

The Lion, the Curse, and the Evangelical

By Dean Ohlman

We find in the term “evangelical” the implied priority of everyone who claims the name. It defines one who believes, shares, and lives by the *evangel*, the Greek word for “good news.” This good news, of course, is that the chosen one of God—the Messiah—came to restore the Kingdom of God and through the Holy Spirit is preparing us to be Kingdom people.



C. S. Lewis wrote of this allegorically in his Narnia chronicles: “Aslan is on the move!” The loving intent of the not-tame lion, Aslan, (“the good lion by whose blood all Narnia was saved.” *The Last Battle* ch.3), was to defeat the dormancy and death of perpetual winter and bring back the verdancy and life of perpetual spring. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* the noble lion willingly gave up his life, like a sacrificial lamb, in order to do two things: remove the curse on the natural order and reestablish people as rulers and stewards of the kingdom of Narnia (“Narnia was never right except when a Son of Adam was King.” *Prince Caspian*, ch.5). Aslan then arose from the dead in order to accomplish this—using all of creation to assist him in defeating the evil witch who had held the land in her icy grip. This same picture is used in a more sophisticated manner by Lewis in his novel *That Hideous Strength*.

One could imagine the Narnian creatures singing the lines from Isaac Watt’s beloved Christmas hymn, “Joy to the World”:

No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest [*nor ice afflict*] the ground; He comes to make His blessings flow [as] far as the curse is found.

Mr. and Mrs. Beaver might have read from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians:

The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own. . . . The whole of created life will be rescued from the tyranny of change and decay, and have its share in that magnificent liberty which can only belong to the children of God!” (Romans 8:19-21, Phillips).

Tumnus, the faun, might then have led the creatures in the song the apostle John witnessed in a revelation from Jesus Christ: all of God’s creatures singing in praise at the consummation of history. They were celebrating the return of the Lamb (as Aslan was characterized in the end of *Dawn Treader*) who was slain, Jesus, now raised again as the Lion of Judah:

Blessing and honor and glory and power be given to him who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb, for timeless ages! (Revelation 5:13, Phillips).

The actuality alluded to in Lewis’ allegory is affirmed not only by the Scriptures, but also asserted by a number of the great saints of the Christian faith. Let your imagination roam again. Think of John Wesley preaching his sermon “The General Deliverance” while standing on a hillside and proclaiming to

the creatures what he told the people of his congregation about nature's rebirth at the consummation of the age:



In that day, all the vanity to which [you] are now helplessly subject will be abolished; [you] will suffer no more, either from within or without; the days of [your] groaning are ended. At the same time, there can be no reasonable doubt, but all the horridness of [your] appearance, and all the deformity of [your] aspect, will vanish away, and be exchanged for [your] primeval beauty. And with [your] beauty [your] happiness will return; to which there can then be no obstruction. As there will be nothing within, so there will be nothing without, to give [you] any uneasiness: No heat or cold, no storm or tempest, but one perennial spring. In the new earth, as well as in the new heavens, there will be nothing to give pain, but everything that the wisdom and goodness of God can create to give happiness. As a recompense for what [you] once suffered, while under the "bondage of corruption," when God has "renewed the face of the earth," and [your] corruptible body has put on incorruption, [you] shall enjoy happiness suited to [your] state, without alloy, without interruption, and without end.

How great is the grace of God that promises everlasting blessing not only for His people but also for His other living creation. I wonder, though, how often we think of that grace in reference to the non-human world—a world that biblical writers seemed to honor far more than we do. The sweet sound of salvation's grace that amazes us will one day draw from "all creatures here below" the same doxology we have sung for centuries: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow!" Do we truly understand, as the Bible and many of our Christian hymns imply, that all created things in their own nature respond to their Creator?

Other distant voices proclaimed what seems strange to our ears today. American Quaker minister John Woolman remarked.

He whose tender mercies are over all his works hath placed a principle in the human mind, which incites to exercise goodness towards every living creature; and this being singly attended to, people become tender-hearted and sympathizing; but when frequently and totally rejected, the mind becomes shut up in a contrary disposition.

