

# Beyond Hope: Evaluating Ecotheological Models with Respect to the Anthropocene and Eschatology

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## Abstract

Christianity's traditional eschatology and its belief in a new heaven and earth stand in sharp contrast with escalating concern over the devastating effects of the Anthropocene and our knowledge of the cosmos' origins and future direction. While traditional eschatology maintains unassailable hope in a new creation, environmentally focused organisations provide grim scientific predictions regarding the extent, duration, and ferocity of climate change. The theological reflections of numerous scholars on these matters are yielding alternative ecotheologies that seek to better align the church's response to the needs of the climate crisis. In this paper, I categorise four models of ecotheology from these alternatives and assess their fitness to respond to both the witness of scripture and to the climate crisis. This evaluation reveals stark distinctions in the approaches each model engenders, with meaningful consequences for the church's impact on ecological crisis. I suggest the adoption of a revised eschatological hope that calls for the church's active engagement to build the Kingdom of God in our midst and to yield a more positive future for creation.

**Keywords:** eschatology, anthropocene, ecotheology, eschatological hope, deep time

We are immersed in a world of urgent need, with a palpable sense of desperation. Desperation appears in those resisting the endless melee of gun violence, relentlessly seeking equality where it is lacking, and championing liberative forms of government. A relatively new urgency presses in upon those of us who are affected by or grasping the escalating risk imposed by climate change. We see it in the global protests of the young begging us to take action to mitigate climate change. We witness it in the desperate voyage of migrants fleeing climate-induced famine. We confront it in the catastrophic losses accompanying nature's destructive power. It is felt by the over three billion people who are highly vulnerable to climate change now.<sup>1</sup> Trending as we are toward more extensive climate crisis, the impacts are predicted to be far greater.

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<sup>1</sup>"Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). "Summary for Policymakers." Frontmatter. in *Climate Change 2021 – The Physical Science Basis: Working Group I Contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, 3–32. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. doi:10.1017/9781009157896.001.5.

Christianity and the church have long provided refuge from the ills of the world like these. Its eschatological hope in an eternal, perfect hereafter offered a harbinger of hope that would mend all wounds for the redeemed. Yet, this traditional eschatological hope now sits squarely in the crosshairs of the Anthropocene's escalating climate crisis and our knowledge of the cosmos, insights that jeopardise the concept of a heavenly escape altogether.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, climate science predicts needless devastation in the relative near-term if we do not act decisively to avert crisis, whereas Christianity traditionally offers the vision of a perfectly restored new creation at some point in the future. It is as if both are racing toward a finish line, but we cannot say how long the race is that either is running. Will the climate crisis reach its catastrophic tipping point before the church reaches its salvific eschaton?

Compounding the challenge to eschatology is our scientific awareness of the cosmos and its nearly incomprehensibly long evolution. Compared to all that has been, humanity represents a mere speck in a cosmos that continually adapts to create something new. Our knowledge challenges the imagination to accept a rational case for a new heaven and earth. Does it make sense to adhere to the notion of a new heaven and earth now that we better grasp our origins and can reasonably model a future cosmos that has no less scope and time horizon than has its past?

These crosshairs create a mounting tension on traditional eschatological hope that begs the question, what is the church to do? To what extent should the church prepare for the return of Christ at the expense of engaging in mitigating climate action? Can the church reconcile our knowledge of the cosmos' workings with its blessed hope for eternal life?

These questions and their import are generating the engagement of numerous theological scholars to develop ecotheologies aimed at raising the church's awareness of issues and meeting these challenges. These ecotheologies range across a wide spectrum of perspectives derived from their unique approaches to scriptural interpretation and attitudes toward science. They yield starkly different eschatological positions that weigh significantly on their resulting environmental position. This paper reviews four ecotheology models I derived by grouping those with significant shared features, allowing us to frame the discussion and make useful comparisons of their positions.

I will first summarize the environmental crisis to provide context for the severity of the issue and to critique the efficacy of the models. I will then present each model by discussing their

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<sup>2</sup> The Anthropocene refers to the current geological age, regarded as the time since human activity has become the dominant influence on climate and the environment.

hermeneutic approach, attitude toward science, eschatological hope paradigm, and their resulting climate crisis response.

I will show that each model's interpretation of the Bible's dominion and Kingdom of God language, along with the extent of their adherence to prevailing scientific knowledge, are central to their formation. I will argue that the most viable ecotheologies decentre humanity, locate the Kingdom of God as the work of the church here and now, and embrace cogent scientific perspective. When meeting this test, multiple models are found wanting and the church's traditional eschatological hope paradigm is also a victim in need of revision.

Finally, I argue the environment is beyond hope only if we fail to act in its best interests. I will argue that the model I refer to as Liberative Justice offers us the most robust ecotheology, as it calls us to rise to the challenge of the environmental crisis befitting of the manifestation of God's presence among us. I will offer a historic analogy from the life of Plenty Coup, the last Crow Nation chief, as a model for generating a hope that reckons with lived circumstance to create a better future. The church should likewise recognize the impact of our actions on the contingency of potential climate outcomes and adopt an informed and engaged posture focused on justice and preparation, ever mindful of the wellbeing of God's creation. Such a church will not only find itself required to address climate issues, but will seek to fully engage to combat all injustice.

### **The State of The Climate**

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) details the current state of the environment, forecasts future changes and risks, and models the projected impacts of potential responses. This extensive assessment provides clear evidence that climate change is occurring at an increasing rate,<sup>3</sup> that the rate of temperature increases correlates to compounding harm across an interrelated complex web of factors,<sup>4</sup> and that our actions directly affect both the trajectory of ecological harm and remediation efforts.<sup>5</sup> Of particular interest to this discussion are the following findings:

- Since 1970, we have witnessed the steepest rise in global surface temperature than in any other 50-year period over the last 2,000 years.<sup>6</sup>
- Human activity is likely the main cause of increases in global temperature and sea level rise.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> IPCC, "Summary for Policy Makers,"

<sup>4</sup> IPCC, 12.

<sup>5</sup> IPCC., 5.

<sup>6</sup> IPCC, 4.

<sup>7</sup> IPCC, 5.

