

# Theology of Creation

Some hermeneutical keys and recurring issues/themes  
in church statements and reports



Verenigde  
Protestantse  
Kerk in België

*Working Group Church in Society*

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## Introduction

In March 2022, the United Protestant Church in Belgium (UPCB) organized an extraordinary 'Climate Synod'. One of the speakers was the Belgian physicist and climatologist Dr. Jean-Pascal van Ypersele who has served as the vice president of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The IPCC is the United Nations body for assessing the science related to climate change.

Dr. van Ypersele sketched an alarming picture of the situation in which we find ourselves. The clock is ticking relentlessly: to have any chance of a livable world in the future, scientists say we need to halve global emissions by 2030 and bring them to zero by 2050. Meanwhile, the wave of extinction of plant and animal species also continues unabated, and forests continue to disappear at an annual rate of more than three times the area of Belgium.

Since early 2022, the situation has only worsened. It's too hot, too wet, too dry... records keep falling. Besides causing enormous suffering for thousands of people, ugly wars are also detrimental for policies towards a sustainable and climate-safe future. Unfortunately climate change does not halt when the wish is expressed to push a pause button. There is uncertainty about what the future holds, especially in view of growing resignation among large groups of citizens, politicians, enterprises and the present US administration.

In his sermon at the start of the Climate Synod, Rev. Steven Fuite explained why climate change is an important issue for the church, for our faith and for our theology which is too anthropocentric.<sup>1</sup> Mindful of these challenges, the UPCB Synodal Council, in its report to the Synod session in November 2022, recommended that the UPCB should engage in a thorough theological reflection about issues regarding to ecology and climate change.

This paper constitutes an effort of the UPCB Working Group Church in Society to respond to this recommendation of the Synodal Council. A, necessarily limited, number of statements and documents of churches were analysed and some common themes ("hermeneutical keys") were identified. The Working Group is aware of the fact that many more churches and church related organisations are involved in reflecting theologically on the issues at stake, such as organisations of 'green churches' in several countries, the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN, the World Council of Churches (WCC), world confessional bodies, the Roman Catholic Church, Eokerk, and many, many others. The limited scope of this project, however, does not allow us to be comprehensive. It is our hope that this document gives the reader a flavour of ecumenical reflections around the topic of a Theology of Creation, and that it will inspire the UPCB to further engage in reflection and action on our role as churches and Christians to help safeguard God's creation.<sup>2</sup>

*UPCB Working Group Church in Society,  
Brussels, 2025*

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://nl.protestant.link/ecopreek-synodevergadering-9-maart-2022/>  
<https://fr.protestant.link/ecopreche-assemblee-synodale-du-19-mars-2022/>

<sup>2</sup> It is important to make a distinction between "nature" and "creation". The word "nature" does not hold an inherent religious meaning. "Creation", however, is the language of faith which points to a "Creator," a God who created and continues to create. Christians believe that "creation" is a divine act. Therefore, they can speak about an "environmental crisis" but not about a "crisis of creation". See also *Groene Theologie*, Trees van Montfoort, p. 41, Skandalon, Middelburg, 2019

## Some church statements and documents

Most statements on the issue of climate change and ecological issues start with a description of the problems at stake – some more elaborate, others more succinct.<sup>3</sup>

One example comes from the American Baptist Churches (ABC):

*We have poisoned the earth which God has given us. It is no longer the beautiful garden that Genesis portrays as the home of Adam and Eve. Instead, it is one of streams polluted by nearby landfills, of air filled with chlorofluoro-carbons destroying the ozone layer, and of forests dying from acid rain. The images of the prophet are visible in many places around the world today. Our irresponsibility as creatures is destroying the creation.*

*In short, eco-theology is about exploring the fundamental links between God, human beings and the cosmos. Is a correction of the age-old theological views which places human beings in the center of creation. (ABC)<sup>4</sup>*

Eco Congregation, a project of churches in Scotland, puts it very starkly:

*Caring for creation is a key Christian task. .... Caring for the whole of creation demonstrates our love of God; destroying creation is akin to spitting on the crossbound face of Christ. <sup>5</sup>*

### 1. “The earth is the Lord’s” (Psalm 24)

Almost all of the church documents that were examined, refer to the opening verse of Psalm 24: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it....”<sup>6</sup>

For example, the EKD states:

*The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it, the world, and those who dwell in it" (Psalm 24:1) – this psalm confesses that God is the Creator of all life. Faith in God the Creator leads to an attitude of gratitude and humility, which rejoices in the beauties of creation and lives with respect for it. He binds humans into a community of life with all creatures and assigns them the responsibility to treat the world with reverence and to shape it into a habitable habitat. Faith in creation also includes the belief that humans are created in the image of God. The biblical statements about mankind being created in God's image (Genesis 1:26f.) establish their inviolable human dignity. From this also derives the right of every human being to a life worthy of humankind, which includes the right of all human beings to use the gifts of creation.*

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<sup>3</sup> Most of the quotes originate from English texts which are available on Internet. Translations from the Dutch and the German are unofficial.

