

**R.J. (SAM) BERRY****Disputing Evolution Encourages Environmental Neglect<sup>1</sup>**


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*Doubts about evolution rumble on interminably in some Christian circles, despite virtual unanimity in the scientific community about the main features of evolutionary change and their mechanism(s). The reason for such debates seems to be a laudable desire to keep God implicated in the world he made. The irony is that this effort is unnecessary; it involves a misapprehension of God's creating and sustaining activity, as well as almost certainly alienating outsiders – as Augustine pointed out sixteen centuries ago. But more far-reaching is the likelihood that it spawns an inadequate doctrine of creation and distracts attention from the biblical mandate of creation care. Has the time come to boldly go and take more seriously the admonition of Charles Darwin in the Origin of Species (quoting Francis Bacon) that 'no-one out of a weak conceit of sobriety should think or maintain that he can search too far or be too well studied in the book of God's word or in the book of God's words [divinity or science], but that all should endeavour an endless proficiency in both'?*

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The highest priority for Christians is generally evangelism, set out in the 'Great Commission' (Mt 28: 19). Creation care is generally much lower on the agenda of many Christians, usually regarded as little more than an enthusiasm for specialists, almost a distraction from the God-given obligation to evangelise. This essay argues that this is not the biblical order of priority, and suggests that a major factor (perhaps *the* major factor) in this misunderstanding is the distraction arising from endless debates about evolution, seemingly driven by fears that accepting evolution means ejecting God from the world he created. These debates lead to a non-scriptural dualism in our attitude to God's world.

In pre-scientific days, there was no difficulty about accepting God as the author and sustainer of all things; indeed, there was little alternative for such a belief. True, there was the ever-intrusive problem about the origin and existence of evil in the 'good' world that God had created. However, this could be attributed to the consequence of living in a 'fallen world', from which Christ will deliver us when he returns in glory at the end of time. Meanwhile the hand of God could be seen everywhere in his world; natural theology comfortably complemented the full revelation of God and

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his work as revealed in the bible. Unfortunately for such 'traditionalist' beliefs, growth in knowledge forces a continual need to rethink. As we learn more and more about how things work, God cannot be used as the only explanation of everyday events.

### **A diminishing God?**

For some, this advancing knowledge was – and is – exciting, but for others it seems to diminish the room for God's operations and hence apparently to challenge his sovereignty. The simplest – albeit simplistic – solution has always been to deny the findings of science or the integrity of scientists. Augustine railed against this attitude sixteen centuries ago,

It is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics [the natural world] ... To defend their utterly foolish and obviously untrue statements, they will try to call upon Holy Scripture for proof and even recite from memory many passages which they think support their position, although they understand neither what they say nor the things about which they make assertions.<sup>2</sup>

The consequence of disputing apparently well attested facts not only alienates outsiders from the Gospel (which was Augustine's concern), but also means that the implications of God's revelation about his creative work are not followed through.

A more sophisticated solution has been to reposition God as an architect or engineer, as most notoriously expounded by William Paley at the beginning of the nineteenth century: God is involved, but relegated to a deist operator, not the 'hands-on' sustainer as described in the Bible. In fact, Paley's thesis was not even particularly Christian. Paley based his notions of right and wrong on purely natural reasoning, 'confident that all men could be brought to agree'. There were efforts by 1830 to remove Paley's books from the compulsory reading list at Cambridge University because of 'his emphasis on Bentham's utilitarian principles'. But the recognition of so-called 'deep time' and 'deep space' made Paley's approach intellectually implausible as well as theologically questionable. Even as he wrote, it was becoming apparent that the Earth was hundreds of thousands, if not millions of years old. This stretching of time was an Achilles heel for traditional natural theology. A creator could presumably design an organism perfectly adapted to a particular environment, but this perfection would disappear if the environment was not constant. Adaptation to climate, to the physical structure of the Earth's surface, or to predators or competitors is possible only if organisms themselves can change. At the same time,

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Taylor, J.H. (trans.), New York: Paulist Press (1982), pp. 42-43.

better knowledge of the distribution of animals and plants was leading to the suggestion that there might have been separate acts of creation in different places.

All this stirred considerable theological ferment. In the first half of the nineteenth century traditional natural theology was under threat. It received a near-fatal hammer blow in 1844 with the publication of the *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* by Robert Chambers, effectively a tract against Paley's deism.<sup>3</sup> Chambers wrote that when there is a choice between special creation and the operation of general laws instituted by the creator, 'I would say that the latter is generally preferable as it implies a far grander view of the divine power than the other'.

Charles Darwin had already formulated his evolutionary ideas when the *Vestiges* appeared. He welcomed the book on the grounds that 'it has done excellent service in calling in this country attention to the subject and in removing prejudices', although 'the geology strikes me as bad & his zoology far worse'. But it carried dangers: the geologist Karl Vogt (1817-95), who translated the *Vestiges* into German, used it as a vehicle to attack religion for opposing scientific advances. Together with his contemporary Ludwig Büchner (1824-99), author of *Kraft und Stoff* (1857; English edn 1864, as *Force and Matter*), he is regarded as a significant catalyst in splitting science from religion and the consequent assumption that there is nothing outside the material world. Paley, Vogt and Büchner all contributed – in different ways – to the notion of a dualism between creator and creation. My concern in this essay is with the consequences of this dualism, and in particular with its effect in demoting the natural world from its belonging to God and its dependence upon God (Ps. 24: 1), to merely a material entity, however wonderful and God-given.

## Darwin and Darwinism

Fifteen years after the *Vestiges* came the *Origin*, presenting evidence of evolutionary change in the biological world and making sense of a mass of facts in comparative anatomy, biogeography, classification and fossils – but also providing an easily understood way of how the world could come into being without supernatural agency. Does this make Charles Darwin anti-Christian? Or did Oxford theologian Aubrey Moore get it right when he wrote a generation after the *Origin of Species*, that Darwin did the work of a friend under the guise of a foe by making it impossible to accept the Enlightenment assumption of an occasionally interfering absentee landlord?<sup>4</sup> For Moore, Darwinism was

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3 Secord, J. *Victorian Sensation*, Chicago: Chicago University Press (2000).

