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The World in the Bible

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THE IDEA OF 'GAINING the whole world' while 'losing your own soul' crossed my mind as I struggled to work through a concordance search on the biblical words translated 'world' and related words and concepts. It was a most illuminating exercise, however. The first and most startling thing that struck me (and it is very easily visible in any search on 'the world' as an English translation), was the immediate contrast between the 'flavour' of most of the references to 'the world' in the Psalms, and that of most of the occurrences of 'the world' in John's gospel and first epistle. It is stark, and immediately opens up for us the essential double sense of the word in the Bible as a whole.

In the Psalms, the world is mainly the created earth and all that is in it—human, animal, mineral and vegetable. The whole world in all those senses was brought into existence by God (33:6-9), is owned by God (24:1), ruled by God (33:10-11), and observed by God both in loving provision and in moral judgment (33:13-15). It is the world that God will judge—but that is a matter of rejoicing to all creation, for it means God acting to put things right (9:8; 96:11-13).

In John, the world certainly includes the entire created universe, but having made that clear right up front in his opening verses, the predominant use of the word by John speaks of the sin and rebellion of the world, its opposition to God and its hosting of satanic powers. The world stands in need of salvation—and that indeed is what God has brought about through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But the world as a place of inveterate resistance to God will ultimately be defeated.

And that contrast between Psalms and John merely illustrates a fundamental ambivalence in the biblical presentation of the world. It is simultaneously the wonderfully good creation of God and the horrendously wicked theatre of human and satanic rebellion against God. As we reflect on what it means to bring 'the whole gospel to the whole world', this is a duality that we must keep in mind. For it is this tension

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between the positive and negative conceptions of 'the world'—both equally biblical—that drives so many dimensions of our missional engagement in and with the world.

I Vocabulary and Broad Concepts

Rarely if ever is there a single word in Hebrew or Greek that corresponds to a single English word, and this is very true for 'the world'—understandably so, since in English and most cognate languages, it is a complex and flexible word too. A brief survey of some of the major biblical vocabulary will be a useful starting point for grasping the overall biblical teaching.

1 The Old Testament

Heavens and earth: This expression, familiar from the opening five words of the Hebrew Bible, combines heaven and earth in order to include the whole created universe—all that exists that is not God. It speaks of the world as belonging to God, along with everything else. This double phrase, functioning as a hendiadys, is most often used to express the over-arching universality of God's creation, and therefore of the creator God himself. God is creator of all (Gen. 14:19, 22), owner and ruler of all (Deut. 10:14), and transcendently unique—there is no other god in the universe to compare with him (Deut. 4:39; Josh 2:11).

'erets: This is the commonest of all the relevant words in the Old Testament, since it can refer to the land (i.e. normally the land of Israel but sometimes other national territories), or the earth as a whole. Sometimes in its place is used *ha'adamah*—which means the soil, or the habitable surface of the earth. But *'erets* is the word more connected with what we tend to mean by 'the world'—the whole planet earth —though *'erets* is translated 'world' only twenty times in the NIV. Normally it is translated 'earth' or 'land'.

Tebel: Whereas *'erets* occurs about 2,500 times, and is translated 'earth' in about 20 per cent of its occurrences, this word *tebel* is much less frequent (about 36 times), and is almost always translated 'world'. Its commonest occurrence is in poetic contexts like the Psalms, often in parallelism with *'erets*, with its second most frequent use in Isaiah—mostly in eschatological contexts. It seems to speak of the *ordered* world of God's creation along with its human population (Psalms—e.g. 24:1; 33:8; 50:12; 96:10; 98:7), or the human world as a whole standing under the judgment of God (Isaiah, anticipating John's use of *kosmos*, e.g. Is. 13:11; 14:26; 24:4).