<sup>4</sup> American Baptist Churches Policy Statement on Ecology (ABC/USA), 2007

<sup>5</sup> Eco Congregation, *Theology and the environment. Some green theological perspectives*, 2012

<sup>6</sup> See for example Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), 1993, ABC/USA and Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD): *Umkehr zum Leben*, 2009

In this context, the Evangelical Church in America (ELCA) also points to the Nicene Creed:

*“Scripture witnesses to God as creator of the earth and all that dwells therein (Psalm 24:1). The creeds, which guide our reading of Scripture, proclaim God the Father of Jesus Christ as “maker of heaven and earth,” Jesus Christ as the one “through [whom] all things were made,” and the Holy Spirit as “the Lord, the giver of life” ( Nicene Creed).”*

## 2. Genesis

It may come as no surprise that numerous church documents refer to the book Genesis when they address issues related to a Theology of Creation.<sup>7</sup>

*God blesses the world and sees it as “good,” even before humankind comes on the scene. All creation, not just humankind, is viewed as “very good” in God's eyes (Gen 1:31). God continues to bless the world: “When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground” (Ps. 104:30). By faith we understand God to be deeply, mysteriously, and unceasingly involved in what happens in all creation. God showers care upon sparrows and lilies (Mat 6:26-30), and brings “rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life” (Job 38:26). (ELCA)*

*Humanity is intimately related to the rest of creation. We, like other creatures, are formed from the earth (Gen 2:7, 9, 19)..... We depend upon God, who places us in a web of life with one another and with all creation. (ELCA)*

*Humans, in service to God, have special roles on behalf of the whole of creation. Made in the image of God, we are called to care for the earth as God cares for the earth. God's command to have dominion and subdue the earth is not a license to dominate and exploit. Human dominion (Gen 1:28; Ps. 8), a special responsibility, should reflect God's way of ruling as a shepherd king who takes the form of a servant (Phil 2:7), wearing a crown of thorns. (ELCA)*

*The wonder of God's magnificent creation leads us to admire our Creator, whom we come to know in his creation. We are called to care for God's creation. When we care for creation, we honor the Creator. When we care for the places where our neighbors live, both near and far, we demonstrate our charity. (PKN)<sup>8</sup>*

## 3. The role of human beings in God's creation, stewards, co-creators

Stewardship is a notion which is often used in church statements to describe the role of human beings in God's creation. The Conference of European Churches (CEC) points out that, in this context, the concept of stewardship was first introduced by John Calvin:

*One who contributed significantly to the theological principles of stewardship is John Calvin (1509–1564). In his commentary on Genesis 2:15, he underlined in particular the divine mandate of stewardship:*

*“The custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam, to show that we possess the things which God has committed to our hands, on the condition that, being content with a frugal and*

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<sup>7</sup> E.g. ELCA(1993) and Church of Sweden (CoS): *A Bishop's letter on Climate*, (2014/2020)

<sup>8</sup> *Laat Gerechtigheid Stromen. In gesprek of de zorg voor het behoud van de schepping en ecologische gerechtigheid*, notitie voor de generale synode van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland, november 2024

*moderate use of them, we should take care of what shall remain. Let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses.”<sup>9 10</sup>*

The American Baptist Churches (ABC) follow up on this:

*The earth belongs to God, as affirmed in Psalm 24:1. We are caretakers or stewards. Thus we are each related to God as one appointed to take care of someone else's possessions entrusted to us—our life, our home, the earth. The vast resources of the earth can provide for all its inhabitants, or they can be greedily swallowed up or poisoned by a few without regard for the impact of their actions.*

*The best understanding of the Biblical attitude of humanity's relationship with the Creation can be gained by a study of the Greek words which are the foundation of the New Testament. The word “stewardship” comes from the Greek words for house and management. The Greek word which is commonly translated “stewardship” is the root word for economics and ecology. The literal translation of steward is manager of the household. As such, we are all called to be managers of God's household, the earth and all that is in it.*

*Our responsibility as stewards is one of the most basic relationships we have with God. It implies a great degree of caring for God's creation and all God's creatures. The right relationship is embodied in the everlasting covenant to which Isaiah refers. There can be no justice without right relationships of creatures with one another and with all of creation. Eco-justice is the vision of the garden in Genesis—the realm and the reality of right relationship. (ABC)*

*The biblical concept of stewardship is rooted in the understanding of the world as creation. Human beings are not owners of the world. We are following the task of managers and carers given to us by God. We are all stewards and caretakers of the world, and God has entrusted us with the resources, abilities and opportunities to care, and each of us will be called to give an account of how we chose to manage what God gave to us. (CEC)*

Some church statements, however, qualify the notion of stewardship. Although the notion is not necessarily rejected as such, it is pointed out that placing human beings above the rest of creation, carries the danger of regarding human beings as having ‘domination’ rather than ‘dominion’ over the rest of creation. Such views have (had) devastating effects.<sup>11</sup>

