

Agency, Sin and Grace: Protestant perspectives on mission and the earth crisis.

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Abstract

This essay examines the relationship between Protestant mission thinking and the ecological crisis facing the earth. An examination of five contemporary traditions (Evangelical, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Lutheran) notes that it is extremely difficult for Protestants to deal with the earth crisis missiologically, and it is argued that this is because Protestant missiology is deeply embedded in the self-same affirmation of human agency that is at the heart of the earth crisis. The essay then engages with the notions of agency, sin and grace to suggest an alternative Protestant approach to mission that is responsive to the depth of the crisis.

Fifteen years ago David Bosch correctly identified the ecological crisis as one of the key shifts that (Protestant) missiology faces as it breaks with the 'modern paradigm':

A further disastrous consequence of the Cartesian model is found in what we today refer to as the ecological crisis. We have degraded the earth by treating it as an insensitive object; now it is dying under our very hands ... Enlightenment culture - science, philosophy, education, sociology, literature, technology - has misinterpreted both humanity and nature, not only in some respects, but fundamentally and totally.²

Yet, there is no reference to this in the final chapter of the book where he sets out in 150 tightly argued pages the elements of an emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm, that is comprehensive, detailed and profoundly thought through. This is even the more surprising given the fact that Bosch draws so deeply on the work of the World Council of Churches (WCC), for he simply misses the entire post-Vancouver (1983) discussion of "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation" leading up to the Seoul Convocation of 1990, that sought to draw ecological issues into the mainstream of theological reflection. Thus his work leaves a huge gap for contemporary missiology.

1. Ecological concerns in some contemporary Protestant missiology

Bosch's book was published in 1990 the year before the Rio Earth Summit put ecological issues on the global agenda (although seven years after the WCC meeting in Vancouver). In the past sixteen years the earth crisis has become more and more evident, with growing

¹ The financial assistance of the Council for World Mission (CWM) towards this research is gratefully acknowledged.

² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991) p355.

evidence of the implications of climate change, deforestation, loss of top soil and diminishing fresh water supplies. Churches in both the North and South are more and more aware of this, and there has been a burgeoning theological library around the issue, but the question remains: How has this affected our understanding and practice of mission? To answer this question and to gain a summary overview of the Protestant answer to that question, I propose now to examine – not the general church resolutions on the environment, ecology, creation, or the earth crisis³ – but the contemporary *missiological* statements of five traditions from the diverse Protestant world.

(a) *The 'Lausanne' Evangelical Tradition*

A significant part of the Protestant church that calls itself 'Evangelical' and which chose not to be involved in the World Council of Churches, gathered together and focused its thinking on mission in the Lausanne Covenant of 1974. The struggle at the heart of this movement has always been to define the relationship between evangelism and social concern, without undermining the traditional evangelical understanding of the 'gospel'. This has been a running battle!⁴ Nevertheless, one of the more exciting and ground-breaking advances to come out of this tradition, nurtured within the Evangelical-based Interchurch Relief and Development Agency and its successor, the Micah Network, has been the *Micah Declaration on Integral Mission* of September 27, 2001, and more recently the Micah Campaign, drawing on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).⁵

The *Micah Declaration* makes a strong argument for the Evangelical community to focus on what in Spanish is called '*misión integral*', meaning holistic or comprehensive mission, but translated directly as 'integral mission' in English. It is a strong call to integrate evangelism and social concern in the face of globalization and the reality of poverty for many of the world's citizens. The seven-page document has a preamble, followed by sections on integral mission, integral mission with the poor and marginalized, integral mission and the church, integral mission and advocacy, integral mission and lifestyle. While the document includes a strongly motivated critique of neo-liberalism, there is no recognition of the relationship between economy and ecology, other than in the final section on 'lifestyle', where there are two possible references: "There is a need for integral discipleship involving the responsible and sustainable use of the resources of God's creation ... The concept of Sabbath reminds us that here should be limits to our consumption", however, this is immediately taken up with the notion that wealth should be shared, rather than that the limits point to a wider ecological framework in which wealth and poverty is located.

(b) *The Anglican Communion*

If mission in the Lausanne tradition is haunted by the tension between evangelism and social concern, then a reading of the mission documents of the Anglican communion from

³ Following Rasmussen I prefer the terms earth and earth crisis, and also the verb 'earthkeeping' due to its biblical connections (Genesis 2:15). See Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997).

