

The *Imago Dei*: A Bridge to Faith-Infused Reconciliation Ecology

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Other authors have made a compelling case for the Christian practice of Faith-Infused Reconciliation Ecology (FIRE) as an important aspect of Christian faithfulness. However, the ecological reasoning that has birthed this idea may not be convincing (or particularly cogent) to the average North American churchgoer. We suggest that the doctrine of the image of God (imago Dei) can be used to bring people to understand faith-infused reconciliation ecology as part of their Christian vocation. In particular, we argue that the imago Dei includes the vocation to a specific (loving and responsible) relationship with nonhuman creation, which leads naturally to the requirement for reconciliation with that creation when we fail in our vocation. While this interpretation of the imago Dei is not widespread in North American churches, it uses concepts and language that are readily accessible to most churchgoers, making it an approachable way to engage the subject. Our goal is to show how the imago Dei doctrine can lead to a faith-infused reconciliation ecology paradigm.

Keywords: *imago Dei*, image of God, vocation, creation care, reconciliation ecology, earthkeeping, environmental stewardship, incarnation, resurrection, embodiment, church

Emerging awareness of the environmental crisis has caused a growing number of Christians to engage the Bible and the Christian tradition in a search for theological grounding for environmental action.¹ Several names have been attached to this effort, including “earthkeeping,”² “stewardship,” and “creation care.”³ Ten years ago, David Warners, Michael Ryskamp, and Randall Van Dragt argued in this journal that the idea of “reconciliation ecology” offers a more accurate description of what is required of Christians as they seek to live in proper relationship with God’s creation.⁴

Reconciliation ecology is a term from the ecological literature which describes the intentional creation of habitat for non-human organisms in human-dominated spaces, adapting our homes and lives to allow mutual flourishing of both humans and other members of creation.⁵ By adapt-

ing this idea into a creation-care paradigm, Warners, Ryskamp, and Van Dragt suggest that “Faith-Infused Reconciliation Ecology” (FIRE) differs from contemporary ideas of “stewardship” by emphasizing the relationships between humans and nonhumans, which need to be restored.

They prescribe five steps in the process of reconciliation, taken from the literature on reconciliation between people:

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1. Recognizing the wrong that was done (Awareness).
2. Lamenting personal complicity (Repentance).
3. Minimizing further harm and working to fix the wrong that was done (Restoration).
4. Accepting forgiveness extended by the agent that was wronged (Acceptance).
5. Moving forward in a new relationship marked by mutual flourishing (Renewal).⁶

To distinguish between reconciliation ecology as a Christian calling and the strictly ecological use of the term, we will refer to the creation-care paradigm using Warners, Ryskamp, and Van Dragt's term of faith-infused reconciliation ecology, or FIRE.

Whatever one calls it, there is a good case to be made for Christians living wisely in the world God has made and where God has placed us to live. This case is an easy one to accept as a Christian working in an environmental field—by inhabiting both theological and ecological spheres, we can see the imperatives of conservation, restoration, and stewardship, as well as the wounds and harm we often cause.⁷ As we (the authors) have synthesized Christian and environmental worldviews (largely through the Au Sable Institute's Graduate Fellows program while we were both in graduate school at Ohio State University), we have come to not only care more deeply about the fate of creation and our fellow creatures but have also found our faith and wonder at God deepened as we gain a greater understanding of God's world, his creatures, and how we fit in. Taking this physical world seriously has also reflected back to our theological understanding of reality, particularly the incarnation and resurrection. We will discuss the importance of these doctrines, how they relate to the image, and the vision they provide for life in the new creation.

However, as we have worked to integrate these two spheres of faith and science in our vocations, we have realized that these concepts are not intuitive for many of our fellow churchgoers. They see our interest in creation care as merely idiosyncratic: a passion that we are permitted to pursue but that does not hold relevance for them. Some express skepticism of our efforts, believing that environmental concerns are not relevant to Christian faith beyond some limited and generalized application of kindness or responsibility. This perspective is reinforced by the culture within their churches, which teaches them to focus on more "spiritual"

concerns, and the broader culture beyond the church, which does little to confront us with the reality of environmental degradation, the nonhuman suffering it causes, and our complicity in this brokenness. We are concerned that the paradigm of FIRE, moving as it does from seeing the world as a resource to be managed to seeing the world as a web of relationships to be reconciled, can be difficult to incorporate into the average churchgoer's internal understanding of the nonhuman creation.

However, we strongly believe that caring for creation is not a calling only for those with years of training, but for all of humanity, and that FIRE presents an important way to approach this concept. How do we bridge this divide and exhort both laity and pastors to care for creation, especially those without environmental interest or education? We have made some attempts at translating creation care and reconciliation ecology concepts for our fellow believers, and we propose the doctrine of the image of God, or the *imago Dei*, as a bridge to the concept of FIRE. The *imago Dei* is the doctrine that humans are created in the image of God. In this article, we will briefly review the main views of the *imago Dei*. We then organize aspects of the image through the lens of the *munus triplex*, or three-fold office, of Christ:⁸ the royal, priestly, and prophetic aspects of our vocation. Our key text will be Genesis 1–3, but we will also look at how the Israelites, as God's people, were called to display God's image. In addition, we consider how Christ came as the second Adam, reinterpreting the image for us, since Christ himself is the image of God.⁹ Looking forward, to the new heavens and new earth, the image can inform the eschatological vision of what humans were made for versus what we struggle with now in our fallen world. Our goal is to make this concept clear to a predominantly Christian audience, so we often assume a Christian worldview on behalf of our reader. However, we strongly believe that we are speaking of a vocation applicable to all humans, and we hope that any reader may benefit from the attention we give it here.

The Image

The Bible is God's revelation to humans, and since it is written for us, we can fall into the trap of thinking we are the main characters. The true protagonist of the story is the Creator and Sustainer, the God of the Universe, our Savior and Redeemer. The doctrine of the *imago Dei* can help us remember our place in the story: *We are royal representatives called to work toward and proclaim the shalom (peace, wholeness, and flourishing) of God's creation.*¹⁰ God is the one who orders the cosmos and

fills it with creatures; the creation of humans comprises only part of day six. While the creation of humans gets special treatment,¹¹ once humans are created, they are immediately integrated into the rest of what God has made. They are given a place (the garden), a task (to fill the earth and subdue it), and relationships with their surroundings and their fellow creatures (as they tend and keep the garden and name the animals¹²). The creation is not simply a backdrop for the story of humans. God made this good (eco)system and entwined humans within this web to tend and keep it.

We are by no means the first to connect the *imago Dei* and creation care. Douglas Hall connects them explicitly in *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*,¹³ and the specific interpretation of the image of God we will be describing is adapted from Richard Middleton's *The Liberating Image*¹⁴ and the more recent *Being God's Image* by Carmen Imes.¹⁵ Both of these authors connect the *imago Dei* to care for creation, and the *imago Dei* is included in many discussions of creation care and reconciliation ecology.¹⁶ Our contribution is to connect the *imago Dei* specifically with the paradigm of FIRE in a way that can reach the average North American churchgoer.