*Traditionally, anthropocentrism has been especially strong in western theology, which has contributed to the lack of a balanced view of nature and creation. Creation theology has readily either romanticised nature or justified its exploitation. It became necessary to instead work towards a creation-oriented outlook on life that emphasises the mutuality in the relationships within creation and between God and creation, at the same time that it safeguards humans’ special mandate and responsibility. (CoS)*

*According to Gen 2:15, our role within creation is to serve and to keep God's garden, the earth. “To serve,” often translated “to till,” invites us again to envision ourselves as servants, while*

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<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis I*, Genesis 2:15, <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01/calcom01.viii.i.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Conference of European Churches: *Every Part of Creation Matters. A Discussion paper*, Brussels, 2022

<sup>11</sup> See also Larry L. Rasmussen: *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, WCC publications, 1996, p.230 ff, Matthijs de Jong/Cor Hoogerwerf: *Hemels Groen. Nieuw Licht op Duurzaamheid als Bijbels Thema*, Nederlands-Vlaams Bijbelgenootschap, 2024, p. 88 ff, Kelly Keasberry: *Geworteld in verbinding. Een ecologische theologie voor de toekomst*, Garant, Antwerpen, 2024, p. 29 ff, en Trees van Montfoort: *Groene Theologie*, Skandalon, 2019, p. 143 ff

*“to keep” invites us to take care of the earth as God keeps and cares for us (Num 6:24-26). (ELCA)*

*We are called, as God's image-bearers, to cultivate and preserve the earth as a habitable habitat (Genesis 2:15). "Humans are seen as representatives and dialogue-capable representatives of continuous and caring rule. The Creator's mandate assigns humankind co-responsibility for the prosperous use and life-promoting management of the habitats created by God. (EKD)*

*And God plants the Garden of Eden and assigns us to be its gardeners, to “till it and keep it”. Here we become most human when growing and cultivating the land. At one with creation, yet also with a special task and responsibility; this is how we humans meet ourselves on the first few pages of the Bible. We are made of the same building blocks as everything else in the universe. It is poetic, but also scientifically correct, to say that we are all formed from stardust. We are part of a cohesive tapestry of life. Creation is characterised by mutual dependence between everything that has been created and by shared dependency on God, who, with divine creative power, constantly maintains creation. In this, the psalmist recognises the work of the Holy Spirit of God: “When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground” (Psalm 104:30).*

*Based on the creation narratives, the role of humans can be described as that of stewardship. As a rule, stewards have a long term assignment. They may have far-reaching powers and considerable responsibility, but must never forget that they do not own what they are looking after. A day will come when the result of the stewardship will need to be reported. The role of steward may be important to highlight in our search for a sound way of approaching the climate crisis.*

*However, the description of the role of steward is not entirely unequivocal, and throughout history people have made what we now realise were mistakes. The notion of stewardship has legitimised social structures characterised by subordination and oppression instead of community and cooperation. It has been used to defend colonial and hierarchical structures that have denied those at the lower end of the scale their full value: women, children, fauna, flora and minerals. In other words, the notion of stewardship is a good way of underlining that we humans are part of creation and have special responsibility, but it cannot serve as the sole model with which to interpret that responsibility.(CoS)*

In recent times, the role of human beings has also been described as being ‘co-creators’ with God. This issue is addressed by the Church of Sweden (CoS):

*That God becomes human gives an even more intensive affinity between the Creator and creation: in Jesus, God becomes our fellow human being in the world. More recent theology refers to humans as “created co-creators”. In a ground-breaking way, this term captures our human duality, our tragedy and our power. We are created, dependent, limited, perishable, small. And we are creative, both in our creative activities and in our destructive activities, inventive in our constant attempts to stretch our limits and, driven by our inherent curiosity, to cross the line between what can be perceived as present in reality (immanent) and what lies beyond (transcendent). In that way we are incurably religious.*

*Referring to humans as created co-creators is a radicalisation of the idea of stewardship that is not entirely uncontroversial. The Bible has a word for “create” that is only used when describing God creating, because God’s creative activities are completely different to when humans use or care for nature. Theology has for a long time therefore settled on referring to*

*humans as God's fellow workers. This idea of being fellow workers is not, however, as effective in expressing the crucial tension between our smallness and our greatness, our limitation and our boundlessness, our failures and our successes. Since the mid-20th century, we know that human inventiveness has given us the possibility of devastating creation on our planet using nuclear weapons. (CoS)*

Finally, the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (PKN), refers to the Belgic Confession of Faith which

*succinctly expresses this attitude of reverence and admiration in its introduction: "For (the world) is before our eyes like a beautiful book, in which all creatures, great and small, are like letters that make us see the invisible things of God, namely his eternal power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says (Rom. 1:20)." (NGB art. 2, incl. italics). Later, it is added that God "has given to each creature its essence, form, and shape, and various tasks to serve its Creator." (NGB art. 12)*

