

## Ecomissiology

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*Emerging from recent ecotheology, ecomissiology is an approach to mission which sees the mission of God in terms of reconciliation at all levels in a reality characterized by relationship and interdependence. Inviting a conversation on the scope of ecomissiology, there is here a list of missiological implications of ecotheology, involving a distinctive method, content and personal location. The ecomissiological vision for cosmic redemption is comprehensive and holistic, setting traditional mission and evangelism in a broader context and calling for the pursuit of ecojustice, ecopraxis and an ecospirituality.*

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**W**hat would it mean for missiology to be suffused with an ecological perspective? This is the question implicit in the term "ecomissiology", which is to missiology what ecotheology is to theology. Ecomissiology is an approach to mission which sees the mission of God in terms of reconciliation at all levels in a reality characterized by relationship and interdependence throughout. When applied to the practise of mission itself it could be called missionary earthkeeping, mission work with the goal of "wholeness, integrity and renewal of people and Creation and their relationships with each other and the Creator, ... [that is, the] reconciliation of *all things* (1 Cor 15:20-22; Col 1:15-20; Rom 5)" (DeWitt and Prance 1992:ix, italics in original).

### Ecotheology

The term "ecotheology" is a term for theologies deeply influenced by ecological ways of thinking. Definitions of ecotheology are hard to find,<sup>1</sup> and there are many different types of ecotheology (Scott 1998).

We can say, however, that ecotheology is broader than either a theology of nature, a creation-oriented theology or a response to the ecological crisis. It is also more than a theology of ecology (as offered by Sittler (1970)).

It is an ecological approach to theology. Analogous to liberation theology, it is a way of doing theology (method) as well as a type of theology (content), and rightly emerges from an environmental commitment (location). It tends to be closely related

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to ecopraxis, ecofeminism and ecojustice because of their emphasis on interconnect-  
edness.

Ecological theology is ecological in the sense of trying to take account of the whole in its relationships at every level. It seeks to be aware of our interrelatedness with all things and with God. According to Sallie McFague ecological theology is an understanding of God which involves a growing appreciation of the thoroughgoing, radical interdependence of life at all levels and in every imaginable way (McFague 1987:x). It involves both a worldview and a “God-view”. There is a dash of imagination and poetry in it. It has a sensibility which colors our whole approach. Its governing metaphor is relationship. As the poet Wallace Stevens put it: “Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations or interconnections” (1957:163; cited in McFague 1987:4).

### God and Creation

Ecotheologies tend to use an organic model for God, in which all of creation is God’s self-expression (“Liberating Life” 1990:279). To use the language of Bonaventure, God is the fountain of fullness who freely explodes into creatures which, though not God, are God’s self-expression (cited in Edwards 1995:105).

This emphasis on immanence alongside transcendence is found almost universally in ecotheology and can be labelled “panentheism”, the view that “the creation and its processes are somehow ‘in’ God, even though God is ‘more than’ creation” (McDaniel 1995:97). This strengthens the affirmation in the first chapter of Genesis, repeated seven times, that God saw creation as good. Indeed, creation becomes an aspect of God’s self-expression and self-embodiment, part of God’s incarnating dynamic evident in creation, in human history and definitively in Jesus Christ (Langmead 1997:65-66; Dyrness 1997:49). Paul was expressing this view when he quoted Greek poetry to the Athenians: “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).<sup>2</sup>

God’s self-expression takes shape in creation, in humanity and in Jesus Christ. As Jürgen Moltmann puts it, embodiment is the goal of all God’s works (1985:244-245). Not only are the earth and the cosmos the objects of God’s creative love, and humans in their sensuality created in God’s image, but the mode and content of God’s work of reconciliation is summed up in the phrase “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14) (1985:245).