4 Moore, A. 'The Christian doctrine of God', in Gore, C. (ed.) *Lux Mundi*: 57-109, London: John Murray (1889), p. 99.

infinitely more Christian than the theory of 'special creation' for it implies the immanence of God in nature, and the omnipresence of His creative power... Deism, even when it struggled to be orthodox, constantly spoke of God as we might speak of an absentee landlord, who cares nothing for his property so long as he gets his rent. Yet nothing more opposed to the language of the Bible and the Fathers can hardly be imagined... For Christians the *facts of nature* are the *acts of God*. Religion relates these facts to God as their Author, science relates them to one another as integral parts of a visible order. Religion does not tell us of their interrelations, science cannot speak of their relation to God. Yet the religious view of the world is infinitely deepened and enriched when we not only recognize it as the work of God but are able to trace the relation of part to part.<sup>5</sup>

The fact of evolutionary change was rapidly accepted.<sup>6</sup> Owen Chadwick judged that 'the compatibility of evolution and Christian doctrine was increasingly acknowledged "among more educated Christians" between 1860 and 1885; after 1876, acceptance of evolution was both permissible and respectable'.<sup>7</sup> It is often noted that many of the authors of the *Fundamentals*, the series of booklets produced between 1910 and 1915 to expound the 'fundamental beliefs' of Protestant theology as defined by the General Assembly of the American Presbyterian Church, were sympathetic to evolution. One of the contributors (G.F. Wright) wrote, 'If only the evolutionists would incorporate into their system the sweetness of the Calvinistic doctrine of Divine Sovereignty, the church would make no objection to their speculations.'<sup>8</sup> Princeton theologian B.B. Warfield, a passionate advocate of the inerrancy of the Bible, believed that evolution could provide a tenable 'theory of the method of divine providence in the creation of mankind'.<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding, there are problems associated with evolution which have theological implications – and these are repeatedly used in attempts to discredit the whole of evolutionary science, usually in the interest of understanding God and his work in creation.

The evolutionary process involves death, disease, stress and an enor-

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5 Moore, A. *Science and the Faith*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner (1892), pp. 184-185.

6 Moore, J.R. *The Post-Darwinian Controversies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1979).

7 Chadwick, O. *The Victorian Church*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1970), pp. 23-28. It is said that in 1880 only two 'working naturalists' in the United States were not evolutionists: Numbers, R. *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism*, New York: Knopf (1992), p. 7.

8 Cited by Colin A. Russell *Cross-currents*, Leicester: IVP (1985), p. 163.

9 See Noll, M.A. & Livingstone, D.N. (eds.) *B.B. Warfield: Evolution, Science and Scripture*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker (2000).

mous amount of apparent waste.<sup>10</sup> It troubled Darwin himself. Theologians and moralists have never stopped wrestling with this dilemma.<sup>11</sup> Darwin's own answer in the *Origin* was, 'It may not be a logical deduction, but to my imagination it is far more satisfactory to look at such instincts [such as parasitism, or the way 'a cat plays with a mouse']... not as specially endowed or created instincts, but as small consequences of all organic beings, namely, multiply, vary, let the strongest live and the weakest die.'<sup>12</sup> A second and specifically scientific difficulty is that natural selection – the most important agent of evolutionary change – depends on inherited variation, which originates in random changes in the chemistry of genes (i.e. in DNA). However, adaptation results from the selection of advantageous variants in breeding individuals, and this is a deterministic process. Darwinian evolution itself is not the result of chance.

The fact is that there is no unanswerable theological objection to evolution per se – but there is the undeniable fact that evolutionary processes can be described without invoking any metaphysical agent. This has made many authors uncomfortable and led them on a search to find room for God somewhere in the evolutionary mechanism, most commonly in somehow directing the nature of the mutational events. But behind this is a bigger worry: is God necessary? Is evolution wholly naturalistic? Has the demise of Paley's watchmaker meant that God is irrelevant in and therefore excluded from the evolutionary process? This problem is compounded by some Christian apologists defining 'naturalism' (the assumption that the laws of nature determine natural events) in an unnecessarily limited way – as implying the non-existence of any supernatural agent.<sup>13</sup> This is a wholly arbitrary restriction. It has been answered powerfully on philosophical grounds by Eliot Sober.<sup>14</sup>

The assumption of a God-excluding naturalism lies behind much of the

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10 Reviewing Phillip Johnson's *Darwin on Trial* (see Note 19), historian David Hull wrote:

The evolutionary process is rife with happenstance, contingency, incredible waste, death, pain and horror.... Whatever the God implied by evolutionary theory and the data of natural selection may be like, he is not the Protestant God of waste not, want not. He is also not even the awful God portrayed in the Book of Job. The God of the Galapagos is careless, wasteful, indifferent, almost diabolical. He is certainly not the sort of God to whom anyone would be inclined to pray ('God of the Galapagos', *Nature* (1991) 352, 485-486)

11 Southgate, C. *The Groaning of Creation*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox (2008); Berry, R.J. & Noble, T.A. (eds.) *Darwin, Creation and the Fall*, Nottingham: Apollos (2009).

12 1st edn., pp. 243-244.

13 e.g. Alvin Plantinga in *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, New York: Oxford University Press (2011), p.x. Plantinga defines naturalism as meaning 'there is no God'. Michael Ruse has discussed evolutionary naturalism at length (including Plantinga's views), and concludes that the problem is largely due to an over-restrictive definition of naturalism: *Evolutionary Naturalism*, London: Routledge (1995); *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2001), pp. 94-110.

14 Sober, E. *Did Darwin Write the Origin Backwards?*, New York: Prometheus Books (2011).

theological and philosophical debate about evolution. Of course one can have a faith that divine action does not happen (this is the belief of the 'new atheists'), but this is a preconception which should be exposed for what it is – an unnecessary supposition.