#### 4. Priests

Following up on the writings of some of the Church Fathers, the CEC mentions the priestly role of humans (next to stewardship):

*(...) humans can be seen through the lens of their priestly role, meaning that one is responsible for offering the whole creation to God in order to survive eternally. It is not just a moral task but a new way of life that seriously takes creation, in all its aspects, into account as an ontological component of the imago Dei.*

The CEC paper points to Maximus the Confessor (7<sup>th</sup> century), who shared the insight that

*The heart of being a priest of creation is to offer all of creation, including humanity, to God, so that God, in turn, can sanctify creation, returning the offering completely transformed. In this way, creation plays the key role in the unfolding of God's plan of salvation.*

The CEC follows up on this line of thought:

*As outlined by patristics, the priestly role of every human person is also closely related to subsequent thoughts of the founders of Protestantism, especially Martin Luther and John Calvin, and their teaching on the universal priesthood of each person faithful to Christ. In reference to the biblical quote: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Pet. 2:9), Luther underlines: "In this way we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians", which he underpins with an additional reference to 1 Corinthians 4:1: "No one should regard us as anything else than ministers of Christ and dispensers of the mysteries of God."<sup>12</sup>*

The idea of priesthood is also picked up by Eco Congregation:

*Another perspective has been derived from the understanding given in Genesis 1:27 that humans are made in the image of God. In some Christian traditions the priest takes on the role of mediator between the people and God. Extending this to the care of creation, the model of priestly care would be to oversee on behalf of God the care of creation and to offer this care back to God as part of Christian thanksgiving. This priesthood model helpfully includes the concept of acting for God, not like a god. Its basis is not that the care of creation is entrusted*

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<sup>12</sup> *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium* [Prelude Concerning the Babylonian Captivity of the Church], Weimar Ausgabe 6:564.6-14 as quoted in Norman Nagel, "Luther and the Priesthood of All Believers", *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61:4 (October 1997), 283–84.

*to the ordained part of the church, but rather that the whole of humanity is called to be a bridge between God and the rest of the created order, between God's purpose on Earth and God's purpose in heaven. Within this role of priesthood there is an understanding of not just offering sacrifices but taking on sacrifices as a loving act to bring about new life for all.*

However, Eco Congregation also observes that this concept

*.... is not readily translated across all Christian traditions, in part because of different understandings of the term priesthood and also because there is no clear need for a mediator between God and his creation.*

## 5. Covenant

The rainbow as sign of covenant between God and humankind and "every living creature" (Genesis 9:10-16) is mentioned in various church documents.<sup>13</sup>

*....we are to live within the covenant God makes with every living thing (Gen 9:12-17; Hos 2:18), and even with the day and night (Jer 33:20). (ELCA)*

*In the Noah Covenant, God reaffirmed his gracious and life-sustaining yes to his creation even in the face of human sin and wickedness (Gen 8:21f. and 9:8-17)" (EKD).*

*We believe that God has made a covenant with all of creation (Gen 9.8-12). God has brought into being an earth community based on the vision of justice and peace. The covenant is a gift of grace that is not for sale in the market place (Is 55.1). It is an economy of grace for the household of all of creation. Jesus shows that this is an inclusive covenant in which the poor and marginalized are preferential partners and calls us to put justice for the "least of these" (Mt 25.40) at the centre of the community of life. All creation is blessed and included in this covenant (Hos 2.18ff). (WARC)*

*God made an everlasting covenant with human beings, with the animals, with the plants, with the earth. That is our hope. (NHK)*

*(...) after the Flood, God made a covenant with all creation. In the story of the covenant between God and Noah and his descendants, "all living creatures" are mentioned four times, "every living thing" five times, and "the earth" six times (Genesis 9:8-17). (PKN, 2024)*

*Whilst many covenants recorded in the Old Testament are of a secular nature, between two leaders, or have a divine/human nature, between God and God's people, the covenant made before Noah at the end of the flood, and recorded in Genesis 9 has a universal aspect. It is made by God to 'every living creature' and reminds us of the value God attaches to all life. (Eco Congregation)*

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<sup>13</sup> E.g. Raad van Kerken in Nederland, *Een verbond voor het leven. Geloofsbrief over gerechtigheid, vrede en heelheid van de schepping*, 1988, Fédération Protestante de France, *S'engager pour la justice climatique. Contributions protestantes*, 2022. See also Gijsbert van den Brink, *En de aarde bracht voort. Christelijk geloof en evolutie*, Boekencentrum, Utrecht, 2017, p. 207 ff

## 6. Sabbath, Sabbath Year and Jubilee Year

The notions of Sabbath, Sabbath Year and Jubilee Year provide helpful entry points to reflect on creation theology (e.g. Exodus 20: 8-11 and Leviticus 25).<sup>14</sup> Deuteronomy 5:15 links the Sabbath to liberation from slavery and in Deuteronomy 15:1-18, the Sabbath is linked to care for the poor.<sup>15</sup>