Human embeddedness in creation is central to an ecological view. In Genesis 2:7 Adam is formed from the dust of the ground (*adamah*); humanity is not materially separate from creation but constituted in relationship with it. This challenges perspectives such as our rugged individualism, “substance-talk” in metaphysics, and a view of nature as object. McFague argues this point passionately:

We are, in the most profound ways, “not our own”: we belong, from the cells of our bodies to the finest creations of our minds, to the intricate, constantly changing cosmos.... Relationship and interdependence, change and transformation ... are the categories within which a theology for our day must function. (1987:7-8)

Ecologically speaking, sin is the all-embracing perversion of the God-human relationship (Moltmann 1985:233). So the dynamics of sin reach out to include all parts

of the web of creation. Although sin is a uniquely human phenomenon, it is not only humans who wait with longing for redemption but all of creation which longs for it (Romans 8:19-22). As Moltmann puts it, although it is always only sinners who are justified “it is not only human beings who must be redeemed from sin; the energies of sin themselves have to be redeemed too” (1985:234). Environmental degradation is an example of the “energies of sin” and its transformation is therefore properly included in the processes of redemption or reconciliation.

### Jesus Christ and Salvation

While some ecotheologies seem to be more theocentric than christocentric, three common themes are: the significance of the incarnation for valuing creation, salvation as *shalom*, and the cosmic Christ. Running through all of these is the insistence that salvation is multi-dimensional and will affect the whole of creation.

First, the incarnation indicates (among other things) that God infinitely values creation. To say that the Word became flesh is to say that God became self-embodied within the cosmos. It sanctifies everything with which humanity is united in interdependence (Nash 1991:109). Incarnation is sometimes broadened in meaning, not only to refer to the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ but also to be seen as the way God always acts, namely in self-expressive love and embodiment (Langmead 1997; McFague 1993:133).

Second, salvation is universally seen in ecotheology as encompassing the farthest corners of creation. It follows from the governing metaphor of relationship that if sin is a distortion of relationships at all levels between God, humanity and the rest of creation, then salvation involves reconciliation at all of these levels. It includes the Hebrew Bible concept of *shalom*, which is a multi-dimensional reality including both justice among people and the fertility of the crops. Extended to the cosmos, this vision has been preserved in Eastern Orthodoxy. Timothy Ware writes:

The whole of the material creation will eventually be transfigured.... This idea of cosmic redemption is based ... upon a right understanding of the Incarnation: Christ took flesh — something from the material order — and so has made possible the redemption and metamorphosis of all creation — not merely the immaterial but the physical. (1963:234-235)

Third, the cosmic role of Christ as creator and Logos (John 1:3), as the principle of coherence in the cosmos (Colossians 1:17), and as the person through whom God reconciles all things (Colossians 1:20) is emphasized in various ways. It has huge implications for Christian mission because it includes all of creation in the scope of the *missio Dei* (Deane-Drummond 1996:33).

Sometimes Jesus of Nazareth and the cosmic Christ drift apart in theological understanding. The sweep of evolution can devalue the historical Jesus, as arguably happens in the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Carter 1992:95). The concept of Christ can be diluted to a “christic consciousness”, as is arguably a tendency in the thought of McFague (1993:xii) and Fox (1988:7-8, 133). The central Christian affirmation, however, is that Jesus is the Christ. As James A. Nash insists, “The Representative of Humanity is *simultaneously and interrelationally* the Representative of the Cosmos, the Cosmic Christ. The incarnated God embraced the whole” (1991:110, italics in original).

## The Spirit

The work of the Holy Spirit is integral to an ecological theology, as the Spirit is intimately connected with both creation and recreation. The biblical vision of the Spirit as life-giving breath includes the Spirit blowing across the waters in creation (Genesis 1:2) and the combination of the earth's dust and the breath of God in forming humanity (Genesis 2:7). Joel's vision of the Spirit poured out on all people is accompanied by a prediction of ecological harmony (Joel 2:21-29). The Spirit is abundant life (among many other things) and ecotheology situates this life in both the spiritual and material dimension, seen as the "inside" and "outside" of our reality. The Spirit is God-at-work in the world, and the panentheistic view finds God's presence in all of creation, sustaining it and making it sacred.

