

Apocalyptic Sustainability

The Future of Pentecostal Ecology

ROBBY WADDELL

Resolving the ecological crisis of our planet . . . is no longer a problem we can leave to the scientists. Just as we are all part of the problem, so we are all also part of the solution. We all need to come to terms with the forces that have created this crisis and the resources within our traditions that can motivate us to resolve the crisis. One of those traditions is our biblical heritage.¹

INTRODUCTION

IN THE EPIGRAPH, DESMOND Tutu claims “our biblical heritage” is a resource that can motivate us to resolve the ecological crisis. On the one hand, there are biblical texts that support ecojustice, for example Rom 8:21, “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (NRSV). On the other hand, there are a number of texts that have fueled ambivalence and at times even hostility toward creation care, a prime example being 2 Pet 3:10, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up” (RSV). 2 Pet 3:10 has unfortunately been far more influential

1. Tutu, Forward, *Earth Story in the New Testament*, vii.

among Pentecostals than Rom 8 in relation to the ecological responsibility of the church, or the lack thereof.

Notwithstanding the sentiments of Archbishop Tutu, the Christian tradition has not been at the forefront of ecological thought or praxis, leading many to question whether Christianity is compatible with environmental concerns. In fact, Christianity has received a significant amount of the blame for the ecological crisis, an indictment supported by a number of separate, though related, arguments. One argument is that the cultural mandate in Gen 1:28 encourages an anthropocentric view of the world, which inevitably leads to the degradation of nature.² Offering a more comprehensive reading of the creation narratives, Miroslav Volf challenges the assumption that Genesis sanctions human abuse of nonhuman creation, though he qualifies that “human work is *the* cause of ecological problems.”³ He concludes, “Both ecological alarmists and optimists must agree that the quality of life for the human race, and indeed its future, depend on the capacity of human beings to learn how to work in a way that is cooperative with, and not destructive of, their nonhuman environment.”⁴

Equally prevalent is the complaint that some forms of Christian eschatology are hopelessly otherworldly in orientation and thus render Christians incapable of ecological concern. For instance, Ludwig Feuerbach claimed that, “Nature, the world, has no value, no interest for Christians. The Christian thinks only of himself and the salvation of his soul.”⁵ In this chapter, I shall respond to both the protological and eschatological criticisms that Christianity contributes to ecological degradation, briefly reexamining the role humanity has in the created order, followed by an analysis of a key biblical text that is often used to support ecological abuse, namely 2 Pet 3:10–13.

CARING FOR CREATION IN THE BEGINNING

Although Lynn White is not the first to hold Christianity responsible for the ecological crisis, his oft-cited article, “The Historical Roots of

2. For example, White, “Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” 1203–7.

3. Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 42. Emphasis original.

4. *Ibid.*, 42.

5. Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, 287.

Our Ecological Crisis,”⁶ has become the hallmark of the anti-Christian critique. White, who describes western Christianity as “the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen,” argues that the monotheism of the Judeo-Christian worldview is unique in establishing a hierarchical theology of creation that logically leads to the use and abuse of nature. According to White, the cultural mandate which instructs humans to subdue and have dominion over the rest of creation not only permits but encourages people to dominate nature and utilize it to meet their needs. In White’s interpretation of Genesis, “no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes.”⁷

Alternatively Wendell Berry rightly argues, “Such a reading of Genesis 1:28 is contradicted by virtually all the rest of the Bible, as many people have now pointed out . . . (God) thinks the world is good, and He loves it. . . . If God loves the world, then how might any person of faith be excused for not loving it or justified in destroying it?”⁸ Although humanity is called upon to subdue and have dominion over the rest of the natural order, it does not necessarily follow that humans should *dominate* nature in a self-serving manner. Humanity has been created in the image and likeness of God; therefore, human rule on the earth ought to resemble God’s loving rule over creation. Often in the biblical narratives, terms such as “ruling” or “having dominion” are tied to the idea of sustaining and nurturing rather than dominating and abusing (cf. Ps 104). In Ps 72, the king is entreated to use his dominion as a means to bring justice to the poor and for the good of children. Likewise, in the New Testament Jesus defines his own leadership as that of being a servant (Mark 10:45). Defining dominion as stewardship fits best with the creation narrative in Gen 2:15 where Adam is instructed to work and care for the garden. “The purpose of human dominion over nature is the preservation of the integrity of the nonhuman creation, not simply the satisfaction of human needs and wants.”⁹ In the end, White’s anthropocentric interpretation of the creation narrative is simply too selective.