- Some regions already experience hard and soft adaptive limits and maladaptation.<sup>8</sup>
- Global warming will reach 3.2 C° by 2100 without the rapid implementation of robust corrective measures.<sup>9</sup>
- Every region will witness overlapping and increasingly occurring climate change impacts, to include longer heatwaves, increased drought.<sup>10</sup>
- The likelihood and severity of irreversible changes increases with each rise in global temperature.<sup>11</sup>

Were the adequacy of our climate response merely tied to awareness, findings like these would certainly galvanise our response. However, competing priorities thwart the momentum of progress as economic, political, and often religious forces weigh heavily against achieving climate mitigation. Required investments and policy changes are falling behind the need, as reflected in the fact that fossil fuel investments still exceed those made toward climate change remediation.<sup>12</sup>

As sobering as these statistics may be, the IPCC notes the increasing availability and affordability of climate mitigating technologies, including solar and wind energies, improved land-use management approaches, and reduced food waste methods that can help reverse climate warning.<sup>13</sup> Its modelling includes pathways that could limit warming to 1.5 C° by 2100 if we were to employ the fullest extent of responses now.<sup>14</sup> As promising a future as these technologies can provide, the IPCC issues us this stark warning: “There is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a livable and sustainable future for all.”<sup>15</sup>

Christians must scrutinise their ecotheology to account for these findings. The longer we go without adequately responding, the greater the harm, with ever-increasing losses that cannot be restored. While many hope that technology may yet save us from ourselves, this hope stands challenged by the inertial weight produced by competing priorities and too often by ecotheologies that stand at a distance. The church, like all stakeholders, cannot singlehandedly solve the climate crisis. Yet, the following analysis demonstrates the church’s position matters a great deal, serving to either exacerbate or ease the climate crisis.

### **Introducing the Ecotheology Models**

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<sup>8</sup> IPCC, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> IPCC, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> IPCC, 13.

<sup>11</sup> IPCC, 19.

<sup>12</sup> IPCC, 11.

<sup>13</sup> IPCC, 28.

<sup>14</sup> IPCC, 24.

<sup>15</sup> IPCC, 25.

This paper sets out four models of ecotheology I derived based on their answers to the questions raised in the introduction, primarily what is the Church to believe and do in the crosshairs of our traditional eschatology and the Anthropocene? While these models do not claim to account for all ecotheologies, they can serve as a useful tool to survey prominent ideas and thus allow us to see some of the major moves being made to distinguish various approaches. Each discrete ecotheology contains unique nuances and may share aspects in common with other models, but they are assigned to a particular model for their points of emphasis, sharing similar hermeneutics, the relative weight of science on their position, and the type of climate crisis response these aspects yield. The four ecotheology models are Replacement, Communal, Plenary, and Liberative Justice.

The Replacement Model is based on the hope of Christ's imminent return and a subsequent replacement cosmos. Because of its hermeneutic, it assumes we have all the resources we need to live an unconstrained life as we assert our God-given dominion over creation. Further, it includes unassailable hope for the redeemed because God will provide a new heaven and earth, or the coming Kingdom of God, in time to spare us from any harm that a so-called climate crisis would create. It breaks with scientific findings both in its rejection of Anthropocene-based climate warnings, and in its metaphysical register where it sees a coming break in spacetime divorced from cosmic history.

I categorise the next group of ecotheology articulations as the Communal model, deriving the term from Richard Bauckham's "community of creation".<sup>16</sup> This model identifies the harmful effect of dominion thinking and seeks to undo its impact by asking that we reframe our conception of humanity's role with respect to creation, seeing ourselves more as caretakers than overlords.<sup>17</sup> Through this vital hermeneutic move, it tempers the reach and fervour of our environment footprint. Nothing prevents adherents of this model to maintain a Replacement-style hope with belief in a new heaven and new earth, but it is intent on living a human existence more respectful of this creation and understands the needless suffering inherent in Anthropocene-based climate change.

The moves made by the next model, the Plenary model, allow it to serve as a sea change when compared with our prior models. With its focus on deep incarnation, it does not just shift our thinking regarding humanity's role in creation. It goes on to emphasise the cosmos-encompassing

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Bauckham, "Being Human in the Community of Creation," in *EcoTheology: A Christian Conversation*, eds. Kiara A. Jorgenson and Alan G. Padgett (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company Jorgenson, 2020), 45.

<sup>17</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger, "The Character of Earthkeeping," in *EcoTheology: A Christian Conversation*, eds. Kiara A. Jorgenson and Alan G. Padgett (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company Jorgenson, 2020), 169.

nature of God's salvific work which includes all of creation as constituents in the Kingdom of God. Also central to its formation is the inclusion of deep time as paramount to our understanding of the unfolding cosmos. Its metaphysics allow for no break in the spacetime continuum to yield miraculously an instantaneous new heaven and earth. So, as in a plenary session, where all participants are to attend, the Plenary model requires that all of time and all of creation are considered in our ecotheology. It asserts that as we sit in this moment in time, the fate of creation can be swayed by our actions to create a better future. We are to build the Kingdom of God here and now. Should we or should we not succeed to respond adequately, hope remains as found in the ongoing eternal work of God to create from whatever realm of possibility exist.

Lastly, Liberative Justice emphasises an expedient urgent response to address the climate crisis and its associated injustices. It shares deeply with the Plenary model's view that building the Kingdom of God is the present-day task of the church. It sees no exit ramp from our self-inflicted climate wounds and insists that we mitigate harm and injustice to the extent possible while bracing for the change to come. Where it departs from Plenary is in its time horizon focus, its actionable thrust, and its contingent hope. Liberative Justice adherents maintain a clear focus on measures that can be taken to preserve this creation and minimise the suffering of its inhabitants. It emphasises the extent to which suffering is contingent upon our actions and takes no solace in any newly evolved creation eventually built from earth's ashes.

### **The Replacement Model**

Replacement ecotheology assumes God provided Earth for our benefit and that its resources suffice to allow for our unconstrained use until the redeemed are provided a new heaven and earth. It is likely that few who adhere to this type of ecotheology would recognise it as such. For them, it is an accidental, non-deliberative environmental position. It is a default, generated from the literal interpretation of scripture and a dispensational eschatological construct that informs their worldview. It represents the "dominant trend in twentieth-century scholarship", strengthened by Albert Schweitzer's influential historical Jesus work which argued that Jesus himself expected the literal end of the world.<sup>18</sup>

John MacArthur, a dispensationalist pastor, articulates his ecotheology as a reaction to the environmental movement. His views represent those that maintain the Replacement model.

*The earth we inhabit is not a permanent planet. It is, frankly, a disposable planet—it is going to have a short life. It has been around six thousand years or so—that's all—and it may have a few thousand more. And then the Lord*

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Harris, *The Nature of Creation: Examining the Bible and Science* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 170. The Kenarchy Journal (2024), 6, 1-26 Copyright © 2024

*is going to destroy it. I have told environmentalists that if they think humanity is wrecking the planet, wait until you see what Jesus does to it...God is literally going to turn it on itself in an atomic implosion so that the whole universe goes out of existence.*<sup>19</sup>

When the predominant apocalyptic eschatology associated with Schweitzer's Jesus<sup>20</sup> was confronted with evidence of the Anthropocene, those like MacArthur doubled down on their belief in the earth's temporality and generated a callous Replacement response. Christians seeking to understand climate change and Christianity are confronted with perspectives such as these, "Whether a person believes in global warming or not, the Bible tells us the world will be destroyed by fire (2 Peter 3:7-10). Logically, this would mean the earth will continue to get hotter and hotter until the destruction of the planet. The Bible tells us that the destruction of the world is going to be within God's plan."<sup>21</sup> The songs they sing and the sermons they listen to reiterate the blessed hope of an imminent heavenly escape. As comforting as this may be, this is the starkest ecotheology model, both bleak in its assessment of this cosmos' future and absolute in its hope for the redeemed among humanity. Because it is the starkest, it serves as the baseline in my assessment, from which we can see the moves other ecotheologies make to temper its stringent approach.