⁴ See Orlando Costas, "Integral Mission and its Historical Development" in Tim Chester (ed), *Justice, Mercy and Humility: Integral Mission and the Poor* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2002)

⁵ See the essays in Chester (ed) *Justice, Mercy and Humility*. See also <www.micahchallenge.org>

the past decade would suggest that this tradition is haunted by the constant need to define what it means to be 'Anglican' in mission. In their documentation, reports and resolutions on the theme of 'mission' there is a great deal of reflection on the incredible diversity and breadth of ecclesial experience that makes up the Communion, and the impact this has on mission, and what this means for a church that until very recently was formally rooted in Anglo-Saxon culture and expression. Throughout there is an overriding concern to shape the structures of the Anglican church to be open to mission in many contexts.

In looking at three key documents, the Lambeth Conference Report of 1998, Section Two, entitled *Called to Live and Proclaim the Good News*;⁶ the final report of MISSIO, the Anglican Communion Mission Commission (which met four times between November 1994 and April 1999) called *Anglicans in Mission: A Transforming Journey*;⁷ and the interim report in 2002 of IASCOME, the Inter Anglican Standing Commission on Mission and Evangelism, called *Traveling Together in God's Mission*,⁸ one is struck by how little attention is paid to earth issues. Between 1984 and 1990 the Anglican Church did speak of the Five Marks of Mission which included, as the fifth, "to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth"; but these Five Marks seem to have fallen out of favour with MISSIO,⁹ and no longer provide a framework for thinking about mission in later documents, with the effect that this fifth mark has disappeared almost entirely (which does not mean that earth concerns have faded from the Communion, just that they are no longer clearly integrated into mission thinking.)¹⁰

Called to Live and Proclaim the Good News (the Lambeth report) has a strong focus upon mission in a time of globalization and the negative impact of the market economy, urbanization, religious pluralism, reconciliation and international debt, and young people and children. There is a statement that "effective mission entails a clear witness to the presence of God in all creation and the responsibility of the human race as a steward of the created order. This is especially important in the present century with its all-too-frequent abuses of natural resources and other living creatures in our world. All our work in evangelism must include this theme: in Christ the possibility is given of a right relationship to the whole creation; in Christ we are called to seek justice for all creation",¹¹ but the paragraph is unrelated to the discussions on the market economy, urbanization or international debt. There is no reference to the environment, ecology, the earth or creation in *Anglicans in Mission*, the final report of *Missio*, and just one reference in *Traveling Together in God's Mission*, where tucked into the third area of concern, namely, "The Journey towards wholeness and fullness of life" is a reference to the threats to life, including the life of the planet (p18), and a call for "a healing of the wounds inflicted on

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<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/resources/documents/pdfs.cfm?fname=1998lambethsection2> (Downloaded on 9/9/06)

7 <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/resources/documents/Anglicans%20in%20Mission.pdf> (Downloaded on 9/9/06)

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<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/commissions/iascome/pdfs.cfm?fname=acc12interimreport> (Downloaded on 9/9/06)

⁹ See *Anglicans in Mission: A Transforming Journey*, the *Missio* Report of 1999 8.

¹⁰ Andrew Warmback's PhD thesis, *Constructing an 'oikotheology'* engages thoroughly with the long-standing Anglican commitment to ecological and environmental matters.

¹¹ See *Called to Live and Proclaim the Good News*, Section Two, 6

the earth” (p.20), which “should include liturgies for environmental healing.” It would seem true to say then, that the Anglican branch of Protestantism has yet to articulate the challenge of mission and creation in a thoroughgoing way.

(c) *The Methodist Tradition*

The World Methodist Council is an association of Churches in the Methodist tradition throughout the world. The mission statement of the Council indicates that it exists to promote unity and seeks to undertake a number of roles (fourteen in all) which include evangelism, Christian education, and ministries of justice and peace but there is no reference to ‘mission’ itself,¹² and while there are eight standing Committees for a range of common tasks, there is none for mission. There also is no specific reference to common witness around environmental issues. To take up the theme then, we turn to the dominant Methodist denominations in the USA and Britain.

Rather than having a comprehensive theological statement on mission The United Methodist Church in the USA has a simple two-page statement on the purpose of the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) and the Four Mission Goals of the GBGM.¹³ These goals are to: (1) Make disciples of Jesus Christ; (2) Strengthen, develop and renew Christian congregations and communities; (3) Alleviate human suffering; and (4) Seek justice, freedom and peace. There is no reference at all to creation, nature, the environment, ecology or the earth.

The 1996 Conference of the Methodist Church of Britain adopted a statement which affirmed nine statements of mission, and which continue to provide a missiological framework for the Church.¹⁴ The fourth of these statements is “Caring for the earth”. In 1998 the Methodist Church proposed an environmental policy, specifically to translate “its affirmation that mission includes caring for the earth”.¹⁵ The policy affirms that

3. Christian mission includes sharing in putting right the relationships within God's creation that have gone wrong, and growing towards the balance and good stewardship envisaged in the Biblical vision of the world as it is meant to be.

