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## **Paul and Christian Social Responsibility**

**Many Christians today attach a high priority to social responsibility. The biblical underpinning for this is commonly found in the Old Testament prophets and in the teaching of Jesus. The apostle Paul has sometimes been seen as irrelevant or even hostile to this area of ministry. Christopher Marshall challenges this misconception. The theology of Paul is in fact a rich resource for Christian thought and action on questions of social justice and environmental concern.<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction: The Tragedy of Christian Amnesia**

Recently I was asked to serve as a theological adviser to a consultation organized by the Social Justice Commission of the Anglican Church in New Zealand. The purpose of the consultation was to discuss how Anglicans could be better equipped to evaluate and respond to social and economic developments in the community. The perception of the organizers was that most Anglicans no longer know how to articulate their convictions about social justice in a way that is directly informed by their faith. Their Christian beliefs exist in one compartment of their lives and their social concerns in another, but the two are not materially related.

Of course this problem is not unique to Anglicans. Most regular church attenders would find it extremely difficult to explain how their fundamental theological understandings engage directly with the great social issues of our day. Their religious beliefs and their political convictions exist in splendid isolation from each other. Even many committed Christian social activists would be hard pressed to give a theological or biblical justification for their activity – beyond a general sense that God calls us to love our neighbour as ourselves. This is true, of course, but it doesn't take us very far in furnishing a theological rationale for social engagement or in providing a way of reading Scripture that is socially sensitive.

As I reflected on this problem at the consultation, I had a feeling of great sadness. Over the last 15 years, New Zealand has undergone one of the most radical social and economic restructurings of our history. We have witnessed not just the rise of a new brand of economic philosophy, but a fundamental shift in the basic value structures of our society. Policies have been pursued according to a value system that is often totally at odds with the values of Christian faith. Furthermore, these policies have been justified by an appeal to an alternative faith story — not the Bible's story of a God who seeks justice, but the New Right's story of the omniscient, beneficent market, whose invisible hand guides the decisions taken by its priesthood of business leaders and which sovereignly propels society forward to its eschatological goal of unfettered commercial freedom and prosperity. But unlike Christian eschatology, which claims that the future reign of God has *already* broken into the present, the eschatological hope of free market faith is thoroughly futurist. Its dream of a more dynamic and prosperous society is always just around the corner. It will come, and soon, but not just yet. It will come only if we pay the price, only if we offer further sacrificial victims,

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper delivered to the Just Future Conference at Knox College, Dunedin, in September 1998.

only if we atone for the sins of government intervention and welfarism. Only if we further impoverish the poor and reward the strong, will economic utopia dawn.

The faith-story of free marketism, whose god is Mammon, is proclaimed publicly in our society day in and day out. It is repeated so often and so pervasively that even many Christians, guardians of a very different faith-story, have started to believe it. Certainly many Christian leaders have challenged current social and economic policy, and many churches have come to the aid of those who have been chewed up and spat out in the restructuring process (through food banks, emergency housing, and so on). But arguably the great majority of ordinary Christians remain silent and confused about what is going on, either unable or unwilling to resist the alien ideology that lays claim to our allegiance and values.

This is tragic. At a time when our society desperately needs to hear a different story to the materialistic, self-serving story of laissez-faire economics, Christians have forgotten what their story is. Or rather they have forgotten how to tell the Christian story in a way that nurtures nonconformity to the world system in which they live (Rom. 12:1-2). Many have also lost confidence in the truthfulness of the story, no longer sure whether it is as reliable or as powerful as they once thought.

I want to suggest that one of the reasons for this tragic amnesia and pitiful hesitancy in the Christian community is that for generations we have heard the Christian story told only in truncated form. We have been told that the Christian faith is simply about how God saves individual sinners from their sins and gets them into heaven, nothing less and nothing more. For generations, Protestant Christians have imbibed such an abbreviated, emaciated and spiritualized recension of the biblical story that it is no wonder it has provided no bulwark against the inroads of neo-liberal thinking. Malnourished for years, many believers have succumbed to a kind of moral and spiritual dementia, no longer sure of what they believe, Whom they know, and how they are to live and think as God's people.