This vision is a sacramental view of the world, in which God's presence is discerned in the human, the material and the everyday. Ecotheology is as much a sensibility as a set of doctrines. Like many of the mystics (such as Francis of Assisi or Thomas Merton), ecotheologians have an ecological spirituality, which experiences the earth and all living things as reflections of God's goodness (Hill 1998:255). This amounts to a "re-enchantment" of the cosmos (Griffin 1988; Tacey 2000), although Christian theology is rightly guarded about the term. This means that creation reflects the glory of God, and God is present in it, but not that we should worship any aspect of creation. It is sacred but not divine (Nash 1991:115).

This broad understanding of the Holy Spirit, however, is not sanguine about how things are. The theme of the 1991 World Council of Churches Assembly, "Come Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation", was a prayer deeply conscious of the ecological crisis. It rises in the current context of a threatened creation, of a world already largely despoiled. Moltmann wrote in preparation for the assembly that the prayer "gives utterance to the mortal cry of dying creatures and with the breath of the Spirit calls for life and freedom" (1990:98).

## Missiological Implications

Ecotheology implicitly contains an ecomissiology, just as all theologies give direction for understandings of mission that flow from them. As ecotheology is holistic in approach, so also is ecomissiology. The underlying theme of ecotheology is one of relationship at the heart of life, and the corresponding missiological theme is that of reconciliation at all levels.

In the explosion of recent writing on ecology and theology there is a great deal written about practical action — what Christians should do — and this is certainly a part of a missiological response. As we have seen, there is also a great deal written on ecotheology, reconceiving the faith in ecological perspective. But there is little written under the heading of an ecological approach to missiology, what we might call "ecomissiology". In some ways, therefore, the following list of implications is an opening attempt to gather together some of what is found in many places, a way of putting some ideas forward for missiological conversation. Most of them emerge directly from the brief outline of ecotheology above.

In arranging the ideas, I will group them roughly according to my earlier suggestion that ecomissiology is distinguished by its method, its content and its location. As a result they are also roughly arranged from more abstract considerations to more practical implications. This reminds us that the boundaries between missiology (with its more scholarly focus) and mission (with its more practical focus) are rather

blurred. After all, what are the precise differences between missiological implications and implications for mission?

The first four are implications for missiological *method*. The next five or so are implications for the *content* of ecomissiology. They are not very distinct as a group from the last five, which are more practical, and are implications for the practise of mission or its *location* in ecological commitment.

### 1. *Ecomissiology Is Holistic*

What ecology teaches missiology is that life in all of its dimensions has to be taken into account. Mission that is directed to only one aspect of existence will always be an incomplete form of mission. Ecology is about a whole system in interrelationship, and then systems-of-systems. Abundant life shares a similar scope. This means that missiology needs to be both comprehensive (taking all dimensions of the gospel into account) and holistic (integrating them and not just adding one to another).

J. A. Loader puts it succinctly: “If the gospel is about life and mission is about the gospel, then it *has* to be encompassing, or, to use the term now reappearing in ecological circles, *holistic*” (1991:48, italics in original).

### 2. *Interdependence and Relationship Are Methodological Keys*

Ecology not only sees the world through the governing metaphor of relationship; it aspires to pursue understanding through relating its perspectives to those of other disciplines.

The literature of ecotheology crosses boundaries with many other disciplines. Ecomissiology also operates in interdisciplinary ways, listening to unlikely sources for understanding and building bridges to those of all persuasions.

As an academic discipline missiologically draws on all the other theological disciplines synoptically (Bosch 1991:494). It is a matter for light-hearted banter over coffee in theological faculties that missiologists depend so heavily on other disciplines for their insights — is it that missiology is not really a discipline, or is it that it gathers up fragmentary insights and weaves them into the missional understanding which ought to be the goal of all theology?

Ecomissiology will continue to develop the tradition of ecumenical missiology. Not only is Christian unity essential for effective engagement in God’s mission of reconciliation, but the various wings of Christian church have a great deal to learn from each other in the spirit of interdependence.

Dialogue in learning from other faiths is also methodologically central in missiology, particularly given the conviction that God is at work in all of creation.