The image has been understood in several ways throughout history, and one can still find a variety of views in the church today. The main three interpretations are

1. the structural or substantialist view, focused on physical and mental particularities;
2. the relational view, focused on the relationship humans have with God; and
3. the functional or royal representative view, focused on the vocation or office given to humans.

While each of the views can be helpful, we will present a hybridized concept that focuses on the functional view.

The structural (also called substantive or substantialistic) view understands the image as attributes possessed by humans that distinguish them from other animals: human abilities to think, reason, and work, and the possession of an immortal soul, are often given in this description of the image. The structural view was held by Augustine and Aquinas,¹⁷ and has been expressed by more-contemporary theologians such as Charles Hodge¹⁸ and Louis Berkhof.¹⁹ However, this view can be problematic when we think about humans who have undeveloped or diminished cognitive²⁰ or physical

abilities—are they less of God's image? What about humans who are not yet born? There is certainly merit to considering the characteristics that make humans unique among God's creatures, but we do not view such abilities as the primary meaning of being God's image.²¹

The relational view, developed by John Calvin²² and furthered by Karl Barth,²³ focuses on humans as fundamentally relational beings, both to God and among fellow humans, analogous to the relationships in the Trinity. Barth sees the creation of two genders as an "analogy of relation," with the relationship among the persons in the Trinity demonstrated in some way by the relationships between male and female humans.²⁴ Douglas Hall and Colin Gunton refine this view, emphasizing that God is fundamentally a relational being and that humans are defined by their ability to reflect his image in relating properly (that is to say, in a loving way) to God, to others, and to creation.²⁵ Usefully, Hall does not reject the structural notion of the *imago Dei* wholesale but instead argues that

if [humanity] is "endowed" with any qualities that are different from the qualities with which other creatures of God are endowed, these human qualities should not be considered ends in themselves but only a means for the fulfilling of its relational ends.²⁶

The structural view has tended to focus on the human distinction from the rest of creation. Neither the structural view nor the relational view requires much from the body, as they focus on intangible aspects, such as relationships (in the case of the relational view) and abstract qualities, especially rationality (in the case of the structural view). This has the effect of "exclud[ing] the body from the image (whether explicitly or by omission), thus entrenching a dualistic reading of the human condition."²⁷

The royal representative, or functional, view is rooted in the function and actions of humanity, especially related to the cultural mandate in Genesis 1.²⁸ This interpretation draws on contemporary ancient near east (ANE) usage of the term "image" (Hebrew *tselem*).²⁹ Kings in the ANE were said to be sons of the gods, their *tselem* to the common people. Temples of the gods would contain physical representations of the god—these were also *tselem*. It was understood that these images were not actually the god, but rather an embodiment or manifestation—a vital representation of the god on Earth.³⁰ The king, then, has a responsibility to carry out the will of the god when ordering his kingdom. However, the use of *tselem* in Genesis differs significantly from that in the contemporary ANE: rather than just kings and cultic

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statues, the Genesis account uses *tselem* to refer to all of humanity!³¹ Thus each human, individually and corporately, is given the vocation of pursuing God's will for creation.³² We see this corporate image, for example, in how the nation of Israel is called to be a light to the nations,³³ but we also see that the individual has great value³⁴ due to their identity as the image of God. An additional layer to the royal representative view is kinship, whereby we have the royal role and name due to our kinship with our creator—just as a queen inherits a throne from her father, we inherit the royal responsibilities by our kinship in being God's image.³⁵

While all of these descriptions of the *imago Dei* have an element of truth to them, we believe that the functional view is required to fully “flesh out” an authentic vision of humanity in the image of God. Just as Hall incorporates the substantive view as “means not ends” to imaging God faithfully in relationship, the functional view (and Hall arrives at a similar conclusion) gives form and direction to the quality of our image-bearing relations. Thus, we may say these things of the *imago Dei*: Humans are endowed with certain unique qualities and capabilities that enable us to engage relationally with God, each other, and creation; and they are given a unique responsibility and role in these relationships.

To discuss aspects of the image of God and how they relate to FIRE, we will organize our vocation into three categories: king, priest, and prophet—the *munus triplex*. These three roles, all of which were historically bestowed by anointing, were first identified by Eusebius³⁶ and further developed by John Calvin.³⁷ Recent commentators have observed that Adam also occupies these roles,³⁸ tying them to the image of God which is given to Adam, expressed corporately in Israel, and perfected in Christ, who is The Image (Col. 1:15). We see these three offices held by people throughout the Old Testament, but rarely does one person occupy all three. In fact, there appears to be a pattern of progressive fracturing of these offices: for example, the priestly role is removed from Moses's duties during his meeting with God at the burning bush.³⁹ While Moses still rules and talks to God, bringing God's words to the people of Israel (thus holding both royal and prophetic offices), Aaron's line and the tribe of Levi become the ones to officially hold the priestly duties. This division of the offices seems to continue through Joshua and the Judges, culminating in Samuel, who appears to fill all three offices due to the corruption of the priesthood. Eventually the people demand from Samuel a king. The royal office is then separated from the prophetic, leaving the three offices in the hands of different people.

Once Israel has a king, the office of prophet has little formal authority in society (not a priest, not royal) but still the responsibility to bring God's word to the king, to the people of Israel, and to the nations (Nathan, Ahijah, and Huldah, to name just a few). The offices remain separate until the advent of Jesus, the Messiah, who brings them together again.

Thus the *imago Dei* runs forward from Adam in Genesis to Jesus, who is The Image (Col. 1:15), the Messiah/*Christos*, anointed one. Because Jesus brings three fractured offices into one person who perfectly images God as we should have, we can interpret the image given in Genesis to all of humanity in view of the revelation of Jesus's incarnation and life among us. We see Genesis 1–3 by a retroactive light, just as many prophetic passages were reinterpreted in light of Jesus.

Our analysis is helped considerably by a recent paper by Gijsbert van den Brink on the ecological implications of the threefold office, published in *PSCF*.⁴⁰ He helpfully points out that the idea of the *munus triplex* is ecumenical, that is, shared broadly across the Christian traditions. Van den Brink also emphasizes the importance of integrating the roles: they are not three separate people but a single person fulfilling three responsibilities. Thus, while he ties the royal role to concepts of stewardship and justice, the priestly role to identification and love, and the prophetic role to truth-telling, all three of these aspects are required for faithful Christian living. We here repeat and elaborate on some of his work by discussing each office in turn, showing how it is present in Genesis 1–3 and how the life of Jesus guides our application of it to our human vocation today. We also tie each office to the FIRE paradigm, showing how each one points us to fractured relationships with the nonhuman creation and offers opportunities for reconciliation.