If this is true, there is before us an enormous task of helping people to recover the full Christian story, to read the biblical narrative as one that speaks of life and community in this world, not just the next, to discover how to retell this story in a way that speaks directly to the needs of our time, and, most of all, to re-believe its truth, its power and its relevance. For it is only when our commitment to social justice springs from the deepest well-springs of the Christian apprehension of God and from allegiance to the person and mission of Jesus Christ, as revealed in the biblical narratives, can it be regarded as distinctively and authentically Christian. One crucial task for the church today, then, is to help revive informed Christian witness in the marketplace, based on a recovery of the true dimensions of the Christian message.

So how do we do this? How do we go about constructing a theological basis for social responsibility? There are, of course, many valid ways of doing so, many different ways of using the biblical tradition to motivate and shape Christian social thinking. But I am often struck by a peculiar anomaly in this respect, by a striking lacuna in the biblical and theological traditions usually employed to give direction and content to Christian social ethics. It is an anomaly relating to the apostle Paul.

## The Anomaly of Paul

In his magisterial study of Paul's theology, James Dunn describes Paul as the first, the greatest, and the most influential Christian theologian of all time.<sup>2</sup> There can be little dispute about this. Apart from Jesus himself, no other person has had such a profound influence on Christianity as the apostle Paul. 'Christianity', for most Western Christians, is essentially Pauline Christianity. And 'Christian' theology is, essentially, Pauline theology (or some version of it). We owe more to Paul than to any other person for the basic belief-structure and theological vocabulary of the Christian faith.

This is not to say that the Western Christian tradition has necessarily been faithful to Paul, or has always correctly understood his teaching. Throughout its history, the Christian church has sought to understand and apply Paul's theology in the light of its own needs and circumstances, and it has sometimes misconstrued or distorted Paul's own perspective in the process. Indeed one of the main reasons why current Pauline studies is so vigorous and exciting is the growing recognition that the Reformation tradition's reading of Paul was more of a sixteenth-century contextualization of Paul's thought than an objective, accurate account of the apostle's own first-century, Jewish-Christian outlook.

Be that as it may, since the Reformation, Christians in general, and Protestants in particular, have looked mainly to the writings of Paul (especially Romans and Galatians) to define the content and concerns of Christian faith. It is quite appropriate to have done so. But it has created a significant problem with respect to Christian social ethics. For when Paul defends a gospel of 'justification by faith *and not by works*', the whole place of such 'works' as justice- and peace-making in the orbit of the gospel becomes problematic. Indeed in the conventional Protestant reading, Paul is downright suspicious of the place of good works in Christian life, fearful that people may rely upon them to commend themselves to God or to secure their own salvation. He therefore stresses that God is concerned with our *faith*, not with our works, and while it may be good to do good works, they are not really integral to our relationship with God.

Perhaps it is due to this received understanding of Paul that those Christians who have wanted to affirm the centrality of social justice issues to Christian faith have tended to look elsewhere for their biblical inspiration – maybe to the thundering denunciations of injustice by the OT prophets, or to the social welfare provisions of OT law, or to the example of Jesus' ministry to the poor and the oppressed. This is quite appropriate. There is no dearth of biblical material calling God's people to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with their God (Mic. 6:8).<sup>3</sup> But what about Paul? Must we conclude from Paul's systematic exposition of Christian belief, especially in Romans, that he, *the person most responsible for shaping our comprehension of the Christian faith*, has no place for justice concerns within his understanding of the gospel?

It seems to me that many Christians have arrived at this conclusion. Conservative Christians have sometimes used Paul's apparent lack of comment on issues of oppression and injustice in his own world, such as slavery and imperialism, as validation for their own neglect of

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<sup>2</sup> J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1998, pp 2-9.