4. The Methodist people are challenged and encouraged to care for the earth by following sustainable practice and taking into account global and local environmental considerations for present and future generations

The environmental policy then raises a range of objectives which focus on awareness and commitment, energy and water, waste, materials and resources, natural and built environment, and travel.

It is difficult to gauge the impact of this, however, as this concern seems to have disappeared in the *Priorities for the Church* which were adopted in 2004 after a period of review and reflection.¹⁶ The priorities are rooted in a strongly missional understanding of

¹² See <http://www.worldmethodistcouncil.org/mission.html> (Downloaded on 10/09/06)

¹³ See <http://new.gb-gm-umc.org/about/globalministries/purpose/> (Downloaded 10/09/06)

¹⁴ See <http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=pandw.content&cmid=589> (Downloaded 10/09/06)

¹⁵ See <http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=information.content&cmid=350> (Downloaded 10/09/06)

¹⁶ See <http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=information.content&cmid=879> (Downloaded 10/09/06)

the church, and include 'supporting community development and action for justice', and 'developing confidence in evangelism'. While the document reminds the church that "ours is a contextualized mission" and the last in the list of general contextual themes that demand our attention is "the dangers of environmental pollution," in the discussion on these two themes there is no reference at all to the earth, creation or nature. Like the Anglicans, then, the conscious integration of mission and creation at a theological or praxiological level seems to be missing in the Methodist tradition.

(d) Reformed Tradition: The Presbyterian Church, USA.

As an example of a church in the Reformed Tradition, we can look at the Presbyterian Church (USA), which in 2003 adopted a new vision for international mission entitled, *Gathering for God's future: A Renewed Call to Worldwide Mission*.¹⁷ This ten page document seeks to guide the church in a way of mission that is "God-called, Christ-centered and Spirit led", and that focuses on four crucial challenges: (1) Witnessing and evangelizing worldwide; (2) Equipping the church for transforming mission; (3) Engaging in ministries of reconciliation, justice, healing and grace; and (4) Living the Good News of Jesus Christ in community with people who are poor.

Having identified the ways in which the PC(USA) engages in mission, the document turns to the contemporary context of mission and lays out what it considers to be the five key dynamics in the world at present. These are globalization, ecology, interfaith-tensions, population and power shifts, and diseases of poverty. Ecological concerns thus receive quite a high profile. The subsection reads as follows:

As the planet's ecological health is endangered, and some places are made especially un-healthy, we should be reminded of God the Creator and our stewardship role. Our international mission involvements provide opportunities to answer this call for ecological health. This is part of the fullness of life we seek in faith, not only for ourselves, but also for poor, oppressed and disadvantaged people.

The document then moves to a close with integrating these concerns in the challenge to the church to undertake three roles: witness, discipleship and community. However, it would seem that the lack of cohesion between the four crucial challenges, the five key dynamics and these three roles, means that the integration of an ecological concern into 'ministries of reconciliation, justice, healing and grace' via the role of 'community' (or witness, or discipleship, for that matter) is left hanging. This may reflect the fact that this is a compromise document (as almost all church documents are!) or perhaps a desire to be non-prescriptive coupled with an awareness that this kind of integration can only happen locally in specific contexts. Nevertheless, as with the Anglicans and the Methodists, the Presbyterian document reminds us how difficult it is to actually integrate ecological concerns into mission.

(e) The Lutheran World Federation

A recent Lutheran contribution, however, suggests that there may be creative ways of doing just this. In 2004 the LWF, via its Tenth Assembly and LWF Council meeting,

¹⁷ See <http://www.pcusa.org/wmd/gathering.htm> (Downloaded 10/09/06)

adopted a well argued and extremely comprehensive 64 page document, *Mission in Context -Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment: An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Mission*.¹⁸ The document seeks “to strengthen and deepen the church’s understanding of itself as a missional church and to live it out fully.” (p7) Understanding mission as ‘accompaniment’ (drawing heavily from the Emmaus road story), and involving a hermeneutical spiral, the document is divided into three major sections following a basic see-judge-act logic: (1) Contexts of Mission; (2) Theology of Mission; and (3) Practice of Mission. Ecological or environmental concerns emerge consistently through these three chapters.

In terms of the Contexts of Mission (section 1) the document focuses on globalization, technology, health, violence, and ‘religious, cultural and political contexts’. Ecological concerns do not have a separate section, but are integrated within the discussion of economic globalization: “As the globalized consumer economy continues, the devastation of the ecosystem intensifies” (p14) and this has an impact upon rainforests, desertification, urbanisation, extinction, fragile ecosystems, and upon the quality of land, air and water.