The Royal Office

As noted above, the functional view of the image is rooted in royal language and metaphors. In Genesis 1, we see that God commands humans to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”⁴¹ Further, in Genesis 2, Adam is placed in the Garden of Eden “to cultivate it and tend it.”⁴² These two verses have traditionally been interpreted as granting human authority over creation and expressing the nature of that authority.⁴³ The idea of human authority over creation has attracted its share of critics,⁴⁴ but it is consistently

assumed in the biblical witness.⁴⁵ In addition, the power humans hold over creation has become more and more an inescapable empirical reality during the last century: no matter what is thought of the ethics of dominion, it is clear that humans currently can dramatically order, or disorder, the nonhuman creation.⁴⁶

Our contemporary reluctance to accept dominion over creation stems in part from our historical abuse of that authority. We believe it is important to critically examine the nature of the dominion conferred in Genesis 1–2. The job of the image (*tselem*) in the ancient Near East was to represent the gods on earth, and in the case of the king-images, to rule in their stead, “representing [their] deity ... and ... mediating divine blessing to the earthly realm.”⁴⁷ This is the reason that the word “royal” appears in our description of the image.⁴⁸ However, “royal” does not necessarily mean despot. “The image of God in the human person is a mandate of power and responsibility. But it is power exercised as God exercises power.”⁴⁹ Thus to properly exercise our dominion, we should look to God as our example.

The Old Testament has a clear vision of the ethical responsibility of rulers to care for the poor and the vulnerable, to not show favoritism, and to execute justice.⁵⁰ Kings were specifically criticized when they used their power primarily for their own benefit.⁵¹ The human dominion over nature should be understood similarly.⁵² The “task of dominion [in Genesis 1:26] does not have to do with exploitation and abuse. It has to do with securing the well-being of every other creature and bringing the promise of each to full fruition.”⁵³ Many also point out that the Hebrew verbs *abad* and *shamar* in Genesis 2:15, translated “cultivate” and “tend” above, have meanings related to protection and service, resulting in flourishing.⁵⁴ Thus Adam’s role in the garden was not merely to look after his own needs, but to preserve order and enhance the fruitfulness of the nonhuman creation, perhaps even extending the garden into the surrounding wilderness.⁵⁵

This Old Testament evidence shows that dominion is expressly intended not only for human benefit, but for the benefit of all creation. Looking at Jesus’s exercise of royal authority provides yet more definition to how we should view our own authority over creation. While first-century expectations for the Messiah seemed to include political conquest of Israel’s foes, Jesus emphatically rejects this use of power.⁵⁶ Instead, he uses his power to serve, and ultimately to redeem, his subjects, at great cost to himself. He describes himself as “gentle and humble in heart.”⁵⁷ From the beginning, we see him

in lowly circumstances, born in a stable, not seeking to climb any power structures. He is a suffering servant, instructing us to follow in his footsteps by turning the other cheek and offering a second mile of carrying labor to the oppressor.⁵⁸ Jesus does not allow the importance of his task (the redemption of humanity and of the entire creation!) to justify the use of alienating force.

We see Jesus working for the flourishing and peace of those under him,⁵⁹ rather than for his own aggrandizement; in fact, he quite literally sacrifices his own glory for the sake of the world.⁶⁰

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, as He already existed in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied Himself by taking the form of a bond-servant and being born in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death: death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5–8, NASB)

Thus Christ’s rule is profoundly counter-cultural and other-focused. He emphatically rejects the power and privilege that the world associates with his royal office. And as those called to be conformed to “the image of Christ,” our rule should look the same. “A Lord who serves does not beget disciples who act like lordlings!”⁶¹

In addition, Christ’s rule over us is profoundly relational. Through the incarnation he “moved into the neighborhood.”⁶² Although he was already intimately involved in bringing the creation into existence and in sustaining the entire cosmos,⁶³ he became even more intimately involved, in a way our eyes could see and our hands could touch, through the incarnation.⁶⁴ The Gospels depict Jesus’s life with his disciples as filled with meals and travel, anchored in a specific time and place, and investing in specific people. He humbled himself not only to death but to friendship and family. The doctrine of the incarnation was a key entry point for us into the theology of creation care and FIRE. If Jesus became human, all this matter must truly matter.

In the same way, our calling is to serve the nonhuman creation which has been entrusted to us. We do this in part by acknowledging our shared creatureliness with creation.⁶⁵ Ours is not a disinterested rule based on decrees from a distance. It is a rule that involves incarnation: direct availability and identification with those in our charge. We “move into the neighborhood” of creation, identifying with both its joy and its pain.⁶⁶ Only then can we truly understand the consequences of our actions and make wise decisions for those in our

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charge.⁶⁷ But Jesus's rule over us is also not ultimately divorced from his desire for relationship with us. He is our King, not only out of obligation, but out of love. So we too are called to rule creation not as some transcendent emperor handing down decrees, no matter how well intentioned, but as fellow creatures participating in the joy and travails of creation as we work to serve it with careful attention.

When we do not properly discharge our rule, creation is not simply disorganized and unproductive; it groans.⁶⁸ There is a break in relationship, a lack of justice. It is clear to us that humans have misused our royal authority by turning dominion into subjugation. One of the characteristic features of the Anthropocene, the new human-dominated geological epoch,⁶⁹ is a vastly increased rate of species extinction.⁷⁰ Far from protecting those under our care, we have destroyed them for our convenience. Far from helping God's creatures to flourish, we have systematically impoverished creation in pursuit of our own selfish purposes. The prophets often called Israel's rulers to task for misusing their royal authority, and the proper response was always confession and repentance.⁷¹ So, we too must become aware of our sin against creation (step 1), confess and lament it (step 2), and start working to exercise our royal vocation rightly, as demonstrated by Christ (step 3). (We will address steps 4 and 5 later in this article).

The Priestly Office

A priestly role is one of mediation between God and the creation. Scripture is clear that Jesus fulfills a priestly office toward the people of the church,⁷² mediating our relationship both by his death and resurrection, and by his ongoing intercession. Both Israel⁷³ and the church⁷⁴ are referred to as a nation of priests. For both communities, this involves an aspect of performing service in worship of God (in the temple for Israel, and as a gathered community of the church), and in displaying God's love to the nations. In a similar way, commentators have argued that Adam had a priestly vocation in the garden: one of tending a sacred space⁷⁵ and of "offering" creation to God in service.⁷⁶ Adam's and our role as priests with respect to creation may be understood through these two primary actions: that of worship (mediating creation's praise to God) and that of loving care (mediating God's love to creation).

Worship

One of the duties of the Levitical priests was to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. This is associated not only with atonement but also with the act of worship.⁷⁷

In a similar way, we suggest that part of the human vocation is to worship God both with and on behalf of the nonhuman creation. As we "tend and keep" the world, we so order it into a place where God's presence is happy to dwell: a place of shalom, of flourishing, and of justice. In doing so, we necessarily utilize the nonhuman creation. This is clearly seen in the arts—for example, when creation (paints, clay, charcoal, ink) is ordered in ways to express human worship of God. It is less clear, but no less present, in other cultural activities: in the human use of creation in ways that glorify God by loving God, neighbor, and creatures in uniquely human ways—that is, as we image God in creative ways, by participating with God in the act of (sub)-creation, we draw creation into our worship of God.

We must be careful, however, to not assume that creation requires human intervention to worship God. Scripture is quite clear that it does not: whether it is in litanies calling all creatures to praise the LORD, such as Psalm 148, or in the image of all creation praising God in Revelation 5:11–14. Jesus, though likely intending to be hyperbolic, speaks in Luke 19:40 of even the inanimate creation as able to praise God.⁷⁸ Thus, even as we draw creation into our praise, we also allow creation to draw us into its own praise of God. The ability of either one of us to praise God "on our own" surely does not invalidate the ability of our joint efforts to add to that praise in unique ways. Human praise and creation's praise may rise together in harmony: each may enhance the other, with the result more than the sum of its parts.