A missiology informed by ecology lives in relationship with the life sciences and physics, with anthropology and agricultural economics, with philosophy and politics, with gender studies and postmodern analysis — and so the list goes on. This need to engage with other disciplines applies to both missiology-proper and to the practise of mission. There are lively discussions at the more theoretical level. At the more practical level, missionaries trained in agriculture(for example) need to work alongside others trained in the life sciences, whether Christians or not.

Ecomissiology encourages cooperation and association. It takes the view that although we endeavor to bring a distinctive holistic Christian perspective we can never

understand enough to do it alone. We need to do our research and be well informed before declaring that a decision is bad for the earth or its people, but as well, we need to engage in respectful debate at all times, realizing that all our estimates of environmental impact are provisional.

To be committed to the whole-in-relationship is to be out of one's depth immediately and to depend on others. It is to live aware of the incompleteness of our understanding and the need to be in relationship with others at every point on the journey to understanding the mission of God, which is mystery. Ecology is ultimately a sensibility. Ecomissiology is distinguished in the same way. This leads to the next point.

### *3. Poetry, Imagination and an Ecospirituality Are Essential*

When it comes to expressing the truth that God is intimately involved in all of creation and desires its well-being at every level, from the microscopic to the macroscopic, propositions seem woefully inadequate. Ecotheologians are often poets, musicians or visual artists. There is more than a touch of mysticism in the ecological perspective, which happens to be in tune with an emerging sensibility in Western culture. Some of the most profound writers are poets, such as Wendell Berry. Some mystics, like Teilhard de Chardin, feel divine energy in their bodies and consciously plumb the spiritual dimensions of mundane life and the plants and animals around them (1970). Others, such as Thomas Merton, pursue contemplation and paradoxically find themselves deeply connected both to God and creation (1972).

For many Christians it is a significant paradigm shift to approach missiology from an ecological perspective. It asks us to see the world "as if" it is charged with the presence of God. It recognizes that theology is metaphorical and our theological frameworks are at least partly constructions which are tentative and relative (McFague 1987:26-27). It requires imagination in order to enter a new paradigm, and part of what sustains a paradigm is the art, theatre, poetry, music, irony and humor which fill it out and make it live for us. To integrate this insight into theological education is a great challenge, which lies in front of most of us who are involved in it.

### *4. Ecomissiology Seeks a Deeper Contextualization*

An ecological perspective in mission asks the question of how the gospel takes a different shape not only in different cultures but also in different ecosystems, conceived in the broadest terms. Factors such as language, culture and religious background are often considered today in the process of inculturating the gospel. If we are to situate our mission more deeply in creation in all of its regional variety, we may have to learn to take into account other factors such as the land, flora, fauna, climate, geography and physical history. "Inculturation", with culture at the centre, begins to seem an inadequate term for this deeper contextualization.

A deep rootedness in the land leads to both obvious and subtle differences. In central Australia, cooperating with the mission of God may involve us in exploring with those who live there the meaning they find in a sense of immensity, or the desert silence (Brown 1991:207-216). It will vary greatly. What for Europeans may seem to be an empty desert is likely for indigenous Australians to be teeming with life, meaning and stories of origin. These are all factors of missiological significance, and ecomissiology prods us to pay attention to ecology as well as to the cultural environment.

In this vein Ched Myers asks the pointed question, "How might we re-place our Christian symbols in the soil of a land we love?" (1994:368). He takes a bio-regional approach to spirituality and explores his life-long love for California and Los Angeles. Identifying the forgotten "songlines" of his region and city he tries to name what gives life and what threatens it (1994:368-379). He takes up the suggestion that a tree can symbolize a region and writes at length about the great Californian oak tree. This bio-regional missiology is brimming with promise as we consider deepening our contextualization. Myers' work invites us to respond both in developing the concept missiologically and in providing specific examples of deeply-rooted mission that is locally or regionally contextualized.

If the first four missiological implications are largely methodological, the next five are more connected to the content of an ecomissiology; that is, they form the core of an ecological theology of mission.