2 The New Testament

Kosmos: This is the world or universe considered as an ordered whole. It can mean the world in the general sense (the planet, all the nations), but especially in John and Paul it has the more negative sense of the world as ordered in opposition to God, and thus something to be resisted by God's people. But at the same time, God loves the *kosmos* and Christ has come 'into' it in order that it might be saved/redeemed.

Aion: This means 'age', but it can refer to the world considered from a temporal point of view—i.e either the world of 'this age', or 'the world/age to come'.

Ge: This corresponds most often to the Hebrew *'erets*, the earth as the place of human habitation, the world of lands and territories and peoples, or the land as distinct from the sea and the sky.

Oikoumene: This means the inhabited known world, usually regarded as more or less equivalent to the Roman Empire—as when Caesar decreed that the whole world (*oikoumene*) should be counted and taxed.

Ktisis: This means 'creation', and can have the verbal sense of 'God's creation of the world', or the more static sense of the whole of God's creation. In the latter sense, it can then refer either to the existing creation in which we now live and within which history takes place under God's control as the arena of the work of the gospel, or to the new creation that is being born within the womb of the old.

Ta panta: Literally 'all things'; this is an expression used by Paul, sometimes combined with 'in heaven and earth' but sometimes on its own, to signify the whole of God's creation, visible and invisible, material and spiritual. He most enjoys using it in connection with the missional plan of God and the cosmic work of Christ.

Having surveyed the range of vocabulary, we can anticipate the discussion below by summarizing several broad senses that 'the world' or 'the whole world' has in the Bible. The Bible speaks of the world:

- first, as the physical creation (the world in which we live);
- secondly, as the whole human race, (the world of nations);
- thirdly, as the place of rebellion and opposition to God (the world of sin and judgment, the world of all the resulting suffering, poverty and pain);
- fourthly, as the object of God's love and mission of redemption in history;
- fifthly, as the new creation (the world to come).

II The Whole World in the Plan of God

1. The World of God's Creation

There is no need to replicate here the thrust of Peter Harris's paper that follows. And I have also written extensively myself on the topic of the land and the earth in biblical ethics, and on creation care as a legitimate part of Christian mission.[1] It is still worth reminding ourselves, however, of just how extensive is the Bible's engagement with the world of creation.

Acknowledgement of YHWH as the creator of *heaven and earth*—that is, as the universal God of all—is found on the lips of many (apart from the narrator of Genesis 1-2): Melchizedek (Gen. 14:19, 22); Abraham (Gen. 24:3); Moses (Deut. 4:39); David (1 Chr. 29:11); Nehemiah (Neh. 9:6); Psalmists (Pss. 8; 19:1-4; 33:6-9; 89:11); and prophets (Is. 40:21-31; Jer. 10:12 = 51:15).

As mentioned above, the Psalms

1 See Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Nottingham and Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 103-145; and *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Nottingham and Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 397-420.

rejoice in God's relationship with the earth (*'erets* and *tebel* often combined). It belongs to him, because he founded it (Pss. 24:1; 50:12; 89:11). It shares his quality of reliability (Pss. 93:1; 96:10; 104:5). But he precedes it in his eternal being and wisdom (Ps. 90:2; Prov. 8:23, 26). The personification of divine wisdom in Proverbs 8 portrays the wisdom of God 'rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind' (Prov. 8:31).

In the synoptic gospels, creation can be simply a time marker for all of recorded history, or prior to it (Mt. 24:21; 25:34). The same temporal use is found elsewhere, to signify something that happened before the creation of the world (e.g. our election, the Father's love for the Son, or the significance of Christ's death; Eph. 1:4; Jn. 17:24;1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8), or all the time since creation (Heb. 4:3; 9:26). Creation can also be the theological starting point for ethical orientation (on the issue of marriage and divorce, Mk. 10:6). But the created world is also the arena for missional and eschatological action, since the gospel 'will be preached in the whole [inhabited] world' (*oikoumene*) before the end comes (Mt. 24:14), and (according to the longer ending of Mark) is to be preached to all creation (*ktisis*; Mk. 16:15)