Many are rightfully fearful that casting humans as a component of creation's praise will end in subsuming creation's inherent characteristics or unique voice beneath that of humans:⁷⁹ that humans will dominate (and not just direct) the resulting symphony of praise. This may be what we typically observe, but it is not a necessary outcome of the partnership in praise. A sculpture may draw out rather than obfuscate the character of the stone from which it is made, giving new expression to the unique characteristics of this part of creation. A human may tend a garden, providing a home to birds singing God's praise. And as creation takes new form under human guidance, it itself may praise God in new ways. Human cultivation can enhance the diversity of flora and fauna, bringing new notes into the symphony of praise: consider the varieties of flowers or apples, that have resulted from human attention and care; or the domestication of dogs from wolves. Do these creatures not uniquely praise God on their own, even though they are in part a result of human intervention?⁸⁰

To ensure that our worship is a partnership with creation, we must again look to Jesus as our supreme example of the *imago Dei*. Jesus did not merely use humanity to enhance his own worship of God. He rather gave himself up for us that our own worship of God might be revived. In such a way, our worship with creation needs to be characterized by love for that creation. God does not merely want to hear our praises enhanced by the creation, but rather the true polyphony of our diverse voices.⁸¹ In this sense, our worship cannot be properly separated from the other sense of our priestly vocation: to show God's love and concern for the creation.

Loving Care

As a priest expresses the community's worship to God, they also express God's loving care toward that community on God's behalf. As priests, then, humans are called to "tend and keep" creation with loving attention.⁸² While there is overlap here with the royal steward's call to bring order and peace to creation, we wish to focus our discussion of this role on the preservative and protective aspect of our calling. However disordered or unpleasant creation may be, we are still called to love it and serve it. Robert Farrar Capon puts it succinctly: "Man's real work is to look at the things of the world and to love them for what they are. That is, after all, what God does, and man was not made in God's image for nothing."⁸³ Moses intervenes for the people of Israel even in the midst of their rebellion,⁸⁴ and through Jesus, "God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."⁸⁵ For this reason, our care for creation must include some responsibility to preserve natural systems as they are: even as we domesticate wolves into dogs, we also must love the wolf for what it is, ensuring that it has the habitat it needs to flourish, and that human-wolf conflict is minimized.

This love extends beyond mere provision for the needs of creation, or attention to its flourishing, as discussed with the royal office. It includes the act of knowing and valuing the individual aspects of the creation. Jesus did not love us by merely ordering things for our flourishing from afar; he became incarnate and loved *individual people*. Indeed, it is a tenet of orthodox Christianity that each person is not loved by God in the abstract as a member of the human race, but is, in fact, loved individually, as a person precious in God's sight.⁸⁶

Such a loving attention to the things of the world both requires and results in attachment through webs of relationship. This is a difficult thing to grasp in our day

because we are not used to thinking of the nonhuman creation in relational terms. In *The Embers and the Stars*, Erazim Kohák, no less a product of modernity than we ourselves, reflects on his years of living "beyond the power line" in a cabin he built in a forest clearing in New Hampshire. He observes that our modern conception of creation as fundamentally "matter in motion" is neither historically common nor necessarily more true than older, relational concepts of creation. Based on his own experiences, he suggests that it is at least as valid to consider creation as "a society of persons"⁸⁷—and all the more so because it is created by a personal God! This is not to say that the nonhuman creation is populated by human persons, but that the fundamental way of relating to creation is as to a subject with inherent (God-given) value and meaning, rather than an object that is only valuable in so far as it is useful.

Relations between human and nonhuman persons are, of course, different from those between human and human persons—and different yet again from those that exist between different nonhuman persons. As bearers of the *imago Dei* we express God's love toward creation in ways that uniquely affirm creation's goodness, and perhaps even add elements of purpose and direction to its praise. Kohák says, "Humans ... by the power of their love ... bring the world alive, [and] give things the love, care, and use they need for their fulfillment. Thus, they act out the incarnation. That is not a matter of taking possession of the world but of making it our own in a bond of mutual belonging."⁸⁸ This "bond of mutual belonging" is not a legal title to possession, but rather a bi-directional relationship characterized by interdependence and reciprocated respect.⁸⁹

For both Kohák and Capon, these two aspects of priesthood are intrinsically related: in loving things, we offer them to God as they are, precious in his sight and in ours.⁹⁰ Far from enveloping creatures into human-centered artifice,⁹¹ we are to first love creation for what it is, and then, through our care-filled and respect-filled interactions with creation, live out our lives in joyful, creation-affirming cooperative worship. When we consider this aspect of our vocation, it is easy to see how horribly humans have failed. Rather than truthfully mediating God's love for creation, we have instead used creation for only our own ends. We have substituted utility for intrinsic value, breaking the loving relationship we were meant to have with the creation, treating it as object instead of subject. Once we are aware of this failure (step 1), it is clear that repentance (step 2) and reconciliation (step 3) are needed.

The Prophetic Office

The biblical prophet characteristically communicates directly with God and conveys God's messages to the Israelites and to the nations. In this sense, we see that Adam and Eve's direct communion with God⁹² displays the prophetic aspect of the *imago Dei*. Later, Israel receives God's revelation through both the *Torah* and the prophets; they are meant to "be a light to the nations,"⁹³ welcoming the nations and pointing them to worship of the true God.⁹⁴ Israel's rulers (Moses, Joshua, and the judges) occupied the role of both regent and prophet until the institution of the monarchy, when the offices appear to have split (Samuel retaining the role of prophet and Saul taking the role of king). We see Jesus as the exemplary prophet in Hebrews 1:1, revealing the truth of the character of God and his plans for the world. Jesus announced his ministry⁹⁵ by quoting from Isaiah 61, which itself speaks of proclamation of truth and good news from God.⁹⁶ Finally, the church is called to speak God's truth clearly to the people within⁹⁷ and around it,⁹⁸ and even to all creation.⁹⁹

If the prophet speaks God's truth, how are humans called to speak truth to creation? While this may conjure images of preaching to the creation, as purportedly practiced by St. Francis of Assisi, words are only one way of speaking. In fact, there is a strong biblical tradition of prophetic acts that convey God's truth.¹⁰⁰ It seems clear that humans can still act out God's truth¹⁰¹ with respect to creation, and we suggest that we are called to speak the truth that God made creation "very good" by extending God's loving rule and care to creation as outlined above. This behavior demonstrates the truth, that God cares for creation, to both the creation itself and to other humans who witness such behavior.¹⁰² It also means that we should be willing to speak difficult truths, even if we ourselves are implicated and need to consider changing our behavior.¹⁰³

However, the role of prophet has something else to offer, in that the prophet is concerned with communicating truth even if nobody listens. The history of Israel's prophets is largely one in which the prophets are ignored, resulting in ridicule of the prophet and the people's willful disobedience to the will of God. Some prophets were even informed beforehand that their message would fall on deaf ears.¹⁰⁴ Yet they were still called to speak and are commended for their obedience.¹⁰⁵ In the context of creation care, the role of prophet empowers us to speak and act even when such action seems ultimately meaningless, since our hope is ultimately not in the power of our actions but in Jesus

