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FROM CARING FOR CREATION TO CARING THROUGH (RE-) CREATION: MISSIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE THEOLOGY OF CREATION IN EVANGELICAL AND NEO-CALVINIST THOUGHT¹

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A RELEVANT TOPIC FOR CONTEMPORARY MISSIONALITY

Our physical planet has become a central topic over recent years in various aspects of public life. Nowhere are people perhaps more aware of the impact of climate change, deforestation and exploitation of natural resources on daily life than those living in South America. Brazil is in fact hosting COP30, the UN Climate Change Conference, from 10th to 25th November this year.

Books and articles are continuously being produced to present a Christian response to the ongoing climate crisis. There is a clear concern for the physical world which is shared between Christians and non-Christians, and which is at the forefront of many people's minds across the planet. Research which emerged from Greece in 2023 concluded that Generation Z apply an existential element to climate change, suffering from what is termed 'eco-anxiety'.²

There has been, however, a shift in language when speaking about the Christian approach to climate change or ecological issues. Traditional globally-representative evangelical organisations such as Lausanne and World Evangelical Alliance in this context replace terms like 'climate' and 'environment', and the prefix 'eco-' - which are commonplace in the third sector, in sociology, in politics, and in anthropology - with the word 'creation', when grammatically correct to do so. 'Creation care' becomes the prominent term rather than 'environmental care' or 'climate care'.

¹ This article is a lightly edited version of a paper presented by Mairi MacPherson at the conference *A Public Gospel: Evangelicals, Neo-Calvinists, and Society* which was held in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in May 2025.

² N Proutsos, D. Tigkas, I. Tsevreni, M. Tsevreni, 'Generation Z Worries, Suffers and Acts against Climate Crisis—The Potential of Sensing Children's and Young People's Eco-Anxiety: A Critical Analysis Based on an Integrative Review' *Climate* 11.8 (2023), p. 171. Online: <https://doi.org/10.3390/cli11080171>.

Just to nip any expectations of facts and figures in the bud, and for clarification, I am *not* a scientist or an eco-theologian. What I am wrestling with is this language of 'creation' and how the doctrine of creation is used in the context of mission. By 'mission' here I mean bringing people of every tribe, tongue and nation into the kingdom of God by the power of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ's 'all-inclusive salvation'.³

A COMMONLY HELD DOCTRINE OF CREATION

The shift in terminology from 'climate' to 'creation' in the context of ecological debate demonstrates an inherently theological approach to this topic. It is based at its very foundation on the theological supposition that the one true triune God created the heavens and the earth, and that he also sustains them. Humanity is vitally viewed as part of this creation event, but is set apart, being recognised as creatures made in the image of God. Additionally, in settings where this terminology shift is taking place, there is the commonly held idea of '*new creation*'. The idea of new creation meaning here that God will not destroy the world but rather restore it in a renewed perfected form. These basic doctrines of creation are affirmed in the Evangelical and Neo-Calvinist traditions. What then develops from this basis is not completely separate in the two traditions, but it *is* distinct in emphasis and missiological outworking.

I will firstly look at the evangelical approach, then move on to the Neo-Calvinist approach. I aim to show how we, through comparing and contrasting these two thought traditions, are offered the opportunity to expand our missiological interpretation of the word 'creation' beyond 'creation care as mission' towards 'caring through (re-)creation'.

THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION IN EVANGELICAL MISSIONOLOGY

In general evangelical thought, the term 'creation' both connotes the singular event of God making the physical world and it describes this physical world itself. The development of evangelical thought over the past 50 years regarding 'creation', the physical planet (i.e. the environment, climate, eco-systems, biodiversity) has often been a reaction to previously enacted theology which failed to place emphasis on the natural world. Hollinghurst describes how it is 'easy to develop a Christian theology that is very unfriendly to the environment.' He goes on to say that until the

³ I have incorporated some terminology used by Johan Herman Bavinck into this definition. Johan Herman Bavinck and David Hugh Freeman (tr), *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1960), pp. 22, 62.

mid-20th century, the church had developed an 'ark' mentality, rather than a 'new creation' mentality when it came to creation. The physical world was not seen as the everlasting home of humanity, therefore mission work was to save people from (out of) the temporary world. 'If this is true, then environmentalism is a distraction'.⁴ The 'ark' mentality in theology and mission led to the exploitation of land and people for the cause of the Kingdom of God and its expansion.

Evangelical missiology thus saw the need for a correction to the idea that Christian theology was 'bad for the environment'. In evangelical missiology, the act of God creating the world is placed directly alongside the act of God assigning humanity stewardship of the physical world, as seen in God's command to humanity in Genesis 1:28.⁵

What then is the intersection between creation and mission in evangelical thought?