White also argues that Christianity is further culpable for the ecological crisis, because it was the impetus for rise of modern science and technology, which in turn has been the means of so much of the world’s

6. White, “Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” 1203–7.

7. *Ibid.*, 1205.

8. Berry, *What Are People For?* 98.

9. Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 147.

ecological degradation. This criticism is also problematic. Though many of the scientists throughout western history have been Christian, it is far too unrealistic to think that Christianity alone provided the motivation for their discoveries. In response, Wolfhart Pannenberg comments that the domination of nature by human power corresponds more to the time in the eighteenth century “when modern humanity in its self-understanding was cutting its ties with the creator God of the Bible.”¹⁰ In actuality, the philosophical ground for the dichotomy between humans and the material world can easily be traced further back to the radical dualism between the soul and the body popularized by the philosophy of René Descartes. In *Discourse on Method*, Descartes suggests that his philosophical project, if successful, will render humanity as the “masters and possessors of nature,” enabling a person “to enjoy trouble-free the fruits of the earth and all the goods found there.”¹¹

Significantly influenced by Cartesian (and Platonic) philosophy, “Christian theologians have for centuries,” according to Volf, “stripped the human spirit of everything corporeal and emptied corporeality of everything spiritual.”¹² Despite the popularity of this belief, a careful reading of the creation narratives supports a more integrated anthropology. A human is not simply a soul that inhabits a body, but rather the integration of both body and soul. The goodness of nature ought not to be reduced to a utilitarian function providing the necessary though transitory conditions for humans to exist. God affirms the innate goodness of creation by pronouncing it as such even prior to the formation of humans (cf. Gen 1:4–25). An emphasis on the unique position of humanity as the sole bearers of the image of God often overshadows the fact that humanity was not created on a separate day but rather shares the sixth day of creation with the rest of the animal kingdom, implying a basic human naturalness.¹³

10. Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, 78. While at the end of the day White’s assessment of the cause of the ecological crisis is too narrow, he does, nevertheless, suggest an interesting solution to the problem. Seeing the industrial and technological culture as being morally bankrupt, White proposes a revival of Franciscan Christianity, following the lead of its founder, Francis of Assisi. Francis, who White describes as “the patron saint of ecologists,” is legendary for his care and concern for animals and nature.

11. Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 35.

12. Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 143.

13. See Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 244ff.

On the one hand, my comments thus far should not be read as an apologetic for the neglect of environmental sensitivity for which Christians share responsibility. As Christians we need to confess our sin of failing to care for the rest of creation. To reiterate Tutu, “we are all part of the problem.” On the other hand, I wish to highlight the ways in which our biblical heritage contains an alternative voice, which both repudiates the destructive history of ecological exploitation and degradation and promotes a holistic theology of creation care. In other words, Judeo-Christian protology, rightly understood, encourages ecological concern.

CARING FOR CREATION IN THE LIGHT OF THE END

The ecological argument against Christian eschatology focuses primarily on a widespread form of eschatology most popular among North American evangelicals and Pentecostals, which foresees the future of creation as an inevitable downward spiral ending in cosmic destruction. By implication, if the church is going to be raptured and the world destroyed, what is the need for ecological care? Al Truesdale comments, “Until evangelicals purge from their vision of the Christian faith the wine of pessimistic dispensationalist premillennialism, the Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation and the biblical image of stewardship will be orphans in their midst.”¹⁴ The incompatibility between dispensational millennialism and ecological concern means that apocalyptic eschatology “makes it religiously unnecessary and logically impossible to engage in the long-range commitments to the environment.”¹⁵ When I have personally advocated energy conservation or protested various forms of ecological degradation, I have had students innocently, if naively, question my motivation. If everything is going to burn up in the final judgment, then why concern ourselves with the temporary material world?¹⁶

The response to this question will depend on one’s understanding of the eschatological nature of the kingdom of God. Both popular and scholarly opinions are divided in regards to how the kingdom of God should be understood. The various views can be divided into three areas: (1) an apocalyptic eschatology, which expects an abrupt end to the status

14. Truesdale, “Last Things First,” 116.

15. Ibid.

16. The logic behind this question is faulty. Even if the premise is granted that the world is temporary, it does not necessarily follow that this grants humanity license to abuse or neglect it. Cf. Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 78.

quo brought about by a radical divine intervention; (2) an inaugurated eschatology, which understands the kingdom to be both already present and not yet fully consummated; and (3) a realized eschatology, which sees the kingdom being fully present whether in the words and deeds of Jesus or in the contemporary words and deeds of the followers of Jesus.