Christ our Lord who created, sustains, and will redeem and restore all things. Steven Bouma-Prediger is worth quoting at length here:

If God is really at the center of things and God's good future is the most certain reality, then the truly realistic course of action is to buck the dominant consequentialist ethic of our day—which says that we should act only if our action will most likely bring about good consequences—and simply, because we are people who embody the virtue of hope, do the right thing.¹⁰⁶

This is an important point to make, because the scope of environmental devastation coupled with the availability of information about it can often cause despair.¹⁰⁷ The quasi-designation of the Anthropocene as a distinct human-dominated epoch¹⁰⁸ in some sense signals a quickening and gathering together of these negative perceptions into "anxiety-laden narratives."¹⁰⁹ We the authors have attended more than one environmental seminar which seemed to point only toward despair: in effect, "go and visit the coral reefs before they all disappear." It is in this context that prophetic action can speak, offering direct examples of a different world, one that is ruled by God's truth rather than by worldly wisdom. Even if this holy work of reconciliation is eventually lost, it is precious in God's sight. And it points toward a powerful truth: that ultimately the reconciliation of the world depends on God, and God is faithful. He will accomplish the work he has set out to do.¹¹⁰ In this sense, the prophetic action of caring for creation not only offers a vision of the sure future, but it also convicts the hearts of those who destroy creation in apathy or despair, thinking "there is no other choice." We must offer not only chastisement for wrongdoing but also a vision of faithful action, powered by hope in God's faithfulness and eventual restoration of all things. Efforts such as A Rocha's work to preserve the estuary near their field station in the Portuguese Algarve¹¹¹ show that, while the odds often seem against those engaged in faithful creation care, God's care for creation can prevail.

The prophetic aspect of the image thus removes one of the most visceral objections to creation care: that, in the face of overwhelming ecological destruction, our individual actions have little value. Have we erred so much that acknowledging our sin will lead only to despair? The prophet insists not; confession and repentance will always produce a meaningful outcome, and even if much will be lost, a remnant will be saved and the kingdom will ultimately come to fruition.¹¹²

The Image and Eschatology

Throughout the previous discussion, we have shown how the royal, priestly, and prophetic aspects of the *imago Dei* connect with steps 1, 2, and 3 of the faith-infused reconciliation ecology paradigm proposed by Warners, Ryskamp, and Van Dragt. It remains to be shown how the doctrine of the image of God connects with the last two steps. Step 4, which requires “accepting forgiveness from the agent that was wronged” is, the authors concede, difficult to visualize. They state that “We will not be directly granted forgiveness by creation, but when we work to restore degraded streams, replace lawn areas with native habitat, or advocate for preserving tracts of forest, creation will respond.”¹¹³ Kohák makes a similar observation about his own existence in the New Hampshire forest.¹¹⁴ In a sense, forgiveness is offered and received by experiencing the restored relationship itself (step 5). However, it is also important to remember that, as God has given us the task of caring for creation, failure to fulfill our obligations is also an offense against God. Thus, we seek forgiveness not only from creation, but from God, for our sins of environmental destruction.¹¹⁵

Step 5 is “moving forward in a new relationship marked by mutual flourishing.” What does this look like? While examples can be drawn from contemporary environmental work,¹¹⁶ we can also look to the eschatological vision of the Bible for how restored humans, bearing the image of God, interact with nonhuman creation. Much of the work of being a Christian comes in opposing sin and healing brokenness in the world. But the way we do this is motivated by the knowledge that Christ has fully dealt with sin, and that God will wipe away every tear.¹¹⁷ Both the vision in Revelation and how the human vocation is depicted before the Fall, in Genesis 1–2, can offer strong indications of what this will look like, and we are called to foreshadow that reality in meaningful, tangible ways.¹¹⁸ In our sin, we do not live out the image fully as we should, but we still *are* the image. A virtuous and regenerate life is a renewal of that image¹¹⁹—a whole human living toward shalom. Combining the renewed scenes in Revelation with the earthly calling from Genesis 1 and 2 also counters the notion that heaven sounds boring. Heaven is not our ultimate hope. We are waiting for the “life after life after death.”¹²⁰ The biblical vision of eternal life is physically embodied, taking place in the physical “new heavens and new earth.” Christ’s resurrection was not the end of his triumph over death: He is only the “first fruits from among the dead.”¹²¹ Whatever Revelation means, it means that humanity will be resurrected as Christ was.

On the cross and in the tomb, Jesus defeated not only sin and the powers but also death itself. Unfortunately, many Christians do not see the resurrection as being a future event. Heaven is as far as their sights go. Instead of a renewed creation they look forward to going “where God and glory shine ... where feet nor wings could never climb”¹²² and “like a bird from these prison walls I’ll fly.”¹²³ The idea of release from our bodies into heaven is present in many hymns and other church songs,¹²⁴ but this gnostic-dualism impulse of separating soul and body is from Plato rather than Christ. Gerald Hiestand puts it in clear terms: The “Platonic and Stoic narrative has steadily pulled Christian eschatology up and out of the material world into the world of the forms, gods, and spirits. The problem with the Platonic eschatological narrative, of course, is that it is wrong. Heaven is not the final resting place for the people of God. God has created us from the earth, as earth people.”¹²⁵

This ethereal existence is a diminishment of not only our embodiment (the doctrine that our bodies are part of who we are), but also of Christ’s life and resurrection. The whole chapter of 1 Corinthians 15 has much to say about the resurrection (Christ’s and ours), but especially starting in verse 16:

For if the dead are not raised, then not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ only in this life, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Cor. 15:16–19, NASB)

An embodied existence after the events of Revelation points to an aspect of the image that we have alluded to but not explicitly named: that we are beings made to work. This work is paired with rest, as God demonstrated with the seventh day, but humans who spend their time only resting or only working are missing out on a pattern God has set for us.¹²⁶ In Genesis, we see humanity given work before the Fall,¹²⁷ so the Fall did not introduce work but it did introduce futility into our work—“thorns and thistles” and “painful toil.”¹²⁸ So a restored cosmos will presumably remove the futility but not the good work that we have been called to do since the beginning. What might that work look like in the new creation? As we do now, we will work with God and in his power to further his kingdom and bring shalom (peace, wholeness, and flourishing) to creation.

The clearest picture of the renewal of creation is in Revelation 21–22, where John reports seeing “... a new

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heaven and a new earth ... I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."¹²⁹ In Revelation 22, we see the "river of life" flowing from the throne of God through the middle of the city, and watering "the tree of life" growing on either side of it.¹³⁰ The imagery in Revelation draws heavily from the Old Testament, and this passage is a clear reference to Ezekiel's vision of the restored temple in Ezekiel 40–48.¹³¹ In this vision, Ezekiel sees a river flowing out of the temple. Trees crowd around its banks, and it winds through the Arabah desert and into the Dead Sea. When it enters the sea, it makes its waters fresh,

And it will come about that every living creature which swarms in every place where the river goes, will live. And there will be very many fish, for these waters go there and the others become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes.¹³²

The overall vision is one of restoration—not only of humans but of the whole creation!

