

Beyond Instrumentalism and Mere Symbolism: Nature as Sacramental

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The aim of this article is to reflect on the possible ways in which theology has contributed to the current ecological crisis and to offer a departure point for a theological shift in the Estonian free church tradition. Drawing insights from Paul S. Fiddes and Paul Tillich, it analyses three approaches towards creation: instrumental, symbolic and sacramental. It will be shown that the instrumental view, developed as a result of Enlightenment thinking, and the symbolic use of creation, asserting the arbitrary split between material and spiritual, represent a deficient theology which denies creation's God-given inherent value and its role in the history of salvation. It proposes that the sacramental view of creation, acknowledging creation as an actual sign of God's grace, would offer a biblical understanding of creation and help to shape people's attitudes toward it.

Keywords

Creation; instrumental; symbolic; sacramental; free church

Introduction

Earlier this year I was asked to write a column for an American Christian online magazine, *EthicsDaily* to mark the 2020 World Water Day. This began my thinking on how water is viewed in the context of my own Estonian free church tradition and how this view is connected to the global issue of the ecological crisis.¹ This article is a further study on the same topic, expanding the discussion from water to the whole of creation. However, it is not a comprehensive theological survey but rather an attempt to suggest a direction for the discussion by reviewing the way creation is seen, interpreted and used in theology. I draw insights from Paul S. Fiddes, a contemporary Baptist theologian, and Paul Tillich, the twentieth-century Protestant theologian. Guided by their insights, I try to unpack some of the problems regarding the relationship between God the Creator, human societies and

¹ Helle Liht, 'Water: An Actual Element of God's Grace and Redemption', in *EthicsDaily* online, 18 March 2020 <https://ethicsdaily.com/water-an-actual-element-of-gods-grace-and-redemption/> [accessed 22 June 2020]. Further in the current article I also use the term 'evangelical', as this issue concerns a wider Protestant community than only the Estonian free church tradition. However, I do recognise that the evangelical community has different streams and therefore may have also different approaches to creation.

non-human creation that have contributed to the ecological crisis, and then to suggest a way forward.

The proposal of this article is for my own tradition to shift the way it views creation away from an instrumental and mere symbolic understanding, to a sacramental one. The instrumental view sees creation through the lens of human need and desire, and with this, creation's primary function becomes the enabling of human life and development. I claim that such a view abandons the biblical understanding of creation which recognises the inherent value of the whole of creation and not only human beings. The symbolic view of creation as developed in the Protestant tradition connects creation to the sacraments/ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper), yet prioritises the spiritual meaning over the material elements. It therefore disconnects creation from redemption and tends to narrow God's activity in the present and the future to the spiritual realm. For these reasons I propose that my own evangelical and free church tradition might adopt a sacramental view, which affirms God's presence in and through creation.

Instrumental View of Creation

In recent years there has been a lot of talk about climate change and the future of our planet. The variety of related topics is vast, starting with personal life-style issues and ending with inter-governmental negotiations on reducing CO₂ emissions and promoting sustainable development goals. On the other hand, there are still climate-change deniers and those who doubt our human responsibility for it. However, their voices are becoming quieter in the face of the growing number of natural disasters, whether these are hurricanes, bushfires or droughts. These events, together with scientific research, leave no doubt about the changing realities and humanity's role in them.² The seriousness of the climate situation and its impact on human life is mobilising various groups in society to act and offer different ways to stop this threatening development.

Discussing the future of our planet, the secular discourse is inclined to focus on economic considerations. Most governments aim to encourage economic growth, while at the same time they seek to guarantee a good living environment for their citizens. One key concept in this discussion is 'natural resources' — resources that are not man-made yet make human life possible on earth. Some of these are non-renewable, while others are renewable. Progressive governments encourage different methods of investment in sustainable and low-carbon economies. These abandon the use of 'non-

² The United Nations (UN) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) provides regular reports with assessments on a scientific basis of climate change. See the collection of the reports at <https://www.ipcc.ch/> [accessed 23 June 2020].

renewable natural resources' and reduce, or in best cases stop, polluting the atmosphere. This is seen as an 'innocent' way to ensure economic growth, and the result is that the vicious cycle of ever-growing production and consumption continues to flow.