<sup>3</sup> For a review of such material, see my essay 'Made a Little Lower than the Angels': Human Rights in the Biblical Tradition', in B. Atkin & K. Evans (eds), *Human Rights and the Common Good: Christian Perspectives*, Victoria University Press, Wellington 1999, pp 14—76.

justice concerns today. Much worse, some have appealed to features of Paul's teaching – especially on women, wives and slaves, and on submission to ruling authorities — to justify the continuation of structures of oppression today or to defend Christian quietude in face of violence and injustice. One American scholar, Neil Elliott, has observed that, 'The apostle Paul is perhaps never closer to the hearts and minds of the American people than when war must be promoted.'<sup>4</sup> For the same reason, more radical Christians committed to social action have tended simply to ignore Paul (or apologize for him) in constructing theological foundations for their endeavours. Another American NT scholar, John Donahue, has expressed surprise at the remarkable neglect of Paul's teaching in contemporary ecumenical discussions of faith and justice.<sup>5</sup>

But neither option – neither the championing of Paul *against* justice commitments, nor the *ignoring* of Paul in favour of justice concerns – is satisfactory. Both assume that the premier Christian thinker of all time counted social justice commitments to be, at best, secondary to Christian faith, or at worst, a positive threat to it. But such a conclusion, I believe, does a grave disservice to the great apostle, and offers little hope for overcoming the dichotomy between personal faith and public life that afflicts so much of the church today. It is not possible here to offer a thoroughgoing interpretation of Paul that corrects the prevailing understanding of him as either a social conservative or an otherworldly mystic. All I wish to do is point to three emphases or themes in Paul's writings which, I believe, have great potential for contributing to a Christian theological basis for social commitment. I can only offer a thumbnail sketch of each, but I hope to say enough to call into question the common neglect of Paul in Christian social ethics.

### **Liberation of the Oppressed: Paul's Theology of Divine Justice**

The first theme is that of God's righteousness. Modern scholarship is virtually unanimous that the leitmotif of the epistle to the Romans is the 'righteousness of God'. The phrase recurs eight times in the letter, and righteousness-terminology features more than 60 times. Paul announces the theme at the outset: 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith"' (Rom. 1:16-17; cf. 3:21-26).

For Paul, the Christian message is about the manifestation of God's righteousness in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and the accompanying promise that human beings are justified by faith'. From this it follows that the church's mission is essentially the proclamation and appropriation of this epoch-making event.

So far so good. But what most modern readers fail to realize is that when Paul defines the gospel in terms of God's righteousness, he is using *justice language*. That is to say, in order to explain what God has accomplished in Christ, and its radical implications for human experience, Paul deliberately, and pervasively, employs the categories and terminology of justice and justice-making. In so doing, he is affirming that the Christian gospel is all about

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<sup>4</sup> N. Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle*, Orbis, Maryknoll NY, 1994, p 18.

<sup>5</sup> J.R. Donahue, 'Biblical Perspectives on Justice', in J. C. Haughey (ed), *The Faith That Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change*, Paulist Press, New York 1977, pp 88-89.

justice. We often miss this because our English translations obscure a significant fact. The Greek terms for ‘righteousness/justice! justification’ derive from the same lexical root (*dik* stem), as does the corresponding Hebrew terminology (*sdq* root). They are part and parcel of the same basic concept. But in rendering these terms into English, translators employ terms deriving from two different language stocks – the Latin terminology of ‘justice/justification’ on the one hand, and the Anglo-Saxon terminology of ‘right/righteousness’ on the other. As a result, English readers do not readily perceive the intimate connection that exists between the biblical language of ‘righteousness’ and the notion of justice. The problem is compounded by the fact that in modern English, ‘righteousness’ and ‘justice’ have quite different connotations. Righteousness carries the sense of personal moral purity and religious piety, while justice is concerned with social policy and legal rights. One term belongs to the private realm, the other to the public realm.