Mentor to C. S. Lewis, George MacDonald, did not find it outrageous to think that even individual animal souls could survive death and be reunited with new bodies in the last resurrection:

For what good, for what divine purpose is the Maker of the sparrow present at its death, if He does not care what becomes of it? What is He there for, I repeat, if He have no care that it go well with His bird in its dying, that it be neither comfortless nor lost in the abyss. If His presence be no good to the [dying] sparrow, are you very sure what good it will be to you when your hour comes? [Understand that] it is not by a little only that the heart of the universe is more tender, more loving, more just and fair than yours or mine.

While many of us know that William Wilberforce was England's great emancipator of slaves and a catalyst for emancipation in America, fewer know that he was also one of the founders of the Royal

Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). That great heart broken by slavery was also broken by cruelty to animals.

Contemporary evangelical writer and pastor John Piper in a poem titled “Glorified” let his heart speak in consideration of the dawn of the messianic reign of Christ when all those who died in faith are reunited—and he also with his cherished dog:

And as I knelt beside the brook
To drink eternal life, I took
A glance across the golden grass,
And saw my dog, old Blackie, fast
As she could come. She leaped the stream—

Almost—and what a happy gleam
Was in her eye.
I knelt to drink,
And knew that I was on the brink
Of endless joy.

Are these men of faith insisting that one must believe in the immortality of individual animal souls? No. MacDonald confesses it as mere hope. But he also goes on to base that hope on the character of God:

Multitudes evidently count it safest to hold to a dull scheme of things. . . . Those that hope little cannot grow much. To them the very glory of God must be a small thing, for their hope of it is so small as not to be worth rejoicing in. That He is a faithful creator means nothing to them for far the larger portion of the creatures He has made. Truly their notion of faithfulness is poor enough; how, then, can their faith be strong?

Evangelical Protestants often make of little account the stories about the honored Roman Catholic saint, Francis of Assisi, with his sympathy for and empathy with the animals. Many evangelicals may not realize, however, that the words of one of our most beloved hymns, “All Creatures of Our God and King,” were originally penned by Saint Francis. In this anthem, we sing in our churches of sun, moon, clouds, wind, flowers, fruit, joining with us in praise of the triune God. Further, it is this hymn that introduced to Christendom the much-maligned expression “mother Earth.” By that phrase Francis did not imply that the earth has a personal spirit—as those with a pantheistic bent sometimes do—but that our earth is the nurturing source of all life. For that reason he concluded, “Let all things their Creator bless, and worship Him in humbleness.”

The truth implied in that song and made clear in many biblical prophecies about the restoration of nature to a state at least as grand as the Garden of Eden is one that has been lacking in our churches and our Christian educational institutions. We understand that the Kingdom of God is, in part, with us now, but will one day be fully realized—at the return of Jesus Christ. We believe that the process of sanctification—becoming more like Christ—is taking place in us now. We stand as witnesses before the fallen world that the *evangel*, the good news, is true and that some consequences of the fall can begin to be reversed now. Francis Schaeffer



believed that because of the redemptive act of Jesus on the cross and the work of sanctification we should be working toward a “substantial healing” of all the rifts created by the fall of man:

My division from God is healed by justification, but then there must be the “existential reality” of this, moment by moment; second, there is the psychological division of man from himself; third, there are the sociological divisions of man from other men; and last, there is the division of man from nature, and nature from nature. In all of these areas we should expect to see substantial healing. . . . On the basis of the fact that there is going to be total redemption in the future, not only of man but of all creation, the Christian who believes the Bible should be the man who—with God’s help and in the power of the Holy Spirit—is treating nature now in the direction of the way nature will be then. It will not now be perfect, but it must be substantial, or we have missed our calling.

Perhaps none have missed this high calling as profoundly as we evangelicals who say we desire to live by the “whole counsel of God.” Not grasping that the gospel we preach is also good news for the other living creatures that share the earth with us, we have neglected and even abused God’s good creation. We have forgotten that the *evangel* is not only to be preached, but also to be lived out faithfully under the gaze of the watching world. Witnessing for Christ does not only mean sharing God’s salvation plan for man; it also means we demonstrate renewed appreciation and care for the natural world that God will also restore, renew, and reunite. Simply put, nature is also going to be “born again.” Do we hold that joyous truth in our hearts as a motivation to cherish creation’s fellow worshipers who are also recipients of God’s attention and compassion? If we saw the other living creatures as fellow worshipers of Christ the Creator, would our callousness toward them not diminish?

Schaeffer asked us a significant question over 35 years ago that most of us older evangelicals never bothered to answer:

Christians, who should understand the creation principle, have a reason for respecting nature, and when they do, it results in benefits to man. Let us be clear: it is not just a pragmatic attitude; there is a basis for it. We treat it with respect because God made it. When an orthodox, evangelical Christian mistreats or is insensible to nature, *at that point* he is more wrong than the hippie who has no real basis for his feeling for nature and yet senses that man and nature should have a relationship beyond that of spoiler and spoiled. You may, or may not, want to walk barefoot to feel close to nature, but *as a Christian* what relationship have you thought of and practiced toward nature as your fellow creature, over the last ten years?

Because our theology of nature is slim and anemic, I feel that we evangelicals have missed the boat on this matter. By our carelessness toward the natural world, we have been negative witnesses for our Savior and Creator. We have also failed to see that many unbelievers will refuse to listen to the good news we seek to share with them because they see that we have neglected to be evangelical in reference to God’s creation—to be “complete evangelicals.”

I used to backpedal when fellow evangelicals responded to my urging, “Yes, we do have a responsibility to care for creation, but that has to be the lowest of our priorities.” I would agree far too easily. But I’m not going to do that anymore. The reason is that the majority of those who use that argument typically demonstrate that God-honoring care for the creation does not appear *anywhere* on their priority list. Yes, the endangered souls of men are our major spiritual concern, but we have no justification for prioritizing our evangelical responsibilities in such a way that some tasks are never attended to.

The reason I feel so strongly about it is that regardless of where it appears on our priority list, when any responsibility to God is neglected for a long period of time, the consequences of that neglect become greater and their remediation more demanding and difficult. By our disregard for creation, the responsibility of creation stewardship is rapidly climbing toward the top of our “to do list,” because our long neglect of the non-human creation is now beginning to seriously impact the human community we say we love. Water and air pollution, desertification, loss of fresh water, fisheries depletion, deforestation, and other degradations of God’s good creation are killing or threatening the life and health of millions every year. The health of people depends upon the health of the earth. That’s why we followers of Jesus must be *completely*—not *selectively*—pro-life.



Perhaps it’s time now for evangelicals to speak for the dumb—the voiceless creation that is looking forward to the consummation of all things when it will by the redeeming power of Jesus’ death and resurrection be relieved of the frustration of the curse and of thoughtless human exploitation. It is both wondrous and humbling to recognize that our Creator has a loving relationship with both people and with the suffering creation, making us ask the compelling question, “Do we love and care for what the Creator loves and cares for?”

Given, then, that God’s good earth and its creatures will share in the future promises, could it not be the time now for us to think more seriously about our own relationship to that groaning creation? The creation is looking to us and our coming role as perfected and active children of God for hope.

Let the words of Bishop N. T. Wright be the motivation to help us be catalysts of nature’s hope:

When God saves people in this life, by working through his Spirit to bring them to faith and by leading them to follow Jesus in discipleship, prayer, holiness, hope, and love, such people are designed—it isn’t too strong a word—to be a sign and foretaste of what God wants to do for the entire cosmos. What’s more, such people are not just to be a sign and foretaste of that ultimate salvation; they are to be a *part of the means by which* God makes this happen in both the present and the future. That is what Paul insists on when he says that the whole creation is waiting with eager longing not just for its own redemption, its liberation from corruption and decay, but *for God’s children to be revealed*: in other words for the unveiling of those redeemed humans through whose stewardship creation will at last be brought back into that wise order for which it was made. And since Paul makes it quite clear that those who believe in Jesus Christ, who are incorporated into Him through baptism, are already God’s children, are already themselves saved, this stewardship cannot be something to be postponed for the ultimate future. It must begin here and now.

[Italics in the original] [From *Surprised By Hope* by N. T. Wright: HarperOne, 2008, p. 200]