##### *5. The Mission of God Encompasses Both Creation and Re-Creation*

Ecotheology broadens our understanding of the mission of God to include both the process of creation and of redemption. Although nearly all theologies hold these two aspects of God's work in an overall framework, ecotheology brings them very close together, without collapsing them into one. There is little danger of concentrating exclusively on the goodness of creation, as any ecological awareness makes it impossible to deny that humans are in deep need of reconciliation within themselves, with each other, with their environment and with God.

Some see "the Fall" as following a historical period of idyllic communion with God (Nash 1991:117-121), while others see it as describing a state of alienation from God we have always known (Fox 1983:46-51; Clatworthy 1998). In both cases ecomissiology proceeds in a framework of creation and re-creation (Darragh 1993:26).

It recovers the belief that God is involved both in creation "at the beginning" and in continuous creation (Moltmann 1985:208). It sees the reconciling work of Christ as important as well; in fact, God's involvement in continuous creation is not merely preservation but includes the central dimensions of liberation and redemption (Moltmann 1985:208). Ecomissiology weaves the creative and redemptive work of God together through its vision of Christ as Creative Word and Cosmic Redeemer (Granberg-Michaelson 1990:13). It sees the work of the Spirit as a unity, even though we can also distinguish between the Spirit's creating, sustaining and renewing activity (Moltmann 1985:12). So ecomissiology proceeds with a trinitarian basis which integrates mission and sees it as cooperating with the mission of God for the whole universe.

##### *6. Redemption Has Cosmic Scope*

We noted ecotheology's vision for salvation as cosmic *shalom*, encompassing all of creation. This is of great significance for mission, given that in practise Christians have often reduced the gospel message to one of personal reconciliation with God on a spiritual level. Liberation theology has broadened the concept of liberation to include justice and peace, fruits of reconciliation between humans. But ecomissiology insists that the circle be widened further, and that the welfare of the creation be included as a missiological concern. We see this in the approach of the World Council

of Churches' covenant for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (Niles 1991).

It is true that, insofar as human contributions are concerned, the welfare of the environment awaits human transformation. Theology has generally understood that as faith without works is dead (James 2:17) so also a declaration of faith without evidence of a transformation in inter-personal relationships is meaningless. Ecomissiology will argue for an even wider circle of transformed relationships; in fact, ultimately the effects of salvation include all of creation.

Although some ecotheologians will wax lyrical about lions getting on with lambs, Nash points out that our expectation of cosmic redemption is necessarily vague and expressed poetically (1991:132-133). We do not really know what reconciliation between creatures means, even less reconciliation at all levels. Nash says what many missiologists believe, namely that the vision of cosmic *shalom* functions as an expression of hope in the trustworthiness of God. The creator of all, who embraced creation in the incarnation and inhabits it through the Spirit, will fulfil the creation, bringing the goodness we affirm as much in hope as in experience (1991:132).

### 7. *Reconciliation Is the Heart of Mission*

Given that relationship is the governing metaphor of ecotheology, and that sin is a perversion of human relationships with God and creation, it follows that reconciliation is the heart of the mission of God and, as a result, the mission of the church. T. W. Manson wrote: "The driving force behind the gospel is the love of God. Its *modus operandi* is reconciliation" (1963:50).

In the well known passage in 2 Corinthians 5 Paul makes several significant claims about reconciliation: It brings total renewal to humans; it is God's doing; God reconciles us through Christ, in whom the whole world is also reconciled; and we are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation.

This rich concept deserves much more unpacking than can be done here. It is a term that covers many related ideas: the cosmic mission of God, the Hebrew vision for *shalom*, the meaning of the cross, the nature of Christian conversion, the breaking down of barriers between Christians of all cultures, the overall mission of the church in the world, and Christian peacemaking.

### 8. *Creation Has Intrinsic Value*

Ecotheology offers a basis for seeing creation as more than 'natural', or merely our environment. Instead of being merely a backdrop for the divine/human drama the cosmos has intrinsic value. A despoiled earth deeply affects God who creates and indwells it. Careless exploitation of the world around us is ruled out if we see creation as a sacrament of God's presence, as reflecting the glory of God, or even as the self-expression of God.