### **A God who is too small**

There is no doubt that religious confusions about evolution have been exacerbated by the various sorts of 'creationism' which lie outside both science and orthodox theology. As a matter of history, most religious attacks on evolution do not stem from the debates prompted by the *Origin* itself, but rather to the version of extreme literalism espoused by the first generation of Seventh-day Adventists,<sup>15</sup> notably George McCready Price whose cry was 'No Adam, no Fall; no Fall, no Atonement; no Atonement, no Savior'.<sup>16</sup> By the end of the 1920s, three American states (Tennessee, Mississippi and Arkansas) had passed laws banning the teaching of evolution in government-funded schools. In Dayton, Tennessee, John Scopes was convicted in 1925 in the notorious 'Monkey Trial'. This proved a disaster for anti-evolutionists<sup>17</sup> and organised 'creationism' in the US lapsed into relative quiescence for several decades. This uneasy peace was shattered in 1961 when the *Genesis Flood* appeared, a book written by John Whitcomb, a Bible teacher, and Henry Morris, a hydraulic engineer.<sup>18</sup> It rapidly became a key text for 'young earth creationism'. In an attack reminiscent of Augustine's anathema, the authors rejected the established findings of geology, palaeontology and archaeology on the grounds that the world had been so ravaged by a worldwide flood that (they claimed) orthodox stratigraphy cannot be applied. Such 'young earth creationism' continues to attract a large number of adherents. Bibles are still produced with the date '4004 BC' heading the references at the beginning of Genesis.

A more nuanced variant of 'creationism' is 'Intelligent Design' (ID). Although vehemently denied by its proponents, ID is in effect a revival of the classical argument of God as a Divine Watchmaker. ID first came to general awareness in a book *Darwin on Trial*,<sup>19</sup> written by a Californian

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15 Numbers, R.L. *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism*, New York: Knopf (1992).

16 He apparently learnt this from an English atheist, Robert Blatchford, who wrote in 1903, 'Accepting evolution, how can we believe in a Fall? When did man fall? Was it before he ceased to be a monkey, or after? Was it when he was a tree man, or later? Was it in the Stone Age, or the Bronze Age, or the Age of Iron? And if there never was a fall, why should there be any atonement?' (Cited by Kent, J. *From Darwin to Blatchford*, London: Dr Williams's Trust (1966), p.11).

17 Larson, E. *Summer for the Gods*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1998).

18 Whitcomb, J.C. & Morris, H.M. *The Genesis Flood*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company (1961).

19 Johnson, P. *Darwin on Trial*, Downer's Grove, IL: IVP (1991).

lawyer, Phillip Johnson, reacting against the naturalism of Richard Dawkins and some rather sophisticated criticisms of conventional evolutionary theory by palaeontologist Colin Patterson and biochemist Michael Denton.<sup>20</sup> The main complaint of Johnson and his followers was not evolution as such, but the assumption that belief in evolution leads inevitably and inexorably to atheism. A scientific case for ID has been claimed by Michael Behe on the grounds that some biological mechanisms and processes are 'irreducibly complex' and incapable of evolution by natural selection.<sup>21</sup> Behe's examples have received short shrift from reviewers;<sup>22</sup> they are in fact nothing more than the dangerous assumption that God can be found in the gaps in knowledge – an assumption that is open to contradiction by further discoveries.<sup>23</sup>

ID has a much wider acceptance in Christian circles than it warrants.<sup>24</sup> The reason for this probably lies in its seductiveness in apparently finding a place for a 'hands-on' God, one who is a Designer as well as a Creator and Redeemer. This is an understandable and laudable ambition, but it portrays a God who is far too small; one who cannot really be understood as sustainer as well as creator (Ps 104: 28-30; Col. 1: 17; Heb. 1: 13). As Donald MacKay wrote, 'The God in whom the Bible invites belief is no

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20 Yerxa, D.A. 'Phillip Johnson and the origins of the intelligent design movement, 1977-1991', *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* (2002) 54, 47-52. See also Johnson, P.E. & Lamoureux, D.O. *Darwinism Defeated?*, Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing (1999).

21 Behe, M. *Darwin's Black Box*, New York: Free Press (1996); *The Edge of Evolution*, New York: Free Press (2007).

22 Shanks, N. *God, the Devil and Darwin*, New York: Oxford University Press (2004); Kitcher, P. *Living with Darwin*, New York: Oxford University Press (2007); Alexander, D.R. 'After Darwin: is Intelligent Design intelligent?', in Northcott, M.S. & Berry, R.J. (eds.) *Theology After Darwin*, Milton Keynes: Paternoster (2009), pp. 22-40

23 The notion of the 'God of the gaps' is said to have originated with Henry Drummond (*The Ascent of Man*, Glasgow: Hodder & Stoughton (1904), chap. 10) who chastised those Christians who point to things that science could not yet explain – 'gaps which they will fill up with God' – and urges them to embrace all nature as God's, the work of '... an immanent God, which is the God of Evolution, is infinitely grander than the occasional wonder-worker, who is the God of an old theology'. Francis Collins warns

Faith that places God in the gaps of current understanding about the natural world may be headed for crisis if advances in science subsequently fill those gaps. Faced with incomplete understanding of the natural world, believers should be cautious about invoking the divine in areas of current mystery, lest they build an unnecessary theological argument that is doomed to later destruction.... ID is a 'God of the gaps' theory, inserting a supposition of the need for supernatural intervention in places that its proponents claim science cannot explain...The warm embrace of ID by believers, particularly by evangelical Christians, is completely understandable, given the way in which Darwin's theory has been portrayed by some outspoken evolutionists as demanding atheism. But this ship is not headed to the promised land; it is headed to the bottom of the ocean. (Collins, F. *The Language of God*, New York: Free Press (2006), pp. 93, 193, 195).

24 A popular book by Lee Strobel, *The Case for a Creator*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (2004), which purports to be a well-balanced investigation into evolution and biblical faith is fatally marred by the selection of the 'witnesses' interviewed by Strobel.