Literally interpreted, Genesis lends itself to support an elevated place for humanity against the rest of creation. Francis Bacon is credited with interpreting the Genesis dominion texts as a mandate for humanity to exploit creation for the improvement of our own lives.<sup>22</sup> It is thus our project to cultivate and harness nature's potential. His view aligns well with the Replacement model, which equates Genesis' dominion language with a free license to use nature as we see fit. Its philosophy rationalises boundless cultivation and leads to the prioritisation of human interests.

David Horrell weighs the import of Genesis 1:26 and 28 dominion language as it relates to ecology. He states, "the mandate given to humanity to 'rule' the animals and 'subdue' the earth may be seen as the key biblical text undergirding the damaging anthropocentrism that Lynn White famously saw as the root of the modern ecological crisis."<sup>23</sup> In 1967, Lynn White Jr. laid the blame for

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<sup>19</sup> John MacArthur, "Evangelicalism and the Environmental Movement," *Grace to You Podcast Transcript*, <https://www.gty.org/library/Articles/A148/Evangelicalism-and-the-Environmental-Movement>.

<sup>20</sup> Harris, *The Nature of Creation*, 170.

<sup>21</sup> Vivian Bricker, "What Does the Bible Say About Climate Change?" *Christianity.com*, September 9, 2021, <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-life/what-does-the-bible-say-about-climate-change.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Bauckham, "Being Human," 39.

<sup>23</sup> David G. Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology: Biblical Challenges in the Contemporary World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 26.

Western culture's excessive anthropomorphism and environmental abuses on its Christian worldview, which advocated dominion.<sup>24</sup>

Further explaining the Replacement adherents' philosophy is their belief in the Earth's apocalyptic end, followed by a new heaven and new earth. This eschatology is shaped by the dispensational thinking of Nelson Darby and was brought to the U.S. by Cyrus Ingerson Scofield who wrote the influential Scofield Bible. Darby constructed a chronologic scaffolding of seven dispensational periods, past and future, he believed convey God's progressive relationship with humanity.<sup>25</sup>

The seventh dispensation is most relevant to Replacement ecotheology. Derived from its literal interpretation of apocalyptic texts, adherents anticipate the imminent rapture of the redeemed, upon which time those remaining on earth will be subjected to a great tribulation to usher in Christ's return and millennial reign.<sup>26</sup> God will then execute final judgment and the eternal new heaven and earth will emerge. This utterly new creation will be the perfect instantiation of God's goodness and perfection, the rebirth of all that was cursed when Eve sinned in the garden.

With respect to science, Replacement ecotheology maintains an attitude toward science consistent with its stark certainty of scripture. It does not weigh the environmental data and formulate a theological response. It operates instead from a known outcome and rejects that which would challenge its beliefs. Yet, there is more than this that underpins the rejection. Behind this dismissal lies a long-held distrust of science as an influence intent on slighting scripture and advancing atheism. As such, science that conflicts with their position is met with a guarded, adversarial response.

Such is the case with the literalists' rejection of evolutionary theory, which helped form these distrustful battle lines and helps to animate their rejection of climate science. In his 2006 study of Creationism, Ronald Numbers plots the course from which young-earth Creationism developed. By 1875, most American naturalists accepted organic evolution, and the Church sought to reconcile this development with the Bible's accounts of creation. It is notable that responses were not consistent, and those engaged saw different ways to interpret the relevant scripture. But among respondents were those who saw no way to reconcile scripture and evolution. They rejected the

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<sup>24</sup> Horrell, 6.

<sup>25</sup> LeeAnn Snow Flesher, "The Historical Development of Premillennial Dispensationalism," *Review and Expositor*, no. 106 (2009): 35-45.

<sup>26</sup> Flesher, 37.



idea that Genesis could be anything other than literal and felt that selectively treating some scripture as metaphorical jeopardised the authority of all scripture.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1920s, William Jennings Bryan correlated decreased religious belief among youth with exposure to teaching in school regarding evolution.<sup>28</sup> Questioning the quality of the science and reproachful of its theological implications, his efforts led to an Antievolutionist awakening campaign to remove evolution from the classroom. His nationwide campaign against evolution rivals the efforts of current creationist advocates and climate science deniers to affect today's curriculum.<sup>29</sup> The fear is not just that children learn something "incorrect" like evolution or climate change, but that this learning subverts Christianity.

### **Replacement Repercussions**

The contrasts between Replacement ecotheology and climate change science are stark. Climate scientists see a direct correlation between the escalating harm of climate events and the rise of the Anthropocene. They maintain that our environmental policies and practices precipitate needless destruction, resulting in the untimely loss of life, home, and resources. Replacement adherents interpret these same events as apocalyptic "signs of the times". Suffering and calamity are thus seen as necessary to usher in God's kingdom and are God's pleas to awaken us to our need for personal salvation. Where climate scientists foresee an uninhabitable planet, Replacement adherents maintain unassailable hope in a new creation. Climate scientists' appeals for urgent action are ignored as the misguided impulse of humanistic science, dismissive of God's Word and authority. Calls for action are met with cries for conversion. This response is a double-edge sword both exacerbating the environmental crisis and doing detriment to the broader salvific message of the church.

The repercussions to the church's actions are clear in this model. Here, the church must prioritise evangelisation to ensure the salvation of the most souls and ensure their entry to heaven. This, of course, offers no remedy for the greater than three billion people affected negatively by the climate crisis. One wonders how MacArthur reconciles his conjecture that the earth may stand for another few thousand years with his environmental position, which further imperils future

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<sup>27</sup> Ronald Numbers, *The Creationist: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 26.

<sup>28</sup> Numbers, 55-65.

<sup>29</sup> Alejandro De La Garza, "More States Want Students to Learn About Climate Science. Ohio Disagrees," *Time Magazine*, March 29, 2023, <https://time.com/6266938/ohio-climate-change-education-bill-culture-war/>.

generations. Continued inaction and lack of preparation will not make the church the refuge that it needs to be.