Pentecostalism in its various forms seems to oscillate historically between the two extremes of an apocalyptic eschatology, which has been influenced by fundamentalist dispensationalism and currently popularized by *The Left Behind* series, and a realized eschatology represented in both the postmillennialism of the Kingdom Now movement and the hyper-faith doctrine proposed by Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, and others. These extremes seem to be determined at least partially by the socio-economic status of the perspective groups. The poor and socially marginalized gravitate toward the apocalyptic eschatology with its annihilationist tendencies while the middle class and upwardly mobile gravitate toward the realized eschatology, functionally if not theoretically. The irony of the mega-church tendency in Pentecostal circles is that it maintains a verbal commitment to an apocalyptic eschatology and therefore preaches that the salvation of souls is the only ministry goal of ultimate value; yet the mega-church simultaneously constructs multi-million dollar buildings, commits itself wholeheartedly to political campaigns (usually Republican), and offers seminars that promise to maximize the personal and financial success of its membership in the here-and-now.¹⁷ This theological bipolarization has plagued the Pentecostal movement for decades.¹⁸

Further problems arise between theology and ethics. Despite the otherworldly orientation of apocalyptic eschatology and its expectation of a sudden and destructive end to the world, Pentecostals have endorsed and engaged in various forms of social ministry.¹⁹ The failure of

17. Althouse, "In Appreciation of Jürgen Moltmann," 31. It is interesting to note that the popularity of fundamentalist dispensationalism seems to be waning among Pentecostal ministers. According to Margaret Poloma's research, only 58 percent of Pentecostals surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I believe in a dispensationalist interpretation of Scripture." Poloma "The Future of American Pentecostal Identity," 162.

18. Many early Pentecostals who held an apocalyptic view of the kingdom avoided political involvement thereby displaying as certain consistency in their theological ethics. See Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 19–20.

19. Theologically Pentecostalism has been for the most part an otherworldly religion, but practically its adherents have been committed to and involved in a variety

the church to address this tension has resulted in a theological ambivalence in which “beliefs are permitted to head in one direction, while the practice of ministry heads in another.”²⁰ Theologically, this conundrum has been addressed by the construction of a distinctively Pentecostal eschatology. Over the last few decades, Pentecostal scholars have opted for neither the apocalyptic nor the realized eschatology and instead have advocated an “already/not yet” eschatology.²¹

In the gospels, the kingdom of God (and Matthew’s verbal equivalent, “kingdom of heaven”)²² is present on earth, introduced by the words of Jesus, “The time is fulfilled.” Gordon Fee makes an important distinction that the kingdom of God “refers to a *time* that was *promised* and was to be *fulfilled*, not to a place where people were to go . . . Those around Jesus, therefore, never ask about *what* or *where*, but “*when* does (the kingdom) come?”²³ Supporting this idea and contrary to popular opinion, the final vision of Revelation does not contain an image of Christians being resurrected and going off to the wild blue yonder, but

of social ministries. Although inconsistent with their eschatology, the endorsement of social ministry proved to be a natural fit with Pentecostal pneumatology. The Spirit has empowered them in the last days to minister in the world. In 1968, Michael Harper rationalized a renewed call to social ministry stating that “the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles was constantly destroying social barriers, and reconciling deeply entrenched prejudices.” Harper, *Walk in the Spirit*, 60. Also in 1968, the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God drafted a statement on social concern which included a final pledge “to exert (their) influence as Christian citizens to justifiable social action in areas of domestic relations, education, law enforcement, employment, equal opportunity and other beneficial matters.” For the complete statement see Menzies, *Anointed to Serve: The Story of the Assemblies of God*, 394–95. Ironically, the 1968 General Presbytery also removed the fellowship’s official statement on pacifism. For an assessment of these and other Pentecostal efforts for social justice in the 1960s see Dempster “Soundings in the Moral Implications of Glossolalia,” 1–2. Cf. Sepúlveda, “Reflections on the Pentecostal Contribution to the Mission of the Church in Latin America,” 108; Alexander, *Peace to War*.