Paul shares the Old Testament understanding of creation, and could preach it without even quoting the biblical text in a pagan context (Acts 17:24, using *kosmos*, but adding the more Hebraic 'heaven and earth'). The insight of the Psalmist that creation reveals truth about God (his glory, Ps. 19:1-4; his righteousness, Ps. 50:6; his power, Ps. 93:3-4), becomes, in Paul's hands, the basis for declaring all humanity to be without excuse. We know essential truths about God simply by living within his created world (Rom. 1:20). And Paul turns the Psalmist's recognition that there is nowhere in creation we can be lost from God's presence (Ps. 139:7-12), into the assurance that there is nothing in creation (*ktisis*) that can separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:39)

However, in line with the way he so thoroughly identifies Jesus Christ with his scriptural monotheism, he associates Christ strongly with creation. In one place he quotes the well-known Jewish formula about God as creator of 'all things'—i.e. the whole universe: 'from him and through him and to him are all things (*ta panta*)' (Rom. 11:36). But in another he adjusts the phraseology, aligns it to the *shema'* of Deuteronomy 6:4, and comes up with the amazing double formula that identifies Jesus as Lord with God the Father and creator.

'…for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things (*ta panta*) came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things (*ta panta*) came and through whom we live' (1 Cor. 8:6). Paul's biblical doctrine of creation has become totally Christocentric.

Or to put it another way, which is missiologically important, one of the ways that the New Testament affirms the deity of Jesus Christ is by linking him with (rather identifying him as) God the creator. All that the Old Testament affirmed about YHWH in this respect, the New Testament affirms about Jesus. Paul has 'christified' Old Testament monotheism. The uniqueness and universality of Christ, then, is

not simply a Christian claim in which we support our champion or declare our love for him. It is the profound conviction that in Jesus of Nazareth, the living God of biblical faith—creator (and also ruler, judge and saviour) of all the world—has walked among us and claims our trust and allegiance.

There are several key truths embedded in the range of texts surveyed above which are of fundamental importance in sustaining a solidly biblical worldview in relation to our world. These include:

- That creation is ontologically distinct from God, yet entirely dependent on God;
- That creation is good, by God's declaration, and as such continues to reveal truth about God its creator;
- That creation is sacred, because it is at every level related to God, but it is not divine and should not be worshipped as God;
- That creation exists to bring glory and praise to God the creator, and continuously does so;
- That creation is the object of God's constant presence, love and provision;
- That creation is included in God's plan of redemption through the cross of Christ and will ultimately be brought to full cosmic unity in him.

In more dynamic terms, when thinking of 'the whole world' as meaning the whole universe of God's creation, the Bible tells us that God owns the world, rules the world, reveals himself through the world, watches all that happens in the world, and loves the world. Or again, the world belongs to God, submits to God, points to God, is accountable to God, and needs God.

Now human beings are creatures. We are unique creatures, of course, in that we have been created in the image of God to have dominion over the rest of creation by serving and keeping the earth. But we remain *part* of the creation, part of the world God made. We therefore share in every dimension of that list of relationships between God and the earth. This must impact what it means to think about 'the whole world', as we move forward to using the term to apply to all people.

All humanity, every person, has these things in common, along with all the rest of creation.

- They belong to God—however much they have surrendered that ownership to usurped lords.
- They live under God's sovereignty—however much they resist it. History is still governed by God, as is all creation.
- They were created to bring glory to God and give him thanks and praise—though they persistently fail to do so.
- They know God to some degree simply by living in the world that reveals him—however much they have suppressed that knowledge in darkness and perversion.
- They are accountable to God who watches all they do and understands not only the actions but also the motives of every human being.
- They are loved by God, even when (especially when) they reject his love, or ignore the daily proofs of it, or indeed treat God as the enemy.

Such biblical truths must have an impact on our understanding of mission, and are important to bear in mind as we move to our next section.