*Then God looks at creation and sees that everything is “very good”, but this is not the end of the story. A day of rest ensues, which God makes a holy day. That rest, the Sabbath, becomes a holy part of creation. (CoS)*

*By observing the Sabbath, worshippers are encouraged to view life as a means to God’s purpose and God’s end, rather than the earth as a means to an end in life. (Eco Congregation)*

*(...) the Jubilee Year of Leviticus 25, a year of land reform. It is a recognition that all land basically and ultimately belongs to God, and that no person or group has the right to destroy it or to use it unendingly for unjust personal or institutional gain. (ABC)*

*(the Sabbath) is a day of healing and wholeness for people threatened with succumbing to limitlessness. The Sabbath tells us a different story than one of feasibility, maximization, and efficiency. Especially in these times, when we live in an economic system focused on unlimited growth and see that people and the planet cannot keep up, this day of reflection and contemplation can remind us that we were created to live in freedom. The perspective of the joy and peace of the Sabbath casts our work in a completely different light.*

*The Sabbatical year and the Jubilee year make this perspective concrete at the level of society as a whole. (PKN, 2024)*

## 7. Psalms

Psalms are often referred to in church documents. The first verse of Psalm 24 is clearly a ‘favorite’. Other Psalms are Psalm 89, 96, 98, 114, 145 and, especially, 148, which all praise God for creation in which human beings are part of creation.

*The joy and wonder of God's good creation are described in many Psalms. "Praise the Lord, O my soul! O Lord my God, you are exceedingly glorious; you are beautiful and beautifully adorned. Your clothing is light; you spread out the heavens like a curtain..." (Psalm 104:1-2). The attitude of praising the Creator and grateful wonder at his work reminds people that they have been richly blessed by God. This attitude is a strong and positive motivation to preserve this good creation of God, to treat it with care, and to share the goods of creation justly. (EKD)*

The Netherlands Council of Churches points to Psalm 85 to illustrate the close connection between justice, peace and the integrity of creation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See also Dave Bookless, *Het groene hart van het geloof. Zorg voor Gods wereld*, Micha Boeken, 2008, chapter 3, Trees van Montfoort, p. 113 ff, Kelly Keasberry, p. 103 ff, Larry Rasmussen, p. 224 ff, Matthijs de Jong/Cor Hoogerwerf, p 58 ff

<sup>15</sup> See also *Laudato si'*, encyclical of Pope Francis, 2015, where the cry of the earth is linked to the cry of the poor. For a summary of *Laudato Si'*, see Trees van Montfoort p. 164 ff

<sup>16</sup> Raad van Kerken in Nederland, *Een verbond voor het leven. Geloofsbrief over gerechtigheid, vrede en heilheid van de schepping*, De Horstink, 1988

In Psalm 104 creation is depicted as a continuing process (with no mentioning of the human being!). Seemingly, this is in contrast with Psalm 8 which can be read as a mandate to humans to rule over creation. A closer reading, however, contradicts this.<sup>17</sup>

## 8. Prophets

Several prophets protest sharply against the acts of human beings which lead to the destruction of God's creation. Hosea (4:1-3), for example, speaks out against human beings who destroy the earth. Jeremiah 4:23-26 sees 'creation in reverse' and bemoans this (12:4)<sup>18</sup> Joel (1 and 2) provides a prophetic frame for ecological devastation, repentance, and call to conversion.

Isaiah (chapter 24) links environmental destruction with people who have broken 'the eternal covenant' (24:5). In other words, the 'covenantal responsibility' was pushed aside by the people of Israel.

In the church statements that were explored in the context of this paper, however, no references were found to the prophets, except in the Accra Confession of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches which points to Hosea 2:18ff in the context of the covenant:

*All creation is blessed and included in this covenant.*

## 9. Sin

The prophet Jeremiah (4:23-28) describes disrupted creation as the result of God's judgement over the irresponsible acts of humankind (see also Deuteronomy 11:13-17). A disrupted nature is a judgment on our unfaithfulness as stewards, a result of sin. This is still very relevant for the situation today as the Council of Churches in The Netherlands points out.<sup>19</sup> CoS acknowledges: "Our sin is great".

*Alienated from God and from creation, and driven to make a name for ourselves (Gen 11:4), we become captives to demonic powers and unjust institutions (Gal 4:9; Eph 6:12; Rev 13:1-4). In our captivity, we treat the earth as a boundless warehouse and allow the powerful to exploit its bounties to their own ends (Amos 5:6-15). Our sin and captivity lie at the roots of the current crisis. (ELCA)*

*In the ability God has given us to make choices also lies inherent danger. We can choose to disobey, to be irresponsible, to disrupt and disturb the peaceable relationship of creature and creation. We can choose to use nature's resources only for what we perceive is our own immediate interest. Such action is sin. It is a violation of the basic covenant wherein we are called to stewardship. It is an unfaithful refusal of the responsibility entrusted to us. Often we tend to think of sin in terms of individual actions. Yet decisions and actions which we make as groups, communities and societies constitute corporate sin. These corporate decisions and actions reflect values and interests which conflict with the vision of shalom and eco-justice consistent with created order. Our task is to discern the conflict and to choose ways of living which build an eco-just community and world. (ABC)*

