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Three IN LABOUR

Romans 8.22

The proper understanding of II Peter 3 provides us with an insight into the unity of the biblical message concerning the future of this world. If this is accepted, other passages that speak of a hopeful future suddenly fall into place. I am thinking especially of Romans 8, where Paul ends his exposition of the Christian message with a description of the hopeful future for this world: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the sons of God to be revealed."

Paul speaks with striking optimism about the future of *this* creation. He clearly teaches that this world as we know it is a fallen world: "creation was subjected to frustration"—but not in order to be destroyed. "Yet there is hope that the creation itself will one day be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." (18-21)

Paul then comes to his moving comparison in verse 22: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (22-24).

Here Paul himself makes the distinction between "we ourselves" and "the whole of creation which cannot be explained in any other way except that there is also hope for the external world of animals and plants, mountains and lakes. We see futility and decay everywhere, but those who have heard the message of the resurrection of Christ now hear a deeper groaning beyond this: the pain of nature is labour pain. This idea is expressed clearly in one other place in the New Testament, in a discussion between Jesus and his disciples. Peter had asked Jesus, "We have left everything and followed you—what will we have?" And Jesus answered him, "You who have followed me will share in my royal glory *in the regeneration*, when the Son of man will appear." (Matthew 19.28) The words "in the regeneration" (*palin genesia*), refer to the renewal of the whole of creation as a kind of new birth.

POLLUTION AND THE DEATH OF MAN

In 1970 Dr. F. A. Schaeffer wrote a book on pollution. He was one of the first in the Christian world to be alarmed by the destruction of nature as a result of our human-centred consumption society. He wrote, "Modern man has no real value for nature. All he has is the most crass form of egoist, pragmatic value for it. He treats it as a thing in the worst possible sense, to exploit for the 'good' of man." (p. 58)

Time magazine (September 19, 1988) article tells how the future of this earth is in real danger as a result of three problems in the environment:

(1) the "greenhouse" effect.

The industrial age has been fuelled by the burning of coal, wood, oil, which spews wastes—most notably carbon dioxide—into the sky. This thickens the layer of atmospheric gases that traps heat from the sun and keeps the earth warm. This greenhouse effect is expected to bring about change more quickly than any other climatic event in the earth's history... melting enough of the polar ice caps to threaten the water supply of New York City and the very existence of low-lying New Orleans... productive farmland would become parched and dusty.

(2) The thinning ozone layer:

This is being caused mainly by the production of chloroflourocarbons (CFCs), chemical compounds that can be found in styrofoam cups and fast-food containers and in the freon used in air conditioners and grocery refrigeration cases. The CFCs float up into the stratosphere and break down the layer of ozone gas, which serves as a shield protecting the earth from much of the sun's harmful ultraviolet radiation. One result... more cases of skin cancer.

(3) Acid rain and forest destruction so that the lungs of the earth are destroyed.

This article limits itself to dealing with the effects of pollution on the U.S., but these three problems will have dire consequences for the whole planet.

On the second page of his book *Pollution and the Death of Man*, Dr. Schaeffer tells of his visit to a man in California who had arranged a tombstone on the coast of the Pacific ocean and carved this epitaph on it:

died A.D. 1979
The Oceans born—the Lord gave
The Oceans died—man has taken away
Cursed be the name of man

The author of this epitaph is one of many who are worried about the pollution of nature. Even in the middle of the oceans, birds and fish are dying because of the chemicals that we dump there. This tombstone should wake us up.

At the same time however, we as Christians standing in the stream of Judeo-Christian teaching should be saying, "Stop a moment—you have put the wrong date on the stone. It was not in 1979 that the oceans died. They died long before that." This is the profound meaning behind Genesis 3 and, in sharp contrast to that, II Corinthians 5:17.

Genesis 3 tells of the reality of the historic Fall of man. The moment Adam and Eve sinned against God, a curse was laid upon the whole of creation:

Because you have sinned
Cursed be the earth
from now on it will bring forth
thorns and thistles
and death will be the end of every living creature:
dust thou art and to dust thou wilt return.

These words show the situation of nature to be much worse than any green party has phrased it. The oceans died long ago. When man sinned the whole of nature was put under the law of death (Romans 8.20,22). We observe today the serious result of what happened deep down at the beginning of mankind. On the tombstone should be written:

Died in the Garden of Eden
The oceans, the skies, animals and plants

The Bible teaches that it all died with the death of man.