The Theology of Mission (section 2) takes as its starting point the context of sin and alienation which includes the estrangement of human beings from nature (p23). The ‘Mission of God’ (the document avoids the Latinized, *missio Dei*) seeks to respond to this: “God’s grace, overcoming the consequences of sin – alienation, death and depravity – extends beyond the individual to all communities, to all creation.” The God in mission is the Triune God, and so the document goes on to reflect on God’s mission as creator, as redeemer and as sanctifier. God’s mission as creator is an affirmation of the importance of creation, and God “is calling people to participate in mission in creation”, although the full implications of this are not spelled out at this point. The Trinitarian understanding of the *missio Dei*, has a parallel in the three dimensions of mission: transformation, reconciliation and empowerment. Transformation is “the unfolding of the potential life-giving nature of all creation and an expression of the working of God’s grace in nature. It is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to effect transformation in and through the church to the whole world” (p33). Thus the document can say:

Mission is holistic and contextual with regard to its aim, practice, and location. Its aim encompasses the whole of creation (ecological concerns), the whole of life (social, political, economic, and cultural), and the whole human being (i.e., all people and the whole person – spiritual, mental, relational, physical, and environmental needs). (p36)

Section three, Practice of Mission, strengthens the argument concerning the whole church in mission. The missional church in action is a witnessing community (involving worshipping, nurturing, being a messenger, serving, and healing) and an *oikumene* community, one which covers three aspects of the *oikos*: ecumenical, economic, and ecological (p51). This final section on ‘ecological engagement’ is worth quoting in full:

The *oikumene* community believes strongly in the goodness of God’s creation. It is first and foremost God’s creation, which is then received with gratitude as an *oikos*

¹⁸ See www.lutheranworld.org/LWF_Documents/DMD-Mission-in-context-low.pdf (Downloaded 10/09/06)

(home) for all people. The first step in the church's ecological mission engagement is that of confession and repentance. For centuries, the church's otherworldly outlook and its emphasis on human dominion or domination over creation paved the way for the exploitation and destruction of nature. The oikos earth is in agony.

The church as a healing community, in every place, needs to look at the whole of creation in the light of the gospel and search for ways to restore this planet to health. The world is not primarily a human environment, nor simply the stage for the drama of human salvation. Rather, it is in and of its own an active participant in God's mission. In the apostle Paul's vision, "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:20-21). The church as oikumene community, with its worldwide networks, should further and prioritize its participation in the process of rehabilitating the earth and preventing further ecological destruction caused by the use of fossil fuels, toxic waste pollution, and the extermination of species, for example. Together with civil societies and voluntary groups concerned about the integrity of the earth, there is an urgent need for the church to raise its prophetic voice in naming and denouncing destructive actions against the oikos. Local projects dealing with ecological rehabilitation should be encouraged and supported financially by all partners. Ecological engagement is an urgent mission call for all. (p53/4)

While opening up the possibility of integrating the ecological and the economic via the term 'oikos', the document does not do this, and so the focus is on specific actions to rehabilitate and prevent destruction, rather than as a critique of the kind of fundamental economic choices we are making as human beings that are undermining earthkeeping. There is no call to a new oikos-culture. This is surprising given that in the first section (contexts) ecological concerns were integrated into the section on globalisation, as we noted above. The document then draws to an end with a focus on 'new challenges and opportunities for mission' (p54-59), which seeks to encourage the church to take up the vision of mission promoted in the document.

2. Mission, human agency and the earth crisis.

We began this review of mission discourse with a desire to uncover how some Protestant churches have sought to integrate creation/earth/environment into their mission work.¹⁹ Our answer is that three options seem to suggest themselves. First, the entire theme can be absent (cf. Micah declaration, World Methodist Council, and the United Methodist Church). Second, the earth crisis can present itself as part of the 'context' in which mission takes place and to which it must attend, but not raise fundamental issues about mission itself (cf. Anglican Communion, Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Methodist Church of Britain). Third, there is the possibility that the earth crisis begins to raise questions about the very notion and nature of mission, and that mission must be re-thought in the light of the earth crisis. (It would seem that the LWF document is moving in this direction). My own sense is that the third option is the correct one, but that we are still struggling to find the language to articulate it.

¹⁹ A further reminder that we were examining the integration of *mission* and the earth crisis, not general statements about the latter. I am aware that many of these traditions have very strong statements about the earth crisis itself.