- a) The idea of the *missio dei*, is the presumed stance in evangelical missiology regarding 'creation'. In contemporary evangelical missiology, *missio dei* (here I am speaking of the specific missiological phenomenon developed in the mid-20th century as part of the 1952 Willingen Conference) provides an invitation for the church to step into an area in which God is already working, for example the area of climate awareness and environment care. It is viewed as an opportunity for the church to engage with a pertinent topic which is gaining traction in wider society and use it for the growth of God's kingdom. Additionally, the *missio dei* is seen to give purpose to the mission of humanity, 'Humans have a unique role to play on that journey because, made in God's image, they have a unique calling and responsibility to protect and nurture creation, but they must learn to listen to creation as well as each other if we are to travel this path together as God desires'.⁶ Creation care is therefore framed as a duty assigned to humanity as part of the *missio dei*; it is a mission of reconciliation which humanity is called to fulfil. It is our duty as Christians then to strive for this reconciliation between humanity and the earth, empowered by the Holy Spirit, before the earth is ultimately renewed in the new creation by God. Creation care is presented as

⁴ Steve Hollinghurst, 'Environmentalism and evangelism, essential companions in Christian creation care', *Practical Theology* 15.5 (2022), pp. 481, 484. DOI: 10.1080/1756073X.2022.2102711.

⁵ Gen. 1:28 reads: 'God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

⁶ Hollinghurst, 'Environmentalism', pp. 484-489.

a missional declaration for humanity to be God's hands and feet on earth in love rather than in dominance.

- b) Creation care is often framed as a justice issue in evangelical missiology. Statistically, it is those who are poorer in the world who will suffer more from the negative impacts of the climate crisis. Evangelical missiology therefore argues for mission to include advocacy on the behalf of others; it is seen as a form of justice mission, or justice as mission. It serves to address a disparity in the approach to climate care where people in the Global North 'worry' about climate change while people in the Global South 'suffer' it.⁷ This therefore requires a global and contextualised missiology; those suffering the impact of climate change directly are encouraged to talk about the climate crisis from their perspectives, and practical work is encouraged as part of the mission of the church.
- c) Consideration of, and care for, creation is additionally framed as an expected response after an acceptance of the Christian gospel. The 2010 Cape Town Commitment from the Lausanne Movement states 'we cannot separate our relationship to Christ from how we act in relation to the earth. For to proclaim the gospel that says 'Jesus is Lord' is to proclaim the gospel that includes the earth, since Christ's Lordship is over all creation. Creation care is thus a gospel issue within the Lordship of Christ.'⁸ Creation care is therefore a matter of discipleship, which Dave Bookless (Director of Theology at A Rocha International) argues is in keeping with the Great Commission.⁹ Lausanne advocates for misión integral (English: integral mission/ holistic mission) and incorporates this idea of discipleship producing care for creation.¹⁰

⁷ Proutsos et al., 'Generation Z'.

⁸ Doug Birdsall and Lindsay Brown, *The Cape Town commitment: A confession of faith and a call to action* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011). <<https://lausanne.org/statement/ctcommitment>>.

⁹ Dave Bookless, 'Christian Mission and Environmental Issues: An Evangelical Reflection', *Mission Studies* 25.1 (2008), pp. 37–52. DOI: 10.1163/157338308X293891.

¹⁰ Lausanne are defining creation as the environment/climate/bio-diversity. See Dave Bookless, Jasmine Kwong, Seth Appiah-Kubi & Jocabed Solano, 'Creation Care', *Lausanne Movement* (2023), <<https://lausanne.org/report/sustainable/creation-care>>.

The use of the term ‘creation’ in evangelical missiology has therefore evidently been narrowed to refer almost exclusively to our physical planet, to its climate, its biodiversity and its eco systems.

WHAT ABOUT NEO-CALVINIST THOUGHT?

Neo-Calvinist thought on the other hand broadens what we mean by the term ‘creation’ itself, subsequently broadening the missiological potential of ‘creation’. The term ‘creation’ in Neo-Calvinism refers not only to the literal physical world which was once made by God and which is sustained by Him, but it is also inextricably linked to the concept of God’s self-revelation. Steve Bishop explains this helpfully in the Handbook for Neo-Calvinism. Bishop highlights two distinctive elements that God reveals to us in the physical world he has created:

