>. Accessed 07/16/08. He argues that our "Solidarity for and sympathy with all life encourages sympathy with all life and "becomes engraved upon our hearts, and culminates in spiritual union and harmony with the Creative Will which is in and through all." Ibid., 10.

<sup>xi</sup> Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for A Planet in Peril* ( Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2000),117

<sup>xii</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2006), 398.

<sup>xiii</sup> Jacob Olupona, "Comments on the Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature," *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 1, vol.77, March 2009: 63.

<sup>xiv</sup> J.M. Schoffeleers ed., *Guardians of the Land : Essays on Central African Territorial Cults* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1979)

<sup>xv</sup> John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 94.

<sup>xvi</sup> There are as many African Christologies as they are African theologians. Jesus as our ancestor, elder brother, healer, liberator, chief, guest, proto-ancestor and Earthkeeper are among the African Christologies titles proposed. Robert J. Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1991. Donald J. Goergen, "The Quest for the Christ of Africa," *The Journal of the Faculty of Theology*, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 17, # 1 (March 2001): 5-51.

<sup>xvii</sup> Gift Makwasha, *The Repression, Resistance, and Revival of the Ancestor Cult in the Shona Churches of Zimbabwe: A Study in the Persistence of a Traditional Religious Belief* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2010).

<sup>xviii</sup> Marthinus L. Daneel, *African Earthkeepers: Wholistic Interfaith Mission*( Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 2001.

<sup>xix</sup> Daneel, *African Earthkeepers*, 277.