As we noted above, if David Bosch was aware that in the light of the earth crisis a 'basic reorientation' in mission was called for, and yet even he with his incredible breadth and depth simply ignored it, then Vischer is surely right: "The transition from the recognition of the crisis to a new orientation is difficult to make".²⁰ The fact that two recent comprehensive books on mission from senior Protestant missiologists, D. Preman Niles, (formerly General Secretary of the Council for World Mission)²¹ and J. Andrew Kirk, (former Director of the Centre for Mission and World Christianity at the Selly Oak Colleges and University of Birmingham)²², do not touch the theme at all seems to underscore the difficulty.

Why is this the case? Why is it possible for Christians and churches to recognise the earth crisis, and yet struggle to integrate the radical challenge this poses for us, into mission thinking and practice? The answer, I would suggest lies in the fact that Protestant mission thinking and action is wedded to the same affirmation of human agency that is itself the cause of the earth crisis. Thus it is so deeply embedded in the problem-causing paradigm that it cannot perceive of a way out. If this is indeed the case, then unless and until we can come to grips with this missiological problem, we will struggle to integrate the two. So let us examine this in more depth.

Marx's eleventh of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it",²³ is a terse summation of the Enlightenment's amazing confidence at engaging the 'given-ness' of the world and turning it into something better. The Industrial Revolution, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and many other revolutions and struggles for liberation around the globe all bear testimony to this conscious uncovering of human agency – of the intentional desire to make history; to not just interpret the world, but "to change it." Yet while Marx can be credited with the brilliance of articulating this conscious discovery in his thesis, we would be missing the point if we thought that people had *not* been changing the world prior to Enlightenment. For the history of the world, since the retreat of the Ice Age around 12,000 years ago, has been one of human beings taking the given-ness of the world and – through labour – changing it. That change is not just a European phenomenon, but began around the same time in the Near East, the Mediterranean, China, Meso-America, parts of Africa and some of the Pacific Islands – and expanded over the past millennia to encompass the whole globe.²⁴ Contra Marx, there have in fact been very few philosophers merely interpreting the world. There have been many more humans changing the world in all kinds of ways, through agriculture, mining, industry, conquest, migration and exploration.

²⁰ Vischer, "God's Creation as theme of Missionary Witness: God's Creation as theme of Missionary Witness: Some considerations with a view to an international consultation", unpublished discussion paper for Conference on Mission and Creation hosted by the John Knox Centre, Geneva, September 2006.

²¹ D. Preman Niles, *From East and West: Rethinking Christian Mission* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2004)

²² J. Andrew Kirk, *Mission under scrutiny: Confronting current challenges*. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006)

²³ Although written in 1845 this was first published posthumously as an appendix to Engel's *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy, 1886*

²⁴ An extremely useful introduction to this that itself draws from vast scholarly debate is Jared Diamond, *Guns Germs and Steel* (New York: W W Norton & Company, Inc., 1997)

What seems to be the case, however, is that this change – though catastrophic in a number of cases such as Easter Island – has seemed to ebb and flow with the rhythm of the earth and to have had little global impact for thousands of years.²⁵ Then at about the same time that the Enlightenment was consciously and intentionally giving human beings the moral authority to change the world, to make history, to break out of the ‘natural state of things’ – at about this same time – the actual impact of the change on the world began to speed up dramatically. It seems likely that the two are connected: the discovery of human agency, of the intentionality of changing the world, of being part of ‘history’ rather than of ‘nature’, of embracing the idea of ‘progress’, of claiming the right to change the ‘natural state of things’, appears to have contributed to exactly this: the changing of the natural state of things.²⁶

Indeed, we are able now, with hindsight, to recognize that at this point human beings began to have a decisive impact not just upon history, economy, politics and society – but upon the earth. Our current ecological crises to do with deforestation, loss of water, degradation of topsoil, depletion of air quality, and destruction of biodiversity all seem to stem from about this moment – the emergence of modernity, with its coalition of science, technology, democracy, industry, and individualism all rooted in a culture that believed in progress as the greatest good.²⁷

Thus it seems clear that there is a very profound relationship between our way of being in the world, our way of acting, our way of organizing our labour, our culture, our economy, our beliefs and ‘habits of the heart’, and our natural environment. This has been true from the dawn of history. However, the scope and scale of this impact has grown tremendously since the advent of the industrial revolution, and is true of both ‘daughters’ of this revolution, namely, free-market and planned economies. Both of these assume that human beings have the right and responsibility to organize the world according to human needs, making the assumption that it is only human structures – and not the constraints of the wider biosphere – that have a decisive impact upon the ability to meet those needs. Thus while the truth that economics (*oikos/nomos*) and ecology (*oikos/logos*) belong together in our one world home (*oikos*) is not always acknowledged, it is nevertheless clearly obvious.²⁸ And as the human ability and desire to ‘change the world’ to meet human needs grew, as we claimed the right of human agency, so indeed the world changed – and the earth has suffered accordingly.²⁹

Now, significant for our current theme is that by and large what Protestants understand by ‘mission’ is rooted in exactly the same historical nexus. Emerging at the same point in both time and space, the great missionary movement of the nineteenth century can be

²⁵ See Jared Diamond, *Collapse*. (London: Penguin, 2005)

²⁶ Here I am following the excellent argument of Rasmussen in *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*.