It is ironic that on the one hand we are resolved to sort out the problems of global pollution, loss of biodiversity and accumulative climate change; yet on the other hand, the main concern of the majority of governments is economic growth. Economic growth seems to have become the key to defining human well-being. Increasing personal income gives access to (better) education, (better) health services, (more) comfortable living. And even if in recent years the word 'sustainable' precedes the term 'economic growth', it is still about economic considerations and growth.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) attempts to offer a balancing instrument to prioritise human well-being, and therefore adds the dimensions of education, health and coherent community relations to economic considerations. Also, in preparation for the 2020 Human Development Programme, the 'environmental dimension' has been brought in more explicitly because environment is considered 'a key enabler of human development'.³

Although these approaches vary, they adopt the same view that creation's primary function is to ensure an ever-improving human well-being. The key question is what do we need to do for our planet to continue to be habitable for us, our children and grandchildren.

These are important questions to be tackled, yet such a human-centred approach views creation primarily as instrumental for human life and development.⁴ An instrumental view of creation is affirmed by the generally adopted language of 'environment' and 'natural resources'. These technical terms reinforce the understanding that everything on our planet is assessed from the human point of view and is there to serve human purposes. 'Environment' is being constantly shaped to make life more convenient for

³ United Nations Development Programme, *Towards HDR 2020* <http://hdr.undp.org/en/towards-hdr-2020> [accessed 23 June 2020].

⁴ Paul S. Fiddes discusses the fruits of the Enlightenment project and explains how in 'modernity' the world becomes an object 'that is detached from the subject'. He suggests that such a 'self-world relation [...] fails to attend the world in its own right' and 'fosters the tendency of the self to try and control [...] the world around it'. See Paul S. Fiddes, *Seeing the World & Knowing God: Hebrew Wisdom & Christian Doctrine in a Late-Modern Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 30–36. Different scientific approaches since Charles Darwin have established a connection between human beings and non-human creation to the extent that they claim *homo sapiens* to be one of the species among other animals and thereby clearly only one element in the whole ecosystem. Yet in my opinion this does not seem to affect the way human beings generally understand and treat creation — the Enlightenment project has seemingly a deep and lasting impact on humanity's self-understanding.

human beings. And in that process ‘natural resources’ are being utilised, benefitted from, and exploited.

It is true that human beings would not be able to survive without a ‘support system’ — fertile land, clean drinking water, and tolerable weather conditions. All these are essential for human beings to live on the earth. Yet this does not mean that responding to human need is the only reason why non-human creation exists. Non-human creation is instrumental for human life, yet in addition to this, the biblical account views and values it in its own right. I will come back to this later in the article.

To conclude this section, I want to propose that it is precisely because of the bare instrumental view of creation that we today stand in front of the half-open door to climate catastrophe. If creation is understood to exist for human beings only, it is impossible to draw a line between its use and overuse. Economic growth is too often achieved at the expense of loss of natural habitats and biodiversity, yet it is a formally accepted, preferred and fostered concept to achieve human well-being. Creation is seen as the mere means to that end, the ‘natural resources’ and ‘environment’ for human beings. But where do we draw the line between human well-being and human greed? There seems to be nothing to stop this vicious cycle of production and consumption, a *perpetuum mobile* of the continued destruction of the earth. Therefore, I propose that, in order to bring any change into such utterly harmful practices, the way we view creation needs to be completely transformed.

Symbolic Use of Creation

As I already indicated at the end of the introductory section, the Judeo-Christian tradition has great potential to challenge the instrumental view of creation. The biblical account sees creation as something that has received its value from God and that relates to God in different ways. The fundamental understanding that the earth belongs to God guides the everyday life of the Hebrew people as they sow and harvest and herd their cattle. Jürgen Moltmann sees the celebration of Sabbath as a practice that shapes the Hebrew people’s understanding of the earth as God’s creation and their responsibility to care for it — following the Sabbath rules guarantees rest for people as well as for the earth.⁵

Furthermore, there are several scriptural texts which reveal a special connection between God and creation. The whole creation brings glory to God (Psalms 19, 104). Therefore, we can conclude that it is God’s good

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), pp. 113–114.

intention to have a divine relationship with the entire creation. Fiddes asserts that

God relates to all creatures in their own way, and not only humans but the world of nature sings praises: God is with the wild hinds as they calve, releases the wild asses to roam freely, and teaches the hawk and eagle to soar in the sky; the waves roar before God, the heavens pour forth speech, the trees of the field sing and clap their hands as the divine king comes.⁶