### **Communal Model**

As its name implies, Communal ecotheology seeks to decentre humanity from a position of dominion over creation, as in the Replacement model, to one that undertakes a community paradigm. As noted, I borrow the term Communal from the work of Richard Bauckham who advocates for a “community of creation” perspective. Ecotheologians in this model seek to develop a less exploitive, climate sensitive perspective more mindful of God’s love for all of creation. This decentring move is a necessary first set to move away from the dominion mindset and it is shared by all subsequent models.

The initial seeds of Communal ecotheology arose from a growing awareness of the harm dominion thinking was having on humanity and creation. In witnessing the devastation wrought by environmental exploitation and manifest destiny, some asserted that we must have misunderstood Genesis, so they sought a new way to interpret the message. Scholars like John Walton drew attention to the influence of Ancient Near East (ANE) culture on the Genesis narrative, presenting the idea that God intended humanity to act as God’s priestly or kingly representatives.<sup>30</sup> If this were the case, then our ecotheology should evolve, requiring that we exercise great care to protect and preserve creation by adopting the judicious practices of stewardship instead of the greedy behaviour of dominion.

Although stewardship remains part of the conversation, it is difficult to use it to fully redeem dominion as it relates to the Genesis narrative, either from the psyche or from an evaluation of the text. “...any time spent honestly looking at how ANE monarchs operated...does not lead to a conclusion that care was gentle and kind. Might was usually shown by violent brutality.”<sup>31</sup> Unsatisfied that stewardship adequately met the challenge, ecotheologians rejoined the effort to displace dominion thinking with a more scripturally defensible position. As with stewardships’ teleological move, these approaches focus on how we see ourselves in the world, recasting humanity’s purpose and building a more ecologically inclusive consciousness. It hopes that this new mindfulness will generate changed behaviour sufficient to remedy the gap between exploitive dominion behaviour and climate crisis mitigation.

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<sup>30</sup> John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 77.

<sup>31</sup> Bethany Sollereeder, “The Human Role Revisited on a Rapidly Changing Planet,” *Ephata* 4, no.1 (2022): 268, <https://doi.org/10.34632/ephata.2022.10357>.

In Bauckham's community of creation framing, we witness an expanded approach to using the witness of scripture to testify for God's love for creation. "Other creatures are not just something else besides us, a nonhuman world from which we are separate, but our fellow creatures. We and they are all creatures of God—however diverse—and we belong with them in this world that God has made for his own delight and for the independent flourishing of us all."<sup>32</sup> Bauckham traces the origins of stewardship to Matthew Hale in the seventeenth century, who argued that we were to act as "God's estate managers charged with looking after and improving the property."<sup>33</sup> Bauckham critiques stewardship for its continued insistence that humanity remains pivotal to the proper management of nature—that nature must be contained, cultivated, overseen instead of left to its own flourishing.

Instead, Bauckham asks that we see in scripture God's love for all of creation, from which he derives a "theocentric, not an anthropocentric or even biocentric, view of the world."<sup>34</sup> We are to remove ourselves from the pinnacle of creation and take our place alongside all its creations. He points to the continued refrain in Genesis 1 where God proclaims that each element of creation is good. Psalm 104 plays a key role in Bauckham's expanded ecotheology hermeneutic as in its unfolding we bear witness to the community of creation. He notes the extent of creation's diversity and God's provisions for more than humanity.<sup>35</sup> In his reflection on the Psalms, Bauckham argues, "The psalmist is taken out of himself, lifted out of the limited human preoccupations that dominate most of our lives, by his contemplation of the rest of God's plentitude of creation."<sup>36</sup> One can see in Bauckham's approach an elevation of the value we are to ascribe to creation, beholding it not as a resource for our purposes but as extensions of the creative outflow of God, generated by and for God's purpose. Living and non-living alike, all of creation has intrinsic worth.

I include the ecotheology of Steven Bouma-Prediger in this model, who agrees with Paul Santmire that stewardship is too tepid, anthropocentric, and misused to adequately displace dominion thinking.<sup>37</sup> Bouma-Prediger prefers the term "earth keeping" and emphasises the development of Christian virtue ethics suited to support proper environmental care.<sup>38</sup> Bouma-Prediger argues that our call to dominion is one where we are called to serve, even to suffer for that which is in our care. This conception of service, he suggests, is dominion rightly understood and

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<sup>32</sup> Bauckham, "Being Human," 39.

<sup>33</sup> Bauckham, 45.

<sup>34</sup> Bauckham, 48.

<sup>35</sup> Bauckham, 46.

<sup>36</sup> Bauckham, 49.

<sup>37</sup> Bouma-Prediger, "The Character of Earthkeeping," 180.

<sup>38</sup> Bouma-Prediger, 169.

applied.<sup>39</sup> Focusing as Bauckham does on humanity's purpose, Bouma-Prediger asks, "what kind of people should we human earth keepers be if we are members of the community that is creation?...what we do is driven by who we are."<sup>40</sup> He proposes fourteen ecological virtues we should exhibit in an adequate ecotheology.

As for its approach to science, it should be appreciated that the Communal model is largely motivated by growing concern over the scientific evidence for climate change, in contrast to the Replacement model's recalcitrant response to the Anthropocene. The evidence to them suggests that something must be afoot with our justification for exploitation as it is yielding such negative effect. As Bauckham states, "But the more we notice what is going on in the world of which no part is now immune from the effects of human activity, the more extensive our disastrous impact on other creatures turns out to be."<sup>41</sup> Not threatened by the influence of science, they seek to employ judicious environmental practices to stave off waste and abuse. This model does not entail or require any specific eschatological view or emphasis and may therefore maintain belief in God's divine intervention to create a new reality. Bouma-Prediger offers that we anticipate the culminating reign of the Kingdom of God, "by believing that God's good future includes bodily renewal, a transfigured life, and a redeemed heaven-on-earth—all acts of hope in an age of despair."<sup>42</sup>

### **Communal Repercussions**

The Communal model is certainly an improved ecological posture from that of Replacement as it diminishes its exploitative tendencies. Where Replacement advocates place few boundaries around our exploits, those following a Communal model encourage environmental considerations in their calculus. In his development of ecological virtues Steven Bouma-Prediger states, "Eco-humility is the disposition to act as the earth creatures we are—finite, embodied, embedded...we act in ways that neither overplay nor undervalue our worth...we act cautiously. Before making decisions, we survey as many consequences as possible."<sup>43</sup>

It seems inevitable that maintaining belief in transfigured life and redeemed heaven-on-earth can limit the motivation for urgent climate action, even for the most conscientious Communal advocate. Given the investment gap that needs to be filled, the needs that must be met, and the policies that require development, Communal approaches whose predominant focus remains on shifting our perspective away from dominion (as stewardship attempted) offer a limited response.

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<sup>39</sup> Bouma-Prediger, 184.