“Cosmic Mechanic”. Rather is he the Cosmic Artist, the creative Upholder, without whose constant activity there would be not even chaos, but just nothing ... To invoke “natural processes” is not to escape from divine activity, but only to make hypotheses about its regularity....<sup>25</sup>

### A theology of nature

Where does all this leave belief in the biblical God who is active and sovereign in his creation?<sup>26</sup> Natural theology in the Thomist sense as a proof of God’s existence is dead, although it is implicit in both ‘special creationism’ as espoused by the authors of the *Genesis Flood* (note 18) and their followers and by the adherents of ID with their emphasis on irreducible complexity.<sup>27</sup> Notwithstanding, the Bible is clear that God can be seen as controlling events in the natural world (Mk 4: 41; Acts 14: 17; Rom. 1: 19, 20) and his work inferred therein (Ps 104; Mt 6: 26-30). This recognition is vital. Religious debates over evolution are significant for students or seekers (as Augustine realised), but they are much more important in distracting from the general need to understand God’s relation to his creation.<sup>28</sup> Christians will continue to ignore the need and responsibility for creation care if they continue to argue about evolution. There is a vital need for a theology of nature which can relate the God revealed in Scripture to his creation which is our dwelling-place.

The effect of this lack of a robust theology of nature should not be underestimated; it is a major fault line in biblical understanding. We acknowledge God as creator, but allow ourselves to be diverted into assuming that this means we must somehow hold on to our interpretation of his creating work, either by rejecting non-biblical sources (i.e. the findings of science) or by constructing deist hypotheses of one sort or another. We build a dangerous disjunction into our theology, by degrading the world into an object as distinct from God’s work, designed and presented to us for his praise (Ps 148). As a result, we largely ignore the biblical implications of this belief. We are highly selective in our responses to God’s calling and purpose for us. John Stott has insisted on the need to take together both Psalm 24:1 (‘To the Lord belong the earth and everything in it’) and Psalm 115:16 (‘The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to mankind’):

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25 MacKay, D.M. *Science and Christian Faith Today*, London: Falcon (1960), pp.10,15.

26 O’Brien, G.J. & Harris, T.J. ‘What on *Earth* is God doing? Relating theology and science through biblical theology’, *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* (2012) 64, 147-156.

27 Rice, R. ‘Creationist ecology?’, *Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America* (1986) 67(1), 8-10; Petto, A.J. & Godfrey, L.R. (eds.) *Scientists Confront Intelligent Design and Creationism*, New York: W.W. Norton (2007), (esp. pp. 244-247).

28 Karl Barth’s rejection of natural theology has been widely examined and criticised, e.g. Torrance, T.F. ‘The problem of natural theology in the thought of Karl Barth’, *Religious Studies* (1970) 6, 121-135; Barr, J. *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1993). The debate surrounding Barth’s views is outside the remit of this essay.

‘the earth belongs to both God and man – to God because he made it, to us because he has given it to us. Not, of course, that he has handed it over to us so completely as to retain neither rights nor control over it, but he has given it to us to rule on his behalf.’<sup>29</sup> Peter Harris, the founder of *A Rocha*, has commented that

As I have puzzled over the causes for current (not historic, incidentally) evangelical indifference to creation ... it has become uncomfortably clear that its results lie in unbiblical belief. It is not that evangelicals shrink from paying a price in lost comfort for a change of lifestyle.... The problem is that we do not extend that commitment and concern to the wider creation, nor are we persuaded that God cares about it.<sup>30</sup>

The challenge is to look at what the Scriptures really say about creation and not merely use them as ammunition for historic disputes.

The very first pronouncement in Scripture related to humankind is ‘Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, and every thing that moves on the earth’ (Gen. 1: 28). The command to ‘be fruitful and increase’ is the same as that given to all animals (Gen. 1: 22); only humans are told to ‘subdue and have dominion’. This has too often been interpreted in a wholly anthropocentric and utilitarian way, sanctioning unlimited exploitation of the natural world. This understanding ignores the setting of the verse. The command is given in the context of humankind made in God’s image. This is a phrase much debated<sup>31</sup> but which C. F. D. Moule concludes as most satisfyingly understood as ‘that which sees it as basically responsibility’.<sup>32</sup> It underlines our relationship with the creator, which was disrupted by disobedience as described by Genesis 3. It is further emphasised by the ideal of rule for ancient Israel, which was servanthood, not despotism (Ps. 72). We are God’s vicegerents on earth. The common description is that we are his stewards. The word ‘steward’ is a problem for some because they see connotations of an absent landlord, a hierarchy, or a vassalship, but we should not be distracted by terminology.<sup>33</sup> A steward has a much more positive

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29 Stott, J.R.W. *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 4th edn., Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (2006), p. 146.

30 Harris, P. ‘A new look at old passages’, in Berry, R.J. (ed.) *The Care of Creation*, Leicester: IVP (2000), pp. 132-139.

31 Middleton, J.R. *The Liberating Image*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos (2005).

32 Moule, C.F.D. *Man and Nature in the New Testament*, London: Athlone (1964), p. 5. Claus Westermann argues similarly: ‘The uniqueness of human beings consists in their being God’s counterparts. The relationship to God is not something which is added to human existence; humans are created in such a way that their very existence is intended to be their relationship to God’ (*Genesis, 1-11*, Scullion, J.J. (trans.) London: SPCK (1984), p. 158).

33 Palmer, C. ‘Stewardship: a case study in environmental ethics’, in Ball, I., Goodall, M., Palmer, C. & Reader, J. (eds.) *The Earth Beneath*, London: SPCK (1992), 67-86; Santmire, P. ‘Partnership with nature according to the scripture: beyond the theology of stewardship’, *Christian Scholar’s Review* (2003) 32, 381-412; Berry, R.J. (ed.) *Environmental Stewardship*,

role than 'preservation'. Possible alternative words are agent, manager, factor, trustee or simply creation-carer. The key is that we have a responsibility towards our world as a consequence of being in God's image; we are not merely animals with an interest in protecting our kin and resources.