2. The World of Humanity

Very many of the references to 'the earth' or 'the world' have in mind the human population of the earth. Sometimes it means simply everybody who lives on the earth in a general sense (e.g. 1 Sam. 17:46; Pss. 24:1; 33:8; 49:1; Is. 12:5; Zeph 1:8; Mt. 5:14; 24:14; 26:13; Rom. 1:8; 10:18; Col. 1:6; Acts 17:26; Rev. 3:10).

But more often there is an awareness of the cultural and political realities of human life in the world.

Linguistic -cultural: The description of humanity after the flood in Genesis 10 speaks of the varieties of tribes, nations, languages and territories. This appears to be entirely natural and what God planned and expected. It is only the attempt to forge all this variety into a unified human project arrogantly raising itself to heaven that leads to the *confusion* of languages and the implicit strife among nations that has plagued the world ever since. Ethnic and linguistic diversity are not in themselves sinful (though they are problematic for the gospel, as Paul acknowledges, 1 Cor. 14:10); on the contrary they will be a continuing feature of the redeemed humanity. The picture of the new creation in Revelation picks up precisely the trio of terms from Genesis 10 (tribes, languages and nations) and pictures people from all of them gathered in the redeemed humanity, praising their saviour God. The mission of God is what takes the world of nations from Genesis 10-11 to Revelation 21-22.

And half way between Genesis and Revelation (as we might say), stands Pentecost—the anticipation of that eschatological redemption of human languages (and cultures). For when Luke tells us that people 'from every nation under heaven' (both Jews and Gentile proselytes) were in Jerusalem that day, he would have known then as well as we do now that his statement was not literally true—no matter how long the list of nations that follows. But was the statement merely rhetorical hyperbole? At one level, yes—it was a remarkably international crowd. But knowing Luke's saturation in the scriptures and his understanding of the great sweep of God's promise to Abraham, through Israel, to all nations on earth, his phrase surely has an intended eschatological resonance too. What happened in Jerusalem on that day of Pentecost was a prophetic signpost pointing to the day when indeed people 'from every nation under heaven' (to use Luke's phrase) will declare the praises of God in their own languages.

So, from a missional point of view, there is every biblical justification for taking the phrase 'the whole world' to imply the anticipation that every linguistic, ethnic and cultural component of the human family will be included in the scope of the proclamation of the gospel and in distinctive embodiments of the gospel's transformation.

Political—territorial: Many references speak of the nations of the earth, or the kings of the world, thinking of them as centres of political and territorial power and authority. The election of Israel as a nation from out of the midst of all the nations of the earth is the most telling example of this usage (Ex. 19:4-6; Deut. 7:6; 1 Kgs.8:53). God's work in and for Old Testament Israel would be a source of wonder in the whole world of nations (Ex. 34:10;

Deut. 4:32-39; 28:10). Jerusalem did not have to wait until the day of Pentecost to become an international magnet. It was a cosmopolitan city even in Solomon's day.

The Deuteronomic historian anticipates Luke in his rhetorical hyperbole, enthusing that 'men of *all nations* came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by *all the kings of the world*, who had heard of his wisdom' (1 Kgs. 4:34). However, the author's greater concern, from the mouth of Solomon himself, was that such praise should be for YHWH, not for Solomon, as he anticipated foreigners from all over the world having their prayers answered by the God whose name dwelt in the temple in Jerusalem—'so that *all the peoples of the earth* may know your name and fear you' and 'so that *all the peoples of the earth* may know that the LORD is God and that there is no other' (1 Kgs. 8:43, 60; my italics).

These are astonishingly missional prayers, and not the only place the narrative expresses such universality (cf. 2 Kgs. 19:19). The Psalmist turned the same thought into his own breathtaking prayer: 'May all the kings of the earth praise you, O LORD' (Ps. 138:4).They should, for after all, 'the kings of the earth belong to God' (Ps. 47:9).