The New Testament vision embraces the traditional understanding of God by the Hebrew people which binds together God's acts of creation and redemption. This gave people a reason to thank him and praise him (see, for example, Psalms 8, 19, 24, 95, 104). The New Testament church did not doubt God's intention to redeem both people and the whole created order (Matthew 6:10, Romans 8:18–23). And the early Christians understood themselves as God's agents in his total redemptive work in the world.⁷

So, the potential to challenge the instrumental view of creation is clearly there in the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, for many contemporary evangelical churches, including those in my own tradition, the basic relationship between God the Creator and non-human creation has been overshadowed by the Enlightenment-enforced dualism of body and mind, material and spiritual. Thus, non-human creation has been made a passive object to be subdued by human beings.

It is commonly argued that Protestantism is the father of 'privatised religion' and 'extreme individualisation' which in turn has led to the 'secularisation' of creation.⁸ Although there is an ecological motive present in the original understanding of the Reformers,⁹ Paul Santmire, analysing the subsequent development of Protestant theology, traces the reduction of the importance of the theme of creation. He distinguishes in the Reformers' thinking 'focal' and 'circumferential' elements and demonstrates that the focal elements continued to live and develop in modern Protestant theology while the circumferential elements largely disappeared from the picture. For

⁶ Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), p. 56. Cf. John Weaver, *Earthshaping Earthkeeping: A Doctrine of Creation* (London: Lynx, 1999), pp. 37–38.

⁷ See Nicholas T. Wright, *Creation, Power and Truth* (Hong Kong: Graphicraft Limited, 2013), loc. 133–138 of 1668, eBook.

⁸ See, for example, Dee Carter, 'Unholy Alliances: Religion, Science, and the Environment', *Zygon*, 36, no. 2, (June 2001): 357–372 (p. 360).

⁹ See Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1–5*, Vol. 1 of *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), pp. 3–68; James Wm McClendon Jr, *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) p. 158; H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 128–132; Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 35. I have studied the ecological motive in the Reformers' thinking at greater depth in my unpublished master's thesis 'Restoring Relationships: Towards Ecologically Responsible Baptist Communities in Estonia' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Wales, 2008).

example, for Luther the focal theme was clearly the doctrine of justification, establishing the right relationship between God and an individual human being which culminates in human salvation. This theme was firmly established in the Protestant tradition, yet the ecological motive was left aside and largely disappeared from Protestant theology. As a counterweight, the seventeenth-century scientists developed an independent mechanical view of creation. The resulting split was inevitable. Santmire concludes that as a result of this process, ‘nature [...] was approached as a self-enclosed, machine-like structure without any value or life of its own before God, set apart from both God and humanity’.¹⁰ Creation became an object to be controlled by science and fast-developing technology. This was central to a concept of human progress which would contribute to a better life and was therefore embraced by many.

Yet there is an important part of Christian life and worship that continues to require the involvement of natural elements. These are the sacraments/ordinances. In the Protestant tradition, churches celebrate mainly two sacraments/ordinances — baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Each of them relies on actual physical elements of water, bread and wine.¹¹

Here it is necessary to explain that in the evangelical tradition, including my own free church tradition in Estonia, the word ‘sacrament’ is hardly used. Instead, the word ‘ordinance’ is chosen to indicate that this practice was ‘ordained’ by the Lord himself and this is what he has asked his followers to do. So, the concept of ‘ordinance’ emphasises the human response to the Lord’s command and therefore mainly the human ‘response’ element in the practice. Tillich, examining the history of Protestant tradition, explains that this is a result of the legitimate Protestant resistance to a Roman Catholic sacramental system which was overloaded with ‘magical’ elements and ideas. However, he claims that this was something of an overreaction by Protestants and an important understanding of God’s presence through the natural elements was lost.¹²

This is not true by any means of all contemporary Protestants. However, in the Estonian free church tradition the word ‘ordinance’ tends to underline a theology that understands and articulates baptism as a purely symbolic act. It is understood as an ‘outward sign’ through which an already converted person expresses their faith and promises ‘obedience’ to Christ’s

¹⁰ Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*, pp. 122–124, 133.

