

PAUL AND THE ENVIRONMENT: AN INVESTIGATION OF HIS CHRISTOLOGY AND ESCHATOLOGY

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Abstract: *The role that Paul has played in shaping Christianity cannot be overemphasized. His influence continues even in contemporary Christian communities. This paper attempts to show how the teaching of Paul can be used to address the present ecological crisis. Specifically it looks at the Pauline doctrines of eschatology (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:3 and 1 Corinthians 15) and Christology (Romans 8:18-23). It underlines that since Paul considered the eternal world to be here on earth, his teaching can be used to promote environmental conservation. The same is true of his Christology which equates human beings with all the other created order.*

Introduction

Of the twenty seven books of the New Testament, almost half claim Pauline authorship. Over and above these, about half of Acts of the Apostles tells the life and teaching of Paul. New Testament scholarship has for long debated the extent to which each of these writings inform us about the historical Paul. Today the majority of the scholars take seriously only seven letters as authentically Pauline.¹ Acts' accounts of Paul are taken with a pinch of salt as the author is accused of being tendentious and of colouring his accounts with legendary hue.² Thus in

¹ See, for example, M.J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), p.41.

² H. Conzelmann and A. Lindemann, *Interpreting the New Testament* (Massachusetts: Hendrikson Publishers, 1988), p.356.

reconstructing the life and teaching of Paul, the *modus operandi* has been to give the seven genuine Pauline letters (Romans, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians and Philemon) precedence over the other sources. I follow the same approach here. From these many sources, what then is Paul's teaching concerning the environment?

Paul's teaching on the environment cannot be easily discerned. There appears to be two main reasons for this. First, is the fact that the Pauline writings and indeed all other New Testament books are not works of systematic theology. They rose out of the practical needs of the New Testament communities. The second reason is that early Christians, just like Christians today, considered the Old Testament³ canonical and so were likely to turn to it for its rich guidelines on environmental issues whenever they had need. Be that as it may, one can still read, in between the lines, Paul's attitude to and teaching on the environment. To do so it is, however, necessary to first define one's use of the word 'environment.' When we talk of the environment we talk about our surroundings. We do not talk only about the land, the trees and grasses that grow upon it. Rather we include the resources that we draw from and from underneath the land, the air that we breathe, the creatures that traverse the land, the seas and other water bodies around us, the deserts and ice lands, the birds that fly and so on. Environmental issues are about humanity's relations with all these.

From the preceding discussion of the word 'environment,' it is then possible to discuss Paul's attitude to the environment. I will do this first, by showing Paul's assumption of the Old Testament about creation. I will follow this with a discussion of Paul's eschatology analyzing what he

³ In this paper I follow the Christian practice of referring to the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament to distinguish from the New Testament.

thought about the world to come. My assumption here is that what Paul thought of the destiny of this world influenced his and his followers' attitude to the environment. I will follow this with a discussion of Paul's Christology looking at what Paul said about creation in Romans 8:18-23. I will then consider the implications of Paul's attitude to the environment for Christians today before concluding the paper.

Paul's assumption of the Old Testament about creation

Paul was a Jew proud of his Jewish heritage. In Philippians 3:5 and 2 Corinthians 11:22 he tells us that he was full Hebrew, circumcised on the eighth day, of the tribe of Benjamin and a zealous Pharisee. His attitude towards the environment should therefore have been heavily influenced by the Old Testament, particularly the teaching about creation (Genesis 1-3). Jewish children were instructed in the stories of the Old Testament from a very young age and if we consider the Acts account that he studied Jewish under Gamaliel in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3), then we cannot question Paul's knowledge of the Old Testament teaching on the environment. In a number of passages, Paul takes for granted the Old Testament view that the earth and everything in it is the proud handiwork of God. In Romans 1:20, for example, he asserts that the created world reflects the character of God himself who created it. In Acts (14:17, 17:24), Paul says the creation and indeed the cycles of nature are accredited witnesses of God, the primary testimony he gives to himself.⁴ Being influenced by the Old Testament view of creation, there is little doubt then that Paul assumed the role that the same Old Testament assigns humanity over the created world. He therefore should have viewed human beings as having been entrusted with the care of the created world as trustees, stewards and managers.⁵ As a Jew, he believed

⁴ S. Rayan, 'The Earth is the Lord's,' in D.G. Hallmann (Ed), *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), pp.130-148.

⁵ S. Berry, 'A Christian approach to the environment,' in The John Ray Initiative, *A Christian Approach to the Environment* (London: John Ray Initiative, 2005), pp. 1-4.

in the Genesis story that God created the world and gave humanity dominion over it. He believed that as they were created in the image of God, human beings share the 'godly' responsibility over the created world. But apart from his assumption of the Old Testament teaching about the environment, Paul also addressed environmental issues in his theology. This can be found in his Eschatology and Christology.

