“For God So Loved the World”:
An Incarnational Ecology

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“For God so loved the world that he gave his
only Son, so that everyone who believes in him
may not perish but may have eternal life.”
John 3:16

“Christ recapitulates all of creation.”
Irenaeus of Lyons

In an age where ecological devastation threatens our very existence, Christian theology can send us mixed messages about our relation to the earth. Revisiting the doctrine of the Incarnation and the two natures of Jesus as explicated in the Council of Chalcedon, we find rich resources for claiming an incarnational ecology. A non-anthropocentric look at Scripture reveals that God’s covenant is with all creation, and that humans and creation belong together. The Incarnation is the fulfillment of this covenant, and of God’s love for all life. Christ gathers all to himself, and all life partakes of redemption. In the Incarnation we are called to participate in God’s ongoing creative activity in the earth’s redemption and renewal.

Introduction

At the beginning of the twenty-first century we are facing ecological devastation on an unprecedented scale. The earth is getting hotter and stormier, water and soil are getting increasingly scarce, critical habitat is being lost. From the visible pollution of our air and water to massive toxic waste dumps to species extinction, the planet is facing

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assaults from human activity as never before. To compound the problem, the decline in the natural systems that sustain life and the rising aggregated social demand due to population and consumption increases are on a collision course. This makes the environmental crisis one of the most pressing and immediate problems of our age. In the now-famous words of Daniel Maguire, “if present trends continue, we will not.”

The crisis state of our planet has been recognized for decades as a problem that has serious—one might say dire—implications for human and ecological health. For the last forty years, environmental concerns have involved scientists, engineers, lawyers, architects, urban planners, writers, poets, artists, and ethicists as well as government at all levels, businesses, nonprofits, hospitals, and schools. In short, it has involved practically everyone, except the churches.

For too long, churches have failed to take account of our destruction of the environment and recognize it as the profound issue of faith that it is. Happily, this is finally changing, and churches across different faith traditions are getting involved. Faith communities are recognizing that, even more than a problem for public health, public policy, a sustainable economy, or even ethics, the state of our planet reflects a crisis of spirit. The reality that we are in a planetary crisis raises essential questions about the relationship between humans, nature, and God, and how these relationships are understood as a matter of faith.

Increasing numbers of theologians and ethicists are rising to this challenge as they open up long-held beliefs and doctrines, test assumptions, and seek guidance from their faith in navigating this crisis. Many theologians are seeking to uncover problematic strands in the tradition and reclaim lost or suppressed elements of Christian faith that can provide fresh understandings and serve as an ethical foundation for praxis applications of an earth ethic.

Christian ecological theology as a focus of scholarship is only a few decades old, and has developed certain strands of thought and approaches more than others. I have found that the emphasis of

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scholarship has tended to be on cosmology and creation theology, with less discussion of Jesus, or on an explicitly Christological approach to our environmental crisis. Thus my central project here is to examine the doctrine of the Incarnation, as it is foundational to Christian belief and a matter of emphasis for Anglicans, in light of the ecological threats we are facing. How does our understanding of Jesus as both fully human and fully divine shape and orient our relationship to the earth?

This essay begins by briefly describing the nature of the environmental crisis. The central part of this paper will propose an incarnational ecology by applying a conceptual approach, using Anglican theological method as the tool to guide this analysis. One of the defining characteristics of Anglican theology is its threefold appeal to Scripture, tradition, and reason. This method is correlative in that it "seeks to explain the contents of faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence." With regard to Scripture, the Anglican interpretive framework is guided by the phrase "Holy Scriptures containeth all things necessary to salvation." I will be following this framework in my selection and analysis of Scripture, asking: "In the context of the environmental crisis, what is necessary for salvation?" Guiding the Anglican interpretation of Scripture is the appeal to antiquity, in particular the ecumenical councils. I will give particular focus to the theology of Irenaeus of Lyons and the Council of Chalcedon as it sets forth our understanding of the person of Christ.

My thesis is that classical incarnational theology and its understandings of the nature of the relationship between the spiritual and material world provide an essential foundation for aligning ourselves to God and creation, as the Incarnation explicates our covenantal and sacramental relationship to God and to all life. Understanding the Incarnation as the fulfillment of the love of God, we find the heart of the message of Jesus: the union and reconciliation of God and all creation, human and non-human alike.