*Salvation cannot come to creation unless we repent and turn away from former lifestyles (Romans 8:12-14, 18-23). (ABC)*

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<sup>17</sup> See Matthijs de Jong/Cor Hoogerwerf, p. 163

<sup>18</sup> See Matthijs de Jong/Cor Hoogerwerf, p. 103, Dave Bookless, p. 61 and Larry L. Rasmussen, p. 242 ff

<sup>19</sup> Raad van Kerken in Nederland, *Kwetsbaarheid, Verantwoordelijkheid en Moed. Klimaatverandering: het moment van de waarheid*, 2009

*How one-sided is it, given the current environmental crisis, to designate economic growth and technological progress as 'structures of sin'? (NHK)*

*Time and again, people have failed to live up to this mandate and have become guilty before God and creation. The Bible tells many stories of these transgressions, but also stories of God's patience and goodness, with which he calls people who have gone astray to repentance and brings them back on the right path. (EKD)*

The message of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church in 2016 states:

*It is clear that the present-day ecological crisis is due to spiritual and moral causes. Its roots are connected with greed, avarice and egoism, which lead to the thoughtless use of natural resources, the filling of the atmosphere with damaging pollutants, and to climate change. The Christian response to the problem demands repentance for the abuses, an ascetic frame of mind as an antidote to overconsumption, and at the same time a cultivation of the consciousness that man is a "steward" and not a possessor of creation. The Church never ceases to emphasise that future generations also have a right to the natural resources that the Creator has given us.<sup>20</sup> (CEC)*

*Failure to exercise the command to till and care for the earth, given in Genesis 2, and worse, to scar creation through human activity, may be understood as a sin and an act of betrayal of the promises and love of God. Despite the sinfulness of humanity, the Biblical account and experiences from the past through to today reveal God's grace and continuing call away from sin and to the purpose of ushering in a new heaven and a new earth. (Eco Congregation)*

## 10. Conversion and redemption

The existence of sin, necessitates conversion which can result in redemption.

*As a Protestant church, we are convinced that a radical change in mentality in politics, business, and society is necessary to mitigate the effects of climate change and preserve the livelihoods of future generations. Such a shift toward a sustainable economy and way of life requires a conversion that the Bible calls "metanoia," a radical and comprehensive conversion. (EKD)*

*(This) requires a radical shift in mentality and awareness in society as a whole, and especially among those in positions of responsibility in business, politics, and society. A shift toward a truly sustainable, environmentally sustainable way of life and economy requires a change of heart, which in biblical language is called metanoia, or "a change of mind."<sup>21</sup>*

*Creation itself is also included in God's renewing and liberating salvific action, for it, too, is promised liberation from slavery and oppression (Rom 8:21). God's salvific action in his Son Jesus Christ, which encompasses all of creation, is the basis and origin of a radical conversion, described with the biblical word "metanoia." "Conversion" here does not mean a return to past, supposedly better times, but in the biblical sense, a radical reorientation toward God's promises of salvation and commandments. It is about renewing one's thoughts and actions through faith*

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<sup>20</sup> Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, § 8, Pentecost 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Bishop Wolfgang Huber, moderator EKD, *Es ist nicht zu spät für eine Antwort auf den Klimawandel*, EKD-Texte 89, 2007

*in the gospel of Jesus Christ. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is" (Rom 12:2). (EKD)*

*The creation is in crisis. We believe that ecology and justice, stewardship of creation and redemption are interdependent...(.....). The Bible affirms, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein" (Psalms 24:1). As Christians we believe that the whole universe reveals God's manifold works. God continues to create as well as to redeem. God asks us not only to call persons to redemption but also to teach them to be wise stewards, tenderly caring for God's creation. (ABC)*

*We look forward to a redemption that includes all creation (Eph 1:10). (ELCA)*

*Nature and the whole of creation are longing for redemption. Creation is out of balance and groaning, as we read in Romans 8:18-23. The redemption of humans is a healing force for creation. Humans and nature cannot be separated in this matter. (CEC)*

*Our Lutheran tradition never tires of reminding us that we are both righteous and sinners at the same time, justified by grace through faith. We know that we ultimately live more on what we receive than on what we do. We live by grace. It is a gift from God to us that our worth in the eyes of God does not depend on our achievements but on God's love for us. (CoS)*

## 11. New Testament

Romans chapter 8 is frequently referred to in the context of eco-theological reflections. Salvation is not only meant for human being but also for the world and for creation as a whole.<sup>22</sup>

*Central to our vision of God's profound involvement with the world is the Incarnation. In Christ, the Word is made flesh, with saving significance for an entire creation that longs for fulfillment (Rom 8:18-25). The Word still comes to us in the waters of baptism, and in, with, and under the bread and wine, fruits of the earth and the work of human hands. God consistently meets us where we live, through earthy matter. (ELCA)*

*....the love and the care that God has for the whole creation, "for God so loved the world..." (John 3:16, Romans 8:21-22, Matthew 5:43-48). (ABC)*

The same point is made in the 'hymn to the cosmic Christ' in Colossians 1 which stipulates that through Jesus Christ, "God chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself" (1:20).