20. Dempster, “Christian Social Concern in Pentecostal Perspective,” 53.

21. See Kuzmič, “History and Eschatology,” 135–64; Volf, “Loving with Hope,” 28–31; Dempster, “Evangelism, Social Concern and the Kingdom of God,” 22–43; Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*; Macchia, *Spirituality and Social Liberation*; and Petersen, *Not By Might Nor Power*.

22. Although he shows a strong penchant for the phrase “kingdom of heaven,” on four occasions Matthew uses the more common phrase “kingdom of God.” For a nuanced look into Matthew’s verbiage see Thomas, “Kingdom of God in the Gospel according to Matthew,” 136–46.

23. Fee, “Kingdom of God and the Church’s Global Mission,” 8.

rather of the kingdom of God coming down to earth (i.e., the descent of the New Jerusalem). In the new creation, heaven comes to earth and the two become one. The throne of God, which was once hidden in the heavenly realm (Rev 4–5) is now on earth (21:3, 5), thus providing a final consummation of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come and thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven."²⁴

By praying "thy kingdom come" the Christian is acknowledging the future elements of the kingdom, a prayer of "kingdom-expectation." By praying "thy will be done" the Christian is making supplication for a present transformation, a prayer of "kingdom-participation."²⁵ Drawing attention to the latter aspect of the kingdom, Fee explains, "[Our] gospel is not simply that of 'saving souls'; it is rather, as with Jesus, the bringing of wholeness to broken people in every kind of distress."²⁶ To focus solely on either the spiritual dimensions or the physical realities is to misconstrue the global mission of the church. The Christian mission, indeed the mission of God (*missio Dei*), is indivisible. In other words, eschatology and social ethics inevitably go hand-in-hand.

Although a number of Pentecostals have written on the correlation between eschatology and social ethics, Miroslav Volf has been the most unequivocal in connecting eschatology, social responsibility, *and ecological concerns*.²⁷ In his article "On Loving with Hope: Eschatology

24. In a number of ways this chapter, focusing on the ecological implications of a transformational eschatology, builds on my previous work on the cosmic implications of transformation. See Waddell, "Revelation and the (New) Creation," 30–50.

25. Kuzmič, "History and Eschatology," 150–54.

26. Fee, "Kingdom of God," 17.

27. Other Pentecostal constructions of an eschatological social ethic are by no means devoid of ecological concern. Volf's work, however, is the most explicit about the ecological implications. See especially Macchia, *Spirituality and Social Liberation*. Macchia's work is most helpful in identifying an early, theologically motivated, concern for ecology in the ministry of Johann Blumhardt who advocated for the "liberation" of the whole creation, and even more conspicuously this idea can be found in Johann's predecessor Friedrich Oetinger who fully expected the eschatological transformation of nature, 1–12. Perhaps no one has been more influential in the construction of a Pentecostal social ethic than Murray Dempster (see Dempster's chapter in this volume). For the relationship between Pentecostal social concern and the Old Testament mandate for justice see Dempster, "Pentecostal Social Concern and the Biblical Mandate of Social Justice," 129–53; for the role of glossolalia in social justice see idem, "Soundings in the Moral Implications of Glossolalia;" for the social dimension of the kingdom of God see idem, "Evangelism, Social Concern and the Kingdom of God;" for the eschatological role of social ethics see idem, "Christian Social Concern in Pentecostal Perspective."

and Social Responsibility,” Volf responds to a claim that questions the value or even adequacy of using apocalyptic eschatology for justification of a Christian social ethic.²⁸ He concedes that it is *logically* possible to advocate for creation care even if one expects the annihilation of the world. In fact, appropriately utilizing natural resources as long as they last is a fundamental way of caring for other humans, i.e., loving one’s neighbor. Be that as it may, if a belief in annihilation is united with an expectation of an imminent return of Jesus, then ecological concerns lose all rational support.²⁹ Such a combination of theological viewpoints led Assemblies of God member James Watt, Ronald Reagan’s first Secretary of the Interior, to support the reckless consumption of the USA’s natural resources. When questioned about his policy, Watt replied, “I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord’s return.”³⁰

Although logically someone expecting annihilation (and not an imminent parousia) may be involved in social and ecological preservation, *theologically* the doctrine of cosmic annihilation is inconsistent with the protological doctrine of the goodness of creation. Apocalyptic destruction implies that “what God will annihilate must be either so bad that it is not possible to redeem it, or so insignificant that it is not worth being redeemed.”³¹ Volf contends that the Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection and the cardinal Pentecostal doctrine of divine healing make little sense if in the end all matter is annihilated. Rather than being annihilated, our bodies, indeed the whole creation, will be transformed (cf. Phil 3:20–21 and Rom 8:19–23 respectively).