<sup>40</sup> Bouma-Prediger, 186.

<sup>41</sup> Bauckham, "Being Human," p. 41

<sup>42</sup> Bouma-Prediger, "The Character of Earthkeeping," 182.

<sup>43</sup> Bouma-Prediger, 190.

“In a world that is changing rapidly due to anthropocentric climate change, stewardship will likely struggle to provide the necessary flexibility for engaging with dynamic ecosystems moving into new global climatic systems.”<sup>44</sup> It is difficult to fathom the animation of long-term investments in critical infrastructure or extensive sacrifice and involvement coming from Communal model. While it seems likely to stimulate much needed personal and community level engagement, as witnessed with individual churches supporting local climate initiatives, the urgency it generates may not fill the gap between detriment and action that its advocates desire. Because of these, while the remaining models share a common view that humanity must be decentered in a meaningful ecotheology, the two remaining models will bring additional theological and scientific arguments to bear in addressing the challenge.

### **Plenary Ecotheology**

Our discussion thus far has been predominately Earth-focused, and the plot contained within the timeframe of the Anthropocene. Plenary ecotheology employs the concepts of deep time and deep incarnation to shape a far more expansive framing. John Haught, Bethany Sollereeder, and Mark Harris are among scholars whose views align well with this model.

I refer to it as Plenary for the implications of its dual emphasis. First, with its embrace of deep time, it requires us to consider all past and future instantiations of creation in our ecotheology. It withdraws itself from the confines of the age of the Anthropocene by explicitly acknowledging how distant we are from both the universe’s beginning and its end, how minor our role in the play. As John Haught suggests, “a theology of evolution, will be interested in what transpires throughout the whole of the cosmic narrative, not merely in the biological chapters that take up the last four billion years.”<sup>45</sup> Secondly, with its emphasis on deep incarnation, it explicitly welcomes all of creation as partakers in the Kingdom of God. Here, it is not just that humanity is part of the community of creation, it is that creation is part of the full sweep of deep incarnation’s salvific magnitude. “Our action in the world matters, therefore, because it contributes both to the deeper incarnation of God and to the redemption of the whole world, and not just human souls, into the body of Christ.”<sup>46</sup> The Plenary model argues that a viable ecotheology must engage with the full, or plenary, set of constituents or realities derived from both our knowledge of the spacetime continuum and the cosmos-encompassing reach of Christ’s salvific work.

The initial conception of geological time was formulated by Scottish geologist James Hutton after observing the Siccar Point formation in 1788. The evidence of cyclical sedimentation and

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<sup>44</sup> Sollereeder, “The Human Role,” 270.

<sup>45</sup> Haught, *Resting on the Future*, 56.

<sup>46</sup> Haught, 52.

erosion made it clear that the earth must be much older than the then accepted dates which were derived using Biblical genealogical analysis. In 1981, John McPhee termed the concept “deep time” and brought to the fore our awareness that in a universe of 13.8 billion years, humanity’s emergence 200,000 years ago is a mere blip on the cosmic time scale. Deep incarnation was first coined in 2001 by Neils Henrik Gregersen. In his view, Christ’s birth “implies an incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence, and system of nature.”<sup>47</sup> At first conception, Gregersen wished to develop a Christology “sensitive to the fact that evolutionary pain is not a consequence of human sin, but the simple result of natural selection.”<sup>48</sup> When joined, these two concepts yield an all-expansive or Plenary ecotheology. Because the cosmos’ future is no less extensive than its past, a Plenary model asks that we engage in visionary ecological pursuits. And because creation is conjoined with Christ at the incarnation, and therefore in his resurrection, the cosmos partakes in the kingdom's actualisation work that we are to do.

Gregersen’s initial conception of deep incarnation was the seed to germinate a wealth of work exploring its broader implications. Both John 1:14 and Colossians 1:16-20 lend theological authority to this understanding of incarnation. By this way of thinking, the Apostle John’s poetic phrasing, “and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us,” provides Jesus even greater affiliation with creation than traditionally understood. Instead of seeing this enfleshment as Christ assuming only the particular human form of Jesus, it holds that the flesh or “sarx” Jesus took on was instead the universal materiality present in all of creation.<sup>49</sup>

Of equal importance to the conception of Plenary ecotheology is the imagery of the Colossian’s hymn. It transports us from the Word’s incarnation to the womb of our infant universe when the Word casts its creative force to animate its unfolding in the belly of deep time.

*For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth...and he is before all things, and by him all things consist. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell; and, having made peace through the blood of the cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be in earth, or things in heaven.<sup>50</sup>*

Christ, then, is this plenary force, existing before our universe’s creation, representing all its constitutive elements, and initiating its renewal through the suffering of the cross and resurrection

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<sup>47</sup> Neils Henrik Gregersen, “Deep Incarnation: From Deep History to Post-axial Religion,” *HTS Theological Studies*, no. 72:4 (2016): 1, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3428>.

<sup>48</sup> Neils Henrik Gregersen, “The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World,” *A Journal of Theology*, no 40:3 (2001): 192, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.1111/0012-2033.00075>.

<sup>49</sup> Gregersen, “Deep Incarnation,” 2.

<sup>50</sup> Colossians 1: 16-20 (KJV).

to new life. Christ not only affords dignity to the universe's constituents, but Christ's universal entanglement begs our sentient consciousness to grasp the significance of this immersion and live accordingly. The plenary Christ requires a plenary conscious ecotheology.

Its constituents urge us to help "prepare" the universe, not just for the ecological crisis of the next generations but for creation's ultimate fulfilment.<sup>51</sup> Drawing heavily from the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, John Haught recognises in Teilhard the idea "that nature is seeded not with design but with promise."<sup>52</sup> Come what may, the Plenary scholar can assume a brilliant, distant outcome brought about through the ongoing partnership of our evolutionary course and the manifestation of God's kingdom coming to fruition.

*From a cosmologically informed theological point of view, the anticipated fullness of being, meaning, truth, goodness, and beauty is still (emphasis in original) rising during the dawning of a still-emerging universe. Christian faith is compatible with the suffering in life and evolution only because of its expansive hope for a cosmic redemption, and along with it, the ultimate end of suffering in a final resurrection of life beyond all death.<sup>53</sup>*

Plenary ecotheology allows that, while we have significant ecological impact and responsibility, we are transitory inhabitants. Thus, it seeks to strike a balance, both imploring our deliberate action to enable creation's thriving while acknowledging the cosmos' inherent malleable nature and our limitations.

It is clear from our discussion thus far that Plenary ecotheology relies on the sciences to derive much of its thinking. It is confident in the evolutionary model of origins and leaves no place for a miraculous divine intervention to alter the universe's ongoing course. It offers little resistance to the findings of science, save one. Where many that embrace cosmic evolution adopt a completely naturalistic account of the universe's origins and direction, Plenary ecotheologists maintain a spiritual dimension afforded by their belief in the divine and their embrace of deep incarnation as the universe's redemptive course.