*In this hymn, Christ is portrayed as a Priest who reconciles all of creation to God. (PKN, 2024)*

The New Testament (as well as the First Testament) contains references to the importance of including justice in the reflections about care for creation.

*Those hit first by climate change are those who have contributed the least to causing it.....*

*"According to Christian faith, the most vulnerable and exposed must be central to our thoughts and our care. "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited*

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Matthijs de Jong/Cor Hoogerwerf, chapter 8

you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:37–40).....

*Christianity has a powerful counter image: the vision of a fair balance. The Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians: "But I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich... I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." (2 Corinthians 8:8ff) As Christians we must and want to work for liberation from poverty and for just and fair sharing."*

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*Climate change is fundamentally an issue of global justice. The climate crisis should be tackled as part of humanity's dual challenge: to stop climate change at the same time as giving billions of people life and development opportunities, away from poverty and oppression." (CoS)*

## 12. Apocalypticism, ontology and eschatology

The report of the Conference of European Churches reflects on eschatology in the context of eco-theology:

*(.....) the theological concept of creation is not related to cosmological theories but to ontology. Creation is a story of continuation. At the same time, it is an outline of the relationship between human beings and is radically different from the materiality of physical existence. An emphasis on cultivating the relationship to what is ontologically different often leads to the distortion of the theological concept of eschatology. (...) Eschatology is often seen as a theory of what will happen beyond our existing time horizon. The biblical story of creation and God's incarnation and redemption mutually overlap to outline a concept of eschatology that is much richer than any theories of what will happen after the physical death of the mortal body. What occurs beyond our timeline only covers one part of eschatology. The attraction to get closer to the mystery of metaphysics and to discern what happens beyond the time horizon often moves our attention from that part of eschatology that emphasises the relationship to what is already radically and ontologically different. Realised eschatology is predominantly characterised by what unfolds in the here and now. To paraphrase, it spells out God's presence in us and around us. (...)*

*The concept of time, in which eternity unfolds not at the end of time but moves in parallel with the continuity of time, calls for Christians to bring meaningful action on care for creation in any given moment. It is an expression of hope that not only puts its trust in the future but decides its quality in the here and now. It is an expression of hope that tells us our actions and our engagement make sense, even if the world around might try to convince us of the contrary. Christian eschatological vision invites everyone to work for the preparation of the world today and not to wait until tomorrow. (CEC)*

The Church of Sweden juxtaposes eschatology with apocalypticism and warns against the idea that we can fold our arms, do nothing in face of the destruction of the creation, because acting would delay the day of Christ's return on earth.

*The questions about the future of the earth and humanity bring at least two different lines in Christian thinking to the fore. In theological terminology they are called apocalypticism and eschatology. Apocalypticism is a genre that is very recognisable from the world of film.*

*Apocalyptic films are about disasters and depictions of the end of the world. Like books of the Bible such as the Book of Revelation (in Greek, Apokalypsis) they paint a dramatic picture of what is assumed will happen at the end of time. Apocalypticism seems to constitute an irresistible temptation for our human imagination. And with reason, as disasters are part of cosmic history. Research into the emergence and development of complex systems has observed that disasters are key moments in such a development. Disasters matter in creation. Theological reflection cannot ignore that. In the sphere of churches, apocalyptic thoughts about the end of the world and of time are linked to conceptions of the return of Christ, which is fundamentally something to long for and look forward to. In certain Christian contexts, based on this kind of apocalyptic approach, there is opposition to all involvement in environmental work and engagement for the integrity of creation, as it is thought that this would delay the longed-for day of Christ's return. Business as usual is advocated: heaven and earth are going to perish anyway; they will all wear out like a garment (Psalm 102:26). Then Christ will come and look after his own. The rest doesn't matter. However, such an interpretation is in conflict with broader motifs in the Book of Revelation. There is a great deal to indicate that this book is a searing criticism of the imperialist power of that time: Rome. Rome's glorification of military power is contrasted with the power of the lamb, with Jesus, crucified and resurrected, who is victorious through non-violence. The message is that victory over evil is not won by a roaring lion, but by a slaughtered lamb. Then, the apocalypse, the revelation, is not primarily about disaster and violence but instead about Jesus leading us into a world of joy and healing. We are drawn into a movement that will continue until the full completion of creation. The message for believers is: Do not be afraid: there is a limit to evil. That's why there is every reason to courageously tackle the work for the kingdom of God with everything that it involves in relation to creation, fellow humans and ourselves. (CoS)*