The tradition of stewardship was clearly built into the behaviour and farming practices of Benedictine monasteries.<sup>34</sup> Many years after Benedict, Calvin wrote in his commentary on Genesis 2: 15, 'The earth was given to man, with this condition, that he should occupy himself in its cultivation... Let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things he possesses.' A century after Calvin, Sir Matthew Hale, a distinguished seventeenth century Chief Justice of England, expanded the idea in a much-quoted passage from his book *The Primitive Origination of Mankind*, published in 1677: 'The end of man's creation was that he should be the Viceroy of the great God of Heaven and Earth in this inferior world; his steward, villicus [overseer], bayliff or farmer of this goodly farm of the lower world.'

In Hale's view there was no escape from our responsibility to God for the proper management of the earth, with the task to control the wilder animals and to protect the weaker, to preserve and improve useful plants and eliminate weeds. It was an important idea, but one which was implicitly challenged through a rationalisation proposed by Hale's contemporary, John Locke (1632-1704), that a person's labour belongs to them, to do with it whatever he or she wants. Since an individual owns their own labour, society is not involved; if the right to the ownership of property depends on personal labour, property rights carry no social obligation. It was an argument that degraded stewardship responsibilities and effectively opened the way to the industrial revolution. People changed from responsible stewards and God's image-bearers to being 'human resources'.

Nevertheless, the stewardship tradition has persisted. For evangelicals in particular, the language of rule and dominion can be reliably read as a mandate for a stewardship model of humans' care of the Earth. But it needs careful handling. Richard Bauckham argues that the problem is that 'stewardship remains, like most interpretations of the Genesis "dominion", an image that depicts the human relationship to creation in an entirely "vertical" way. It sets humans above the rest of creation, sharply differentiated from it, in God-given charge of it.'<sup>35</sup> Although the steward-

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London: T&T Clark (2006). Lovelock relates the word 'steward' rather mischievously to an etymology from 'swineherd' or 'pig-keeper' ('The greening of science', in Wakeford, T. & Walters, M. (eds.) *Science for the Earth*, Chichester: Wiley (1995), 39-63, p. 61).

<sup>34</sup> Lynn White ended his enquiry (note 38) by proposing Francis of Assisi as the patron saint of ecology. René Dubos has suggested that Benedict would be a better choice since 'reverence [for the natural world] is not enough, because man has never been a passive witness of nature', (*A God Within*, London: Angus & Robertson (1993), p. 173).

<sup>35</sup> Bauckham, R. *Living with Other Creatures*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press (2011), p. 62.

ship model 'has had an enormous influence for good in giving Christians a framework within which to approach ecological issues with concern and responsibility', it 'also has distinct limitations that consist more in what it does not say than what it does.'<sup>36</sup> In particular, stewardship carries the implication that humans are set over creation, not within it. A major theme for Bauckham is that our creatureliness is more fundamental than our distinctiveness. 'We need the humility to know ourselves as creatures within creation, not Gods over creation, the humility of knowing that only God is God,' a point made unequivocally in Job 38 – 41; 'so often, in the Christian tradition, we have thought of the non-human creation merely as a stage on which the drama of the history of God is being played out – and a temporary stage at that, due to be dismantled and removed when the story reaches its final climax.'<sup>37</sup>

Despite the apparently clear inference of stewardship in Scripture, the concept of 'creation-carer' has remained stubbornly peripheral in mainstream Christian thinking. There is no doubt that a large part of the reason for this is a persistent misinterpretation of our relationship to the natural world. The 1967 paper by Lynn White has been enormously influential in this regard, particularly his judgment that

in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion that the world has ever seen... Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature, but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.... Despite Darwin, we are *not*, in our hearts, part of the natural process. We are superior to it, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim.<sup>38</sup>

White's argument has been widely criticised by both historians and theologians, but there is uncomfortable truth in his diagnosis. The problem is that identifying oneself too closely with the non-human environment carries the danger of aligning oneself with somewhat marginal theologies (or heresies) – feminism, Gaia, Teilhardism, or the risk of animism. Many environmentalists have opted for some variety of process theology.<sup>39</sup> This may well be a factor in the fact that conservative evangelicals – particularly in the United States – have tended to shy away from active

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36 His Sarum Lectures of 2006 were entitled 'Beyond stewardship: the Bible and the community of creation'. They are published as *Bible and Ecology*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd (2010).

37 Bauckham *op. cit.*, (35), p. 46.

38 White, L. 'The historical roots of our ecologic crisis', *Science*, NY (1967) 155, 1203-1207.

39 This has been strong In World Council of Churches thought, e.g. Cobb, J.R *Is It Too Late?* Beverley Hills, CA: Bruce (1972); Birch, L.C., Eakin, W. & McDaniel, J.B. *Liberating Life*, New York: Orbis (1990).

environmentalism,<sup>40</sup> even to the extent of denying climate change.<sup>41</sup> The tragedy is that this reaction strengthens the estrangement of Christians from the divine mandate of creation care.

### God's world

The Bible is explicit that the world belongs to God, and that he has entrusted it to us. In theory we acknowledge this, but our practice is an almost universal failure to act on the belief that we live in God's creation. Our response to environmental problems has been overwhelmingly based on pragmatism rather than doctrinal conviction. We increasingly recognise the wounding effects of climate change – pollution, biodiversity loss, population pressures, and so on – and in recent decades we have become uncomfortably aware that environmental change impacts unequally on the poor of the world (particularly in tropical Africa and SE Asia), because they do not have the capacity (or technology) to reduce their influence. In the affluent parts of the world, we can insulate ourselves from our environmental actions, but elsewhere failure to care for the environment means an unequivocal failure to care for my brother; environmental damage leads to injustice. More and more people – believers and non-believers alike – are concerned about these effects, but responses to them have been almost wholly rational and secular.<sup>42</sup>

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40 Significant exceptions to this generalisation were the 'Evangelical declaration on the care of Creation', for which see Berry, R.J. (ed.) *The Care of Creation*, Leicester: IVP (2000), and a 'Call to Action' from the Lausanne Movement Consultation on Creation Care and the Gospel, November 2012 <http://www.lausanne.org/docs/2012Creation-Care-Call-to-Action>.