Its metaphysics are even more challenging than that of traditional incarnation. As perplexing as it is to grasp that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, the additional complexity of Jesus representing all of creation only compounds the difficulty in reconciling incarnation with empirical

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<sup>51</sup> John Haught, "The Unfinished Sacrament of Creation: Christian Faith and the Promise of Nature," in *EcoTheology: A Christian Conversation*, eds. Kiara A. Jorgenson and Alan G. Padgett (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company Jorgenson, 2020), 241.

<sup>52</sup> Haught, 89.

<sup>53</sup> John Haught, "Faith and Compassion in an Unfinished Universe," *Zygon* 53, no. 3 (2018): 782-791, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/zygo.12433>.

science. It is an elusive metaphysics that confounds our understanding. Grounded in the empirical mathematics of deep time and committed as it is to evolutionary explanations, its move to deep incarnation seems in this respect to be as far removed from science as the Replacement model. Naturalistic science cannot account for Replacement's divine intervention or for Plenary's ontology.

### **Plenary Repercussions**

As noted, Plenary ecotheologies are deeply devoted to environmental concerns. In comparison, Replacement models lack consideration for the effects of our actions on the flourishing of near-term generations and a complete disregard for either deep time or deep incarnation ramifications. They have no further time horizon than the imminent return of Christ. Communal models seem meager when contrasted with the sweeping perspective found among Plenary advocates. A shift that merely challenges humanity's teleology will not cross the schism between our current ecological path and Plenary's vision of creation's flourishing.

It is difficult to find a clear articulation of what it means to help prepare the universe for flourishing which can make defining meaningful climate action objectives challenging. That said, Bethany Sollereeder's work develops from her understanding of deep time and evolution's fundamental sway over our past and future, a prelude to the next model under consideration. While aligned with the Plenary model for her emphasis on deep time, she recommends concrete actions that should be taken, serving as an example of a specificity that would benefit the model. For instance, she stresses that climate mitigation actions will slow the rate and extremity of changes we face, giving us additional time to address the challenge through avenues like policy change and technology development.<sup>54</sup>

Likewise, the preparatory vision of the Plenary model would benefit from further engagement with the sciences of modeling/simulation and experimentation. As an example, Finland's safety case experts are engaged in protecting our future planet from the dangers associated with nuclear storage. When one considers that the half-life of uranium-235 is greater than 700 million years, we appreciate the challenge. These scientists account for known hazards such as earthquakes and floods and try to imagine unknown threats that may jeopardise nuclear

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<sup>54</sup> Bethany Sollereeder, "Climate Change is Here," *The Christian Century*, (September 7, 2021): 6, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/climate-change-here>.



storage integrity.<sup>55</sup> Plenary ecotheology may thus add detail to its call for “preparing” the universe as it grapples with concrete deep time problems.

Ironically, Plenary ecotheology in some ways circles back to the certain hope found in the Replacement model. Although it rejects the idea of an instantaneous, perfect new heaven and new earth as the means by which God’s Kingdom will be actualised, it maintains a firm hope that the Kingdom of God will eventually evolve as the ongoing renewal of creation moves eventually in line with God’s intent. Instead of streets of gold and pearly gates, however, it anticipates Haught’s “fullness of being, meaning, truth, goodness and beauty.”<sup>56</sup>

It should be noted that devoid of a spiritual commitment like that associated with deep incarnation, deep time can lead to the secular ethic of longtermism which prioritises the thriving of future generations, in some cases over the needs of those living now. Longtermism can show as much disregard for those currently in need as the near-term blindness consequent in the Replacement models.

As an example, Nick Bostrom, secular longtermism advocate and founder of the Future Humanity Institute, is noted for his dismissal of the climate crisis, asserting that it does not represent an existential threat. In his critique of longtermism, once advocate Èmile Torres quotes Bostrom as stating that investments toward climate change mitigation merely “fritter away” limited resources on “feel-good projects of suboptimal efficacy.”<sup>57</sup> Bostrom and like-minded longtermists prioritise the advancement of human-enhancing technologies and Planet B scenarios to ensure that we fulfil humanity’s ultimate flourishing by populating the universe with the spark of our intellect. In execution, it becomes clear that only the privileged could access these types of enhancements and protections. The deferred investments leave those needing assistance today doubly victimised, having their needs ignored and the actions of privileged individuals accelerating and intensifying climate change. As in the Replacement model, longtermism lends itself to saving its version of the chosen.

Consequently, Plenary’s aim toward cosmic flourishing warrants development, given that what it means to “flourish” is a value judgment and different ethical frameworks would result in different visions. Does this flourishing involve a full embrace of transhumanism? What should be prioritised when competing elements of creation cannot mutually flourish? With the spiritual ground

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<sup>55</sup> Vincent Ialenti, “The Benefits of Embracing ‘Deep Time’ in a Year Like 2020,” *Deep Civilization* 12, no. 20: 1, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20201209-the-benefits-of-embracing-deep-time-in-a-year-like-2020>.

<sup>56</sup> Haught, “Faith and Compassion,” 285.

<sup>57</sup> Èmile P. Torres, “Against Longtermism; Why Longtermism is the World’s Most Dangerous Secular Credo,” *Aeon* (2021): 8., <https://aeon.co/essays/why-longtermism-is-the-worlds-most-dangerous-secular-credo>.

afforded by deep incarnation, Plenary can avoid the moral failings of longtermism. But addressing these and similar issues will highlight the challenges of defining flourishing, whose definition would give more explicit guidance when trying to reach ecological decisions in this model.

### **Liberative Justice Models**

Ecotheology becomes Liberative Justice in the hands of Cynthia Moe-Lobeda and like-minded scholars, as it “becomes a public Justice-seeking, earth-relishing, live-saving force of resistance and rebuilding...concerned with the uprooting of moral inertia among climate-privileged sectors of the church.”<sup>58</sup> I include in this model the approaches which emphasise engagement and leave us with a sense of urgency to address the causes and suffering implicit in climate change. It calls for ethical action “guided by convictions concerning the goodness of creation...shaped by the desire to work towards peace, reconciliation, and unity, not merely for humans, but among all created things.”<sup>59</sup> For their focus on climate mitigation actions, I include Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Katherine Hayhoe, and David Horrell as Liberative adherents.

The distinction between other models and Liberative Justice bears similarities to the distinction between “not racist” and anti-racist. The anti-racist states their position. They advocate, champion, and invest in prevention and restoration as they are able. Anti-racism extends the boundaries of “not racist”, by taking on accountability.