- a) **The creator/creature distinction.** This is supported by arguments for i) *creatio ex nihilo*: God is the only pre-existing being and the world is by nature contingent on him; and ii) the concept of *pan-creationism*: ‘Creation is not limited to the things we can see such as rocks, plants, and animals. It includes things we cannot see, including heaven, angels, ideas, institutions, and the products of human cultural development. Pancreation undermines the notion that rationality and logic are uncreated.’¹¹
- b) **Creation as an ‘organic whole’**, as presented in the works of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. This is supported by the concepts such as unity-in-diversity, creation as dynamic rather than static, and the ‘cultural mandate’ (a term which was coined by Klaas Schilder). To focus in on the ‘cultural mandate’ - God’s command of Genesis to humanity is not just about the physical world; it includes the task of ‘unfolding’ as Kuyper puts it. It involves the “opening up,’ and bringing to fruition, of all potentialities within creation, for God’s glory.¹² Bishop argues that this ‘includes the discovery, development, and unlocking of the possibilities implicit within the creation in accordance with creational norms. It involves a discerning of the creation order and ordinances placed there by the Creator.¹³ This includes the

¹¹ Steve Bishop, ‘Creation’, in *T&T Clark Handbook of Neo-Calvinism*, ed. By Nathaniel Gray Sutanto and Cory Brock (London: T&T Clark, 2024), p. 25. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780567698100.0006>>.

¹² Bishop, ‘Creation’, p. 28.

¹³ Bishop, ‘Creation’, p. 29.

formation of different languages, the development of new cuisines, the discovery of new species – these are all part of ‘creation’.

Bishop lays out for us the distinctives of the Neo-Calvinist interpretation of the doctrine of creation. But these are not then applied to mission and have not been applied as such in contemporary Neo-Calvinist missiology.¹⁴

I want to highlight some of the key points in the intersection between creation and mission in Neo-Calvinist thought. I am drawing from the work of missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck (1895-1964) to inform these points:

- a) **Creation as a ‘point of contact’:** Creation can be presented as a ‘point of contact’ for non-Christians in a mission setting. JH Bavinck uses the German term ‘Anknüpfung’ (English: *connection*) to describe this in his 1940 work *Het probleem der anknüpfung bij de Evangelieverkondiging* and uses the Dutch term ‘aanspreekpunt’ (English: *point of contact*) in works such as *Inleidung in de Zendingswetenschap* (1954). The ‘point of contact’ is the idea of finding an element of worldview within a person’s heart which can be connected with and can be addressed by a gospel truth. This truth can then be used to bring transformation and fulfilment to this part of the person. JH Bavinck describes this part of the person which can be transformed as ‘angrijpenpunkt’, which I argue connotes a *grasping*, or a *taking hold of* rather than an ‘attack’ as some scholars translate it, which is more abrasive in my opinion.¹⁵ Taking hold of one part of the person’s life then leads to the transformation and fulfilment of the rest of the person, orientating the entirety of their life to come under the lordship of Jesus. This is often done through a point of shared human experience. Using JH Bavinck’s language of ‘point of contact’, we could see creation as a ‘point of contact’. For instance, we are all

¹⁴ It is useful to note that Bishop has advocated for the development of a Neo-Calvinist ecotheology using the work of Arnold A. Van Ruler. See Steve Bishop, ‘Book Review: This Earthly Life Matters: The Promise of Arnold A. van Ruler for Ecotheology’, *Affinity* 86 (2024). <<https://www.affinity.org.uk/foundations/issue-86-summer-2024/this-earthly-life-matters/>>.

The Neo-Calvinist doctrine of creation has also been addressed from a biblical theological angle by Albert M. Wolters, *Creation regained: Biblical basics for a reformational worldview*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005).

¹⁵ For example David Freeman’s translation of *Inleidung in de Zendingswetenschap*: Johan Herman Bavinck and David Hugh Freeman (tr), *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1960).

humans who live on this planet and experience the created world.¹⁶ We come from a shared source, Adam in the Garden of Eden.¹⁷ But we as humanity flipped the creator/creature distinction to try and make ourselves into our own gods.¹⁸ This has brought sin into the world, but by the effectiveness of Christ's redemption, by the grace of God the Father and by the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, this distinction can be rectified and we can become the creatures made in the image of the God that we were intended to be. Someone's worldview of creation could be used in such a way as an access point to further gospel teaching. JH Bavinck argues that this is particularly true of individuals in different religions, who already have stories of creation in their religions. Bavinck pleads for the preacher in these contexts to think about the creation worldview of their hearer, being sure not to affirm anything not in keeping with the Bible, but simultaneously unveiling the truth of God as creator and sustainer, a truth which they have sub-consciously suppressed.¹⁹

b) **Caring through re-creation** (i.e. mission): The idea of 're-creation' (*herschepping*) in Neo-Calvinism, is trinitarian in its function and inherently pancreationist, in line with what we have already discussed.²⁰ JH Bavinck then talks about re-creation, or 'regeneration', through missionary activity. 'Re-creation' is what takes place when a point of contact is discovered and is taken hold of under the lordship of Christ. Bavinck argues that all cultures are a means to address humanity's relationship with nature and with God, therefore presenting the gospel to them is a means of re-creating their culture (through the work of the Holy Spirit) so that it is then orientated towards God, the Creator of the world. This is done in various ways, both 'organized' and 'unorganized' as Bavinck puts it.²¹ For example, Bavinck refers to Bible translation and the use of the vernacular in

¹⁶ Johan Herman Bavinck, 'Het probleem der anknüpfung bij de Evangelieverkondiging', *Vox Theologica* 11.4 (1940), pp. 110-111.