41 Oreskes, N. & Conway, E.M. *Merchants of Doubt*, London: Bloomsbury (2010); Powell, J.L. *The Inquisition of Climate Science*, New York: Columbia University Press (2011); Rawles, K. *The Carbon Cycle*, Uig, Isle of Lewis: Two Ravens Press (2012).

42 The first major secular initiative to describe and act on the situation was the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972. It had the unfortunate effect of separating efforts towards development (and the alleviation of poverty) from environmental concern. This provoked a World Conservation Strategy (1980) emphasising the interdependence of development and environment, and identifying the key need for sustainability in resource use. This spawned the Brundtland Report (*Our Common Future*) in 1987 and thence a revised Conservation Strategy (*Caring for the Earth*) in 1991. *Caring for the Earth* introduced ethics as an essential element of conservation and development practice and was a source document for the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (the 'Earth Summit'). This has been followed by the World Summit on Sustainable Development ('Rio+10') in 2002 and the UN Conference on Sustainable Development ('Rio+20') in 2012. The momentum from these led to a set of Millennium Development Goals (2002) which have a large environmental component; a Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2001-5) which concluded that 'human actions are depleting Earth's natural capital, putting such strain on the environment that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted'; and an Earth Charter – 'a declaration of fundamental ethical principles for building a just sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century'. The Ecosystem Assessment and the targets in the Millennium Development Goals are part of an increasing global perception that we are living off natural capital, and extracting an unsustainable amount from it. They represent important – probably vital

This does not mean that there has been no religious input or involvement in environmental matters, but it has certainly not been an important driver of opinion. A milestone was Jürgen Moltmann convincing the 1983 Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), that the traditional Christian call for 'peace with justice' was futile unless it took place within a *whole* creation, a creation with 'integrity'. His advocacy led to the replacement of the notion of seeking a 'Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society' which had dominated WCC policy in the 1970s with a more inclusive 'Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation' (JPIC) Programme. It was welcomed by developing countries, who had (rightly or wrongly) associated 'sustainability' with the maintenance of colonial injustice; for them, JPIC implied the rejection of a global hegemony in favour of regional associations. It was also important that environmental concern should be seen as integral to 'justice' and 'peace'; the concept of the 'integrity of creation' was intended to convey the dependence of creation on its creator and the worth and dignity of creation in its own right.

The JPIC process culminated in a global consultation in Seoul in 1990, which revealed more discord than harmony; sectional and marginal interests dominated the reports and blunted the conclusions. In reaction, the World Evangelical Fellowship Unit on Ethics and Society convened a consultation at the Au Sable Institute in the USA, leading to the setting up of an Evangelical Environmental Network and the drafting of an 'Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation'.<sup>43</sup>

There have been a host of other Christian initiatives. Successive Lambeth Declarations have drawn attention to environmental problems and called for action; the Church of England General Synod has commissioned and received fairly substantial reports on three occasions;<sup>44</sup> the 2nd European Ecumenical Assembly led to the setting up of EcoCongregation, a programme of involvement and commitment for local churches, and a European Christian Environmental Network which sponsors a 'time for creation' every autumn; two Crosslinks missionaries in Portugal established *A Rocha*, dedicated to creation care and now working in eighteen countries;<sup>45</sup> in 2010 the Cape Town Commitment of the Lausanne Movement declared 'we cannot claim to love God while abusing what belongs to Christ by right of creation, redemption and inheritance; we care for the earth and responsibly use its abundant resources, not according to the

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– elements for providing a sustainable future for humankind. But they have been driven entirely without acknowledgement of a creator or any underpinning theology.

43 'Evangelicals and the environment', *Evangelical Review of Theology* (1993) 17(2); Carling, R.C.J. & Carling, M.A. (eds.) *A Christian Approach to the Environment*, Cheltenham: John Ray Initiative (1995); Berry, R.J. (ed.) *The Care of Creation*, Leicester: IVP (2000).

44 *Man in His Living Environment*, (1970); *Our Responsibility for the Living Environment*, (1986); *Sharing God's World*, (2005).

45 Harris, P *Kingfisher's Fire*, Oxford: Monarch (2008).

rationale of the secular world, but for the Lord's sake'. A follow-up Consultation on Creation Care in 2012 had two conclusions: 'Creation care is a gospel issue within the lordship of Christ'; and 'we are faced with a crisis that is pressing, urgent, and must be resolved in our generation'. This complements the 'Fifth mark of Mission' agreed by the Anglican Consultative Council in 1990, 'to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth'.<sup>46</sup>

There is no doubt whatsoever that there is much Christian motivated concern for the environment, and much interest and commitment to action, generally justified by appeals to a created and precious world. But virtually all of it is driven by utilitarian motives, responding to anthropogenic damage; it has rarely been seen as a gospel imperative. Christians have consistently invoked the consequences of the Fall set out in Genesis 3 to describe environmental problems, but have been much less rigorous in interpreting the Fall in the light of Paul's exposition of it in Romans 8: 18-24, clearly applied by Charles Cranfield in an oft-reprinted paragraph emphasising our failure to take stewardship seriously.<sup>47</sup>

The Romans 8 passage makes it clear that our calling is not simply to ourselves and our current neighbours, or even to our children and grandchildren, but to the whole future of creation. In Francis Bridger's words,

We are called to be stewards of the earth by virtue not simply of our orientation to the Edenic command of the Creator but also because of our orientation to the future. In acting to preserve and enhance the created order, we are pointing to the coming rule of God in Christ ... The knowledge that it is God's world, that our efforts are not directed toward the creation of an ideal utopia but that we are, under God, building bridgeheads of the kingdom serves to humble us and to bring us to the place of ethical obedience.<sup>48</sup>

Tom Wright makes essentially the same point:

Paul is talking [in Rom 8: 18-21] about the glory which he says is to be revealed 'to us' (v.18). What he means by that is instantly explained and unpacked in the next few verses. The whole creation, the entire

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46 *Mission in a Broken World: Report of ACC-8 Wales 1990*, London: Church House Publishing (1990).