An implication of this bodily and cosmic transformation is that it presupposes continuity between the present and the future. According to Volf, this continuity includes an integration of human work in cultural, social, and ecological development. “Through their work,” he writes, “hu-

Further developing and applying Dempster’s work to the setting of Latin American Pentecostalism is Petersen, *Not by Might nor by Power*.

28. Volf, “Loving with Hope,” *op. cit.* Volf is responding to Williams, “The Partition of Love and Hope: Eschatology and Social Responsibility,” 24–27. Arguing in favor of an ethic based solely on the command to love one’s neighbor, Williams questions the legitimacy of the role of eschatology in the formation of social responsibility.

29. Volf, “Loving with Hope,” 29.

30. Cited in Fowler, *Greening of Protestant Thought*, 47. Cf. Volf, “God, James Watt, and the Public Lands,” 58–65.

31. Volf, “Loving with Hope,” 30.

man beings contribute in their modest and broken way to God's new creation."³² In the words of Paul, "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord *your labor is not in vain*" (1 Cor 15:58, NRSV).³³ The labor to which Paul refers can certainly not be limited to spiritual matters. After all, the context of his statement is a discussion on the resurrection of the body, which requires a material, albeit glorified environment.³⁴ According to Jürgen Moltmann, "Christian eschatology cannot be reduced to human eschatology, and human eschatology cannot be brought down to the salvation of the soul in heaven beyond. There are no human souls without human bodies, and no human existence without the life system of the earth, and no earth without the universe."³⁵ Commenting on Paul's statement in Rom 8:21 that "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay," F. F. Bruce explains, "if words mean anything, these words of Paul denote not the annihilation of the present material universe on the day of revelation, to be replaced by a universe completely new, but the transformation of the present universe so that it will fulfill the purpose for which God created it."³⁶

Given the argument thus far, it is possible to conclude that the new creation is not *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) but rather *ex vetera* (out of the old). This raises questions however as to how to interpret the biblical texts that purport the destruction of the earth without simply dismissing them as hyperboles. In the next section, I examine what is perhaps the most difficult of this type of passage, 2 Pet 3:10–13, the most common "proof text" for those who maintain an annihilationist view.

32. Volf, "Loving with Hope," 31.

33. Cf. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 208–9.

34. Volf, "Loving with Hope," 29.

35. Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom*, 71. Cf. Richard Bauckham echoes a similar sentiment, "We recognize that, in continuity with the Old Testament (the New Testament) assumes that humans live in mutuality with the rest of God's creation, that salvation history and eschatology do not lift humans out of nature but heal precisely their distinctive relationship with the rest of nature." Bauckham, "Jesus and the Wild Animals (Mark 1:13)," 4.

36. Bruce, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 170. Bruce continues, "There is no discontinuity between here and hereafter, as far as God's working in and for His people is concerned. If inanimate creation longs blindly for the day of its liberation, the community of the redeemed . . . strain forward intelligently for that same consummation" (170–71).

2 PET 3:10–13 AND THE (RE)NEW(ED) EARTH

2 Pet 3 contains a response to accusations by false teachers who are saying that the return of the Lord is doubtful, evidenced by the fact that his coming has been impeded beyond all reasonable expectation. The author suggests that the apparent delay ought not to be measured by a person's shortsightedness, because God's reckoning of time is far different than ordinary human calculations (2 Pet 3:1–9; cf. Ps 90:4/ LXX 89:4). In fact, the purpose of the so-called delay is a direct result of God's forbearance, not wishing that any would continue to adhere to the questionable ethics of the false teachers, but would rather repent. Notwithstanding God's longsuffering, judgment is nevertheless unavoidable and will arrive unexpectedly. The author describes the suddenness of the Day of the Lord coming like a thief, a simile used in the parables of Jesus to illustrate the coming of the Son of Man (Matt 24:36–44; Luke 12:35–40).³⁷

At the Day of the Lord, "the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be dissolved while burning, and the earth and the works in it will be found" (v. 10). The final phrase, which is certainly the most difficult to interpret, is described by Richard Bauckham as a "*crux interpretum*" (an interpreter's cross).³⁸ Although the manuscript evidence is divided, the final verb *ehurethēsetai* (will be found) is unquestionably the best reading as the *lectio difficilior*.³⁹ According to Bruce Metzger,⁴⁰ various ancient attempts were made to correct the opaque passage, including the addition of either a negation (*oux ehurethēsetai*),⁴¹ thus translated, "the earth and the works in it will *not*

37. The time of Noah serves as an apparent backdrop for both the Gospel of Matthew and 2 Peter, albeit in different ways. Matthew compares the unexpectedness of the people in Noah's time to the unexpectedness of the people in Jesus' time (24:36–39). 2 Peter alludes to Noah's flood as the first destruction of the world, which will be followed by a second judgment and destruction with fire (3:5–7).

38. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 316.

39. Despite the fact that this variant is the oldest and the one which best explains the other extant variants, Bruce Metzger, nevertheless, doubts that it is original. The textual support for this reading includes: ε B K P et al. The UBS 3rd edition gives the reading its lowest possible grade, "D." Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 705–6.

40. Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 705–6.

41. The textual evidence for this reading is sparse, including only the Sahidic version and a single manuscript of the Harclean Syriac version. With no attestation in the Greek manuscripts, this variant is certainly not original, though a number of commentators prefer it. For more discussion see Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 317.

be found,” or by providing an additional verb at the end of the verse (*luomena*), which would be translated, “the earth and the things in it will be found *dissolved*.”⁴² Other attempts at harmonization include omitting the last phrase altogether (Jerome, Pelagius, and others) or the substitution of an alternative word that made better sense of the passage, for example “will be burned up” (*katakaēvsetai*).⁴³ Reinforcing the idea that the new creation is completely discontinuous with the present, many modern translations have opted for this final variant or something very similar.⁴⁴ Despite the difficulty of the translation “to be found,” it remains the best textual option and therefore requires a closer look to see if a sensible interpretation can be presented.

Some of the older commentators understood the verse to be a reference to an unveiling of the evil works of humanity in preparation for a divine verdict.⁴⁵ In other words, the earth and the works upon it become visible and therefore susceptible to final judgment once the heavens have been burnt away. This revelation of the wicked in 2 Peter can be contrasted with those who attempt to hide themselves from God’s wrath (e.g., Rev 6:15–16). “The Judgment is here represented not so much as a destructive act of God, as a revelation of him from which none can escape.”⁴⁶ Even in the face of a cosmic inferno, humans will still have to face the consequences of their actions.⁴⁷ It is important to note that the theme of judgment has been the author’s consistent concern rather

42. This emendation also lacks sufficient manuscript support, appearing only in P⁷². As Bauckham notes, this reading has not “commended itself to any scholar. In spite of our author’s tendency to repeat words, the clumsy repetition of *luesthai* three times in vv 10–11 is unlikely.” Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 317.

43. The textual support for this reading is codex Alexandrinus and a host of later minuscules. For a number of modern attempts at emendation see Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 706.

44. The versions which translate the final phrase as “will be burned up” are the RSV, NASB, KJV, JB, ASV. The TEV translates, “the earth with everything in it will vanish.” As noted by Steven Bouma-Prediger, “the French and Spanish equivalents of the TEV render the last verb ‘will cease to exist’ (*cessera d’existir*) and ‘will be burned up’ (*sera quemada*). The 1985 update of Luther’s German Bible comes closer to the true meaning when it translates the last clause ‘the earth and the works upon it will find their judgment’ (*werden ihr Urteil finden*).” Bouma-Prediger, *Greening of Theology*, 3.

45. Wilson, “Eureqhsetai in 2 Peter iii.10,” 44–45. This interpretation is endorsed by Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 319–21, and Skaggs, *1 Peter, 2 Peter, Jude*, 137–38.