But this is not so in Scripture. In biblical usage, righteousness and justice have closely related, often identical, meanings. The basic idea behind the biblical notion of righteousness is ‘doing what is right’, living in a condition of ‘all-rightness’, maintaining right relationships, both with God and with other members of the community. To be righteous is to do justice, that is, to bring about harmony and well-being in *all* one’s relationships, both individual and communal, and especially by defending the oppressed. Righteousness and justice are relational categories before they are moral or legal ones. So when the biblical writers ascribe righteousness to God (as Paul does in Romans), they are referring primarily to God’s faithfulness in his relationships with people, and to God’s actions in the world to secure justice for the oppressed. The righteousness of God is the essentially the saving action of a faithful, covenant-keeping God on behalf of those in need.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, when Paul speaks in Romans of the manifestation of God’s righteousness in the gospel, he is identifying the work of Christ as God’s definitive intervention of saving justice. The gospel is all about justice. It is, on the one hand, about the vindication of God’s justice: that God has proven himself to be a just God, a God who, in Christ, has acted justly towards Israel, and indeed to all humankind. On the other hand, it is about how God has secured justice on behalf the oppressed. In Christ, God has worked justice for those oppressed by the tyranny of law, sin and death, those unable to free themselves from these cruel oppressors. Paul states both sides of the justice-equation in Romans 3:16: ‘This was to prove’, Paul writes, ‘that God is just and that God justifies [or secures justice for] those who have faith in Jesus.’

If Paul’s gospel is about how a just God has broken into a situation of oppression and evil in order to bring liberation, how can it be denied that Christian mission should be concerned about the victims of social injustice? After all, the political and economic powers of injustice that oppress the weak and the poor in the world today are nothing other than the social manifestations of those cosmic principles of law, sin, and death that, Paul declares, God has overthrown in the cross of Christ. To proclaim deliverance from spiritual oppression by the cross of Christ while ignoring or paying mere lip-service to the plight of the socially oppressed is therefore both a theological inconsistency and a travesty of the Christian message. Conversely, to agitate for social and political change while disregarding the

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<sup>6</sup> The technical literature on this matter is vast. For a recent, popular statement, see N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, Lion, Oxford 1997, pp 95-133.

personal implications of Christ's triumph over the power and guilt of sin is equally a reduction of Pauline teaching. Both dimensions of God's justice are inescapably united. As Christians we are called to bear witness to Christ's triumph in all its dimensions, to be the first beneficiaries of its accomplishment, and to be instruments for its continuing practical realization in the structures of the world. 'Present your bodies', Paul says, 'no longer as instruments of wickedness but.. .present your members to God as instruments of justice' (Rom 6:13).

### **Solidarity with the Weak: Paul's Theology of the Cross**

In the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul reminds his readers how, when he first arrived in Corinth, he was overwhelmed with feelings of inadequacy and fear: 'When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling' (1 Cor. 2:1-3).

Paul's anxiety was probably fuelled by a sense of the manifest inadequacies of the new Christian 'philosophy' he was propounding. It centred on a set of claims about its founder, a crucified Jewish carpenter, that was calculated to offend rather than attract people, especially those of Paul's own tastes and class. Paul realized that the elite in Corinth, who valued the pursuit of human wisdom above all else, would find his message nauseatingly absurd, totally asinine, and it filled him with fear and trembling. But he forged on, determined 'to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified'. In other words, he chose to interpret his experience of rejection as an opportunity to participate in the sufferings and ridicule that Christ himself experienced. Paul decided to rest his confidence not in his own (considerable) intellectual acumen, nor in his rhetorical skill, nor in the winsomeness of his personality, but in what he calls 'the wisdom of God' and the 'power of God', by which he meant the capacity of the Christian gospel to confirm its own truthfulness through its impact on the concrete experience of those who responded to it. 'My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God' (1 Cor. 2:4-5).

The only reason Paul could rise above his fear and trembling in Corinth is because he really did believe that the message he proclaimed, absurd as it appeared, was true, completely true, an utterly reliable account of God's surprising work in recent events. Stanley Hauerwas has suggested that the only thing that makes the Christian church different from any other group in society is that the church is the only community that gathers around the true story. It is not the piety, or the sincerity, or the morality of the church that distinguishes us (Christians have no monopoly on virtue). It is the story we treasure, the story from which we derive our identity, our vision, and our values. And for us to do that would be a horrible mistake, if it were not a true story, indeed *the* true story, which exposes the lies, deceptions, and half-truths upon which human beings and human societies so often stake their lot.<sup>7</sup>