¹¹ Due to the limitations of this article, from here onwards I look only at the practice of baptism and its natural context of water as an example to discuss the symbolic view of creation adopted in most evangelical circles, as well as to discuss the sacramental view of creation in the next section. Discussion on bread and wine, the natural elements of the Lord’s Supper, would certainly add depth and complexity to this topic, however they are beyond the scope of this article.

¹² Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. xix, 94.

command.¹³ There are other similar meanings given to the practice of baptism, for example, as a ‘witness’ to God’s saving act or as ‘obedience’ to the example of Jesus. Or, as in my own tradition at the time when I was baptised, it was also seen as a ‘vow’ to keep a clear conscience before God. All these meanings symbolise some aspects of human moral responsibility on one’s Christian journey. Yet water as a natural element has no role in these explanations of baptism.

There is, though, another meaning applied to the practice of baptism which to a certain extent explains the role of water in it. Following the apostle Paul, there is a tradition to proclaim that ‘we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life’ (Romans 6:4). In this image water symbolises the grave connected to Christ’s death and resurrection. It is a powerful symbol in which the believer passes through the water and ‘dies’ and ‘rises’ with Christ. However, yet again, the interpretation of baptism moves quickly to a spiritual symbolism of Christ and his body and gives no value to the water as a natural element.

So why is water used in the practice of baptism?

Symbols are important. They point towards something that is beyond themselves and thereby expand the existing reality. A simple immersion in the water becomes a much deeper act which carries an important religious meaning. Yet focusing predominantly on the symbolic meaning of baptism apart from its natural context is a danger in itself, running the risk that connection with the existing created reality is lost. This, on the other hand, weakens the meaning of the symbol until it becomes a poor shadow of what it could be and how it could inspire Christian discipleship. Tillich argues that disconnecting sacraments from their natural environment exposes them to ‘subjective imagination’ and arbitrary meaning.¹⁴

So, what could the water symbolism in the practice of baptism mean? When we think of water and its connection with baptism, we have to admit to water’s ambiguous nature. The first link that comes to one’s mind is perhaps that water brings life. Dry fields do not grow crops. Thirsty people and animals lose strength and pass away. Fish perish on the shore. A baby in its mother’s womb cannot develop without water. The obvious conclusion is that all life on earth utterly depends on water. But water can also cause

¹³ For in-depth analysis of the theological development of how different baptistic communities within the Evangelical Christian and Baptist Union of Estonia have interpreted the practice of baptism and contributed to the current understanding, see Toivo Pilli, *Evangelical Christians-Baptists of Estonia: The Shaping of Identity 1945–1991* (doctoral thesis, University of Wales, 2007), pp. 142–150.

¹⁴ Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, p. 101. Tillich also claims that Protestants ‘have replaced the great wealth of symbols appearing in the Christian tradition by rational concepts, moral laws, and subjective emotions’. This is noticeable also in the way baptism is explained in the Estonian free church tradition and is worthy of the further study that is beyond the scope of this article.

suffering and pain. How many fishermen have lost their lives in the cold waves? And how many villages have been swept away by extreme floods?

Perhaps it is this ambiguity of water which has made it a symbol for several aspects of spiritual life. Most religions have ceremonies or rites connected to water. Fiddes reflects on the significance of water in the Judeo-Christian tradition and connects it with birth, cleansing, conflict, refreshment and journey.¹⁵ The symbolism of all these water motifs carries implications for the practice of Christian baptism.

A baby's birth through water from the mother's womb first associates water with new birth. Water's naturally purifying effect becomes a symbol of spiritual cleansing. The threatening forces of water evoke the connotations of death and the grave. Yet the revitalising power of water elevates it to a symbol of the renewal of life. And crossing the Red Sea, and later the River Jordan, signify the journey of the people of Israel as they left behind their past in slavery and the desert, and looked forward to the promised land.

Fiddes explains that these primordial images, which are born from the experiences of the people of Israel and now echo in the practice of Christian baptism, are deeply embedded in the natural context. It is exactly from this natural context that they understood God's saving deeds on their behalf, and this formed their faith in God the Redeemer. These events could not have happened without water. In these images creation and redemption are bound together.

Yet Fiddes takes a step further and says that creation *is*¹⁶ a redemptive act of God. He notes that 'creation is redemption in the sense of overcoming the waters of chaos' at the beginning of time, and ultimately in Jesus Christ who became human flesh, a part of created reality.¹⁷ His life, death and bodily resurrection seal the togetherness of creation and redemption.