The Environment in Pauline Eschatology

Pauline eschatology is elaborately stated in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:3 and 1 Corinthians 15. In these passages Paul reminds the Thessalonians and the Corinthians of the resurrection of the dead. His underlining message was that at the parousia, both the living and the dead will be transformed into imperishable bodies to live with Christ forever. An environmental or ecological question that one may ask is where the resurrected will spend their eternal life. This of course would have had an impact on Paul and his followers' attitude to the present world. As E. Lucas admits, Pauline literature does not have a clear answer to this question.⁶ Although 1 Corinthians gives details of the nature of the resurrected body, it says nothing about where the resurrected will live. It is rather 1 Thessalonians 4 (especially verse 16) that gives some idea of where the resurrected will spend their lives. The popular Christian view is that the eternal world is in heaven and that in this world Christians are sojourners. Unfortunately this appears unPauline. The word *parousia* that Paul uses of the coming of Christ is helpful in answering the question of where the eternal world will be. *Parousia* is a word which referred to the coming of a king or a very important person to a city. Often some residents of the city met him/her along the way and then escorted him/her into the city amid fun and pomp (Paul mentions the blowing of trumpet in both 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and 1 Corinthians 15:52 showing he had this in mind). E. Lucas

⁶ E. Lucas, 'The New Testament teaching on the environment,' in The John Ray Initiative, *A Christian Approach to the Environment* (London: John Ray Initiative, 2005), pp.73-96.

should therefore be right when he says in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, Paul was thinking of believers going to 'meet the Lord in the air' in order to escort him back to the earth.⁷ Understood this way, Paul therefore believed eternal life will be here in this world.

In his eschatology Paul also mentions his understanding of what will happen to the body at the *parousia*. He says, '.....but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye....., and the dead will be raised imperishable..... For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality'(1 Corinthians 15:51-53). Thus according to Paul, at the *parousia*, God is not to create new beings altogether. Rather he is going to renew the same old beings. In other words they will be a continuation of the was to the is. J. Pilkinghorne puts it succinctly:

The new creation is not a second attempt by God at what he had first tried to do in the old creation. It is a different kind of divine action altogether, and the difference may be summarized by saying that the first creation was *ex nihilo* while the second creation will be *ex vetere*. In other words, it is God's bringing into being a universe which is free to exist "on its own", in the ontological space made available by the divine kenotic act of allowing the existence of 'something wholly other; the new creation is the divine redemption of the old.⁸

In 1 Corinthians 3:14 and 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, Paul even argues that what humans do in this present world contribute to the new creation. As

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ J. Pilkinghorne, *Science in Christian Belief* (London: SPCK, 1994), p. 167.

we shall see below, this includes humanity's contribution to the environment. Therefore if Paul believed that eternal life will be on this earth, then he should have taught his communities to take proper care of this environment for it is the eternal world.

The Environment in Pauline Christology

The Pauline passage often cited in ecological discussions is Romans 8:18-23.⁹ The text is full of ecological notions. It reads:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God, for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Bryne, for example, notes that in light of the human capacity to act irresponsibly towards the earth, Pauline scholars can hardly help relating this irresponsibility to a reading of this passage.¹⁰ Kassmann finds

⁹ See, for example, B. Bryne, 'Creation Groaning: An Earth Bible Reading of Romans 8:18-22,' in Habel, N.C. *Reading from the Perspective of Earth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp.193-203, M. Kassmann, 'Covenant, Praise and Justice in Creation: Five Bible Studies,' in Hallmann, D.G. (Ed), *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), pp.28-51 and E. Lucas, 'The New Testament teaching on the environment,' in The John Ray Initiative, *A Christian Approach to the Environment* (London: John Ray Initiative, 2005), pp.73-96.

¹⁰ B. Bryne, *Reading from the Perspective of Earth*, 193-203.

thousands of examples of how the creation is suffering: ozone depletion, climate change, land degradation, water pollution, deforestation, habitat destruction, species extinction, use and misuse of biotechnology. Pessimistically she decries, 'Every day seems to bring news of some environmental deterioration.'¹¹

Ecologists have found in Romans 8, a christological connection with creation. It is one New Testament text in which creation is the subject not the object. As a result those interpreters who think Paul had nothing to do with the environment as he was mainly interested in the human soul, have sought ways of explaining away the ecological tones of the passage. R. Bultmann, for example, sees in this text a cosmological mythology of Gnosticism which Paul then appropriates to enable him to express the fact that the perishable creation becomes a destructive power when humanity chooses it instead of God.¹² Other Romans commentators like M. Gorman even decide not to comment on the ecological aspects of the text.¹³ Byrne (2000:194) attributes this lack of interest in the ecological teaching of this passage to scholars' great focus on the theme of justification by faith, 'that Paul's notions that the relationships with the non-human created world should be an intrinsic element of human relationships with God has fallen from view.'¹⁴

Paul sees suffering as a characteristic of this world. So great is the suffering that Paul compares it to labour pains. This suffering for him is being experienced by the whole of creation. Although some readers have tried to limit the meaning of 'creation' to humanity, the general context of

¹¹ M. Kassmann, *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, 28.