This is God's work: the work of one who is "reconciling the world to himself."¹³³ The doctrine of the *imago Dei* is a clear call for us to be engaged in that work, to labor with God toward the vision—the vision of the reality—of the restored earth, watered from the river of life that flows from the New Jerusalem, the garden city where human culture and nonhuman creation flourish together under the loving headship of Christ.

Conclusion

We believe that some Christians are skeptical of the call to care for creation because it is perceived to be a concern imposed from outside the Christian tradition. What we have shown in this article is that care for the nonhuman creation is, in fact, an essential part of our vocation as God's image bearers. As royal representatives, we order creation to promote its fruitfulness and peace. As priests, we join creation in its praise to God, while showing loving care for each individual part of God's world. And as prophets, we speak the truth of God's love for all God's creatures by both our words and our actions.

We contend that God's intent for the human vocation is to exercise loving and self-sacrificing dominion over the nonhuman creation and to "tend and keep" God's world in ways that promote peace and fruitfulness—indeed, in ways that mirror God's own loving dominion over humanity. We believe that there is a strong relational component to this dominion, and that therefore

the failure of humans to care for nonhuman creation requires repentance and reconciliation.

Our hope is that our readers will see this not as another burden to bear, but as a hopeful vision of the future—where deep, mutually self-giving relationships exist not only between humans and God, and humans and other humans, but also between humans and the nonhuman creation that sustains and delights them; that all our voices would rise together in a symphony of praise to God. This vision gives us direction as we confront the environmental challenges of today, but it rests secure in the hope that God is the one who "reconcile[s] all things to himself."¹³⁴ While its ultimate fulfillment awaits the return of Jesus, our lives are meant to proactively anticipate this future by acting it out—however imperfectly—today. In doing so, we not only care for our fellow creatures (human and nonhuman) but also show the love of God to a scared, cynical, and hurting world. The Good News that God loves the world is just as necessary today as it was 2,000 years ago, and we have a chance to speak it.

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Notes

¹Organizations such as Christians for the Mountains, the Evangelical Climate Initiative and Evangelical Environmental Network, A Rocha, and the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies are but a few movements that have grown since the 1980s.

²Loren Wilkinson, ed., *Earthkeeping, Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources* (Eerdmans, 1980).

³Colin Bell and Robert S. White, eds., *Creation Care and the Gospel: Reconsidering the Mission of the Church* (Tyndale House, 2016).

⁴David Warners, Michael Ryskamp, and Randall Van Dragt, "Reconciliation Ecology: A New Paradigm for Advancing Creation Care," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 66, no. 4 (2014): 221–35, <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2014/PSCF12-14Warners.pdf>.

- ⁵Michael L. Rosenzweig, *Win-Win Ecology: How the Earth's Species Can Survive in the Midst of Human Enterprise* (Oxford University Press, 2003).
- ⁶Warners et al., "Reconciliation Ecology."
- ⁷This case is made eloquently by many; among them, Jonathan A. Moo and Robert S. White, *Let Creation Rejoice: Biblical Hope and Ecological Crisis* (IVP Academic, 2014); Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2010); and Bell and White, eds., *Creation Care and the Gospel*.
- ⁸Col. 1:15–20.
- ⁹Col. 1:15–20.
- ¹⁰This description of the image is the one we use in teaching creation care at our church.
- ¹¹The narrative slows down and returns in Genesis 2 for more detail; there is also a different mechanism at work: humans are formed from dust and given breath instead of simply arising from the places God has made ("Let the land produce plants ... let the land produce animals ..." in Gen. 1:11, 24).
- ¹²Gen. 2:15, 19.
- ¹³Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Wipf & Stock, 2004).
- ¹⁴J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Brazos Press, 2005).
- ¹⁵Carmen Joy Imes, *Being God's Image: Why Creation Still Matters* (IVP Academic, 2023).
- ¹⁶Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 2008). She specifically references Middleton's *The Liberating Image* on pages 55 and 56.
- ¹⁷Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 19.
- ¹⁸Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology Volume 2* (Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1872), 97ff.
- ¹⁹Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1996), 204.
- ²⁰The noetic view, which is focused specifically on the intellectual and reasoning differences between humans and animals, is a particular emphasis within the structural view. See Lucy Peppiatt, *The Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God*, Cascade Companions (Cascade Books, 2022).
- ²¹Following Imes (*Being God's Image*, p. 6), we use the phrase "being God's image" instead of "bearing God's image" because the image is not something we pick up and put down but something we are.
- ²²Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 21.
- ²³Catherine McDowell, "In the Image of God He Created Them': How Genesis 1:26–27 Defines the Divine-Human Relationship and Why It Matters," in *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau (IVP Academic, 2016), 33.
- ²⁴McDowell, "How Genesis 1:26–27 Defines."
- ²⁵See Hall, *Imaging God*; and Colin E. Gunton, "The Human Creation: Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of the *Imago Dei*," chap. 6 in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd edition (T&T Clark Ltd., 1997).
- ²⁶Hall, *Imaging God*, 107.
- ²⁷Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 24.
- ²⁸Peppiatt, *The Imago Dei*.
- ²⁹Imes, *Being God's Image*, 31; Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 25, 121; and Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament* (InterVarsity Press, 2010), 107.
- ³⁰Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton University Press, 1994), 114.
- ³¹But see Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 114, for an example from Egyptian mythology that also suggests that all people are made in the image of (a) god.
- ³²Colin Gunton notes in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*: The image is not a static possession, but comes to be realized in the various relationships in which human life is set. The New Testament's reorientation of the concept to Jesus makes the point well. It is because Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" that God is "through him to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven ..." (Col. 1:15, 20). (p. 116)
- ³³Exod. 19:5–6: "Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel"; Also Isa. 42:6–7: "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."
- ³⁴Gen. 9:6: "Whoever sheds human blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made mankind." Also see Psalm 139.
- ³⁵McDowell, "In the Image of God," chap. 1 in *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age*, ed. Jones and Barbeau, 29–46.
- ³⁶Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (Dorset Press, 1965), Section 1.3.
- ³⁷John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.15.
- ³⁸L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus* (IVP Academic, 2015).
- ³⁹Joshua Mathews, *Melchizedek's Alternative Priestly Order: A Compositional Analysis of Genesis 14:18–20 and Its Echoes Throughout the Tanak* (Penn State Press, 2013), notes: Aaron's first introduction into the narrative of the Pentateuch comes in conjunction with Yahweh's burning anger and as a concession for Moses' apparently faithless resistance to Yahweh's instructions ... Moses was punished for his unwillingness to accept Yahweh's commission and was likewise denied the honor that would have come with it ... 'The glory of fulfilling the task did not belong to Moses alone, but was shared in part by his brother Aaron.' The author seems to be portraying the scenario as gradually deviating from what Yahweh initially envisaged or what the ideal scenario might have been had Moses not responded with such resistance. (pp. 83–84)
- ⁴⁰Gijsbert van den Brink, "King, Priest, Prophet, and Climate Science: Ecological Implications of the Threefold Office," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 76, no. 3 (2024): 154–64, <https://doi.org/10.56315/PSCF12-24vandenBrink>.
- ⁴¹Gen. 1:28, NASB.
- ⁴²Gen. 2:15, NASB.
- ⁴³For a description of how this interpretation has changed throughout time, see Richard Bauckham, "Dominion Interpreted: A Historical Account," in *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Baylor University Press, 2011), 16–62.