An ecological approach to mission means that it may be entirely appropriate for a church to maintain a section of a highway, helping to keep a part of God's creation beautiful. It may mean that Christians appropriately choose to worship God on some occasions through the act of tree-planting. It gives some foundation for arguments against the needless extinction of species. Most importantly it elevates the status of the environment to something worth defending, caring for and enjoying simply because it is the intrinsically valuable expression of the creativity of God.

### 9. *Wherever We Go, God Is There Already*

One implication of seeing God as intimately present in all of creation is that God's presence goes before us in Christian mission. This has often been understood in cross-cultural mission, where the Spirit is seen to have been at work already. For example, one group of Australian Aborigines, in developing a contextualized theology, have called it Rainbow Spirit Theology. It begins by saying that God the Creator Spirit has been speaking through Aboriginal culture from the beginning (Rainbow Spirit Elders 1997:11).

This perspective is compatible with nearly all stances towards those of non-Christian religious belief, whether we see them as in desperate need of Christ, as walking in the semi-darkness or as following God by an alternative route. Because ecomissiology affirms that God is at work in all of creation, the only stance ruled out is that which sees those who have not heard the gospel to be living in total spiritual darkness.

Of course, we may still want to say that we experience the powerful presence of God's Spirit on one occasion, while we sense evil and oppression on another. To affirm God-in-all and all-in-God is not to see spiritual presence equally distributed throughout creation. Part of the task of mission is the task of spiritual discernment. We do well to be cautious in our judgement of how absent God is in other cultures, however, until we have listened and learned for a long time, as missionary history teaches us.

### 10. *Expressing Awe and Celebrating Life Is Part of Mission*

If the earth reflects the glory of God, then wonder and praise is an appropriate response, and ecotheologians are not the first to live in awe or to practice a spirituality of celebration of life in its fullness. But ecotheology encourages creation spirituality. An ecomissiology affirms not only that it is appropriate for Christians to bathe in the extravagant creativity of God's world but that is evangelistic to do so. Loader, in asking what the connection between ecology and mission is, lists wonder as one of the two most appropriate mission responses to life in its variety and fullness (1991:54).

More and more people seem to be marvelling at the intricacies of nature. The aesthetic dimension of environmental concern is very strong. Young people, for many reasons, are deeply attracted to nature and its mysteries. The same sense of wonder is a hallmark of biblical perspectives on creation. Yet the church has often appeared to turn its back on creation in favor of "spiritual" issues, in favor of human individualism, or (in some traditions) in favor of aesthetic severity. An ecological approach to mission exudes points of connection with those around us. To recover the proclamation and celebration of the fullness of life will strengthen our mission. The wonder we experience is enriched in the sharing. Abundant grace is at the centre of the Good News, and it is found in life, love and creation.

Leonardo Boff reminds us of the many gospel elements of celebration: It is essentially communitarian, involves music and food, has its rituals, is strongly aesthetic, fills our senses, transfigures our perspective, and is anticipatory of the great feast when we sit with God at the "table of the kingdom" (1995:160). The missiologically significant of celebration is analogous to the practise of Christian community, where in our tasting the commonwealth of God we also naturally proclaim it. Just as a

vibrant and open community is one of the most effective methods of Christian mission, so also is a celebrating community living in awe of God's presence in every part of life.

### *11. Seeking Ecojustice Is an Integral Part of Mission*

It should be clear that the vision of ecotheology leads directly to the inclusion of ecojustice in the mission of the church. In the earliest reference to ecojustice I have come across in the context of mission, Kenneth Cauthen wrote in 1973 that "to speak of ecojustice means that in the quest of that good society which is most productive of justice and joy, we must take into account not only the psychological, social, and historical dimensions of human existence but also give attention to the biological, natural, and cosmological setting of life" (:156).

