

CHRISTIANS FOR FUTURE?
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When talking about creation, much attention in theology and the church is given to the beginning. Daniels' paper rightly points out that "the end of a story matters" (2), and that the *new creation eschatology* connects our hope for the future with what was in the beginning. I want to expand on this thought from a biblical-theological perspective and also reflect on its contemporary relevance.

Daniels and I both have in common that we live in increasingly secularized cultures. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor describes the secularized mindset as an "immanent frame," that is, secular narratives tend to explain the world from what remains within the world. As a consequence, the other-worldly, or transcendent, plays no role in these narratives. This challenges the place for Christian eschatology, and in fact, an increasingly secularized theology runs danger of throwing eschatological hopes over board or finding hope exclusively within the immanent frame. How, then, can the church articulate an eschatology which connects with contemporary secular concerns, but which at the same time transcends the immanent frame?

Daniels points out that the positive outlook of postmillennialism has been found increasingly untenable in the 20th century and onward. This goes parallel to the outlook on the future in mainstream Western society. While it may appear that the heyday of apocalyptic movements in Western societies was already in the 19th century, surprisingly, the end of the world seems near for a growing group of people that warns of the consequences of climate change. The Fridays for Future movement around the Swedish student Greta Thunberg is representative for this *neo-apocalyptic* tendency, as I would call it. How are Christians to relate to this phenomenon?

Daniels shows that from a dispensationalist perspective, there is little to affirm in this movement: "The conviction that at the end of history the earth and all its cultures and human creations will be destroyed has led many Christians not only to ignore, but even advocate against, any concern for the ecology of the earth or the preservation of unique human cultures and their creations." (4) However, this conviction falls short of what the Bible actually teaches.

Daniels goes on to show that the concern for ecology is on solid biblical grounds, and I will expand on this argumentation. He contests that a body-soul dualism is faithful to the biblical witness, but sees its origins rather in Platonic thinking. Creation has been created good, and humanity has been commissioned as God's steward to keep it that way (Gen 1:28). Even in the book of Revelation, the value of creation is affirmed. According to Daniels, "Revelation pictures the New Jerusalem descending from heaven like a giant cube, like the Holy of Holies in the original tabernacle and temple and becoming the center of the new creation." (8) I will add, the book of Revelation gives more priority to an *existing earthly city*, which, in a transfigured way, becomes the new creation, rather than the paradisaical garden Eden.

These points affirm that new creation eschatology "invites believers to more than just mere survival amid an ever-darkening age" (Daniels 8). However, secular initiatives against climate change have the theological shortcoming of working within an immanent framework. Their general prognosis for the future is dire. The ecosystem will supposedly be totally out of balance within a few generations, if not sooner. The problem is aggravated when one considers the material world all that is. The solution presented is human effort. But what is the source of hope that

humans will actually unite in their effort to stop climate change? From a secular perspective, it requires a positive anthropology, but considering the history of humankind, such an outlook can be admired at best.

This is where Christian theology can pick up the issue and actually provide a better motivation as well as solution. Theology describes the core problem of humanity with the doctrine of sin. While creation as such is not bad, it has fallen and is under the curse of sin. At the same time, another force, God's grace, is at work in the world and gives valid reason for hope, rather than human effort as such.

While we have affirmed that care for the environment falls within the Christian mandate, one might wonder what kind of priority it should have in comparison to saving souls. I want to argue that both concerns actually go hand-in-hand when they see sin as the core of the problem. Looking atomistically at a particular action causing a strain on the environment, we might not find sin as the motivation for it, at least if we apply a Wesleyan definition of sin¹. For instance, by boarding a plane to come to this conference, we may not have given much thought to the environmental strain that we are causing, and therefore we did not intentionally sin. However, by interpreting the book of Joel, I want to show that the dimension of sin plays into environmental issues.

Joel describes an upcoming natural disaster through a plague of locusts. They are described like an army and will devour so much grain that the people of God will experience famine (Joel 1:4, 11). There is no differentiation whether the disaster hits the rich, the poor, the sinners or the righteous, so it appears the whole people of God are affected. Interestingly, Joel does initially not describe the cause of the natural disaster, but his call to action suggests that the disaster comes as God's judgment for human sin. This becomes unambiguous when he describes the disaster as the "day of the Lord" in chapter 2. As signs of repentance, the people of God are called to lament and fast (Joel 1:13-14). Joel does not describe the concrete sins of the people, but typically, other Old Testament prophets criticise the people of God for their idolatry, social injustice, complacency, and generally, lack of faith in God. It is fair to assume that the same is going on here. To summarize, a natural disaster is described as the consequence of human sin, and fasting and repentance is presented as appropriate response.

At this point, I cannot give a detailed discussion about the causes and effects of climate change. This discussion better be done by experts in the field of environmental science. However, I would argue that human involvement plays a significant part in this. After all, population growth and industrialization within the past 200 years have produced an unprecedented amount of environmental waste and have lead to a severe depletion of environmental resources. The changes in technology have encouraged an instant-gratification consumerist attitude in society. The benefits from technological advances are unevenly distributed among the planet, but ultimately, *all* of humanity will be affected by the negative effect of consumerism. At the heart of the matter, consumerism is an expression of *incurvatus in se*². The appropriate response to the upcoming human disaster, then, is, like in the time of Joel, repentance and fasting. I would argue that fasting in this situation goes beyond the classical meaning of abstaining of food. In fact, it requires a rethinking

¹ That is, a voluntary transgression of a known law of God.

² A Latin expression used by the reformers to describe sin. It can be translated as "curved inward on oneself".

whether it is necessary to consume what is readily available or whether one's real needs are fulfilled by God.

Following this line of argumentation, Christians can, just as much as environmental activists, call for repentance and a reduction of consumerism. Christians, however, draw their motivation for repentance from the spiritual realm. Added to that, the power to repent comes not from human effort, but from the Holy Spirit. In prayer one opens up for God's work to renew creation.

It may very well be that God uses the Church to make a difference in this situation. However, in the same way that I criticized the secular activists above, we as Christians also need to take serious the church history of the past 2,000 years, namely, that the Church has often failed to follow through on the mission which it was entrusted. The source of our hope goes beyond God's work among His people. It includes His work in making a whole new creation. Considering the above mentioned prediction regarding the imminent environmental crisis, it is worth noting that the exact timing of Christ's return and the day of final judgment is unknown to anyone except God the Father (see Mk 13:32). What we do know is that God made a covenant with creation in the days of Noah that He will never destroy it (Gen 8:21-22).

Christian theology can indeed provide a balanced eschatology of active anticipation that responds to the issue of climate change. First of all, our source of hope beyond the shortcoming of human effort lies in God's faithfulness to His creation and His ability to renew it. Secondly, the dis-ease of sin affects not only human souls, but all of creation. In fact, the sickness of the environment is a symptom of human sin. God's sanctifying work aims to redeem *the whole creation*, and we are called to join Him in this work.