⁴⁴Most famously by Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, 3767 (1967): 1203–07 and vigorously debated since then.

⁴⁵The royal office is referenced throughout the Bible, often appearing along with the priestly office, as it seems clear that Israel and the church are intended to fulfill both of these roles. Psalms 2 and 8 seem to speak to the vocation of humanity in general. Exod. 18:5–6 applies specifically to Israel, and 1 Pet. 2:5–6 and Rev. 1:6 apply this to the church as well.

⁴⁶For one well-referenced example, see Johan Rockström et al., "A Safe Operating Space for Humanity," *Nature* 461 (2009): 472–75, <https://doi.org/10.1038/461472a>. Additionally, our removal, or alienation, from creation in our modern lifestyles with air-conditioning, agribusiness, and Amazon online shopping, distances us from the consequences of our consumerism and resource extraction/consumption. Thanks, Ivy Tyson, for this insight! "We are less exposed to it, understand it less, feel less a part of it, and therefore feel our authority less keenly."

⁴⁷Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 27.

⁴⁸We are royal representatives called to work toward and to proclaim the shalom (peace, wholeness, and flourishing) of God's creation.

⁴⁹Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press, 1982), 32.

⁵⁰E.g., Deut. 17:14–20; Prov. 31:1–9; Eccles. 10:16–17. Many prophets condemned Israel and Judah for failing to do these things; see Heb. 4:14–5:10. Here the Old Testament participates in an Ancient Near Eastern vision of rulership as directed to social reform: see Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 103.

⁵¹Ezekiel 34. Here God specifically promises to protect and feed His sheep (the people of Israel), in contrast to the current rulers of Israel who "have been feeding themselves! Should not shepherds feed the flock?" (Ezek. 34:2, NASB).

⁵²One of the justifications for the exile into Babylon was that the land might enjoy its sabbath rest. (2 Chron. 36:21) This seems to be a fulfillment of the threat in Lev. 26:33–35.

⁵³Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 32.

⁵⁴Indeed, in most places *abad* is translated into English as "serve." See Calvin DeWitt, "Behemoth and Batrachians in the Eye of God: Responsibility to Other Kinds in Biblical Perspective," in *Christianity and Ecology*, ed. Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Ruether (Harvard University Press, 2000); Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, 2nd ed., Engaging Culture (Baker Academic, 2010); and J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Baker Academic, 2014).

⁵⁵William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenant Theology, revised and enlarged ed.* (Paternoster, 2013), 45. Dumbrell sees the outworking of this intention in Revelation 21–22.

⁵⁶Robert Farrar Capon, inspired by Martin Luther, helpfully and memorably contrasts these as "right-handed power" and "left-handed power" in his exposition of the parables of Jesus. See Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 2002), 15.

⁵⁷Matt. 11:29, NASB.

⁵⁸Matthew 5.

⁵⁹Freeing the captives, restoring sight to the blind, and proclaiming good news to the poor (Luke 4:18). This is also

seen as a proclamation of a Jubilee year, which Lev. 25 mandated to occur in the 50th year, but a practice we don't actually see occurring in the Old Testament.

⁶⁰John 3:16.

⁶¹Hall, *Imaging God*, 193.

⁶²Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (NavPress, 2002).

⁶³Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:1.

⁶⁴John 1:1.

⁶⁵See Kyle Meyaard-Schaap, "From Foreign to Family: Kinship as a Pathway Toward Radical Care for the Earth," in *Beyond Stewardship: New Approaches to Creation Care*, ed. David Paul Warners and Matthew Kuperus Heun (Calvin College Press, 2019) and Richard Bauckham, "The Human Place in Creation—A Biblical Overview," in *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology*, 1–13.

⁶⁶This is perhaps not so much an effort to identify with beings different from ourselves as it is a remembering of our inherent interconnectedness with the nonhuman creation. Even today, when a corner of creation groans, the people living there groan also.

⁶⁷This does not mean that we do not make decisions that cause pain to nonhuman creatures, as that would result in inaction. It does mean that we acknowledge the potential pain caused by our choices as we endeavor to make the best one. Erazim Kohák offers a meditation on this in *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 97–99.

⁶⁸Rom. 8:20–22.

⁶⁹David Clements, "Reconciliation Ecology in the Anthropocene," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 76, no. 2 (2024): 125–38, <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2024/PSCF9-24Clements.pdf>.

⁷⁰E.g., Francisco Sánchez-Bayo and Kris A. G. Wyckhuys, "Worldwide Decline of the Entomofauna: A Review of Its Drivers," *Biological Conservation* 232 (2019): 8–27, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2019.01.020>; and Kenneth V. Rosenberg et al., "Decline of the North American avifauna," *Science* 366, no. 6461 (2019): 120–24, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaw1313>.

⁷¹Isa. 3:13–15, Isaiah 58; Ezekiel 34; Micah 3, among many others.

⁷²Heb. 4:14–5:10.

⁷³Exod. 19:5–6, Isa. 61:6.

⁷⁴1 Pet. 2:5–9, Rev. 1:6.

⁷⁵The structure and language in Genesis 1 compares creation to a temple: the Hebrew words used to describe the priestly activities in Num. 3:8 are *abad* (attending to the furnishings) and *shamar* (doing the work of the temple). See John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (InterVarsity Press, 2010).

⁷⁶See G. K. Beale, "Adam as the First Priest in Eden as the Garden Temple," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 22, no. 2 (2018): 9–24, <https://radiantfairbanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/SBJT-22.2-Adam-as-Priest-Beale.pdf>; and Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 41–44.

⁷⁷See, for example, Heb. 13:15.

⁷⁸This is elaborated in Bauckham in a subsection titled "Humans Are Not Priests of Creation," in *Living with Other Creatures*, 151–55.

⁷⁹Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures*, 151–55. We attempt to address Bauckham's fears later in this section.

⁸⁰This must be done, however, while still acknowledging the goodness of the original creation. Domestication of wolves into dogs may add new notes to the symphony of

praise, but it is also important to safeguard wolf habitat so that wolves are able to persist in their unique wolf-ness. We discuss this in more detail below.

⁸¹So, both humans and each part of the rest of creation praise God on their own (rocks: Luke 19:40; mountains and trees: Isa. 55:12; the heavens: Ps. 19:1) but when we meet in creative ways, there is even more praise and glory to God. This is analogous to a statistical model that has effects (human, and rock/wolf/apple) that are independently significant in their effect on the response variable (praise for God's glory in this metaphor). But the interaction effect is also meaningful: stone sculpture, domestication of dogs, each new apple variety.

⁸²These verbs (tend and keep, or *abad* and *shamar*) are present in the charge to Adam and Eve in Gen. 2:15 and are also used for the Levitical priests; for example, see Num. 3:7–8. We use the phrase “work toward” in our description of the image, in part, as a reference to the priestly office. (We are royal representatives called to work toward and proclaim the shalom [peace, wholeness, and flourishing] of God's creation.)

⁸³Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection* (Doubleday, 1969), 19.

⁸⁴Exod. 32:31.

⁸⁵Rom. 5:8.