*What is the problem with being “not racist”? It is a claim that signifies neutrality: “I am not a racist, but neither am I aggressively against racism.” But there is no neutrality in the racism struggle. The opposite of “racist” isn’t “not racist.” It is “anti-racist.”*<sup>60</sup>

The move from neutrality to activism is echoed in Cynthia Moe-Lobeda’s ecotheology when she states, “Lovers [emulating the love of Christ] will practise a form of moral vision that enables seeing structural brutalities in order to change them...”<sup>61</sup> For this adherent, action takes primacy.

While it shares heavily with the Plenary model, its particular focus on preparation and remediation modulates the span and scope of its eco-considerations. Not that Liberative Justice

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<sup>58</sup> Kiara A. Jorgenson and Alan G. Padgett, “Introduction - For the Love of the World: A Dialogue on Ecotheology,” in *EcoTheology: A Christian Conversation*. eds. Kiara A. Jorgenson and Alan G. Padgett (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company Jorgenson, 2020), 37.

<sup>59</sup> Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment*, 140.

<sup>60</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *How to be Antiracist* (New York: RandomHouse, 2019), 246.

<sup>61</sup> Moe-Lobeda, “Hope,” 135.

adherents do not accept deep time as a cosmic reality or deep incarnation as a principle, but an observation that when these are in the forefront of consideration, it will lead to different ecological opinions and priorities, thus warranting a distinct categorisation. For instance, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda is explicit in her embrace of sacramental deep incarnation, but leans into the relatively near-term, actionable Liberative focus.<sup>62</sup>

From a hermeneutic perspective, it is as if adherents of the Replacement and Liberative Justice models are reading two different Bibles. One could say that, in fact, they are. The approach each applies to scriptural interpretation is so dissimilar that their resulting theologies share little common ground. They neither agree regarding interpretations of Genesis' dominion language nor on eschatological texts.

Liberative's first departure, like in the Communal model, is to reject dominion language. David Horrell states, "...despite much Christian theology to the contrary, what we need to learn at the present time is not how unique or special we are to God, but how relatively unpecial we are, how much we share in common with other life forms on earth."<sup>63</sup> The superiority once afforded us as the bearers of God's image finds itself deemphasized and humbled, no longer the reason for the existence of all other creation. While similar in its decentering move, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda critiques Communal's approach to the dominion problem as she sees that it still continues to set humanity apart from creation in too prominent a way.<sup>64</sup>

Recall that Replacement and many Communal ecotheologies believe that God's initial creation was perfect. Once Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, the earth was cursed, unleashing natural evil and requiring more of our effort to subdue and tame nature. All of creation was tarnished, in need of a redemption to be provided at the Second Coming. Liberative adherents agree that creation needs restoration in some fashion, but disagree on why this is the case and how it may be achieved.

The disagreement results from a pivotal departure the Liberative model makes when interpreting the Bible's Kingdom of God texts. Both the Old and New Testaments contain extensive references to the earth's apocalyptic destruction followed by the establishment of God's Kingdom. In the Liberative model, such apocalyptic texts are not meant to foretell the literal end of the world, but can be seen in two ways. First, they may be a prayer for, or prediction of, the end of a political

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<sup>62</sup> Moe-Lobeda, 97.

<sup>63</sup> Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment*, 131.

<sup>64</sup> Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, "Being Human: Responses," in *EcoTheology: A Christian Conversation*, eds. Kiara A. Jorgenson and Alan G. Padgett (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company Jorgenson, 2020), 74. *The Kenarchy Journal* (2024), 6, 1-26 Copyright © 2024

age that stands opposed to God.<sup>65</sup> N.T. Wright makes this point: “It is crass literalism...to insist that the words [apocalyptic texts] must refer to the physical collapse of the space-time world. This is simply the way regular Jewish imagery is able to refer to major socio-political events and bring out their full significance.”<sup>66</sup> References to the Kingdom of God are also found imploring the church to actively build this Kingdom here and now. Per Horrell,

*The Gospel of John insists that eternal life begins here and now (John 5:24). For Paul, those who live in Christ have died to their old lives, to the old world, and now live in God’s new creation...their conduct is meant to match their new identity in Christ. In other words, the shape of the hoped-for future is visible and enacted in the here and now, and implies a responsibility to act in ways congruent with that future, with participation in God’s new creation.*<sup>67</sup>

Where Replacement and many Communal adherents await the coming Kingdom of God, Liberative Justice adherents believe it is the Church’s work to build God’s Kingdom now. Horrell argues that the Gospels and Paul reflect “inaugurated eschatologies” in which the kingdom of God “has already begun to be brought about, and is already visible in the here and now.”<sup>68</sup> The Kingdom of God was born at the incarnation of Jesus and its fulfilment is the ongoing aspirational tasks of believers.

As for its treatment of science, Liberative Justice ecotheology approaches it as a partner to address climate change. Gone are the suspicions found in the Replacement model and the conservative responses of the Communal. They instead approach the sciences as needed allies as reflected in David Horrell’s admission that theology cannot provide all the answers to the ecological crisis, stating, “we need all the information that contemporary science can give us.”<sup>69</sup>

The work of Katherine Hayhoe, who I categorise as a Liberative Justice advocate, demonstrates the extent to which this model engages science and technology. She advocates for the rapid adoption of clean energy and heralds its recent success with Texas generating 23 percent of their 2020 electricity from wind, Scotland realising 97 percent clean energy in 2020, and Norway and Costa Rica reaching nearly 100 percent clean energy.<sup>70</sup> She counters economic resistance, noting that the United States could transition to 90 percent renewable energy by 2035 at no net cost,

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<sup>65</sup> Harris, *The Nature of Creation*, 168.

<sup>66</sup> N.T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 361.

<sup>67</sup> Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment*, 139.

<sup>68</sup> Horrell, 138.

<sup>69</sup> Horrell, 143.

<sup>70</sup> Katherine Hayhoe, *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist’s Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World* (New York: Atria, 2021), 164.

avoiding “\$1.2 trillion in health and environmental costs and 85,000 premature deaths.”<sup>71</sup> She champions investment in lithium battery development, solar energy technology, and carbon capture capabilities, among others. She also recognises the need to bolster implementation with supporting policies and education. One would find it difficult, if not impossible, to find any distance between the approaches advocated for by Liberative Justice advocates and the IPCC recommendations.

### **Liberative Justice Repercussions**

As noted at the start of this section, Liberative Justice ecotheology is virtually unrecognisable from the Replacement model. What they do share is an appreciation for the industriousness and capacity of humanity for advancement. Where Replacement is likely to aim these capabilities toward economic growth, Liberative models seek to aim them toward justice, improving the quality of life and existence for all of creation, now and into the future.

This ecotheology holds that creation is not easily redeemed or replaced and its care requires more than the Communal model offers. Liberative Justice also makes a teleological move, but it casts Christians as Kingdom builders tasked to make this world a better reflection of the values of Jesus. It argues that ignoring climate justice, or any justice, forestalls the coming of this Kingdom; that resisting it in light of the destruction and suffering it causes is immoral.

The salvific urgency associated with Replacement models leads one to convert souls and pray for an expedited escape to spare us from tribulations. Urgency in the Liberative church is directed toward justice. Liberative adherents consistently advocate, champion, and invest. It further entails a generational ethic that considers the quality of life for future generations, of which Replacement models are devoid. Additionally, Plenary’s often blurry vision of the future affords Liberative Justice a practical advantage as it can animate more specific goals and lends itself to clearer ethical guidelines.

Critically, because it does not count on divine action to instantaneously bring about a new creation or take solace in some eventually evolved goodness irrespective of our ability to meet the climate challenge, its version of hope is drastically different from our prior models. This hope is contingent. Katherine Hayhoe cites the Buddhist philosophy of hope as framed by Joanna Macy and Christ Johnston, “Active hope is a practice...First, we take in a clear view of reality; second, we identify what we hope for...and third, we take steps to move ourselves or our situation in that direction...we focus on our intention and let it be our guide.”<sup>72</sup> The very idea of contingent eschatological hope is so foreign to our religiosity and cultural norms that it can create a sobering

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<sup>71</sup> Hayhoe, 166.

<sup>72</sup> Hayhoe, 243.

grief when confronted. While we gain a vision of the future with better grounding in scripture and science, we lose the easy promise of escape and the comforting blessed assurance that all will be well.

### **Beyond Hope**

I noted earlier the divergent hermeneutics these models employ and how this difference affects their eschatology and ecotheology. For each model, the distinct coupling of their eschatological and ecological views results in a different paradigm of hope. Despite these differences, Christian culture is saturated with heavenly hope, as entailed in the Replacement and Communal models. Where evolution and cosmology have made inroads into the broader church's understanding of origins, little attention has been paid to the implications for our destiny. Our hymns, our liturgies, our sacraments, and prayers are filled with the blessed assurance that all will be well.

It can be deeply unsettling to exchange this venerated hope model, which spares us from harm and leads to our ultimate joy, with that which we find in Liberative Justice, whose only guarantee is that a positive outcome requires our adequate response. Asking that we abandon certain blessed hope and simultaneously awaken to the dire plight of creation seems a pathway to certain despair. Can we move beyond traditional eschatological hope and instead derive hope from our capability and capacity to work with God to meet the challenge of bringing about the Kingdom of God in our midst?

In his book, *Radical Hope*, Jonathan Lear chronicles the leadership of Plenty Coup, the Crow Nation chief that presided while the Crow tribe was forced to transition from an independent, nomadic existence to a one contained within a reservation. This transition challenged all aspects of Crow cultural identity, including their conceptions of courage and their ceremonial practices. Plenty Coup's response is a study in how one can cope with cultural collapse, which can inform both our approach to address the impacts of climate change and to shift our eschatological hope models.

Confronted with the loss of all that had held meaning, Plenty Coup had to determine the best response for his people. Must they engage in a war he knew they could not win to remain honorable? Must their old culture be replaced, or could they achieve a hitherto unimaginable renewal? Plenty Coup, "takes on the responsibility of declaring whether the ideals around which he has shaped his life are any longer livable. That is, he will speak for the health and viability of the old way of constituting oneself as a subject. But this can be done hoping to clear the ground for the

creation of new forms of Crow subjectivity.”<sup>73</sup> Lear affirms Plenty Coup’s brand of hope as radical. It is radical in that he grasped reality and “sustained thoughtful engagement with the world that, in terrible circumstances, yielded tangible positive results.”<sup>74</sup> Consequently, unlike many other indigenous tribes, though their territory is greatly reduced, the Crow remain on their original land.

What we can glean from Plenty Coup is a glimpse into the power of an unflinching assessment of our circumstance. While his contemporary Sitting Bull adopted fanciful prophecies of a coming new messiah to save them, Plenty Coup ignored the fervor and maintained bold action aimed at redefining what thriving could look like in their new reality. Where Sitting Bull embraced magical salvific hope akin to the Replacement model, and suffered from that view, Plenty Coup engaged in negotiations, education, and creative reimaging to bolster the chances of Crow survival.<sup>75</sup>

If we are to address the immanent challenges presented by the IPCC, we must adopt an ecotheology that moves beyond its reliance on traditional eschatological hope, sees the situation clearly, comprehends the urgency of engagement, and assumes responsibility for remediation. We must replace the hope of escape with a hope that buoys our actions and sustains our resolve.

## **Conclusion**

In this reflection on the climate crisis and eschatology, I surveyed four models of ecotheology to ascertain their effect on our future. By comparing their treatment of scripture, engagement with science, and eschatological views, stark differences emerge with respect to their conceptions regarding the role of the church and where they derive hope.

The Replacement model assumes our dominion over creation and is based on hope in Christ’s imminent return. The climate crisis is exacerbated by its treatment of earth as a limitless resource, which will soon be replaced. The Communal model addresses the harmful effect of dominion thinking by asking that we act judiciously to attenuate the suffering caused by the climate crisis. While it improves upon the wasteful consumption of the Replacement model, the presence of heavenly hope diminishes its commitment to urgent climate action. The Plenary model addresses the implications of deep time and deep incarnation, requiring sweeping time horizons and expansive salvific emphasis for ecotheology. It can lead to an impersonal hope in the eventual perfection of the cosmos brought about by the dual hands of evolutionary progress and the realisation of God’s

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<sup>73</sup> Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 52.

<sup>74</sup> Lear, 142.

<sup>75</sup> Lear, 150.

creative intent. Lastly, the Liberative Justice model requires our urgent engagement to bring about the Kingdom of God and to remediate creation. Compared to the certain hope in the prior models, Liberative Justice offers a contingent hope, dependent on the efficacy of our response.

The IPCC AR6 makes clear our actions are of paramount consequence to the onset, extent, duration, and severity of the climate crisis we face. The environment is beyond hope only to the extent that we fail to act in its best interests. Having been moved to distraction by a fear of science's secular sway and lulled to apathy by the assurance of immanent relief from the world's suffering, the church finds itself too often missing in action from ministering to the despair and injustice endured by so much of this community of creation. Christianity must move beyond its traditional hope model to affect a positive trajectory for creation. We must embrace a radical hope akin to that of Plenty Coup, able to ascertain our reality and take bold action to respond. A church that does so will stand poised to help ease, not exacerbate the climate crisis. More deeply invested in the plight of creation and mindful of the church's unique call to build the Kingdom of God in its midst, it will also find itself resolved to combat all injustice.

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