²⁷ See Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development* (London: Zed, 1999) for an excellent discussion about the way in which ‘progress’ has come to dominate the thinking and practice of the West.

²⁸ See the *Oikos Journey*, published by the Diakonia Council of Churches, Durban South Africa. Available at <http://www.diakonia.org.za/dmdocuments/OikosA5e.pdf>

²⁹ I have chosen in this essay to assume the fact of the Earth Crisis. For the few doubters left, there is more than enough evidence elsewhere. A helpful overview and summary is the chapter on the environmental crisis in the Millennium Report of the United Nations, 2000. This report was the basis upon which the Millennium Summit met to make the Millennium Declaration from which the Millennium Development Goals have been extracted.

understood as the Christian grasping of the notion of agency and bending it to ecclesiastical purposes. The irony is that while Marx assumed that we had to get rid of religion before we could change the world (“the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism”³⁰), it was religious missionaries – Christians from the North – who more than most others set about changing the world as if thumbing their nose at Marx: “Theologians have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to *convert* it”. Now this incredible outpouring of energy and marshalling of human and financial resources to change the world by converting it had its own logic – certainly in the early decades – but over time (and particularly after 1880) it became intimately linked to colonialism and modernization.³¹ Much has been written about this in terms of the relationship between mission, politics and economics and I have no desire to repeat it here; but what is not often identified is that this also places the Protestant missionary movement in an awkward relationship with regards the earth. If it was/is part and parcel of the same celebration of human agency, of the same conscious assumption of modernity with its political and economic cultures, and of the same embracing of progress as the rest of the North Atlantic colonial project, then it too carries within its bosom a responsibility for our ecological crisis. I think this might be hard truth that Lynn White was hinting at in his in/famous essay of almost forty years ago, “The historical roots of our ecological crisis”.³²

The point is simply this: it is the intentionality of human agency over and against both social and natural ‘worlds’, which characterizes our modern earth-denying cultures *and* which undergirds much of our Protestant missionary practice. Indeed, Protestant missionary practice has generally proceeded upon the belief that we can change things for the better whether it is through converting people, building clinics, establishing printing presses and schools, campaigning for Fair Trade, or advocating for women’s rights. Even the fundamental division between those who emphasize ‘evangelism’ and those who emphasize ‘social concern’ is not a division on *this* issue. Both sides assume that what we really need is more missionaries, better organization, more efficient communication, greater resources, and more shoulders to the wheel. This is what gives mission its role and status in the life of the church, and its claim upon church budgets: it is the ‘agency’ side of ecclesiology, it is where the church engages with the world to ‘change things’, given that ‘theologians have only interpreted the world, in various ways’. The irony of all of this – and to this we must turn now – is that a fundamental point of the Protestant Reformation was that human agency was a dubious thing!

3. Agency, sin and grace

Let me restate the argument: The common denominator between our modern understanding of mission and of the economic culture that is the cause of the earth crisis is the unbridled belief in the limitlessness of human agency. Whether or not we believe in Marx, we all believe that the point about the world is “to change it”. We have labelled the things we don’t like as ‘sin’, and we have claimed God’s blessing for mission, understood in many different ways – but with one similarity: *to change things*, to bring ‘redemption’, ‘salvation’, ‘liberation’, ‘humanization’, ‘healing’, ‘new life’. We know that it is *God’s*

³⁰ Karl Marx. “Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, February, 1844

³¹ See the long discussion in David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp 302ff.

³² In *Science*, 155(1967):1203-07

mission (of course!), but the point is that the church engages in mission as a celebration of baptised human agency. *MISSIO*, of the Anglican Communion sums up this position perfectly:

The vision of the missionary church is to work with God to re-invent the structures of human society so that they more closely reflect the purposes of God. The awareness of the socio-political dimension of evangelisation needs to be brought into the everyday life of congregations if we are to live as agents of transformation.³³

We note the same kind of unbridled affirmation of human agency in the joint statement of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Council for World Mission (CWM), *Living out the Accra Confession: implications for our spirituality and mission*. (Kuala Lumpur, May 2006):

5.1 Accordingly we invite all God's people to join with us in a 'covenanting for justice' movement to transform ourselves and the world according to God's purposes and promises, inspired by the vision of a new heaven and a new earth.³⁴

From the perspective of the earth crisis we are forced to ask: what exactly is the difference between this notion of mission as (Christian) humans 're-inventing the structures of human society' or 'transforming the world' to reflect God's purposes, with the Enlightenment notions of human agency that have got us into this mess in the first place? Is there something more benign about engaging in 're-inventing society' in the name of God? How do we know that these are the purposes of God? What does this say to people who don't believe in (our) God, or are frightened by our talk of the purposes of God, but who nevertheless are deeply concerned about the earth? Do we really believe that it is our task to transform the world according to God's promises? What has happened to those particularly important Protestant concerns of sin and grace, which are rooted in questions about the peril and potential of human agency?

And finally, what does it mean to engage in mission in the face of these questions? Are we able to re-think mission? Not surprising, given its desire to integrate the theme of creation into mission, it is the LWF document, *Mission in Context -Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment*, that pushes in this direction with this insightful statement:

Different sectors of society have worked energetically for change and progress, based on the insatiable human need for self-improvement and gain. Such a process of change, though laudable and at times useful, should not be confused with transformation, which from the perspective of the mission of the church is primarily God's work in the midst of creation. Transformation, perceived in the light of Christ's resurrection, is the unfolding of the potential life-giving nature of all creation and an expression of the working of God's grace in nature. It is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to effect transformation in and through the church to the whole world. Living with expectation in the "already and not yet" of God's redemption, the church must guard itself from a triumphalistic view of transformation and instead should accept it in faith with its ambiguities and uncertainties. (p33)

³³ *Anglicans in Mission: A Transforming Journey*, 6

³⁴

http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news_file/doc-796-1.pdf#search=%22living%20out%20the%20accra%20confession%22 (Downloaded on 7/9/06)

This it seems to me is the heart of the challenge of a contemporary earth-honouring (Protestant) missiology. How do we find a way of holding together on the one hand the notion of mission as 'doing something', 'changing something', 'making a difference' in a world characterised by sin, alienation, injustice, oppression and the earth crisis, ; and yet acknowledge that it is this affirmation of and belief in human agency that is responsible for the earth crisis which threatens to overshadow all other human problems. To begin to answer this question, and to draw the paper to a close – but in a way that hopefully opens up further reflection – let me suggest four themes (with many questions!) that I think bear closer reflection.

(a) *The 'missio Dei' as the 'oikonomia tou Theou'*

Our mission thinking needs to make the connections between the *missio Dei* (the mission of God) and the *oikonomia tou Theou* (the economy of God). While the language of *missio Dei* has gained almost universal currency amongst Protestant churches, it does not seem to provide an intrinsic way to handle the impact of the earth crisis. One possible way of overcoming this and thus providing mission with a route that can handle the ecological crisis could be to turn to some of the work done around the *oikonomia tou Theou*. Rasmussen notes that this “is an ancient way of speaking about the redemptive transformation of earth for its fulfilment.”³⁵ This, it seems to me, is exactly what people mean by the *missio Dei*, certainly in the statements we have reflected on. Except, and this is the crucial point, the introduction of the notion of the economy of God as a mirror image of the mission of God, means that we can locate mission more clearly in our thinking about the earth as *oikos*, and therefore in the interface of economy (*oikos/nomos*) and ecology (*oikos/logos*).

Talking about the economy of God, an economy which surely seeks the health of the earth and of all humankind, means we can ask questions about the relationship between God's economy and our economy, or what Rasmussen, (following Wendell Berry) calls the relationship between the Big Economy, the current globalizing neo-liberal economy, and the Great Economy, the economy of nature.³⁶ The Great Economy is also rooted in theological perceptions of creation and providence, and so opens up fruitful areas of conversation and connection. If the *missio Dei* can be related to the *oikonomia tou Theou*, or the Great Economy (interestingly Berry himself preferred to use the term the Kingdom of God for this)³⁷, then we possibly have a way of thinking about the *missiones ecclesiae* in ways that can be earth-affirming.

(b) *Remembering Grace*

It is possible that the *missiones ecclesiae* is so wedded to the Enlightenment notions of human agency because it has forgotten something about how God's *grace* is revealed in the *missio Dei* and the *oikonomia tou Theou*. If this really is the way that God moves in the

³⁵ Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, p90.

³⁶ See *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, pp111ff.

³⁷ See Wendell Berry's essay "Two Economies" first published in *Home Economics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987) 54 – 75. The reference here is to the reprint in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Washington DC: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2002) 219 – 235.

world, then it is the way of grace; and if it is the way of grace then it comes to us in history in surprising and hidden ways. It comes to meet us in ways that challenge us, but that also bring to completion what we ourselves cannot achieve. This is crucial in thinking about the *missiones ecclesiae* as human activity, and yet we may be surprised about how little reflection there is on it, especially in Reformed circles (given the cry, *Sola Gratia!*).