The Environmental Crisis and Christian Responses

That we are in an environmental crisis has been claimed by a host of contemporary thinkers across disciplines. The evidence clearly

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indicates that our lifestyles, habits, production methods, and levels of consumption are not sustainable. I will highlight here three particularly urgent environmental concerns: global warming, water availability, and biodiversity.

Since the beginning of the industrial revolution the concentration of carbon dioxide, one of the major greenhouse gases, in the atmosphere has increased significantly, contributing to the greenhouse effect known as "global warming." In its most recent findings the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded that "warming of the climate system is unequivocal," and that there is a "very high confidence" that the globally averaged net effect of human activities has been one of warming.5 Further, at continental, regional, and ocean basin scales, numerous long-term changes in climate have been observed. These include changes in Arctic temperatures and ice; widespread changes in precipitation amounts, ocean salinity, and wind patterns; and aspects of extreme weather, including droughts, heavy precipitation, heat waves, and the intensity of tropical cyclones.6 For example, average Arctic temperatures have increased at almost twice the global average rate in the past one hundred years.

When we turn our attention to the global water situation, we see that water—its scarcity, availability, and control—shows every promise of becoming a global battlefield in the twenty-first century that will dwarf the conflicts over oil in the previous one. Currently about one-third of the world's population lives in countries suffering from moderate-to-high water stress, where water consumption is more than 10 percent of renewable freshwater resources. The causes of our water problems are many, but the three major factors leading to increasing demand over the past century are population growth, industrial development, and the expansion of irrigated agriculture.7 Some eighty countries comprising about 40 percent of the world's

6 IPCC, Summary for Policymakers, 9.
population were suffering from serious water shortages by the mid-1990s, and it is estimated that in less than twenty-five years two-thirds of the world's people will be living in water-stressed countries.\(^8\) "In many places, the biggest threat . . . will be a shortage of water. Already more than a half-billion people live in regions prone to chronic drought. By 2025, that number is likely to have increased at least five-fold, to 2.4–3.4 billion."\(^9\)

Another significant environmental impact is the loss of biodiversity, occurring at a rate many times higher than that of natural extinction due to land conversion, climate change, pollution, unsustainable harvesting of natural resources, and the introduction of exotic species.\(^10\) Scientists estimate that if these destructive human activities continue at their present rates, half the species of plants and animals on earth could be either gone or fated for early extinction by the end of the century. Further, a full quarter will drop to this level during the next half-century due to climate change alone.\(^11\)

Global climate change and water shortages are highlighted here because they are not only environmental problems strictly speaking, but also have a direct and significant impact on humans and societies. As one example, former Vice President Al Gore, in his film *An Inconvenient Truth*, estimates that the collapse of a major ice sheet in Greenland or West Antarctica due to global climate change could raise sea levels by twenty feet, flooding coastal areas, and displacing 100 million refugees.\(^12\) The impact of a lack of water on human societies does not need to be explained. But we may well need to be reminded that the loss of species at a rate one hundred times higher than natural extinction also threatens our survival, environmental security, and quality of life.\(^13\)

\(^8\) GEO-3, 150.
\(^10\) GEO-3, xx.
\(^12\) This prediction is entirely possible, according to scientists. Stefan Lovgren, "Al Gore's 'Inconvenient Truth' Movie: Fact or Hype?" *National Geographic News*, May 25, 2006; http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/05/060524-global-warming.html.
\(^13\) Wilson, *Creation*, 5.
In addition, there are individual examples that signal a radical dis­
ordering of our relationship to the natural world. A slow-growing,  
centuries-old tree in the Tongass forest of Alaska is sold for the price  
of a pizza and made into little bags for snacks.\(^{14}\) The few remaining  
elephants in central Africa are threatened by poachers who chop off  
the elephants’ faces to sell the few pounds of ivory, in order to satisfy  
human vanity in some distant land.\(^{15}\) Animals in laboratories are sub­
jected to painful experimentation to test cosmetics. These abuses are  
not new, but the scale and impact, and hence the urgency, are. More­
over, human poverty greatly increases vulnerability to environmental  
threats.\(^{16}\) As humans and nature are inextricably linked, so too are  
ecological and social injustice. And we are running out of time. Eco­
logical devastation might be understood as \textit{the} preeminent problem  
for our time, because it is a relatively new crisis that has come upon us  
and must be solved in this generation. This highlights the reality of our  
planetary crisis as a complex of environmental, economic, and social  
justice concerns.