However, the truth of Paul's story was by no means self-evident to his Corinthian audience. In fact, it seemed to be a complete contradiction to all established notions of wisdom and

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<sup>7</sup> S. Hauerwas, 'The Moral Authority of Scripture: the Politics and Ethics of Remembering', *Interpretation* 34 (1980), pp 356-70.

truth, and his hearers were inclined to reject it. The reason for this is not because it was philosophically incoherent, but because it was socially revolutionary. It asserted that God had acted in a way that no self-respecting God ought to act. Instead of coming in a blaze of glory and triumph to accomplish the salvation of the world, God had demonstrated ultimate saving power in the tortured sufferings of a crucifixion victim, a man rejected by the religious establishment as a blasphemer and messianic pretender, and by the political establishment as a radical upstart, and treated accordingly.

It is hard for us to appreciate today the feelings of sheer disgust and revulsion that crucifixion engendered in the ancient world. It was a penalty reserved for the dregs of society, and a source of such unparalleled shame and pain that it was never mentioned in polite company. Criminals, rebels and insubordinate slaves ended up on crosses, with the severity of their punishment expressing the loathing which those in elite circles felt about such acts of defiance. Such was the symbolic power of crucifixion that some Jews even concluded that those who died in this way had been finally repudiated by God, as well as by the state (cf. Gal. 3.13).

In view of this, Paul's claim that, in the person of Jesus, God had submitted himself willingly to death on a cross in order to liberate the world from the grip of evil constituted an absurdity *precisely because* it represented a total inversion of existing standards of greatness and power. In becoming the epitome of human weakness, in the last gasps of a torture victim finally expiring under duress, God has actually shown himself to be most strong. The power of God is not finally the power of coercion, but the power of forgiving love, a love that endured the agonies of crucifixion without retaliation. Consequently all value systems that invest greatness in the power of coercion, be it physical or intellectual or moral or socio-economic coercion, are cut off at the knees by the story of the cross. They are deprived of the divine approval, or the allegedly self-evident validity, which they claim for themselves. For, as Paul observes:

Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God (1 Cor. 1:26-29a).

Christian faith asserts that God is never more truly God than he is in the dying of Jesus. In the cross, as the gospel writers put it, the veil of the temple is torn in two and God stands revealed. When we are able to recognize and embrace this fact, Paul suggests that we are, at the same time, given a fundamental principle of spiritual discernment (1 Cor. 2:6-16): viz., God is always to be found at the extremities of human pain and need. God is to be found where human strength gives out; God is to be found among the nobodies of society; God's presence is to be discerned where no self-respecting God would want to be found dead.

Now to see in God's *modus operandi* in the cross of Christ a principle for discerning God's ongoing involvement in human affairs today has radical social and political implications. Christians must be committed to the realization of peace and justice, as an inescapable outworking of their faith, precisely because the story of the cross declares that God is most fully known in solidarity with the suffering, the poor, the oppressed and the despised. The word of the cross is not just a message to preach: it demands a social application, an application that inverts the values and priorities of the New Right, that confronts the power centres of human society with a new definition of what strength and greatness and wisdom

and wealth are really all about, and that calls for a new form of human community. It is also something that calls for a new attitude to creation – which leads to our third justice-theme in Paul’s theology.

### **Care for Creation: Paul’s Theology of Cosmic Redemption**

In my experience, one of the commonest reasons why Christians, especially conservative Christians, are so uninterested in issues of social or ecological justice is the strange belief that God intends ultimately to destroy the planet in judgement. The work of the cross saves souls, but human social structures and the material environment in general are destined for *replacement*, not for redemption. Paul’s is the gospel of individual salvation but environmental destruction. Nothing could be more untrue to Paul than this idea. For right at the centre of his letter to the Romans, Paul asserts the redemption of the entire created order.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that 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. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Rom. 8:18-25).

The Bible has a paradoxical view of creation. On the one hand, creation sings the glories of God; it reveals the grandeur of its creator. But, on the other hand, all is not well in the garden. Creation has fallen into disorder; it is less than God intends it to be. In Romans 8, Paul pictures the disorder of creation as a combination of three things: frustration, corruption and pain (vv 20-21). It is not just humankind, but creation at large that is in bondage to the effects of sin. Suffering, sickness, death, violence and destruction afflict the whole created order. But, without minimizing its reality or its intensity, Paul is able to view this affliction in positive terms. The sufferings of creation, he says, are like a woman’s labour pains, intense but temporary, heralding the dawn of a new creation. This is why the whole passage is shot through with a sense of hope and promise, a joyous confidence in the future. ‘For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us’ (Rom. 8:18).

What is this hope for the future, this ‘glory about to be revealed to us’? Nothing less than the restoration of the entire created order to a condition freed from frustration, death, suffering and decay: ‘Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains [for this to happen] until now’ (Rom. 8: 2 1-22). Paul does not speak of the destruction of created order and its replacement with something new. Rather he speaks of its *liberation* from present slavery to become what God always intended it to be. God does not intend to trash the earth! It has a glorious future. Material creation will share with humanity in the redemption Christ has wrought. And the certainty of this inspires Paul with great hope. He can view present pain positively because knows for certain that change is coming, freedom is assured.



But how does he know? How can Paul be so certain? For Paul, it is not just wishful thinking. It is based on the concrete experience of what, in Romans 8:23, he calls ‘the first fruits’ of ultimate redemption. Interestingly, in his writings Paul uses the notion of ‘the first-fruits’ of redemption in connection with three things (all of which are implicit in Romans 8).

The first is the resurrection of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul describes Jesus’ bodily resurrection as ‘the first fruits of those who have died’, the first installment of the general resurrection (1 Cor 15:20,23). We know that God plans to restore the *material* creation because God raised Jesus’ *material body* from the dead (hence the empty tomb). People often misunderstand the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection. It is significant not simply because it proves there is life after bodily death but because it inaugurates a new form of bodily life free from subjection to death and decay ‘We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him’ (Rom 6:9). The bodily (or material) nature of Christ’s resurrection serves as the first fruits and guarantee of the ultimate redemption of the bodily (or material) order as a whole. That is why in Romans 8:23 Paul says we can await with confidence ‘the redemption of our bodies’. What happened to Christ will also happen to us.

The second kind of ‘first fruits’ is the gift of Spirit (Rom. 8:23). For Paul, the Christian age is, above all else, the age of the Holy Spirit. The eschatological gift of the Spirit achieves liberation from the power of sin and the rule of the law, and brings about an inner moral and spiritual renewal, a profound sense of God’s love, and a new immediacy of communication with God.<sup>8</sup> But all this represents only ‘the first fruits’ of what is to come. The ‘glorious liberty’ that God’s children now experience in their inner lives and relationships will eventually spill over to the glorification of their material bodies: ‘If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you’ (Rom. 8:11).

The third application of ‘first fruits’ in Paul’s writings is to the community of faith. In 2 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul describes the church as the ‘first fruits for salvation’ (cf. Rom. 11:16). The church, the body of Christ, is the first installment of redeemed humanity a *new* kind of human community in which the injustices based on class, gender and race are to be transcended (Gal. 3:28). The same thought is present in Romans 8: ‘creation itself will be set free.. .and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God’ (Rom 8:21). Creation will share in the liberation which God’s children have begun to experience and will eventually know in fullness.

It is these three concrete realities – Christ’s resurrection, the gift of Spirit, and the existence of the church – that give Paul his irrepressible hope and courage in face of the present distress that afflicts God’s world. Present agonies are, to the eye of faith, the labour pains of a new, transformed order. The pain is real, but it is also temporary and transitional. A day of liberation is coming, for all that God has made.

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<sup>8</sup> On Paul’s emphasis on the Spirit, see G.D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, Hendrickson, Peabody MA 1994; see also my essay, ‘“For Me to Live is Christ”: Pauline Spirituality as a Basis for Ministry’, in Douglas A. Campbell (ed), *The Call to Serve: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Ministry*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1996, pp 96-116.