Mission must see the connection between human exploitation and environmental exploitation (Wink 1993:476). While there may be times when there is a tension between eliminating poverty and caring for the earth (as there may be between any pair of worthwhile aims), generally speaking the two go hand in hand and are integrable. Justice is for life in all of its forms. "All justice is now ecological" (Wink 1993:477; Langmead 1998-99:163)

### *12. Prophetic Denunciation Includes Resisting Environmental Degradation*

Although this follows from the last point it is worth saying separately. The pursuit of ecojustice can be seen as a constructive activity but it also includes the need to denounce evil (in word) and resist injustice and environmental destruction (in deed), usually together. It is worth saying because the Christian church has largely neglected this responsibility in favor of, first, preaching for personal conversion and, second, extending the vision of the Kingdom of God to embrace social and political liberation. An ecological vision for mission includes what many Christians already do as individuals but few churches do as communities or denominations: defending creation from degradation. To take an example, a few committed environmentalists regularly camp in the rainforest being cleared in the Otway Ranges a couple of hours from Melbourne, but it is highly unlikely they feel supported by churches as they fight strenuously to resist the loss of ancient ecosystems. An ecomissiology insists that this is God's business and therefore part of Christian mission.

### *13. We Should Practice What We Preach in Missionary Work*

Now casting an eye particularly towards aid and development work in poorer countries, the need for ecojustice principles in missionary work becomes clear. Missionaries are becoming more aware that as we proclaim the Good News of God's transforming love in all dimensions we need to be active, informed and vigilant in our missionary earthkeeping. Otherwise we preach reconciliation in all things and yet contribute to the degradation of the earth.

Looking back at missionary practises it is encouraging to remember the ecological respect shown by notable figures such as Francis of Assisi, William Carey and Albert Schweitzer. But it is easy to find examples of Western missionaries who preached God's love for all creation and yet cut down forests, introduced foreign methods of cultivation and opened the path for more ruthless commercial exploitation.

Western Christians have often been accomplices (whether willing or unwitting) in colonizing the land of indigenous peoples, clearing land, dispossessing its inhabitants and destroying their culture. Although convinced we were bringing enlightened faith, in robbing them of their intimate connection with the earth we emissaries of 'developed' cultures have often failed to learn from rural and tribal cultures how interconnected life is.

Still today, when economic development is often the central aim in aid programs, it is a challenge for us to engage in ecological mission. We often pour money into short-term solutions, or programs that are economically productive but ecologically disastrous. International monetary programs often force countries to abandon subsistence farming for cash crops, or persuade poorer countries to supply all-year-round fresh fruit for the richest countries, with high economic and ecological risks. Medical missionary Paul Brand has said that the world will die from lack of pure water and soil long before it will die from a lack of antibiotics or surgical skill (1987:147).

Not only because environmental factors limit the economic growth of poor countries, not only because the overall welfare of poorer people is tied up in their relationship to the rivers and the forests, but also because our message is a holistic and integrated one, missionary earthkeeping ought to be explored much more in our seminaries, in mission agencies and on the field (Testerman 1992:36-39).

#### 14 *Ecopraxis Is Central to an Ecological Approach to Mission*

Finally, an ecological approach to mission is integrally connected to ecopraxis, the reflective practise of environmental commitment. There are two reasons for this.

First, ecology itself requires the interconnection of reflection and action. Ecological mission cannot preach God's self-expression in creation without practical commitment to nurture and defend creation. What is more, the practise and the reflection will enrich and guide each other.

Second, ecotheology is a form of liberation theology, extending liberation beyond the poor of the earth to the "poor earth" itself. The social solidarity of early forms of liberation theology has been enlarged to include solidarity with creation (Boff 1995:77; Gutiérrez 1999:35). But the insistence of liberation theologians that mission issue from the location of commitment to the poor has not changed. By analogy, ecological mission needs to be located in the midst of ecological praxis.

Although individual Christians may use their gifts in one aspect of Christian mission, whether it be evangelism, service to others, justice seeking or environmental action, an ecological approach to the mission of a whole Christian community includes an endeavor to be balanced and holistic.

In summary, an ecotheological perspective deeply affects missiology and the practise of mission. Whether or not we choose to use the term "ecomissiology", the ecological approach to theory and practise invites a significant paradigm shift for both missiology and mission.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> There is, for example, no attempt to define ecotheology in any of the issues of the journal *Ecotheology*, nor in Hallman (1994).

<sup>2</sup> Biblical references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

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