¹² R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1952), p.230.

¹³ M.J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*.

¹⁴ B. Bryne, *Reading from the Perspective of Earth*, 193-203.

the passage and particularly verse 20 has led the majority of scholars to conclude that Paul is referring to the sub-human creation.¹⁵ In fact, in the passage, Paul differentiates 'creation' (sub-human) (8:18) from 'we ourselves' (humans) (8:23). Byrne's interpretation is much more enlightening.¹⁶ He says, although Paul does not cite the creation stories of Genesis explicitly, his argument is premised on the stories. Byrne proceeds, 'In particular the argument hinges around the principle that, because human beings were created along with the non-human created world and given responsibility for that world, they share a common fate with that world. When the situation of human beings deteriorates, so does the rest of creation and, vice versa, when it goes well, the creation shares in the blessing.'¹⁷ As pointed out in the first section, Paul's view of the environment must have been influenced heavily by the Old Testament. This is true of the view expressed in this text, that is, that the destiny of the creation (the environment) is determined by the actions of humanity. The Old Testament is full of evidence to this effect. For example, because Adam and Eve's sinned, the land became difficult to till (Genesis 3:17-19) and when human beings please God and are blessed, "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb.....and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den" (Isaiah 11:6-9). Paul therefore thinks of creation's suffering as a consequence of human behavior, an entirely correct view if one looks at the damage that human action cause on the environment. He therefore envisages the creation waiting with eager longing 'the arrival of human beings at the fullness of the grace of humanity intended for them by God.'¹⁸

Working with Paul's comparison of creation's suffering to labour pains, one cannot but notice that Paul remained hopeful. Although labour pains

¹⁵ E. Lucas, *A Christian Approach to the Environment*, 73-96 is one such scholar who takes this position.

¹⁶ B. Bryne, *Reading from the Perspective of Earth*, 197.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

are unbearable (so I am told), the pain is soon overcome by the joy that comes with the birth of the child. Thus as creation suffers it still remains hopeful, hopeful that the suffering it experiences will bring about new life. But this, for Paul is dependent on the revelation of the children of God. At this point, the Pauline Christology comes out loud and clear. Pauline soteriology is Christocentric. The salvation of humanity is dependent on Christ. In the same way the salvation of the creation is also, therefore, dependent on Christ. Humans are thus co-creators with God.

Romans 8:18-23 is therefore of great value to ecological issues as it shows Paul's concern for the non-human created world. Probably noticing that human life is meaningless outside the whole of the created world order, Paul incorporates the theme of creation in his grand theme of justification in Christ. He therefore shows the intricate relationship between God, human beings and the non-human world. From the above analysis of Paul's ecological views as contained in his eschatological, soteriological and Christological views, what then can we conclude about Christians and the environment?

Paul, Christians and the environment

That our planet is facing an environmental crisis has long been observed. Evidence still abounds in the form of loss of animal and plant species, land degradation, depletion of energy resources, climatic change to mention but a few. Climatic change is a concern of not only governments and environmental organizations. Even individuals are feeling the effects of climatic change. The southern African region, for example, is reeling from some of the effects of the ecological crisis. In 2008, floods affected farming and even led to loss of human life in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and parts of Botswana. Depletion of energy resources has seen us preparing lectures and conference papers under candle light. Various world bodies have noted this crisis with some of them responding in one way or the other. Christianity, however, has

been accused of contributing to this crisis. Some environmentalists have found problems in the Christian view that humanity was given dominion over the earth by God. They argue that instead of caring for the environment as servants and stewards of God and with love, respect, justice, creativity and interest of other creatures, humanity has dominated creation in a malign way.¹⁹ The need for 'development' has seen humanity plundering the creation for its selfish needs. L. White looking at the Christian doctrine of creation, for example, accused the religion of being the 'most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen' and that as a result of this anthropocentrism, Christianity bears the major responsibility for the ecological disaster.²⁰ This is particularly true in Africa and other former colonized states where Christianity, colonialism and 'development' came bundled together in one package. In the name of development and civilization local beliefs and traditions, which for centuries had helped conserve the environment, were demonized. For many different reasons Christians have supported industrialization without considering its effects on the environment.²¹ It is for this reason that L. White accused the religion of bearing the blame of the present ecological crisis. But as those who wrote after the publication of White's work correctly noted, it is not the Christian sacred books that promote wanton destruction of nature by humanity. Rather it is the interpretation of the Scriptures in the Western world that led to the ecological crisis. The Scriptures are full of messages that call for humanity's respect for the created world. The Pauline writings are some of these Scriptures that do promote right attitude to the environment.