⁸⁶This is the point that Jesus is making when talking about God's love for (individual!) sparrows in Matt. 10:26–31.

⁸⁷Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 126. In this book, Kohák provides a compellingly lucid argument for the intrinsically personal character of all of creation, grounded both in the Western philosophical tradition and in his own experiences while living in a log cabin in the New Hampshire woods. As we think this is perhaps the most difficult part of FIRE for most North American churchgoers to accept, we highly recommend this book.

⁸⁸Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 48.

⁸⁹Another angle of what is meant here can perhaps be seen in the introduction of *Botany of Desire* by Michael Pollan: “Seeing these plants instead as willing partners in an intimate and reciprocal relationship with us means looking at ourselves a little differently, too: as the objects of other species’ designs and desires.” Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (Random House, 2002), xiii.

⁹⁰In “The Oblation of Things,” Robert Farrar Capon gives the love of language, music, and cooking as examples. Robert Farrar Capon, “The Oblation of Things,” in *An Offering of Uncles: The Priesthood of Adam and the Shape of the World* (Sheed and Ward, 1967), 77–90.

⁹¹As Bauckham fears in *Living with Other Creatures*, 151–55.

⁹²Gen. 3:8.

⁹³Isa. 49:6.

⁹⁴See Paul Watson, “‘A Light to the Nations’: Israel's Mission to the World,” *MDJ* 4, no. 2 (2013), <https://missiodeijournal.com/issues/md-4-2/authors/md-4-2-watson>.

⁹⁵Luke 4:18.

⁹⁶In our phrasing of the image that we use in our teaching, we use the phrase “proclaim the shalom of God's creation” to reference to the prophetic office. (We are royal representatives called to work toward and proclaim the shalom [peace, wholeness, and flourishing] of God's creation.)

⁹⁷1 Cor. 12:28, 14:1–19.

⁹⁸Phil. 2:14–16.

⁹⁹Mark 16:15.

¹⁰⁰For example, Isa. 20; Ezek. 4:1–17, 12:1–16; Hosea 1–3.

¹⁰¹The Hebrew word *emeth* can be translated “truth,” as in facts, but it is also frequently translated as faithfulness (Gen. 24:26–27; Isa. 61:8). See Jared Byas, *Love Matters More: How Fighting to Be Right Keeps Us from Loving Like Jesus* (Zondervan, 2020), 81.

¹⁰²To speak truth, prophets must first listen. Van den Brink suggests that in the context of creation care, this implies that a Christian should carefully consider the scientific evidence of the state of the nonhuman creation. See van den Brink, “King, Priest, Prophet, and Climate Science.” We, of course, do not mean that Christians should blindly follow scientific consensus. But, along with van den Brink, we think that blindly rejecting that consensus, as appears to be common in some Christian circles today, shows a lack of responsibility toward our prophetic office. There are positions between blind rejection and blind acceptance, though they require substantially more effort than either of these extremes. Such effort is necessary for faithful witness.

¹⁰³Van den Brink, “King, Priest, Prophet, and Climate Science.”

¹⁰⁴E.g., Isa. 6:8–13.

¹⁰⁵Heb. 11:32–38.

¹⁰⁶Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 182.

¹⁰⁷Aldo Leopold famously opined that “to have an environmental education is to live alone in a world of wounds” (Aldo Leopold, *Leopold: A Sand County Almanac & Other Writings on Ecology and Conservation*, ed. Curt Meine [Library Of America, 2013], 877). For a contemporary exploration of this topic, see Panu Pihkala, “Anxiety and the Ecological Crisis: An Analysis of Eco-Anxiety and Climate Anxiety,” *Sustainability* 12, no. 19 (2020): 7836, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12197836>.

¹⁰⁸Clements, “Reconciliation Ecology in the Anthropocene.”

¹⁰⁹Andrew Whitehouse, “Listening to Birds in the Anthropocene: The Anxious Semiotics of Sound in a Human-Dominated World,” *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2015): 53–71, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615898>.

¹¹⁰Isa. 55:6–11. Hope is a virtue that Christianity can uniquely bring to the environmental movement, which can be a difficult place to work. Christians have hope that all shall be well, so we can act in peace and joy, knowing that our hope is not in our own strength or success but in God's consummation of his promises and plans. See Moo and White, *Let Creation Rejoice* for discussion of hope in environmental crises; and also Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth* for discussion of hope and other environmental virtues.

¹¹¹Recounted by Peter Harris, *Under the Bright Wings* (Regent College Publishing, 2000).

¹¹²Rom. 9:27, Isa. 9:21.

¹¹³Warners et al, “Reconciliation Ecology.”

¹¹⁴Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, states, “In the stillness of the evening, amid the sun-drenched hum of the noonday forest, in the grandeur of the lightning, there comes the overwhelming, agonizing, and reconciling recognition of being accepted, being justified. Here the dweller is alien no longer. Nature envelops and accepts him. There is no reason, no merit, only the basic reality: we are justified, we are accepted. It is not because of what we do: given the devastation we have wrought among our fellow creatures, it can only be in spite of it. It is a free gift, agonizing for being so painfully undeserved. (p. 93)”

¹¹⁵Kohák insists that reconciliation with God and with nature are intrinsically linked, and Hall proposes a

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mechanism: all of our relationships, he suggests, are interconnected. Just as “if anyone says ‘I love God,’ and yet he hates his brother or sister, he is a liar” (1 John 4:20), there is also an inherent discontinuity between love for God and disregard for our fellow creatures. See Hall, *Imaging God*, pp. 129ff.

¹¹⁶For some of these, see Bill McKibben, *Hope, Human and Wild: True Stories of Living Lightly on the Earth* (Hungry Mind Press, 1997).

¹¹⁷Rev. 21:4.

¹¹⁸Tyler Wigg-Stevenson, with reference to Hebrews 11, calls this “welcoming the kingdom from a distance.” See Tyler Wigg-Stevenson, *The World Is Not Ours to Save: Finding the Freedom to Do Good* (IVP, 2013), 101–13.

¹¹⁹Col. 3:9–10.

¹²⁰N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (Zondervan, 2008).

¹²¹Col. 1:18.

¹²²Isaac Watts, “Absent from Flesh! O Blissful Thought!,” Hymnary.org, accessed February 3, 2025, https://hymnary.org/text/absent_from_flesh_o_blissful_thought.

¹²³Alfred Brumley, “I’ll Fly Away,” Hymnary.org, accessed February 3, 2025, https://hymnary.org/text/some_glad_morning_when_this_life_is_oer.

¹²⁴Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 29–30.

¹²⁵Gerald Hiestand, “Irenaeus, the Devil, and the Goodness of Creation,” in *Creation and Doxology: The Beginning and End of God’s Good World*, ed. Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, Center for Pastor Theologians Series (InterVarsity Press, 2018), 100–101.

¹²⁶Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 115.

¹²⁷Gen. 1:26, 28, 2:15.

¹²⁸Gen. 3:17–18.

¹²⁹Rev. 21:1–2, NASB.

¹³⁰Rev. 22:1–2.

¹³¹See Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 4–5.

¹³²Ezek. 47:9, NASB.

¹³³2 Cor. 5:19, NASB.

¹³⁴Col. 1:20.



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