

Resurrection of The World

Resurrection describes not only an historical event but also God's ongoing activity to save the world.

by Brian W. Harper

SURVIVAL ON EARTH SEEMS BLEAK AS THE environmental crisis worsens. Amidst the destruction, how should Adventists respond to the environmental crisis? Creation and incarnation dominate Christian understandings of ecology. However, I think that a third theological theme, the Resurrection, best illuminates the relationship of Christianity to the environment.

The Resurrection, otherwise known as Easter, reveals God's plan for the human and natural environment. The Resurrection is not simply an historical event, but an ongoing activity. Easter captures the essence of God's mysterious presence in the world. It compels us to take the natural environment seriously, and shapes our vision of the future. Easter should force Adventists to re-evaluate how we treat one another and the natural environment.

Two general views concerning the future and the coming of God's kingdom have dominated Christian thinking. One Christian view

of eschatology (the study of last-day events) is "other-worldly." God struggles with the evil forces of the world to establish his kingdom on earth; however, evil prevails over good until God decides to save the righteous and destroy the wicked. This includes the destruction of the natural world and the re-creation of a new earth. In this view, sin runs so deep that even the natural environment must be destroyed in order to restore perfection in creation.

Adventist theology is saturated with this "other-worldly" eschatological view. As a result, we have fostered ambivalent, non-caring attitudes about environmental issues. Like many evangelical Christians, we have become caught up in telling people about an other-worldly heaven, and forgotten that God first called Christians to live in the "here and now" of the world.

A second view emphasizes that God works with people to make the world a better, more just place, until it reaches a point where God can come a second time and establish his kingdom on earth. In this scenario, God's kingdom is "this-worldly." The undergirding

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assumption is that once a just social order is established it will cure the ills of the natural environment.

Adventists can be found who hold something like this second view. All Christians, they say, are people living “in between” God’s act in Christ and the final establishment of the kingdom of God. Adventists, they say, have been committed to bringing in the kingdom of God on earth. Our commitment to education and preventive medicine, for example, reveals our dedication to God and a holistic world view. In other words, some Adventists maintain room for Christian practices and institutions that affirm our place in a world not soon to disappear. Unfortunately, this second view of the end time has not reached the average layperson. Adventist eschatology is not necessarily wrong, but it needs to better articulate God’s relationship to the natural world.

What theological vision could help Adventists articulate an eschatological tradition that affirms and builds care for the natural and human environment?

Obviously, the creation of the natural world and universe by God was, and continues to be, a positive statement. The Earth in its original state was beautiful and perfect. Adam and Eve lived in harmony with the animals and natural environment. God made humans as the caretakers of the Earth (Genesis 2:15). As stewards in the service of the Creator, Adam and Eve were given power over every living thing. But the power to dominate was not to be abused, for the world did not belong to them but to God the loving Creator. As Lover, God was intimately involved in the affairs of the world. Apparently God walked and talked in the Garden of Eden on a regular basis (Genesis 3:8ff).

After the Fall, confusion replaced harmony as the primary characteristic of the world. From that time forward, humans have tended to abuse nature rather than care for it as good

stewards. Sin makes a creation based on an environmental ethic problematic. Human beings were created to love God and care for the earth; we have failed to do both. Our sinful nature compels us to take control of the earth from God.¹ Science and technology allow us to be more like God, as we entertain becoming creators ourselves. Arrogantly, we presume that technology frees us from the Creator, giving us power that was previously his alone. As pride clouds our vision, the civilizations we build devastate the natural environment.²

Christian theological traditions in the West, beginning with the Middle Ages and stretching to the present, provide the roots for the environmental crisis of today.³ These Christian theologians brushed aside the tradition of stewardship for an anthropocentric view of the world. As humans assumed control of the Earth and its natural resources, God was pushed outside of the world. The outgrowth of this intellectual tradition can be seen in the environmental crisis facing the economic systems of both capitalist and socialist countries.

Sin destroyed the perfect harmony of creation, and has made the entire future of the world questionable. As long as theological and philosophical thought revolve around a pessimistic view of humanity—a nihilistic anthropomorphism—ecological disaster and social oppression will follow.⁴

The importance of stewardship has not been lost by Adventists. We can have a major impact on the formation of an environmental ethic that emphasizes stewardship as an integral part of God’s kingdom. However, an ethic based solely on creation or stewardship cannot adequately answer questions about the future world, because the story of God’s salvation is not complete.

The incarnation was a testament of God’s love for the natural environment. A human person bound himself to the flesh and our natural existence. However, the many traditions of incarnation theology all end with the

incarnate God, Jesus of Nazareth, dead on the cross. There can be no vision of the future if God is in the grave. It is true that the church Jesus established while alive enables God to live on in the memory of living disciples, but what kind of hope is that for a dying world? As the world's creator, lover, and savior, God is the only one who can save us from the devastation of the environmental crisis. As our only hope, God must be alive.

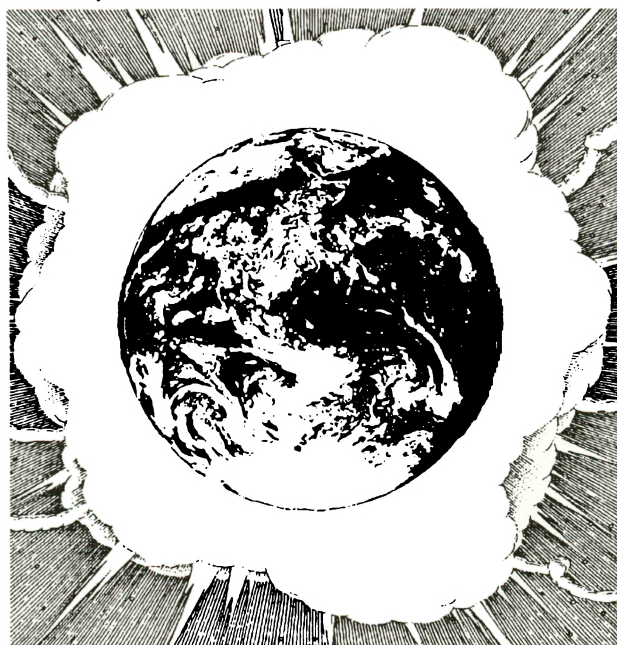
Christmas theology—emphasizing the incarnation of Christ—is good news for the world, but it means nothing without Easter. The word made flesh, in the person Jesus, was slain to save us in our sins. However, the good news of the Christian gospel does not end in death but resurrection. The Resurrection confirms God's triumph over sin and reveals his saving character and orientation toward the entire world. Our Christmas hope in the Christ child was sealed forever in the resurrection of Christ the Lord. The incarnation was not a separate event from the Resurrection, for "resurrection" is a part of what "incarnation" means.⁵ Both events are a part of one continuous narrative about God's activity in the world. The point of the Resurrection is that the spirit of the risen Lord is still at work in the world and church—in the ordinary places of life.⁶

Easter could hardly have been an isolated past event, as it has been the center of Christian worship and hope throughout the history of the church.⁷ Therefore, Easter describes the ongoing activity of God to save the world. The *presence* of God's spirit is real. It is a redemptive gift that transforms our ordinary lives and ordinary experiences in a world of darkness.⁸ God *easterns* in the ordinary lives of believers and in the life of the world. Easter as a verb provides us with the hope that even through such environmental hazards as nuclear waste, chlorofluorocarbons, and pollution, God has not abandoned us to figure out on our own how to solve the environmental crisis.

Our experience of the risen God's spirit in the ordinary places of life addresses ecological concerns in several ways. There is no conclusion to the gospel in light of Easter. Easter envisions a world that is saved. We have always looked forward to the "end of time"; however, we recognize this is not the end of all human existence. Those who are saved will enjoy the new earth and time with the risen Lord.

Everything we know about God, including the symbols we use to help us understand the depths of his mystery, are related to the surroundings of our natural environment. We experience God's spirit on earth. When Christians consume the elements of bread and wine, part of the natural environment, we are reminded that we not only killed the Creator on the cross, but we also go on killing his creation by our devastation of the environment.

Contrary to tradition, the celebration of the Eucharist does not only commemorate a death, but celebrates the resurrected life of Jesus Christ.⁹ The bread and wine, which we eat and drink, comes from the earth and acknowledges God's *presence* here and now in the world and in the church. These symbols actually tie us to the natural and social envi-



ronments where the spirit of the risen Lord works for our salvation.

The dominant metaphor in Adventism pictures the resurrected Jesus at the right hand of God serving as our High Priest. The primary job of the High Priest is to save, and according to some strands of Adventist thought, the High Priest's work of salvation extends to the entire universe. God's cosmic plan of salvation could include some understanding of how God intends to deal justly with the animals and natural environment, which—through no fault of their own—are condemned to death because of human sin.

If God can save humanity, why is it hard to think he can save the natural environment? We

need not despair in the midst of the environmental crisis and the bleak future that seems to be ahead. The presence of God in the world through the spirit of the risen Christ is encouraging. The risen Christ, through the church and its symbols, can change the way many people think about and live with the natural environment.

Ultimately, however, our hope does not rest on the church becoming a powerful political force. Our hope finally springs from the power of the risen Christ to transform our lives and shape our future. The power of Easter can restore a better understanding of how we ought to live not only with one another but also with the natural environment.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, ed., *A Worldly Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984), p. 53.

2. Ibid., pp. 31, 32.

3. Granberg-Michaelson, p. 32, citing Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*, pp. 18-30. White's article charges Christianity with the exploitative attitude propelling the environmental crisis.

4. William Dryness, "Stewardship of the Earth in the Old Testament," in *Tending the Garden*, Wesley

Granberg-Michaelson, ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), p. 64.

5. Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), pp. 170, 171.

6. Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflection on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 294. Also, Acts 5:30-32.

7. Ibid., pp. 293-296.

8. Ibid., p. 295.

9. Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, pp. 170, 171.