CREATION TRANSFORMED

However, once we have understood this connection between the fall of man and the fall of nature, we can also understand the joy of the message of the Gospel, not only for humans but also for the whole of creation. I refer here to II Corinthians 5.17. There must have been a reason for Paul to have phrased it like he did. Linguistically it would have been normal to have said, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is new *creature*," That would fit. But Paul deliberately talks about a new "creation" and adds, according to Isaiah's prophecy, "the old has passed, the new has come." (Isaiah 43.16-21)

This is what the Lord says—
He who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,
who drew out the chariots and horses,
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:
Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past
See I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the desert and streams
in the wasteland.
The wild animals honour me,
The jackals and the owls,
because I provide water in the desert
and streams in the wasteland,
to give drink to my people, my chosen,
the people I formed for myself
that they may proclaim my praise.

We have narrowed the message of the Gospel. In the first place it is good news for man, because he has received a message of life in the midst of death: "My son here was dead, but now he is alive." But the power of the work of Christ is much wider than only the redemption of man. The whole creation will receive life out of death (Romans 8.22) and all the nations will be revived (Romans 11.25). This is what Paul had in mind when he said consciously, "in Christ we are a new creation." Man redeemed through Christ draws a completely renewed world behind him.

Sadly the eyes of many Christians have been closed to this fully biblical statement. Christians have been involved in the abuse of nature just as non-Christians. This is because they have had what Schaeffer calls a "Platonic spirituality". They believed that the material world was not as important as the spiritual world. But again and again Schaeffer asks the question, "How is it possible to love God without respecting the things he has made?"

Part of the problem has been that Christians have misunderstood the biblical promises about the future of this earth. God made a covenant with the whole of creation (see Genesis 9), and Christ's death will redeem all nature from the evil consequences of the Fall. In the same way that the Fall of man led to the fall of creation, so the redemption of man will lead to the redemption of nature.

In Romans 8 the redemption of nature is compared with the birth of a child. When Jesus returns and the children of Adam and Eve are set free from sin and death, the whole of creation will be reborn. I believe in the new birth of animals, trees, oceans, clouds which have been tremendously damaged as a result of sin.

In I Corinthians 15 Paul writes of a process of transformation. He uses the expression "changing clothes": "Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality" (verses 51-53). The words he uses here mean literally "to put on different clothes". The outward appearance will change.

There are analogies to this in nature, for instance the butterfly coming out of the cocoon. If you look at a butterfly and at a cocoon, you would never think that out of the cocoon such a beautiful creature could emerge and fly. The same can be said of the dragonfly. This insect starts its life as a little larva in mud depression of submerged in water. The larva grows stronger and bigger and makes its way to the surface of the water. When the time is ripe, it climbs out of the water and changes into a dragonfly.

If you study these images there does come a point when the preacher should emphasize the continuity. It is true the judgment of God will burn away a lot of things and the whole world will be burned with the fire of God's judgment, but there are moments that the preacher should say, "Listen! God remains faithful to his creation. He put a rainbow over this world in the covenant with Noah, and this was a covenant with the whole of creation, including animals, plants, seasons and the sky. God promised to be faithful to this creation." Therefore, the earth and the works upon it will be found as the New Testament makes clear in, several passage. (Revelation 21 and 22, II Corinthians 5.1 ff).

THE SCAFFOLDING

Why is it important to emphasize this? Because a certain type of doomsday thinking about the future of this world has weakened our resistance to pollution. Chernobyl, the breakdown of the ozone layer, the acidity of the forests as a result of bad air, the poisonous deposits in the ground, drinking water problems, the cutting down of tropical rain forests and the advance of deserts: these are taken merely as apocalyptic signs. But they should rather be taken as last-minute alarm calls to direct ourselves towards God's future. He wants us to be concerned and to be working in the world right now as his children, working towards its renewal. That is our calling—to give a foretaste of the coming renewal.

Jesus did not feed the crowd before he had first commanded the disciples, "You yourselves give them something to eat." When they offered him the five loaves and two fish, which was all they had, he used those tiny things to perform his miracle (Matthew 14.16-20). In the same way, at his return, the Lord will ask us, "What did you do with my creation to renew it?" Then he will multiply our finite achievements into the promised total renewal. To use Paul's image of changing clothes in, I Corinthians 15, he will take the tiny and weak threads and weave them into new garments with which he will clothe the world. There is a reason why the Holy Spirit is called the firstfruit of the new creation (Romans 8.23).

So there is a challenging and important relationship between the works we are called to do now in order to save nature—to purify the water, to preserve the ozone layer, to plant trees instead of cutting them, to care about safe forms of energy—and the future renewal of the earth. God does not *need* our works to accomplish that; he could do it without us. But he will use our work and he will certainly rebuke us if we have not produced the work he expected. He will ask for them and he will make them the core of a renewed world.

As Dr. W. Van Bruggen put it, "It is dangerous to identify our cultural achievements with the kingdom of God, but we should say that the kingdom of God is present in the signs that precede it. They are the milestones, bricks, ingredients, *the scaffolding* of the coming empire, real foreshadowings as demonstration of the things to come." (*Futurum and Eschaton*, p. 173)