47 Cranfield, C. 'Some observations on Romans 8: 19-21', in Banks, R. (ed.) *Reconciliation and Hope: New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology presented to L.L. Morris on his 60th Birthday*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans (1974), pp. 224-230, p. 227. It is reprinted in Leon Morris's commentary on *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans (1988), p. 322), by John Stott in his *Bible Speaks Today* volume on *Romans* (Leicester: IVP (1994), p. 240), by Berry, R.J. 'Did Adam dethrone humankind?', in *Darwin, Creation and the Fall*, Berry, R.J. & Noble, T.A. (eds.). Nottingham: Apollos (2009), p.69.

48 Bridger, F. 'Ecology and eschatology: a neglected dimension', *Tyndale Bulletin* (1990) 41, 290-301. See also O'Brien, G. 'Perfecting not perfect: Christology and pneumatology within an imperfect yet purposeful creation', *Theology and Science* (2009) 7, 407-419.

cosmos, is on tiptoe with expectation for God's glory to be revealed to his children. 'Glory' is not simply a kind of luminescence, as though the point of wisdom were that we would eventually shine like electric lightbulbs. 'Glory' means, among other things, rule and power and authority. As other writers (notably Saint John the Divine) make clear, part of the point of God's saving of his people is that they are destined not merely for a relaxing endless holiday in a place called 'heaven', but that they are destined to be God's stewards, ruling over the whole creation with healing and restorative justice and love.

Wright's conclusion is:

Jesus is coming – plant a tree.<sup>49</sup>

Henri Blocher argues similarly, 'If man obeys God, he would be the means of blessing the earth, but in his insatiable greed ... and in his short-sighted selfishness, he pollutes the earth and destroys it. He turns a garden into a desert (cf. Rev. 11: 18). That is the main thrust of the curse of Genesis 3'.<sup>50</sup>

Unless one assumes premillenarianism and the destruction of this present world, which used to be fashionable in evangelical circles through the influence of the Scofield Reference Bible and is still common in the United States,<sup>51</sup> the implication from Scripture is unequivocal: creation care is not an optional extra for enthusiasts, but is inseparable from our calling as Christians. A theology of nature is integral to the whole of God's working – in creating, sustaining and redeeming.<sup>52</sup> Failure to care for creation is a failure of obedience; it is sin.

### Recalcitrant dualism

Anyone who believes in a cause promotes their understanding by all means at their disposal. Proponents of anti-scientific views of any sort are no different. Confrontation between holders of contrasting views is rarely convincing<sup>53</sup> the commonest tactic used is to claim that the existence of more than one interpretation implies uncertainty in the commonly accepted interpretation. This strategy has been used against those who argue that smoking causes lung cancer or that human activities are lead-

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49 Wright, T. 'Jesus is coming – plant a tree', *The Green Bible*, London: Collins (2008), 172-185.

50 Blocher, H. *In the Beginning*, Leicester: IVP (1984), p. 184.

51 Curry-Roper, J.M. 'Contemporary Christian eschatologies and their relation to environmental stewardship', *Professional Geographer* (1990) 42, 157-169; Northcott, M.S. *An Angel Directs the Storm*, London: I.B. Taurus (2004).

52 Toly, N.J. & Block, D.I. (eds.) *Keeping God's Earth*, Downer's Grove, IL: IVP (2010).

53 Gordin, M.D. *The Pseudoscience Wars: Immanuel Velikovsky and the Birth of the Modern Fringe*, Chicago: University of Chicago press (2012).

ing to climate change<sup>54</sup> it is the basis for ‘creationists’ seeking ‘equal time’ with conventional biological teaching for their views.<sup>55</sup> The tobacco industry and ‘big oil’ have vigorously sought to protect their interests by sowing doubt about scientific claims, backed by large sums of money. The vested interest of ‘creationists’ is much more honourable – fighting to keep God in his world – but their methods are not dissimilar. They have considerable financial resources for their fight.<sup>56</sup> But the consequence of their efforts is dangerously counterproductive. Their effect is that creation is devalued from being God’s world as described in the Bible; it is reduced instead to a ‘thing’, one brought about by divine fiat but where the sense of the intimate involvement of God in both the past and present outcomes of the world so vividly described by evolutionary biologists is completely lost.

Ultimately, how we treat creation depends on how we view and value it. As ‘environment’ it nurtures, supports and surrounds us. We tend to accept it as a common good. While we may recognise that some of our impacts are potentially harmful – as when we destroy areas of natural habitat or pollute with noxious fumes or chemicals, or take more than our share of resources – the truth is that we almost certainly underestimate our influence.<sup>57</sup> Government Chief Scientist, John Beddington has described the ‘perfect storm’ coming to humankind by 2030, faced (as we are) with the need to produce by then 50% more food and energy and have available 30% more fresh water, whilst coping with climate change and population growth.<sup>58</sup> In all this, many Christians behave in almost the same way as non-Christians. In theory we recognise that the world was designed and made by a gracious God, and handed to us for our responsible use; in practice our attitude is brazenly dualistic. We treat the world as an enormous and convenient machine, maintained without any cost to us. Our reasons for failing in creation care are doubtless little different from all other causes of failure – greed, self-interest, short-sightedness, and so on. But underlying them all is, for too many of us, a feeble and defective understanding of God’s world and our responsibility to God for it.

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54 See note 41.

55 This has been repeatedly rejected in US courts: *Epperson v Arkansas* 1969, *Daniel v Waters* 1975, *Edwards v Aguillard* 1987, *Kitzmiller v Dover Area School Board* 2005; see *Petto & Godfrey op. cit.*, (27).