¹⁹ See, for example, K. Gnanakan, *God's World: A Theology of the Environment* (London: SPCK, 1999), pp.51-56.

²⁰ L. White cited by J.B. Cobb, Jr, 'Christianity, Economics and Ecology,' in T.T. Hessel and R.R. Ruether (Eds), *Christianity and Ecology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp.497-511.

²¹ J.B. Cobb Jr, *Christianity and Ecology*, 497-511, gives three reasons why Christians have rallied behind industrialization: Christian support of need for the world to meet human needs, the need to create employment for all and the need for population growth.

I have pointed out above that Paul assumed the Old Testament view of the environment. This should be the starting point for Christian interests in environmental issues. Believing Paul that the created world reflects the character of God (Romans 1:20) should lead Christians to respect the environment. This is because in the passage Paul argues for natural revelation. God can be seen in nature as well as he can be seen in Scripture (special revelation). In a way Paul therefore equated the created world to Scripture: they both reveal God. Thus going by this interpretation, it can be argued that Christians must treat the environment in the same way they revere Scripture. They should manage it as caretakers and stewards of God, not in an exploitative manner as Lynn White (1967) accused Christianity of doing, but in a benign way.²²

Pauline eschatology also has a number of ecotheological lessons for Christians. As we have seen in our analysis of his eschatology, Paul situates eternal life here on earth. Understood this way, the earth is therefore our home, whether from the perspective of realized or of thoroughgoing (futurist) eschatology. This eschatological understanding is important for ecotheology. It means Christians must not wantonly destroy the environment in anticipation of a new creation, but should rather take care of this earth as it is their home forever. In a book on Ecology and Christian anthropology, the South African theologian, E.M. Conradie says taking care of this earth is more urgent for Christians as they must prepare for the coming of God.²³ As we have seen above, Paul does not anticipate a 'death' of this world and a recreation of a new one. Rather he anticipates a transformation of this same creation. His use of the word *parousia* (1 Thessalonians 4) and the analogy of the sown seed

²² C. Dean-Drummond, *A Handbook in Theology and Ecology* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1996), p. 65.

²³ E.M. Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home on Earth?* (Haunts: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), p.299.

in relation to the resurrected body (1 Corinthians 15) drive this point home. Thus G. Zerb, commenting on the whole of the New Testament eschatology (but using the phrase kingdom of God), underlines that eschatology is an ecological concept because the New Testament vision of salvation includes the restorative re-creation of the entire universe to its intended ecological balance, "the restoration of the entire universe to its original state."²⁴ As we have seen this too is the Pauline view of eschatology.

Although Paul's use of the Old Testament and his eschatology have ecological overtones, as we have seen above, it is his Christology as reflected in Romans 8:18-23 which is much more evident. Paul does not separate the suffering of the environment (creation) from the suffering of humanity. In the same way he argues also that Christians, as children of God have the duty to see their salvation in conjunction with the salvation of all creation. In fact by reading between the lines, one can note that Paul sees humanity as part and parcel of creation. With the same origin, they all have the same destiny. Addressing Christians using the text, Kassmann (1994:50) has it that when humans destroy the creation, they therefore should know that they are destroying themselves.²⁵ She goes further, "So we have to recognize the connection of the human beings and nature as a whole because there is common salvation or common condemnation."²⁶

Conclusion

This paper was based on two assumptions. First, is the reality of the ecological crisis we are facing not only in the southern African region but

²⁴ G. Zerb, cited by G. McAfee, 'Ecology and Biblical Studies,' in D.T. Hessel (Ed), *Theology for Earth Community: A Field Guide* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), p.40.

²⁵ M. Kassmann, *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, 28-51.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

indeed worldwide. Second, is the influence that the Bible has in our different world communities. I therefore set out to find out whether Paul, an influential figure in Christian doctrine, has any teaching which is relevant to our environmental crisis. Although Paul wrote his letters about two centuries ago, these letters, because of their canonical status in church, still have influence in the teaching and practice of the church. I specially looked at the Pauline doctrines of eschatology and Christology. In the Pauline eschatology I have underlined the fact that Paul believed that eternal life will be on this earth. Without forcing the text to answer modern ecological questions in a literal way, I have noted that this teaching of Paul can be used to promote humanity's care of the environment. I have also looked at his Christology especially as contained in Romans 8:18-23. Again without forcing the text to answer modern questions, I have stressed that the Pauline Christology of equating humanity with the non-human world is important for ecological solutions.