46. Wilson, “Eureqhsetai in 2 Peter iii.10,” 44–45.

47. Cf. Roberts, “A Note on the Meaning of II Peter 3.10d,” 32–33; Lenhard, “Ein Beitrag zur Übersetzung von II Ptr 3.10d,” 128–29.

than an ultimate cosmic destruction (cf. 2 Pet 3:7, “the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men”). The judgment motif is carried forward in the following verses as well (2 Pet 3:11–14). The readers of 2 Peter are encouraged to pursue lives of holiness and godliness in order “to be found (*ehurethēai*) by him without spot or blemish and at peace” (v. 14). As opposed to the evil works of humanity which will be found by God for condemnation, the faithful are encouraged *to be found blameless*.⁴⁸

Understanding the verse primarily as a prophetic announcement of judgment rather than an annihilation of the cosmos helps to clarify other anomalies in the text. For example, the familiar paring of the heavens and the earth is abbreviated in this verse, simply saying “the heavens will pass away (*pareleusontai*) with a loud roar and the heavenly bodies will be dissolved.”⁴⁹ While the passing away of the heavens and the earth may seem like a necessary prerequisite for the new heavens and the new earth promised in v. 13, it is not altogether clear that an annihilation of the original is required. Early Christians understood the Day of the Lord as a renewal rather than a destruction of creation. Eusebius of Emesa writes, “Like a cloak, (a person’s) body grows old with time. But although it grows old, it will be renewed again by your divine will, O Lord. The heavens will not be destroyed, but rather they will be changed into something better. In the same way our bodies are not destroyed in order to disappear altogether but in order to be renewed in an indestructible state.”⁵⁰ In their visions of the future, both Isaiah⁵¹ and John

48. In v. 10, the passive voice of the verb (*ehurethēsetai*) implicitly implies a divine action, though in v. 14 the grammar is more explicit as the righteous are to be found *by him* (*auto ehurethēai*).

49. For the use of *parérxomai* with the fuller phrase “heavens and earth” see Matt 5:18; 24:35; Luke 16:17; 21:33. Cf. *Didache* 10:6 where the verb is used to refer to the passing away of the world (*kósmos*). Most commentators agree that the word translated “heavenly bodies” (*stoixeia*) refers to the sun, moon, and stars (cf. Isa 34:4 LXX; 2 Clement 16:3). Alternatively, Bede understood the word to refer to the basic elements of nature. He wrote, “There are four elements, earth, air, fire and water. All of which will be swept away by a great fire. Yet that fire will not devour them all but only two of them (fire and water), for there will be a new heaven and a new earth after this destruction has passed.” Bede, “On 2 Peter,” 239.

50. Eusebius of Emesa, “Catena,” 100.

51. In Isa 65:17–35 the Hebrew verb for “create” (*bārâ*) is used three times in the first two verses, emphasizing the creative activity of God; however, the description of this new creation is so continuous with the former life of Israel that to believe in it requires hardly any eschatological imagination. Although the infant mortality rate will be zero

the revelator⁵² seem to imply a transformation of the first creation. In 2 Peter, the addition of the adverbial modifier “with a roar” (*rhoizēdón*) reinforces the connotation of judgment given the frequent use of this metaphor in Jewish literature as an accompaniment of divine judgment.⁵³ 2 Clement 16, which almost certainly shares a common Jewish apocalyptic source with 2 Peter, provides a corroborative parallel, in which the theme of cosmic conflagration is used as a means to reveal the deeds of humanity. Clement writes, “But you know that ‘the day’ of judgment is already ‘approaching as a burning oven, and some⁵⁴ of the heavens shall melt,’ and the whole earth shall be as lead melting in the fire, and then shall be made manifest the secret and open deeds of (humans)” (16:3).⁵⁵

The argument of 2 Peter 3 can be summarized as follows: (1) the false teachers are incorrect when they interpret the delay of the Lord’s coming as evidence that it is not going to happen; (2) the apparent delay

(v. 20) and the standard life expectancy will be considerably lengthened [“those dying at a hundred years will be considered youth” (v. 20)], the life of the people seems strikingly similar to their former way of living. Extraordinary long life, while remarkable, would not have been totally foreign for the Israelites given the life span of their patriarchs as recorded in Gen. In Isaiah’s vision of the new creation, people are living in Jerusalem, building houses, planting vineyards, enjoying the fruits of their labor, and providing a secure future for their children and grandchildren. The discontinuity lies not in the kind of life which they live, full of peace and hope, but the prevalence with which they live it, no longer in a partial or threatened way but to the fullest extent. The first hint that life in the new creation represents a radically different ecosystem comes in the final verse with references to the domesticated lifestyle of wolves, who will feed not on the sheep but with the sheep, and lions, who will eat straw like the oxen (v. 25).