Once again, inherent in this way of looking at the world is a clear mandate for social and environmental justice. Romans 8 calls on believers to recognize their solidarity with suffering creation, and God's solidarity with them and with all that suffers. It is a solidarity of need, a solidarity of hope, and a solidarity of destiny Christians are not saved *out* of the world, but *in* the world, and *with* the world, indeed *for* the world. All creation will share in our glorious destiny of redemption. This calls for a spirituality that explores and celebrates the unique bond that exists between Christian believers and the wider creation. It also calls for a Christian ethics that sees in Christian hope a powerful motivation for social involvement. Paul's account of the redemption of creation is certainly intended to inspire hope in his readers. But it is also intended to incite action, to inspire deeds that are consistent with our future hope for a renewed earth, free from destruction, violence and injustice. Just as faith without works is dead, so hope without action is, simply, hopeless! Hope is more than an attitude of otherworldly optimism. Hope finds feet in deeds of commitment that both anticipate (or point towards) what we hope for, and even, in the grace of God, *contribute* towards its realization. W. S. Towner captures this point well:

We need to think very, very clearly about the future of nature and the role we are to play in that future. If that future is going to be characterized by wholeness, we have to work hard for it now. Like magnets, the peaceable kingdom and the other idealistic visions of a perfected nature pull us toward them.. .because they have moral authority. They enable us to engage in proleptic action now. If peace is the hallmark of the new age (Isa. 11:1-9), then our work in this time of tribulation is to abolish war and to effect reconciliation between people, as well as between people, wolves, and snakes. If abundance of life, taken now to mean both quality of life and bio-diversity, is manifested in the Eden ahead (Ezek. 34:25-31), then we can do nothing better now than to attend to the rain forests (Gen. 2:5,15), cut back on over-consumption, and limit the growth of the human population. We will continue to use nature, of course, but no longer threaten to use it up. If the nature that lies along the banks of the River of Life is spotlessly beautiful (Ezek. 47:1-12; Rev. 22:1-2), then our path to action turns away from waste, pollution, using up the earth's resources, and everything else that makes for ugliness and chaos. The biblical pictures of nature in the future function as incitements toward a style of ethical living in the present that is holistic, interdependent, non-hierarchical, and one that does not reject flesh and matter as corrupt because God does not reject them.<sup>9</sup>

In undertaking such actions, Christians will join forces with other people of good will. Our actions will often be similar. But our understanding of what we are doing, and why we are doing it, will be different. Christians should care for the environment, oppose militarism, and avoid waste as a witness to and a celebration of God's passionate love for all God has made and of God's promise to put right all that has gone wrong on earth. Of course human action, on its own, will not bring about the new creation: that is God's work which God will accomplish in God's own good time. But that fact is not meant to paralyze us, to render us mere spectators of God's work in the world. Our deeds of justice will act as concrete demonstrations of what God is going to do, and, in fact is already doing even now (partly through us).

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<sup>9</sup> W.S. Towner, 'The Future of Nature', *Interpretation* 50 (1996), p 33.

### **Conclusion: Getting the Full Story**

I began by proposing that the current situation in New Zealand (and in postmodern society generally) is one of competing narratives, of clashing world views and differing value systems. In our public life, the faith-narrative of the New Right is currently striving to supplant an understanding of human life and community that, in its origins, owed much to the faith-narrative of the Christian Scriptures. The sources of Christian nurture in our culture are rapidly drying up, and the ideology of market-faith seems to be in the ascendancy. Even among those who still subscribe to the Christian view of life, there is increasingly uncertainty about the social implications, and the inherent truthfulness, of the Christian story

In this critical situation, it is imperative that we Christians learn to read our foundation narratives afresh, to hear in them God's call to join with God in the redemptive mission of divine justice restoring the world to God's original intention. This in turn makes it imperative that we wrestle afresh with Paul's writings. For if the greatest architect of Christian faith is actually silent on, indifferent to, or hostile towards social justice concerns, we of all people are most to be pitied. But if, as Paul asserts, the bodily resurrection of Jesus heralds the beginning and guarantee of the redemption of God's entire creation, then we have, in that fact alone, sufficient basis to work for social transformation and ecological renewal in the name of God's coming kingdom.

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