56 The total income of the anti-evolutionist organisations in the USA in 2008 was \$33 million of which the biggest organisation (*Answers in Genesis*) received \$22 million; in contrast the National Center for Science Education (which seeks to counteract anti-evolutionist teaching) got just over \$1 million. In 2003, the Discovery Institute (the main forum for ID) received over \$4 million. See: [http://www.pandasthumb.org/archives/2005/08/di\\_crsc\\_and\\_fin.html](http://www.pandasthumb.org/archives/2005/08/di_crsc_and_fin.html) and <http://pandasthumb.org/archives/2010/05/creationist-fin.html>

57 Carson, R. *Silent Spring*, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin (1962); Meadows, D.H., Meadows, D.L. & Randers, J. *The Limits to Growth*, New York: Universe Books (1972); Lynas, M. *Six Degrees*, London: Fourth Estate (2007); White, R.S. (ed.) *Creation in Crisis*, London: SPCK (2009); McGuire, B. *Waking the Giant*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2012).

58 ‘Food, energy, water and the climate: a perfect storm of global events?’ <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/goscience/docs/p/perfect-storm-paper> (accessed 15 June 2012).

And this brings the argument full circle. If the earth is little more than the stage for God's salvific purposes, it is effectively reified; it is degraded from the possession and delight of the creator as set forth in Scripture and can be legitimately treated as an object – useful and necessary, but still a 'thing'. Such an attitude can be traced back to the dualism embedded in human rationalising from the times of Plato and Descartes, and heightened by the outlook implanted by the eighteenth century enlightenment. Aubrey Moore saw the possibility of Darwinian thought as a way of uniting God's transcendence and immanence,<sup>59</sup> but the subsequent history of evolutionary disputes throughout the twentieth century have largely destroyed this. The situation has been made even worse by the stridency of the so-called 'new atheists'.

The need to respond to the insidiousness of persistent dualism is supported and strengthened by the drumbeat message in Scripture of God's covenant with his creation. In the Noachian covenant (Gen. 9: 8-17), God explicitly includes 'all creatures' alongside Noah and his family. Indeed, there is a strong case that God first covenanted with creation itself when he established order in it, long before humans appeared on the scene (Jer. 33: 25: 'These are the words of the Lord: If there were no covenant for days and night, and if I had not established a fixed order in heaven and earth, then I could spurn the descendants of Jacob and of my servant David'). He renewed his covenant repeatedly through history – with Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, culminating with Jesus the Christ. The God of Creation and the God of Redemption are one and the same (Rev. 4: 6-11). David Fergusson puts it: 'Creation can only be understood from the perspective of redemption. There is too much wastage, pain and untimely death to make this view possible apart from a particular conviction about the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection.'<sup>60</sup> For Oliver O'Donovan, 'The redemption of the world, and of mankind, does not serve only to put us back in the Garden of Eden where we began. It leads us on to that further destiny to which, even in the Garden of Eden, we were already directed.'<sup>61</sup> Richard Bauckham insists, 'Salvation is not the replacement but the renewal of creation. God's purpose in history and in the eschatological future does not abstract humans from nature, but heals the human relationship with nature.'<sup>62</sup>

Robert Murray concludes his examination of the 'cosmic covenant' by asking 'Have theologians betrayed the Bible's message?' He is clear that 'the Bible teaches us that neither sin nor salvation are affairs merely between us as individuals and God; sin entails alienation from our nature

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59 Moore, A. *op. cit.*, (5).

60 Fergusson, D. *The Cosmos and the Creator*, London: SPCK (1998), p. 87.

61 O'Donovan, O *Resurrection and Moral Order*, Leicester: IVP (1986), p.55.

62 Bauckham *op. cit.*, (36), p. 150.

which relates us to God's other creatures, while salvation entails our re-integration in a vaster order of harmony which embraces the whole cosmos, as we may interpret Paul's tersely-expressed vision in Romans 8.<sup>63</sup> Tom Wright describes Romans 8: 18-28 as 'one of the most central statements in the New Testament about what God intends to do with the whole cosmos. [T]he matter is set out quite clearly. [But] the passage is regularly marginalized in mainstream Protestant interpretations.... Paul's whole argument is that the renewal of God's covenant results in the renewal of God's creation.'<sup>64</sup> David Atkinson argues that a 'fully biblical theology of covenant and creation commits us to respond urgently to the questions posed by climate change, and that such a response is centrally part of the Gospel of a God who "so loved the world"'.<sup>65</sup>

A practical way forward in all this was proposed five centuries ago by Francis Bacon and apparently endorsed by Charles Darwin when he re-printed Bacon's words on the title page of the *Origin*: 'Let no man out of a weak conceit of sobriety or an ill-applied moderation, think or maintain that a man can search too far or be too well studied in the book of God's words or in the book of God's works; divinity or philosophy; but rather let men endeavour an endless progress or proficience in both.' Psalm 19 clearly states the characteristics of God's two books. The idea of the two books goes back at least to Pelagius in the fifth century, but it was Bacon who brought it to the fore by his emphasis on the importance of science. Where Bacon erred was exalting science as possibly enabling the effects of the fall to be countered. But his insistence that we read both books of God is vital if we are to discover the whole of his counsel.

If we accept God as the author of both the Bible and the book of works, it seems obvious that we will only begin to understand his purposes fully when we read and take seriously both books. Anything that hinders us in this discipline must surely be anti-God – in other words, sinful. The study of evolution is part of the study of God's Book of Works. It should be studied for what it is – a scientific enterprise, not an exegetical problem. We err badly if we believe that we have to contrive to keep God involved in the evolutionary machinery. He is integral to it. God's Book of Words makes it abundantly clear that we are part of his creation and that we are called to care for it – humans (neighbours) and 'nature' alike. And as scientists we have a particular responsibility to urge the importance of reading all God's message – both word and works.

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63 Murray, R. *The Cosmic Covenant*, London: Sheed & Ward (1992), p.165.

64 Wright, N.T. *New Heavens, New Earth*, Grove Biblical Series B11, Cambridge: Grove Books (1999), p. 11.

65 Atkinson, D. *Renewing the Face of the Earth*, Norwich: Canterbury Press (2008), p.2.