Thus it comes as something of a surprise to discover that the word 'grace' only appears twice (in the same sentence) in the five pages of the *Accra Confession* on the economy;³⁸ is mentioned in passing once in four pages of a joint WARC/CWM document, *Living out the Accra confession*;³⁹ and then simply disappears in the very recent thirteen-page statement sponsored by the WARC, "An ecumenical faith stance against global empire".⁴⁰ Everything is our task. All is human agency. We have gone from *Deus absconditus* to *Gratia absconditus*, and we risk turning the *missiones ecclesiae* into works righteousness. Clearly it is time to talk about sin!

(c) *All is sin*

Working in a context of poverty in the South, it is clear that we cannot deal with questions of ecology outside of questions of economy, and this is what the idea of the *oikonomia tou Theou* suggests. Andrew Warmback has suggested the term *oikothology* as a way integrating these two.⁴¹ Any attempt to split off ecology from economy runs the risk of either making 'green' issues to be those of the rich North, and thereby setting up a conflict with those who are struggling for economic justice; or – perhaps more fundamentally – of failing to see that it is in fact the Big Economy which is destroying the earth rather than just a few random human acts that can be corrected via 'sustainable development', or ameliorative laws. Human agency, human interaction in community and upon the earth, human labour, and thus human economy is the fundamental cause of the earth crisis. Perhaps we have to think about human agency as a whole in terms of 'sin', and not just those wanton acts that are obviously detrimental to the earth.⁴²

Would this help us to see that it is our modern human culture, our 'habits of the heart', our way of being in the earth that is the real problem, and that any form of mission that assumes this culture, habits and way of being – this overwhelming faith in human agency – is part of the problem rather than part of the solution? Can we recognise that in its reliance upon human agency, the *missiones ecclesiae* is itself subject to sin, and stands under judgement? Yet, this is what it means to remember the relationship between agency and grace! Would this be a way of respecting the earth, and yet still be engaged in mission?

³⁸ http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news_file/doc-159-1.pdf (downloaded on 7/9/06)

³⁹ http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news_file/doc-796-1.pdf#search=%22living%20out%20the%20accra%20confession%22 (Downloaded on 7/9/06)

⁴⁰ <http://www.fosna.org/AnEcumenicalFaithStanceAgainstGlobalEmpire.html> (downloaded on 7/9/06)

⁴¹ See Andrew Warmback, *Constructing an oikothology: the environment, poverty and the church in South Africa* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa)

⁴² Here I think the Protestant tradition could gain much from re-engaging with Reinhold Niebuhr and his understanding of human nature, sin and human destiny. See *Moral Man & Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932); *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941, 1943); *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944); Niebuhr, Reinhold, *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959); Niebuhr, Reinhold, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962).

(d) *Re-thinking agency*

It may seem that as all human agency is sinful therefore we have no option but to fold our hands and wait for the Day of the Lord. There is an approach to mission that does indeed imply this, but it cannot be theologically defended. On the contrary it is clear that if it were not for human agency we would never have overthrown apartheid, and we could never think clearly about how to respond to gender violence, HIV and AIDS, poverty and food security. What it means to be human involves both 'being' and 'doing', and that human dignity is rooted in vocation, in the ability to creatively labour.⁴³ Furthermore, as a missional church we are called to follow Jesus and are sent into the world as mission agents; but – and this is the point – in doing this we need to be fully aware of how close we are to the very 'spirit of the age' which threatens to undo our world, and we must find ways of acting in mission that not only have a different goal to other human agency, but that are attentive to the profound relationship between human agency and the earth.

A missional praxis that takes the earth seriously, that seeks to build an economy in tune with the Great economy, that proceeds with an openness to the idea that God's creation is itself an act of redemption, is one that moves humbly with light footsteps on the earth. It remains praxis, and so it requires human agency responding to God's agency; but in recognition of both the sinfulness of human agency and the grace of God's agency, it calls for wisdom in the service of vocation. It is a praxis that finds its meaning not in the 11th thesis of Marx with its unambiguous desire to "change" things; but in the words of Reinhold Niebuhr:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.⁴⁴

⁴³ See my essay, "Of agency, assets and appreciation: seeking some commonalities between theology and development" in the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 117 November 2003, p20-39.

⁴⁴ See Reinhold Niebuhr, "A view of life from the sidelines" in Robert McAfee Brown *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses* (Yale University Press, 1986) 251.