¹⁷ Johan Herman Bavinck, *Zending in een Wereld in Nood*. (Utrecht, Netherlands: Zomer & Keuning, 1946), p. 10.

¹⁸ Johan Herman Bavinck, *Het Probleem van de Pseudo-Religie en de Algemene Openbaring* (no place name, 1941), p. 8.

¹⁹ Johan Herman Bavinck, *Ons Zendingsboek*, (Bilthoven, Netherlands: De Vereeniging de Gereformeerde Meisjesbond en de Vereeniging de Gereformeerde Jongelingsbond, 1941), p. 71.

²⁰ Bishop, 'Creation', p. 33.

²¹ Bavinck, *Introduction*, pp. 67-68.

missional preaching as a way of ‘re-creating’ or ‘regenerating’ the language, which in turn leads to a ‘regeneration’ of society.²²

c) **Caring through creation:** In Neo-Calvinism, creation is presented as having a missional role for humanity, who are created by God within time and space, and placed in the physical created world, dependent upon it. JH Bavinck uses Romans 1:18-32 to argue for this position, bringing in the idea of ‘religious consciousness’ which all humanity has due to their exposure to physical creation.²³ Doornbos argues that JH Bavinck’s reading of Romans 1 is missional. General revelation in creation therefore not only reveals God to humanity, but the created world also plays the missional role of bringing people to a knowledge of God, a work which God is already doing in all areas of the world. People have however suppressed this truth which God has revealed to them himself through creation.²⁴ Contemporary Neo-Calvinism could therefore argue for creation care as a preservation of God’s general self-revelation to the world, and therefore a preservation of the missional potential of creation. This is the idea of ‘caring *through* creation’. We can protect and preserve the created world for future generations and for others so that all may see God’s general revelation and glory through it, and come to recognise and know Him as their Creator and Sustainer. The global church could approach caring through creation as God giving us the capacity, the science, the logic, the creativity to discuss creation care and find solutions. God has given the tools to look after the environment and be creative within that, so we should see it as a privilege to do this work to God’s glory. It is however vital to note here that general revelation through creation alone does not save, but rather Bavinck argues that it must be accompanied by the preaching of the gospel which he defines as the good news of ‘reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ our Lord.’²⁵

²² Johan Herman Bavinck, *The Impact of Christianity on the non-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: WB Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), p.58.

²³ Johan Herman Bavinck, ‘Religious Consciousness and Christian Faith’, In *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, ed. by John Bolt et al. (Cambridge & Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), p. 297.

²⁴ Gayle Doornbos, ‘We Do Not Proceed into a Vacuum: J. H. Bavinck’s Missional Reading of Romans 1’, *The Bavinck Review* 5 (2014), pp. 61-75.

²⁵ Johan Herman Bavinck, ‘Christ and Asian Mysticism’, in *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, ed. by John Bolt et al. (Cambridge & Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), pp. 303-304.

WHAT NOW?

Further work could be done in examining how J.H. Bavinck and other Neo-Calvinist scholars talk about the physical created world and mission. It would also be useful to develop a Neo-Calvinist perspective on the specific mid-20th century missiological phenomenon of *missio dei* which informs so much of evangelical missiology, sometimes unknowingly. Bavinck uses the term of ‘God’s plan for the world’ and ‘God’s plan of salvation’. ‘God steers with his almighty hand to that exalted goal, the gathering and summoning up of all people and races and tongues under one head, and he bestows on us the immeasurable privilege of being co-laborers to that same final end.’²⁶ Is this just the *missio dei* in different words? Justin Schell defines the *missio dei* as ‘God’s revelatory work intended to establish a divine-human communion within creation’.²⁷ Could this be a helpful middle ground between the two traditions?

Ultimately, if evangelical missiology were to engage more with the Neo-Calvinist doctrine of creation, it would guard against anthropocentrism. It does not fall on the church’s activities to bring reconciliation between God and creation, but rather it falls on the church to provide opportunity for the re-creation of people’s lives through contact with the gospel and to preserve creation for the declaration of God’s glory as it is in the birth pains of a coming age when it will be restored by God.

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²⁶ Bavinck, Introduction, pp. 23, 45, 49.

²⁷ Justin A. Schell and Dane Ortlund eds., *The Mission of God and the Witness of the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2024), p.2.

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