Sadly, Israel's own historical life and behaviour declined, not least from the moment they decided to be 'like all the nations' (1 Sam. 8:5, 20) and have a king. It was an option that was fundamentally idolatrous, that God would finally have to disallow. 'You say, "We want to be like the nations, like *the peoples of the world* who serve wood and stone." But what you have in mind will never happen' (Ezek. 20:32, my italics). For a long time, however, it did happen, and in going that way, Israel fell in line with the typical behaviour of the nations around them.

So the world of nations is at one level simply the manifestation of human ethnic and linguistic diversity—and that is a positive thing intended by God. And yet of course nations also become the focus of political arrogance as human authorities usurp the place of divine power and make absurd claims for themselves. In such posturing, the fingerprints of Satan are all too evident—as Jesus immediately discerned, when 'the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world (*kosmos*) and their splendour' (Matt. 4:8).

Such behaviour is the mark of the world—both in the exercise of such oppressive political authority (Lk. 22:25), and in the everyday world in which 'all the nations of the world (*kosmos*) run after' the bodily needs of food and clothing, things for which disciples can trust God (Lk. 12:30, literal translation).

That brings us to the largest category of all in the biblical picture of the world.

3. The World of Sin and Judgment

The rebellion, disobedience and fall of humanity had dire consequences for the earth as a whole. God's curse rests on 'the ground' (3:17, *'adamah*, rather than *'erets*), and the whole earth ends up filled with violence and corruption, leading to the flood that wipes out 'everything on earth' (*'erets*, Gen. 6 *passim*).

The conviction that the whole world (not just Israel) stands under the judgment of YHWH the God of Israel emerges surprisingly early in Israel's poetry (e.g. 1 Sam. 2:10—'the LORD will judge the ends of the earth' [*'erets*]). But it reaches a crescendo in the universal declarations of God's judgment that we find in Isaiah. Jeremiah and some other prophets follow suit (though we need to distinguish where possible texts which use *'erets* to refer to the land of Israel, and those where the intention is clearly to refer to the whole earth or the world of all nations).

The universality of Isaiah's declaration of God's judgment could not be clearer.

> I will punish the world (*tebel*) for its evil,
> the wicked for their sins.
> I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty
> and will humble the pride of the ruthless.
> I will make man scarcer than pure gold,
> more rare than the gold of Ophir.
> Therefore I will make the heavens tremble;
> and the earth (*'erets*) will shake from its place
> at the wrath of the LORD Almighty,
> in the day of his burning anger (Is. 13:11-13).
>
> This is the plan determined for the whole world (*'erets*);
> this is the hand stretched out over all nations (Is. 14:26).
>
> The earth (*'erets*) dries up and withers,
> the world (*tebel*) languishes and withers,
> the exalted of the earth languish.
> The earth is defiled by its people;
> they have disobeyed the laws,
> violated the statutes
> and broken the everlasting covenant (24:4-5; cf. also 34:1-2).

Comparable oracles of judgment, seen as judgment on the world and all nations, not only Israel, are found in Jeremiah 4:23-28; 10:10; 25:15-26, 29-32; and in Zephaniah 1:2-3,18; 3:8.

All this provides the background for the predominantly negative tone that 'the world' has in the New Testament. The positive truths already noted about God's creation remain true in the New Testament, of course. But if you even randomly look up 'the world' in the New Testament, it is more than likely that it will be talking about the world of human and satanic sin and rebellion, of struggle, temptation and conflict. This is the world in which we have to live, but out of which God has redeemed us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the world that must ultimately pass away under God's wrath. This is not the world of God's good creation, as he made it to be. This is the world of human creation, as we in our fallenness, rebellion and collusion with Satan have made it be.

John

John starts positively, as we saw, attributing the whole creation (*panta*) to the work of Christ 'the Word' (Jn.1:3). And we remain positive with the language of incarnation—the Word has come 'into the world' (*kosmos*; Jn. 1:9-10)—a note that is repeated to the end of the book, as Jesus brings light and life and truth into the world (Jn.