*"Eschatology is literally the study of "the last things", both in terms of time and existentially. It encompasses questions of what happens when the final calendar ends, at the end of time, but also the question of what ultimately gives meaning to the life we are living and what there is beyond death. Eschatology asks the question of what we can hope for in all its breadth and radicality. Its answer is a promise – that when everything ends God is near. When the giver of life, the Holy Spirit, has returned to its origins, when the liberator Jesus Christ has submitted everything to God, then God becomes "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28).*

*In modern times, eschatology has been somewhat less interested in the end of time and the final judgment as the great cosmic finale. Instead eschatology's interest in God's promise of hope and eternal life has grown. This promise is the actual source of the irrepressible hope that permeates all our efforts to build a better world and thereby realise some of the Kingdom of God in the world's conditions. Such irrepressible hope is expressed in the legendary words attributed to Luther: "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree." (CoS)*

### 13. Hope

This 'irrepressible hope' about which the Church of Sweden speaks, is a theme which comes back in other church documents as well.

*Captured by hope, we dream dreams and look forward to a new creation. God does not just heal this creation wounded by human sin. God will one day consummate all things in "new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home" (2Pet 3:13). Creation--now in captivity to disruption and death--will know the freedom it awaits. (ELCA)*

*Our tradition offers many glimpses of hope triumphant over despair. In ancient Israel, as Jerusalem was under siege and people were on the verge of exile, Jeremiah purchased a plot of land (Jer 32). When Martin Luther was asked what he would do if the world were to end tomorrow, he reportedly answered, "I would plant an apple tree today." When we face today's crisis, we do not despair. We act. (ELCA)*

*We claim the deep resources of our Christian faith for this work. We worship a God who created all that exists, who rejoices in its flourishing and blesses its diversity. We follow Jesus Christ, himself one of us "earth creatures," who in dying entered deeply into mortal suffering and who in rising gives hope for the renewal and restoration of all God has made. We are inspired by the divine Spirit, intimately present to all creation, who gives us strength, wisdom and perseverance to join in the "here and now" work of God in healing the brokenness of our hurting home... We acknowledge the dire urgency of this moment not through the lenses of despair, but through lenses of hope and determination. (CoS)*

*God made an everlasting covenant with human beings, with the animals, with the plants, with the earth. That is our hope. (NHK)*

Referring to Isaiah 32:15-19, the PKN states:

*The hopeful vision of God's kingdom lifts us above our daily reality and shows us what other realities are possible. It gives us the courage and inspiration to take action, even in the face of difficulty, brokenness, and resistance. (...) In light of that confidence, we see that God is already working in secret, working toward the fulfillment of his plan. Therefore, the hopeful vision always has the final say. It is a vision of justice, community, carefree rest, safety, peace, and fellowship. To embark on this journey with courage and to remain so, we can pray for the Spirit and walk together with others based on the biblical vision.*

## Concluding remarks

This brief overview of some church (related) documents illustrates the concern of many Christians about the harm that is presently done to God's good creation. It also shows how corrections are being made to anthropocentric approaches which have dominated mainstream theology for a long time, and which have, according to some, contributed to the subjugation and careless exploitation of the planet Earth.<sup>23</sup>

In his sermon at the 'Climate Synod' in 2022, the President of the UPCB Synod, Rev. Steven Fuite asked the question whether creation is presently being crucified and with it, its Creator. A penetrating question indeed! The question illustrates the necessity and urgency for the UPCB to explore new theological avenues and re-assess the place and role of human beings in the entirety of God's creation.

Already some 35 years ago, the General Synod of the Netherlands Reformed Church observed that *the environmental crisis strikes us at the very core of our faith (... ) Our carelessness regarding the dying environment is a form of lovelessness towards God.*<sup>24</sup>

Today, this observation has not lost any of its relevance and urgency.

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<sup>23</sup> See for example Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", Science, March 1967, and Sallie McFague, *The Body of God. An Ecological Theology*, SCM Press, 1993.

<sup>24</sup> Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (NHK): *De gaarde een woestijn? De milieucrisis en de verantwoordelijkheid van de kerk. Een verkenning ten behoeve van het gesprek in de gemeenten, aangeboden door de Generale Synode van de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, (1990). Unofficial translation.

## Some recommendations

The UPCB Working Group Church in Society would like to suggest that the UPCB considers adopting the following recommendations:

- a. Adopt this paper as a reflection and discussion paper for the UPCB.
- b. Organise a deliberative session during one of the upcoming Synod meetings to discuss the topic of Theology of Creation ('eco-theology').
- c. Work towards identifying a number of Affirmations which can serve as a common ground for the UPCB in addressing issues related to a Theology of Creation.
- d. Work closely together with the Theological Faculty to stimulate reflections about a Theology of Creation and about the question what new emphases are necessary in our way of theologizing around the issue of the place and role of human beings in God's creation.
- e. Call on all the members of the UPCB to engage in serious reflection on the implications of eco-theology for our faith and our actions in daily life, both for individuals and for parishes.
- f. Encourage all relevant actors in the UPCB to cooperate closely with other churches and church-related organisations on promoting joint theological reflection as well as action to protect God's creation.

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