But the problem may be rightly understood as even more pro­
found, for it signals humans’ deep alienation from creation. Because  
of this, an increasing number of Christian theologians are reexamining  
the tenets, history, and practices of Christian faith in light of the envi­
ronmental challenge. As Christian theologians have worked toward an  
ecological theology, they have undertaken to revisit problematic  
themes in the tradition, recover suppressed or neglected elements  
that might be helpful, and identify praxis implications for church and  
society.\(^{17}\) These “ecological theologies of Christian inspiration” have  
been catalogued into two different areas of emphasis: covenantal and  
sacramental.\(^{18}\)

The covenantal emphasis focuses on Scripture as the primary  
source of ecological theology. A common approach is to reject an

\(^{14}\) Larry Rasmussen, \textit{Earth Community, Earth Ethics} (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis  
\(^{15}\) J. Michael Fay, “Ivory Wars: Last Stand in Zakouma,” \textit{National Geographic},  
March 2007, 34–65, 44.
\(^{16}\) GEO-3, xxv.
\(^{17}\) Dieter H. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Reuther, “Introduction: Current  
Thought in Christianity and Ecology,” in \textit{Christianity and Ecology}, ed. Hessel and  
Reuther (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for the Study of World Religions/Harvard Uni­
versity Press, 2000), xxxix.
\(^{18}\) Rosemary Radford Reuther, “Conclusion: Eco-Justice at the Center of the  
Church’s Mission,” in \textit{Christianity and Ecology}, 604.
anthropocentric focus to biblical theology, where humans stand at the center and the rest of the world is seen as a backdrop. Instead, covenantal approaches note that if one picks up the Bible and simply reads it, it is hard to get far without encountering rich, vivid nature imagery. This involves a broader view of biblical history, seeing it not in terms of God and humanity over and against nature, but in terms of God and humanity with nature. Under this typology much attention has been given to reinterpreting Genesis 1 and 2, challenging traditional understandings based on a dominion relationship of humans over nature. Many of these writers examining Genesis seek to reclaim a notion of responsible stewardship toward the earth. Still others contend that a historical-critical reading of Genesis reveals that to the ancient Hebrews the land assumes a central role in the theology of promise and blessing, and in that ancient understanding the relationship between humans and the natural world is one of radical interconnectedness and interdependence. This line of thought has strong resonance with current notions of sustainability, which looks to the earth as a model for how to design our processes, and with modern scientific understandings of ecological and biological systems. The covenantal tradition reclaims a moral basis for right relationship with nature that necessitates an ethic of earthcare.

The second area of emphasis for ecological theology is sacramental, and draws not only on biblical sources but also on patristic and medieval mysticism. Such thinkers look to the works of Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, and others to emphasize the ecstatic and aesthetic experience of interpersonal communion and the beauty and gift of nature. Some have focused on the Christian doctrine of original sin, Christian cosmology, and the metaphysical relationship between matter and spirit. Sacramental approaches challenge cosmologies built on Greek metaphysical dualism and seek to recast a Christian

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22 Reuther, “Conclusion,” 605.
understanding of God's relation to the world in a unified vision as a "universe story."\textsuperscript{23}

This typology helps to frame the question that will occupy the main body of this paper. My project here is to reexamine how orthodox Christology and its understanding of the two natures of Christ can serve as the foundation of our understanding of our relationship to all of creation. What is proposed in the following section is an incarnational ecology, grounded in our covenantal relationship with God, that argues for a Christian understanding of our relationship to the earth as God's sacramental body, centered in the Incarnation of God in Christ.

\textit{An Incarnational Ecology}

\textit{Humans and the rest of creation belong together.}

From the standpoint of rational experience, the notion that humans could exist apart from the natural world defies common sense. That we are clearly dependent on the earth for, at a minimum, air (with just the right mix of elements to be breathable), food, and water for our physical survival is obvious. It might be said that the failure to recognize our dependence on the earth of God's providing is the ultimate hubris.