3:19; 6:33; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46-47; 18:37). However, once the opposition to Jesus has consolidated its intentions to be rid of him, the intensity of references to the world are almost entirely to its hatred of God, Jesus and the disciples, its subjection to Satan, and the need for the disciples to recognize its dangers and reject it.

John uses the word *kosmos* 72 times, and more than 40 of those occur in chapters 13-17, describing Jesus' final conversations with his disciples and prayer to his Father, and almost all of this barrage of references to 'the world' are negative.

The theme is, if anything, amplified further in 1 John, where *kosmos* occurs 22 times and all negative, except for the words of hope that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world (2:2), because he had come into the world to be its saviour (4:9, 14) and therefore our victory over the world is guaranteed (5:4-5). James brings a similar note (Jas. 1:27; 4:4).

Paul

Paul uses *kosmos* 47 times (and *aion* 31 times). As we have seen, Paul can certainly use *kosmos* to speak of the whole of God's good creation (though he tends more often to use *ta panta* and/or 'heaven and earth' for that). He can also speak of the world of all humanity in general terms, and, as we shall soon see, he affirms God's saving intention for the whole world very strongly.

Nevertheless, the majority of Paul's uses of *kosmos* speak of it as the place of sin, rebellion and the judgment of God (e.g. Rom. 3:6, 19; 5:12-13; 1 Cor. 11:32); or as the place of satanic deception and idolatrous philosophies (e.g. 2 Cor. 4:4 [*aion*]; Gal. 4:3; Col. 2:8, 20; Eph. 6:12); or as the context of human corrupt culture from which Christians have been rescued, and must therefore resist as something seductive but transient in the light of the cross (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:20-28; 2:12; 7:31-34; Gal. 6:14; Eph. 2:2, 12; 2 Tim. 4:10 9, [*aion*]).

Perhaps it is because the word *kosmos* had such broadly negative connotations for Paul (even though he could use it to mean the whole creation), he never speaks of a 'new *kosmos*', but only of the 'new *ktisis*', new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal. 6:15). That word takes the reader back more clearly to the Genesis creation narratives and the hope of 'new heaven and earth' that the Old Testament projects into the New (Is. 65:17-25).

4. The World of God's Salvation

As Peter Harris's paper points out, the earliest covenant actually so-called in the Bible is not made with Noah alone, but with all life on earth. There is a universality about God's promise of sustenance for the earth as a whole. This is sometimes called 'the cosmic covenant', and there are echoes of it in other parts of the Old Testament, and it is reflected in other ancient Near Eastern texts.[2] We live on the earth that is simultaneously cursed and

2 For a full discussion of the wider ancient near eastern background to the concept of a 'cosmic covenant', see, Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 132-137, and the bibliography there cited, particularly: Robert Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant: Biblical Themes of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1992).

covenanted. And we know from the end of the story which of those conditions will win (Rev. 21-22—'no more curse', 22:3). This longing for God's redemptive intervention to lift the curse (cf. Gen. 5:28-29) leads to an eschatology of hope for the world, considered both as the nations of humanity and as the creation itself.

All nations: It is the world of nations that is specified as the target of God's great agenda of redemptive blessing, his covenant promise to Abraham that all nations on earth will be blessed through him (Gen. 12:3, and its repetition in 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14).

The missional implications of this are incalculable throughout the rest of the whole Bible. So at this point we ought to summarize what the Bible has to say about God's great plan for all nations—the plan of salvation that spans the whole of history and stretches to the ends of the earth until the end of the world (using the phrase in the spatial and the temporal senses that are both part of its meaning in the Bible). However, I have tried to do this very thoroughly in *The Mission of God*, in chapters 14-15, and will not repeat it all here.