Yet when we look at the practice of baptism in the Estonian free church tradition and among evangelicals in general, we have to admit that the meaning given to the powerful symbol of baptism revolves around human action. The way baptism is understood leaves aside those aspects of the rich symbolism that express God's presence in this particular act, and God's work in the wider history of salvation. The symbol has become rather shallow and has lost much of its potential to empower people for meaningful discipleship. No doubt that 'witness', 'obedience', and 'vow' are important meanings to preserve, but these reflect more of a person's individual moral

¹⁵ Fiddes, 'Baptism and Creation', in *Reflections on the Water*, ed. by Paul S. Fiddes (Regent's Park College, 1996), pp. 47–67.

¹⁶ The emphasis is mine.

¹⁷ Fiddes, 'Baptism and Creation', p. 59.

obligations, rather than the connectedness to God's people in biblical times and to God's redeeming work in history.

Tillich argues that '[i]f nature loses its power, the sacrament becomes arbitrary and insignificant'.¹⁸ Disconnecting faith from creation adversely affects both faith and creation.

Sacramental View of Creation

In the previous two sections I have argued that both the instrumental and the mere symbolic uses of creation reflect a deficient theology. The instrumental view robs creation of any divine purpose or meaning. And the mere symbolic use of creation, as developed within the evangelical tradition, quickly shifts the focus to a spiritual meaning to which creation points, but undermines its own inherent God-given value.

This deficiency has been clearly pointed out by Tillich in his study of Protestant theology and tradition:

The decrease in sacramental thinking and feeling in the churches of the Reformation and in the American denominations is appalling. Nature has lost its religious meaning and is excluded from participation in the power of salvation; the sacraments have lost their spiritual power and are vanishing in the consciousness of most Protestants; the Christ is interpreted as a religious personality and not as the basic sacramental reality, the "New Being".¹⁹

Tillich wrote this in 1948 when the first edition of his *Protestant Era* was published. Back then the effects of such a deficient theology regarding creation were much less noticeable than now. Today, more than seventy years later, it is commonly agreed that it is the largely Protestant West, putting into practice its ideas of progress and expansion, that has caused most damage to our planet. The theological roots of such a development have been traced and expounded by many theologians, and their studies build a solid ground for further steps to be taken in order to counter such thinking.

It can be debated whether the transformation should be driven by theory or practice. No doubt both are needed. However, I tend to lean towards the primacy of a crucial theological shift. Focusing on practical creation care activities does not seem to be of value if it does not connect with people's faith.²⁰ It is for this reason I propose that a theological shift needs to happen first, on which good practice can be based.

¹⁸ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, p. 112.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xix.

²⁰ I chaired the Baptist World Alliance Commission on Creation Care for five years from 2016–2020, and my observation is that this has been one of the least attended Commissions. There may be several reasons for this, however, I believe that lack of interest in this topic is the dominant one. It is partly for this reason I wrote a column in *EthicsDaily* in which I advocate making the theme of creation care a regular part of

As said at the outset, the main proposal of this article is that adopting a sacramental view of creation would help evangelical theology establish a healthier relationship between human societies and the non-human creation. So, what does it mean to say that creation is sacramental? And how would it impact the relationship between humanity and non-human creation? Within the scope of this article I draw attention to three aspects which I hope may help shape an evangelical view of creation.

Inherent value of creation

I propose there are at least three themes that emerge from the biblical account and contribute to a sacramental view of creation. Firstly, the biblical account sketches a picture of creation which has an inherent value — value that is given by God and determined by its relationship to God.²¹ Because of these features, creation has power to participate in God's sustaining and redeeming acts for the whole world. Through creation God is present in the world, and God's grace becomes visible and tangible for human beings.

In the previous section, I gave some examples of how the biblical account asserts creation's inherent value. Looking at the example of water, its inherent properties are the power to cleanse, refresh, re-vitalise. It is because of these properties that water actually participates in God's sustaining and redeeming work in the world. And it is because of these properties that water has become an essential element for the practice of baptism. Tillich argues that '[a] special character or quality, a power of its own, is attributed to water. By virtue of this natural power, water is suited to become the bearer of a sacral power and thus also to become a sacral element.'²² Fiddes makes a similar point when he says that

the water in baptism is not merely a visual aid to help us understand various spiritual concepts: in its sheer materiality or 'stuffness' it actually communicates the presence of the transcendent God. A created thing provides places and opportunities for a transforming encounter.²³

Now the question is whether God's presence can be experienced and acknowledged only through the baptismal water that connects the person being baptised with the body of Christ and the people of God. Or can any other experience that contains water as a cleansing, refreshing or revitalising matter become a transforming encounter with a transcendent God? Can a

church worship services. See Helle Liht, 'Why Our Worship Must Focus More on Creation Care', *EthicsDaily* online, 19 April 2018 <https://ethicsdaily.com/why-our-worship-must-focus-more-on-creation-care-cms-24810/> [accessed 22 June 2020].

²¹ Andrew J. Spencer, 'What Kind of Value Does Creation Have', *Ethics and Culture* <http://www.ethicsandculture.com/blog/2020/what-kind-of-value-does-creation-have> [accessed 4 September 2020].

²² Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, p. 96.

²³ Fiddes, 'Baptism and Creation', p. 58.

glass of water extended to a thirsty person become a gift from God and signify God's grace?

When we look at the story of Israel's desert journey, it depicts the situation of people in need in the desert of Sinai. God's people became thirsty in the dry wilderness heat, and they quarrelled with Moses. God responded to the cry of Moses by providing them with water from the rock. God's presence became evident through water and provided people with physical relief. In this story there is an element of helplessness and vulnerability and an openness for God to act. This expression of mutual relationship, of Moses on behalf of the people turning to God in faith and God responding to his request with grace,²⁴ is something that can be recognised as the gift of creation becoming a meeting point with the transcendent God. Yet the power of water to refresh, revitalise and quench the thirst is the same now as it was in the time of Israel's desert journey. Therefore, it can continue to offer an opportunity for a transforming experience where faith and grace come together.

While these two occasions — the baptismal ceremony and water given to the thirsty — may be seen to carry different weights in salvation history, both should be recognised as a sign of God's grace and faithfulness in a sacramental way.

Integrity of creation

I have used water as a starting point to discuss the sacramental nature of creation. Water as a means of baptism brings together its different qualities which have signified God's presence to his people throughout the history of salvation. Yet water is only one 'member' in the 'community of creation', which is itself characterised by interdependence and mutuality of relationships.²⁵ Therefore I now move on to the second aspect which provides a reason to view the whole of creation as sacramental — the integrity of creation.

The English word 'integrity' has a variety of connotations depending whether the source of the translation is Latin or Hebrew. The prime meaning of Latin *integer* is 'whole', 'complete', while the Hebrew *tom/tummah* has an additional connotation of 'innocence', 'blameless'. These meanings help

²⁴ Christopher Ellis discusses the interaction of faith and grace in the context of baptism and says that 'if faith becomes a key pivot of divine activity, that very faith looks to God's graciousness and offers not an anthropocentric but theocentric understanding of what happens in baptism'. See Christopher Ellis, 'Baptism and the Sacramental Freedom of God', in *Reflections on the Water*, ed. by Paul S. Fiddes (Regent's Park College, 1996): 23–45 (p. 30).

²⁵ The term 'community of creation' is introduced by Jürgen Moltmann. With this term Moltmann forms an understanding of a community which consist of human and non-human members and where the mutuality of relationships ought to be recognised. See Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 3.

us to unpack two important questions for the understanding of creation: first the nature of creation and secondly the wholeness of creation.

As early as 1988, Christopher B. Kaiser wrote an article in response to a call made by the World Council of Churches inviting churches to work for the integrity of creation. His understanding was, as he points out, that the background of such a high-level call was a belief that maintaining the integrity of creation is a human responsibility. He therefore conducted a study of how creation is discerned in the biblical tradition and claims that ‘the biblical notion of the integrity of creation is based on the social nature of God, and not on human stewardship’. His argument is that the biblical concept of integrity (in Hebrew *tom/tummah*) carries the meaning of righteous or innocent and is used to describe human beings. The integrity of creation was not questioned in biblical and early Christian thought. Instead, creation was seen as an example to humans of obedience and lawfulness (e.g. Jeremiah 5:22–23; 8:7).²⁶

However, Kaiser also points out that any theological construct which connects *human responsibility* to the integrity of creation tends to view creation as ‘fallen’.²⁷ The complication of such a view is that it diminishes creation’s worth and from there it is only a short step to declare the demise of the entire created order. It denies the goodness of creation and its power to act as a sign of God’s grace.

In the Estonian free church tradition, for instance, such a limiting view of creation has been dominant for quite some time. Although God’s creation is more and more experienced as something good and beautiful, a contradictory understanding of a fallen world is strongly rooted and prevails. According to this view, the Fall of humankind has touched everything and everybody in the world. The earth has changed compared to the time when God claimed that everything he had created was good. It shifted God’s rule on the earth into Satan’s hands, and since that time he is the prince of the world. And because the entire world is affected by the Fall and human sin, the ‘true’ Christian community finds its identity in an otherworldliness and will eventually be rescued from this perishing world.²⁸ While this understanding is still noticeably present in the Estonian free church tradition, there is also some openness to examine and revise this view and to learn from

²⁶ Christopher B. Kaiser, ‘The Integrity of Creation and the Social Nature of God’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 49, issue 3 (August 1996): 261–290 (pp. 265–268).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

²⁸ In the Estonian context, such an understanding arose alongside the nineteenth century’s revival movement and the establishment of the first Baptist churches. They separated themselves from ‘the world’ as well as from the Lutheran church which, according to their understanding, practised only the formalities of a Christian faith. I have studied this aspect of Estonian free church theology in depth in my thesis, ‘Restoring Relationships: Towards Ecologically Responsible Baptist Communities in Estonia’ (unpublished master’s thesis, University of Wales, 2008).

other Christian traditions which do not carry such strong imprints of Enlightenment thinking. The Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches of Estonia is a member of the Estonian Council of Churches, which in June 2020 adopted a resolution ‘We Love Creation’. It affirms the goodness of creation, calls for repentance from destructive human habits and invites further reflection, study, and sustainable practices in all areas of church life.²⁹ This resolution establishes an initial theological framework that moves away from the understanding that creation is fallen and therefore is to perish, and instead recognises creation’s God-given worth and power to signify God’s grace.

Secondly, I want to touch on the issue of the wholeness of creation. I believe it is important to keep the perspective of creation’s wholeness in theological discussion to avoid fragmentation or prioritisation of some elements or aspects of creation. Water, bread and wine are used for the practices of baptism and the Lords’ Supper, and therefore there is a greater potential in the Protestant tradition for these elements to be recognised as sacramental. I have used water to make some theological affirmations yet it ought to be acknowledged that water’s qualities can be experienced as purifying, refreshing and renewing only in the context of the whole complexity of creation. Contemporary science has established an understanding of an interconnected creation, or ‘ecosystem’, where the existence and well-being of one part of the system is closely linked to its other parts. Interdependence, mutuality, and diversity are the keywords of this concept.

Natural sciences have established the concept of a holistic ecosystem within the last hundred years, yet in theological thinking it has been present much longer. In the scope of this article I can only make a short reference to Saint Francis (12th–13th century). As is well-known, Francis systematically and poetically uncovered the beauty of the wholeness of creation. His ‘Canticle of the Creatures’ sketches a rich image of a family — brothers sun, wind and fire, sisters moon, stars and water, mother earth and even sister bodily death — all of them together, including human beings, forming the mystery of life created by the Most High, all-powerful, good Lord who is worthy of praise, glory and honour.³⁰ While such a sentiment can be easily considered as ‘naive romanticism’, Pope Francis makes a helpful connection between this old canticle and contemporary attitudes toward creation. He affirms that the way we view creation affects the way we behave towards

²⁹ See Estonian Council of Churches, ‘We Love Creation’ <http://www.ekn.ee/inc.teema.php?id=467> [accessed 28 June 2020].

³⁰ Iliia Delio, Keith Douglass Warner, Pamela Wood, *Care for Creation: a Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth* (Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2008), pp. 5–6.

it.³¹ Therefore the image of ‘family’ encourages attention and care and would help to avoid exploitation and misuse.

Fiddes uses the same poetic image when he discusses God’s covenant with the whole of creation and says that ‘[t]he world is not a complicated machine but a complicated family’, and the task of Christian theology is to try to articulate its mutuality and interdependence in a move away from dominion.³² I therefore propose that the integrity of creation, researched and affirmed by contemporary natural sciences, opens up the way to understand the whole of creation sacramentally.

The element of mystery in creation

A sacramental view of creation also preserves its sense of mystery. Reading topical reports about the physical sciences, I am full of awe and admiration for what scientists have been able to achieve during the last decade — discovery of the Higgs-Boson particle, identification of the Crispr-Cas9 gene-editing system, detection of gravitational waves, discovery of new exoplanets using the Kepler Space Telescope and much more. In the light of all these incredible achievements, it sounds almost contradictory when Sara Gottlieb-Cohen, a cognitive scientist, admits that ‘science means not knowing’.³³ It is a humble affirmation of the magnificence and wonder of the created universe that human beings can observe, study and be part of, yet not pretend to be its owners. Today humanity knows so much more than a hundred or a thousand years ago, yet this knowing has also increased the amount of unknowing. There seems to be no end to the questions which arise from questions that have already been answered. And despite all discoveries, there still remains a large space for mystery — things we do not know and cannot explain yet which are revealed to our senses — in how we understand the universe (or perhaps a multiverse) today.

Recognising the mystery of creation awakens respect, awe, and admiration. In Christian theology these human responses to what is sensed and experienced belong to God and shift the focus from creation to the Creator, the source of all life. Several Old Testament Psalms express something of such experience of the Hebrew people and their response of awe and praise (e.g. Psalms 8, 19, 24, 95, 104). Here it is important to notice that the connection between creation and the Creator as voiced in the Psalms is a living and ongoing relationship through which God speaks and makes

³¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care For Our Common Home* (Vatican: Vatican Press, 2015), pp. 10–11 http://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si_en.pdf [accessed 4 September 2020].

³² Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 56.

³³ Sara Gottlieb-Cohen, ‘Science Means Not Knowing’, *Scientific American*, 19 July 2019 <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/science-means-not-knowing/> [accessed 27 June 2020].

his presence in the world known to his people. A beautiful example of a theocentric view of creation is Psalm 104:1–4:

Bless the Lord, O my soul.
O Lord my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honour and majesty,
wrapped in light as with a garment.
You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
you make the clouds your chariot,
you ride on the wings of the wind,
you make the winds your messengers,
fire and flame your ministers.

Recognising the mystery of creation presents a challenge for contemporary Estonian free church theology and, I believe, also for wider evangelical theology. We need to shake off the layers of ‘Enlightenment arrogance’ of knowing, and embrace the mystery which even many secular scientists cannot deny.³⁴ God is present in creation through things which we cannot explain as well as through the things we can. This is the sacramental nature of creation which invites human beings to accept a humbler place in the community of creation.

Conclusion

This article grapples with what is probably the greatest challenge facing our contemporary world. Against the background of recent climate change, theology faces crucial questions of how to interpret the relations between God and creation. While recognising the importance of non-human creation as a context for human life and well-being, and the need for sustainable development, this paper argues that creation, from a biblical perspective, has an inherent value; it is not only an instrument serving economic growth or other human needs. The Judeo-Christian tradition challenges the instrumental view of creation, though the Enlightenment dualism of spiritual and material has tended to make creation a passive object to be controlled by science and technology. Even if not true universally, the sacramental link between created elements and spiritual reality has been weakened or lost in a number of Protestant traditions, including in the story of the Estonian free churches, from where this paper derives some examples. As a result, water in baptism and the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper are reduced to mere symbols, losing the view that God’s presence could be understood through

³⁴ I have borrowed the expression ‘Enlightenment arrogance’ from Paul S. Fiddes who is using it to discuss the self-portrait of a human being developed in the Enlightenment. See Paul S. Fiddes, *Seeing the World & Knowing God*, p. 261.

physical elements. Spiritual takes precedence over material. It is the third approach, the sacramental, that the article prefers over the instrumental and symbolic understanding of creation. Creation has an inherent God-given value; it can be interpreted as a redemptive act, overcoming chaos, and through physical nature God is present in the world. In addition, the notion of the integrity of creation, poetically-theologically expressed as belonging to the same family of God, or scientifically using the terminology of an ecosystem, opens new ways of understanding the whole creation sacramentally. This sacramental view of nature has the potential for a sense of mystery, an experience which physical sciences seem to confirm rather than eliminate, and which theologically calls human beings to overcome an arrogant way of life and to live in a humble community with creation and the Creator. The theological shift towards a sacramental interpretation of the physical world, proposed in this article, is necessary to better inform our action as committed people of faith in truly caring for the whole of God's creation.

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