Anglican theology utilizes a threefold appeal to Scripture, tradition, and reason, reason being broadly understood to encompass our lived experience. If reason and experience, properly informed, remind us of the necessity of the earth for our survival, how might this inform our understanding of Scripture and tradition in terms of what is "necessary to salvation"? Put differently, if our attitude toward the natural world is endangering our survival, might it also be imperiling our salvation?\textsuperscript{24}

One of the central self-understandings of Judaism and Christianity is that people of faith stand in covenantal relationship with God. This covenant, put simply, is a bond between two parties whereby each pledges to do something for another.\textsuperscript{24} Biblically, the covenant is the model for the relationship between God and the Israelites, and is later understood by Christians in the context of the Incarnation of God in Christ. The Old Testament/Jewish Bible contains several

\textsuperscript{23} Hessel and Reuther, "Introduction," xxxv.
covenants that are significant for the life of Israel. One is the covenant found in Genesis 9 after the flood has receded, in which God establishes God's covenant with Noah:

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.” (Genesis 9:8–17)

This covenant may be understood as a covenant of grant, whereby God formalizes a relationship of love and benevolence.25 Noah and a remnant of humans and animals are all that remain after a primordial-scale flood has destroyed the earth. The flood in Genesis 7 and 8 recalls the watery chaos at the beginning of creation in Genesis 1, and the everlasting covenant of renewal that is announced here extends to every living creature. This covenant expresses the constancy of God's love for and commitment to all life, human and non-human alike. For our part, humans are called to live into our covenantal responsibility on behalf of all flesh.

When we examine the Book of Isaiah we see a constant linking of humans with the rest of creation. A central theme of Isaiah is Israel's redemption and mission to the world, and Isaiah is an important book for both Jews and Christians. Throughout Isaiah rich nature imagery

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abounds. This vivid depiction of nature is not mere background scenery; it is intimately bound up in all that happens. Both land and people flourish or are ravaged together. As the people sin, suffer, repent, celebrate, and experience the joys, sorrows, ambiguities, and catastrophes of life, parallel events equally dramatic are happening in the natural world. The natural world suffers as humans suffer, and is reborn and renewed as humans experience redemption:

The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers;
the heavens languish together with the earth.
The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed laws,
violated the statutes,
broken the everlasting covenant.
Therefore a curse devours the earth,
and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt. (Isaiah 24:4–6a)

This understanding of the relationship between redemption and creation sheds light on Isaiah’s portrayal of nature, and God’s operation in creation. Of ultimate concern to the prophet Isaiah is the return of the people to God. The language of the salvation of the people of Israel, and the images the prophet invokes to depict it, are the language and images of creation. The sins of Israel have disrupted creation. God re-creates the world, human and non-human, first by deconstructing it until nothing remains but a stump, so that it may be redeemed. In this the prophet never approaches pantheism; it is clear that God is not creation, but is engaging in the world through the process of de-creation and re-creation. God’s creative activity is not a one-time event; God is continually and radically engaged in creating and re-creating. In this activity, humans are not to remain passive, but are called to repent and to participate in the process of rebuilding the social and moral order. Nature shares in the blessings of the human covenant, and languishes and withers when that covenant is broken.

The Book of Job provides a helpful reminder of how we humans are to see ourselves in relation to the rest of the natural world. As a

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classic work of wisdom literature, Job provides a reflection on universal human concerns. Job is famous as an icon of undeserved suffering. When God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind and says, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” (Job 38:4), God reminds Job that he is only a creature among many others. God foregrounds the natural world, and makes clear to Job that humankind is part of creation, not at the center of things. The Lord cares for a vast world beyond human knowing, and does not necessarily exercise control over it for the immediate benefit of human beings. ²⁷ Many of the animals of which God speaks have no utilitarian value to humans:

Is the wild ox willing to serve you?
Will it spend the night at your crib?
Can you tie it in the furrow with ropes,
or will it harrow the valleys after you? (Job 39:9–10)

As we look for clues for how we are to understand human relationship to the rest of the natural world, this passage reminds us not to place ourselves at the center of the divine purpose. There is no hierarchy of being or preferential order expressed in the Book of Job; the human, the wild ox, the vulture, and the ostrich are all part of creation and beloved of God.

Taken together, these biblical passages suggest something about where we stand in creation. Viewing these texts in light of an informed understanding of the environmental crisis, we may say that our salvation depends on our understanding that God’s covenant includes all flesh; humans and all creation are radically interconnected and share in the same blessing and judgment; and that for humans to see ourselves as the center of everything is supreme arrogance and misses the point.

Underlying the idea that humans and the rest of creation belong together is a metaphysical understanding of the relationship between the material and spiritual realms. Modernity since the Enlightenment has tended to impose a dualism between matter and spirit. However, recent biblical scholars challenge this assumption. Examining the ancient Israelite culture and language in detail, these scholars conclude that a dichotomy between nature and spirit is not to be found in

biblical Hebrew language, and does not reflect the ancient Israelites' perspective. Focusing on those passages attributed to the Yahwist source, these scholars claim that the world was regarded by the Yahwist tradition as a single metaphysical unity, and that "almost in their entirety, the Hebrew Scriptures share the Yahwist's unitary metaphysic,"28 which was only modified much later in history. This ancient approach to the earth envisions humans as part of the divine cosmic whole. This reading looks to the Yahwist's account of creation in Genesis 2:7–8, as well as to other texts, whereby humans are fashioned out of the soil by God and thus associated with the earth. Humans do not stand above the earth or apart from it, but are intricately connected to the web of life.

Thus we see a covenantal relationship between God and all of creation, human and non-human alike. This covenantal love takes on new meaning in the Incarnation of Jesus.

God loves the world and becomes incarnate.

Humans and the rest of the natural world are radically interconnected in a covenantal relationship with God, and the ordering principle of this covenant is love. God's love is prevenient, both prior to and enabling human love, and extends to all of creation. God's love of the material world is made manifest through our reason and observation. God makes creatures with energy and power to interact and reproduce, within an orderly framework that is beneficial to their health and survival. One can infer that as God has endowed plants and animals with the capacity for self-replication, self-sustenance, and the ability to adapt to natural environmental changes through evolution, God desires for them to thrive. Each species possesses a unique combination of genetic traits to fit its particular niche in the environment.29 God has endowed animal nature with self-perception and the capacity to interact with the world from its own point of view, and to give and receive love.30 It is also apparent that this arrangement is beneficial to life's flourishing. If one understands God as the source of all being, as Christians do, it follows that the creation and sustaining

28 Hiebert, Yahwist's Landscape, 153.
29 Wilson, Creation, 5.
of life with features beneficial to life’s flourishing is prima facie evidence of God’s love of the material world.

Yet this was not enough. God’s love of creation was so great that God decided to enter it Godself, and two natures—the divine nature and human nature—become one person in Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God partakes, one might say, of the worst of human experience. Thus the Incarnation may be understood as the supreme act of God’s love for creation, as love seeking union with its object. In Jesus, God takes on human flesh and, as this act is understood in early Christian dogmatics, the one person is of two natures, fully human and fully divine. In the gospel of John, Jesus is the incarnate Word, “and the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). In this Johannine prologue “Jesus was now seen as the incarnation of the pre-existent Logos of God who was the agent of creation, of general revelation, and of the special revelation to Israel. It was this Johannine Christology...which formed the basis for the Christology of Nicaea and Chalcedon.”

In the Incarnation, God did a new thing. God so loved the world that God became material. John 3:16 states God’s reason for the Incarnation: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” If “world” may be understood not only as human society but as the entire cosmos, the Incarnation becomes a manifestation of God’s necessity to be materially related to creation, to be immanent and fully present, that is, embodied, in all of life. The New Testament employs three terms for world; the one most frequently attested (kosmos) is the one that appears in John 3:16. There is a second term meaning “inhabited world” (oikoumenē); and a term transliterated as “aeon” or age (aion) that has temporal meanings.

The word kosmos has important theological connotations. It may mean the universe, as in Acts 17:24: “God who made the world and everything in it.” The New Testament also speaks of “the world” as in need of reconciliation, and as such it refers to the totality of humanity in the bondage of sin. Likewise, the Pauline epistles have varying uses for “world.” There is a strong cosmic dimension in which we

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31 Adams, Horrendous Evils, 165.
find a retracing and reworking of creation themes (see Rom. 8, Col. 1:15–20, 1 Tim. 3:16, 2 Cor. 5:17). Chaos is followed by a new cosmos inaugurated by Jesus, by the appearance of the new Adam.\(^{34}\) In his speech in front of the Areopagus, Paul emphasizes God the Creator: "The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things" (Acts 17:24–25).

Moreover, in those instances where "world" refers to that which is in need of reconciliation, it is an important reminder that the whole earth is part of God's covenant. All creation partakes of suffering and redemption, and all creatures are the object of God's salvation in Christ. "World" is thus to be understood as a cosmic unity, and it recalls the metaphysical unity of matter and spirit as perceived by the ancient Israelites.

The early Christian church also rejected the idea of a dualism of matter and spirit and affirmed that God is immanent in the world. An important voice in the early Christian understanding of the earth is that of Irenaeus of Lyons, the second-century bishop whose writings were foundational to the doctrine that would later be captured in the creeds. Irenaeus defended the church against what he considered to be heretical distortions of faith. In particular, he was relentlessly opposed to an anti-cosmic dualism that suggests that God is utterly removed from mundane reality and that the physical world is a self-contained realm of darkness in which everything is evil. Irenaeus took sharp issue with this construction, building instead a theology that some have called "creation history."\(^{35}\) He is firm in the notion of the Creator God who brought the whole creation into being, so that God might bring it to its final fulfillment. Nature retains its created goodness, and the Creator is still creating and is nearby and active in all things. "Irenaeus sees the entire cosmos becoming blessed and eventually immortalized by being ever more fully united with its divine source of being."\(^{36}\)

\(^{35}\) Santmire, *Travail of Nature*, 35.
\(^{36}\) Reuther, "Conclusion," 612.
Irenaeus sees Jesus Christ in the middle of this creation history. Christ, the Incarnate Word, is eternal and life-giving, and together with the spirit of God is moving all creation toward its fulfillment according to divine intention. In this construction, Christ has a twofold vocation; to fulfill the creation on one hand, and to redeem humanity from Adam's sin on the other. In the Incarnation, Christ is "the recapitulation of creation." Irenaeus writes that Christ is "the Word being made man, thus summing up all things in Himself, so that as in the super-celestial, spiritual and invisible things the Word of God is supreme, so also in things visible and corporeal he might possess supremacy, and taking to Himself the pre-eminence, as well as constituting himself Lord of the Church, He might draw all things to Himself at the proper time."

The ideas that had been cultivated by Irenaeus and others were expressed in the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, culminating in the doctrine of the Incarnation formulated by the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The councils were firm in their rejection of any idea of God as removed from creation. The Council of Nicaea in 325 resolved disputes about the relationship between Jesus and God and set forth the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. It was later, at Chalcedon, that the church formulated its definitive Christology: Christ is at once fully human and fully divine, two natures joined together in hypostatic union. Thus did Chalcedon maintain that the human nature of Christ includes a human body and a fully human soul with a finite consciousness and a finite will distinct from the divine, and also a fully divine nature, brought together in the one person. This understanding is critical: Jesus participated fully, not partially, in humanness. Jesus' fully divine nature did not shield him from or lessen his experience of human suffering. And anything less than full divinity does not have the capacity to bring about our redemption.

Fundamental to an understanding of the Incarnation is the idea that by entering into our human situation, God has totally transformed it. God partakes of human nature, and we become partakers of the divine nature. God comes to be manifestly present within creation in order that we may be brought into union with Godself: "The incarnation of the Word of God at Bethlehem, in Galilee, in Jerusalem, is not an isolated wonder, but a central focal point in a network of divine

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initiatives which spreads out into the... whole universe.”

Irenaeus, in his preface to Against Heresies, describes this mutuality in terms of “the word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what he is himself.” When we understand ourselves as created for union with God, we move toward our unrealized potential, which guides our lives and grounds our ethics.

In the fully human personhood of Jesus there is a new intensity of God’s immanence in the world. In the fusion of the two aspects of Jesus, the Incarnation pronounces both a connection to the whole creation history and a new thing, a new manifestation of and participation by God in life. There is continuity with God’s ongoing creative activity and a new, emergent reality in the God-creation relationship. The Incarnation affirms the flesh, and with it all materiality. This means the vocation of Jesus Christ is to serve the whole of creation, not just humans. The Incarnation reflects the love and the esteem in which God holds the world—and not only the aspect of the world that is manifestly good, but all of it, including its suffering and its horrors. This is a vision of unified metaphysic, whereby “one divine economy aims to bring the entire creation... to final fulfillment through the Word and through the Spirit.” All of this has important theological implications for the whole earth and its inclusion in the salvation of Jesus, as well as for sacramental Christology and Christian worship.

*Christ draws all things to himself.*

The premise that God’s love of the world and the fulfillment of the covenant is actualized in the person of Jesus as God incarnate is foundational to Christian theology. The Incarnation may be understood as a manifestation of God’s necessity to be materially related to creation, to be immanent and fully present, that is, embodied, in all of life, and partaking of human experience. By becoming a human being,

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42 Santmire, *Travail of Nature*, 41.
God participates in the intensity of the union of matter and spirit. In experiencing the worst of human suffering—the crucifixion—God identifies with all humans who participate in pain and suffering, which is to say, with each of us. By the Incarnation, in the famous words of Julian of Norwich, we are “knit and oned” with God. This union with God speaks to the blessedness of existence, and reveals the sanctity of all flesh.

If we return to the biblical passages discussed earlier, the significance of this new thing, the Incarnation, in relation to all of creation may become clearer. All three biblical narratives deal with God’s response to sin and suffering. The most obviously personal example of the three is Job. The Book of Job describes the horrors set upon one man. He loses his family, his fortune, and his health, for reasons that have nothing to do with his own righteousness. Through an insight born of an awestruck encounter with God speaking out of the turbulent whirlwind, Job realizes that the universe does not answer to his preferred order of things. Job is helped to understand that he is part of an intricate web of being, and with this new understanding he is renewed and transformed by God.

In the flood narrative, God’s response to widespread human violence and corruption is a near total return to primordial chaos. The mythical character of the great flood should not obscure or soften the horror of the destruction: “Every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground” (Gen. 7:4). It is a wholesale, return-to-chaos de-creation and re-creation, for only such total reversal is a sufficient judgment on the corruption and violence that had filled the earth: “And God said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth’” (Gen. 6:13). And then,

The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered; the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep. And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings; everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark. (Genesis 7:19–23)
These are horrors on a primordial scale.

In Isaiah, the devastation of the earth mirrors the crumbling of human civilization as a result of human infidelity and injustice (Isa. 24:1–6). When humans repent, return to God, and work to restore the social and moral order, the earth is renewed, and both the natural world and human society are radically transformed.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes. (Isaiah 35:1–2, 6b–7)

We have seen how these accounts depict the world as one in which all of creation, human and non-human together, partake of covenantal love, suffering, and redemption, creation, de-creation, and re-creation. But these narratives leave us with a question. We know what God will not do in the face of human transgression and violence: God will not respond again by destroying creation down to a remnant. But this begs the question: what, then, is God's response?

It is the Incarnation that answers this question, for God's answer to horrors and sin is Jesus. God's answer is to participate as fully human and fully divine in a unity of matter and spirit. God responds to evil and pain by partaking of human suffering. Understanding this is central to the process of orienting ourselves to the coming of God's kingdom. God participates in the horrors of the world so that they can be defeated, and with that defeat, be transformed.43 In the crucifixion, the suffering and sin of the world become encompassed by and integrated into God's redemptive plan. In the words of Paul, neither the worst human suffering nor the greatest of atrocities can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:31–39). In Jesus, God does not respond to sin and violence by wreaking a greater destruction. In this

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43 Adams, Horrendous Evils, 166–167.
consummate act of love, God responds by participating, defeating, transforming, and redeeming human suffering. And all creation partakes of this redemption. The cross of Christ is transformative. In the resurrection the worst that humankind can inflict is lifted up, transformed, and made new. Christ’s materiality enables his solidarity with us, and his two-personhood holds the human and the divine together in a cosmic oneness.

God’s defeat of human sin and suffering enables our agency: the transformative power of the Incarnation enables the life-giving process of participating in creation’s renewal. Further, God becoming human calls all life into unity with God. The Incarnation calls us into relationship with God whereby we participate in the realization of God’s kingdom on earth. This understanding heightens our ethical imperative. Far from letting us off the hook, the Incarnation calls us into union with God, to bear witness to the damage we have caused and to participate in God’s redemptive plan for all life. Neither escapism nor passivity is possible.

The vision of restoration of the coming kingdom for all creation defines and shapes our present tasks and sets our priorities. This vision guides and motivates our responsibilities in and for all creation. We are called to order our lives in terms of the values and shape of the coming kingdom. We are reminded that the ecological destruction that threatens all life is the result of human us-first-ness, our harmful industrial processes, and our individualized lifestyles and habits. It is a grave theological and moral error to think we can go on violating our covenantal relationship with impunity and that all will ultimately be rescued. Our moral imperative is not erased, but rather enabled and compelled by what God is able to do and is doing, through our inseparable connection to all of creation, under the embrace of the redemption of Christ. This understanding calls upon us to recognize the divine will in creation’s transformation and renewal, and the necessity of our participation in this transformation. We are called to work toward the vision of life renewed, to a vision that honors all of creation.

Understanding our relationship to the earth incarnationally calls us toward the future kingdom: the renewal of all creation in a metaphysical unity involving the spiritual and the physical, the personal and the social, the human and the cosmic. Social justice and human concerns are inextricably intertwined with restoring earth relationships. Through the Incarnation of Jesus, God calls us into partnership for social transformation and the renewal of the earth.
In this essay I have sought to examine the environmental crisis in light of received tradition fully engaged in the context of our changing understandings of the world around us. I have asked what the tradition in its fullness may be saying to us today, drawing on our reasoning, perceptions, and experience. Engaging classical Christology through the doctrine of the Incarnation as the framework for understanding our relationship to the earth, we find the heart of the message of Jesus: the reconciliation and union of God and creation, and the power to transform and heal the world.

I have endeavored to show that reaching back to the foundational understandings of Jesus does not lead to an anthropocentric or individualistic orientation of Christian faith hostile to a healthy and loving relationship to the earth. In fact, one might well conclude that it is precisely because we have lost sight of the incarnational nature of Jesus that we have alienated ourselves from the rest of the natural world. Reclaiming our understanding of the Incarnation as set forth by the ecumenical councils calls us to recognize our oneness with creation, and to participate in the divine project of bringing God's kingdom to earth—to an earth renewed. The new kingdom is not a spiritualized one, but rather heaven on earth, recapitulating all of creation. We are reminded that Christianity is, at heart, embodied.

An incarnational ecology is to be understood both covenantally and sacramentally. It is a covenantal approach that finds, in God's promise and blessing, an understanding of the relationship between humans and all life as one of interconnectedness and interdependence. It sees the Incarnation as the fulfillment of God's covenant, grounded in love for all life. And it attends to the human covenantal responsibility to bear witness to our destructiveness and to work toward a new creation on behalf of all flesh. An incarnational ecology argues against purely human solutions to the environmental crisis, and against falling into the arrogance that it is a problem we can fix with human ingenuity and effort alone. We are enabled by God, by being called into relationship with God, to be guided in the endeavor of an earth renewed by God's love of all creation and the transformative power of the Incarnation.

As a sacramental approach, incarnational ecology challenges cosmologies built on a metaphysical dualism. In fact, it understands a separation of matter and spirit to be contrary to the belief in divine embodiment in materiality that is found in ancient tradition. It sees embodiment as a blessing that reminds us of creation's bounty and beauty. God's need to be materially related to all of creation reveals the sanctity of matter. Life itself is a sacrament.

When we understand ourselves as part of creation, we, like Job, can learn a new humility that can reveal new insights. An incarnational ecology helps us realize that we stand not above, but in the world, and hence are subject to the earth's laws and must live within its limits. Nature can be seen as a model to design sustainable practices and new ways of living. We can learn how to operate along nature's principles and let the earth itself teach us by example. The intricate web of life of God's design is abundant, mutually dependent, and interconnected. Nothing is produced that cannot be cycled back into the ecosystem, to become part of nature's fecundity. The earth's economy depends on diversity, thrives on differences, and perishes in the imbalance of sameness. Natural systems have much to teach us about how to live sustainably and how to work for a world restored. The idea of looking to nature as a model for our processes and systems is finding many practical applications today in principles of sustainability, architecture, and industrial process design, to name a few.

An incarnational ecology has implications for our social and environmental ethics. The environmental assaults and horrors merely touched upon earlier in this essay display a disregard for the incarnational reality of Jesus and a denial of God's love for all creation. We have set creation at war with itself. The twin problems of ecological degradation and social injustice stem from the same destructive practices and lack of regard for life in all its forms. It is clear that the reality of our planetary crisis calls on Christian social witness and

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46 William McDonough and Michael Braungart, Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things (New York: North Point Press, 2002).
47 Ray C. Anderson, Mid-Course Correction Toward a Sustainable Enterprise: The Interface Model (Atlanta, Ga.: Chelsea Green, 1998); Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins, and Hunter Lovins, Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown & Company, 1999).
environmental ethics to make common cause. Jesus' message of justice applies to all creation.

Finally, ethics, ministry, and social justice need to be brought into unity with faith and worship. The church's mission of redemption in the world, grounded as it is in the good news of Christ, cannot be separated from social justice and healing the earth. Moreover, social and environmental ethics and practice are not disembodied, but must be intimately grounded in worship and the sacraments. When we partake of the bread and wine during the Eucharist, the central expression of the Incarnation in worship, we are embodying our relationship with Christ and with all materiality. The redemptive promise of the Eucharist empowers us to go forth to do God's work in the world. Christian liturgy, with its daily and annual cycles that observe the cosmic activity of darkness and light and the passing of the seasons, offers rich opportunity to bring our sacramental connection to all creation through Christ Jesus into sharper focus. Through our worship we can reclaim ancient wisdom and orient ourselves to an understanding that we and this wounded earth are all gathered to Christ and in Christ, and are called to work together for a new creation.