Suffice it to say that the nations of the world are included within the scope of God's salvation in the most comprehensive ways. God's plan was always universal—that is, intended for the whole world. The election of Old Testament Israel was instrumental for that purpose. It is a totally false and misleading reading of the Bible to imagine that God had a Plan A (Israel), which failed, so he replaced that with Plan B (the Christian church). The Bible never talks of the *replacement* of Israel with the church, but rather of the *expansion* of Israel to include the Gentiles.

The absorption of people from every nation into the Israel of God, and into Zion, is not a *post-facto* rationalization of the missionary thrust of early Christianity, but the explicit intention of the election of Israel in the first place, clarified and amplified in dozens of texts in every part of the canon. The nations, according to the Old Testament, would be blessed with God's salvation (Is. 19:18-25), registered in God's city (Ps. 87), called by God's name (Amos 9:12), accepted in God's house (Is. 56:6-7), and incorporated into God's people (Zech. 2:10-11; 9:7). And that's only the tip of the iceberg of texts that I have surveyed in *The Mission of God*.

Paul is doing no more than drawing out the implications of this Old Testament universality when he speaks of Abraham as 'heir of the world *kosmos*' (Rom. 4:13). And he sees very clearly the connection between what God was doing in and through *Israel* (even in his sovereign purpose that could include and move beyond their hard-hearted rejection of Jesus the Messiah), and God's ultimate purpose for the whole *world*. 'If their transgression means riches for the world [kosmos], and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!… For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world [*kosmos*] what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?' (Rom. 11:12, 14).

Accordingly, the message of God's saving intention is to be proclaimed not in Israel only, but in all the world. The idea of 'gospel', that is, the belief that there is *good news* to be proclaimed by authorized messengers to all nations

on earth, is an Old Testament concept with universal scope (Is. 12:4-5; Ps. 96:1-3; Is. 52:7-10, etc). The New Testament tells us what that good news is: God's saving love has led him to enter into the world in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for the world of sinners and bring the blessings of life, light and salvation (Jn. 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 Tim. 1:15).

All creation: For Paul, however, the universality of the gospel's promise and hope did not stop with the ingathering of the nations—as promised in the covenant with Abraham. It extended to the whole creation. Christ is not only agent of the *creation* of the world (a view Paul shared, of course, with John, Jn. 1:3; and Hebrews, Heb. 1:2-3). Christ is also the one through whom the whole of creation will be *redeemed*.

The overarching plan of God is ultimately 'to bring all things (*ta panta*) in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ' (Eph. 1:10). This vision of cosmic integration (which, in the letter to the Ephesians, then issues in ethnic reconciliation in chapters 2 and 3; ecclesial unity, ethical integrity, and marital union, in chapters 4-6), is expounded even more eloquently in Colossians 1:15-20.

> [15]He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation (*ktisis*). [16]For by him all things (*ta panta*) were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things (*ta panta*) were created by him and for him. [17]He is before all things (*ta panta*), and in him all things (*ta panta*) hold together. [18]And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. [19]For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, [20]and through him to reconcile to himself all things (*ta panta*), whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

The five-fold repetition of *ta panta*, and its explicit definition as meaning the whole universe of God's creation (*ktisis*), is emphatic and powerful. The whole world, meaning the whole created order, was created by Christ and for Christ, is sustained by Christ, and has been reconciled to God by Christ, through his death on the cross. No wonder, as Paul concludes in verse 23, this is good news—the gospel that is preached 'in all creation under heaven' (which I think is the right translation of *en pasei ktisei hypo ton ouranon*, rather than 'to every creature under heaven' [NIV]). The gospel that is good news *for* the whole creation is to be preached in the whole creation.

5. The World to Come

It remains only to point to the Bible's great hope of new creation. As in earlier sections, this too can be seen in terms of the creation itself, and then also in terms of the redeemed humanity that will inhabit the 'new heaven and new earth'.