52. In the final chapters of Revelation, John recounts his vision of a new heaven and a new earth, the first heaven and the first earth have passed away (21:1) and all things are being made new (21:5). Notice that it does not say that God is making *all new things* but making *all things new*. This distinction is of the utmost importance. Although John borrows imagery from Isaiah, he explicitly contradicts his prophetic exemplar by describing life in the new creation as everlasting, “death will be no more” (21:4). The former things that pass away are death, sorrow, and pain. The death of death, to a large extent, is what makes the new creation new, i.e., different.

53. An alternative understanding of the onomatopoeic metaphor (*rhoizēdón*) is that it denotes the crackling of the heavenly elements as they burn in the conflagration rather than a thunderous announcement of divine judgment. Cf. Oecumenius, “Commentary on 2 Peter,” 616.

54. In this passage, Clement alludes to Isa 34:4, which in a variant reading of the LXX says “the powers (*dunámeis*) of heaven shall melt away.” J. B. Lightfoot recommends substituting *dunámeis* for *tines* (some) in the translation of 2 Clement 16:3. Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 250.

55. The translation of 2 Clement comes from *Apostolic Fathers*, 1:155.

is a result of God's longsuffering not wanting any to perish but rather that all should reach repentance; (3) the delay, however, should not be presumed as an acquittal, for judgment is unavoidable; (4) God will make a place for righteousness to dwell; and therefore (5) *caveat lector*, let the reader beware to live at peace with God. According to the interpretation offered above, this argument does not necessitate annihilation. The seventh-century monk Andreas wrote, "It is not just we, says Peter, but the whole creation around us also, which will be changed for the better. For the creation will share in our glory just as it has been subjected to destruction and corruption because of us."⁵⁶

IS "APOCALYPTIC SUSTAINABILITY" AN OXYMORON?

Following the lead of other Pentecostal scholars, I have advocated for an inaugurated eschatology, which is both biblically sound and theologically practical. By adopting a transformational understanding of eschatology, Pentecostals are able to maintain the tension between the already and the not yet. On the one hand, creation is already good and all of life has value; therefore, the social ministries of the church are theologically viable. So we should continue to pray and care for the sick, feed the hungry, house the homeless, embrace the marginalized, speak out against injustice, and care for the environment. On the other hand, our hope is in the coming of God, who alone has the power to transform this world. In order to prevent social activism from becoming a thinly veiled atheism, we must continue to pray, sing, worship, and discern what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Contrary to popular belief, the word *apocalypse* does not mean *end times* or *cosmic dissolution*, but rather *unveiling* or *revelation*. Jewish and ancient Christian apocalyptic texts have more to do with discerning the spiritual significance of the present than predicting the future. The power of the apocalyptic language is its drastic metaphors, which have become quite common among those who speak about the ecological crisis (e.g., the documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*). The dualistic nature of apocalyptic literature (and early Christianity for that matter) is often overstated. It is true that apocalyptic literature purports a dualism between good and evil, Creator and creation, the present age and the age to come. However, religious historians and critics are mistaken

56. Andreas, "Catena," 101.

when they assume that this apocalyptic dualism necessarily includes a denunciation of all physicality in favor of an ethereal spiritual reality.⁵⁷ The early Christians and the Jews before them expected an end to the “*present world order*” but not a cosmic end to the space-time universe.⁵⁸ When *apocalypse* is rightly defined, the phrase apocalyptic sustainability is not an oxymoron.

In closing, I want to make a few final remarks about why I think ecological sustainability is an important issue for Pentecostals. Among the various challenges facing the world today, the ecological crisis intersects and overlaps with a number of other issues of justice. Pentecostalism has been and continues to be the religion of choice among the global poor and because of this Pentecostal theology has often found a corresponding connection with theologies that champion the cause of the marginalized. This may be seen in the appreciation for various forms of liberation theology, whether Latin American, Black, or Feminist. Ecological theology, as one of the many branches of political theology, is a natural next step for Pentecostals. By addressing the ecological crisis, Pentecostals will find their efforts intersecting with other social ministries, because environmental degradation and poverty go hand-in-hand. Again in the words of Archbishop Tutu, “We all need to come to terms with the forces that have created this crisis and the resources within our traditions that can motivate us to resolve the crisis.”

57. Cf. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 297–98.

58. *Ibid.*, 299.