New creation: God's redeeming work is not a plan to obliterate the universe and start all over again. It is rather a plan to purge, purify and renew the whole creation. 'Behold, I am creating

new heavens and a new earth', God declares, in a passage that needs to be read in full (Is. 65:17-25). It is an inspiring vision that portrays God's new creation as a place that will be filled with joy, satisfaction and fulfilment of life and work, free from grief and frustration, and environmentally harmonious and safe.

This Old Testament passage provides the foundation for the way the New Testament portrays the destiny of creation through the redeeming work of Christ. Far from rejecting creation, Paul sees the resurrection body of Jesus as God's great 'Yes' to the creation, and the guarantee of the resurrection of our bodies for life in the new creation—that is already being brought to birth in the groaning womb of the old (Rom. 8:18-25). The closing picture of the Bible is not one of us floating off to some other heavenly home, but of God himself coming down to announce the arrival of the new creation, in which righteousness will dwell (2 Pet. 3:10-13), because God himself will dwell there with his people (Rev. 21:1-4).

Redeemed humanity: But who and what will be there in that new creation? The concluding two chapters of the Bible tell us not only that there will be people from every language, tribe and nation of humanity—now enjoying the healing power of God's presence (Rev. 22:2)—but also that they will bring into the new creation (the city of God, the world to come), the accumulated treasures of their civilizations and cultures That, at least, is how I read the remarkable and repeated affirmation about the kings of the earth bringing their wealth and glory into the city of God (Rev. 21:24-27). Some take these texts to be merely metaphors for the submission of all human authority to the Lordship of God in Christ. But I think they mean what they say. The world of humanity, of nations and civilizations—so shot through with sin and pride, with violence and greed, in the world as we now know it—will be purged of all those things, so that that which truly reflects the image of God in humanity will remain, for the glory of God and our everlasting enrichment. 'The world to come', as it is sometimes called, will not be a blank sheet, with all that humanity has accomplished in fulfilment of the creation mandate simply crumpled up and tossed in a cosmic incinerator. Rather it will take that accomplishment, purged and disinfected of all the poison and corruption of our fallenness, as the starting point of an unimaginable future—an eternity of new creation and new creativity, totally glorifying to God and satisfying to us, to be enjoyed forever by both in intimate and unspoiled communion.

III Concluding Reflections

Whatever may have been in the mind of those who framed the famous triplet—'the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world'—it is clear from our biblical survey that we cannot confine the final phrase to a purely quantitative meaning (all human beings on the planet). All five meanings of 'the world' outlined above need to have their distinct impact on our missional reflection and practice.

Lausanne 1974 called evangelicals to realize that they could no longer contemplate or practise 'evangelization' as something aimed at maximizing the number of individuals who could be

reached and invited to respond to the gospel. That truly biblical objective had to be combined with the equally biblical demand to pay attention to the social, economic and political realities in which those individuals lived. The gospel also addresses and challenges our contexts as well as our persons. To these two great focal points must now be added the third biblical concern—the whole world of God's creation. Mission that is biblically integrated must share in the integrated mission of God that extends his love and redemptive action to the whole world in that sense too. The gospel is good news for individual persons *and* for society *and* for creation.

We are perhaps more familiar with the second of our themes above, especially in the wake of 1974, since we are well aware that the human race exists in a vast diversity of ethnic, linguistic, cultural and political arrangements. So the task of engaging the gospel with all of these human realities, and seeing how the gospel works its transformative power within them, remains as relevant and urgent as ever. Contextualization is as old as the Bible itself, and as new as every contemporary cultural ebb and flow.

And finally, grouping the last three themes together, our missional activity will always find its most challenging and creative tensions in addressing the constant ambiguity of the fact that we live in a world that is good by God's creative power and declaration, and simultaneously evil by human and satanic corruption and rebellion. Discerning the difference and the boundaries remains a task that requires deep biblical reflection, careful research and analysis, and constant dependence on the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit.