

Cherishing the Trees, as Christ is Lord Over All and the Center of All Things: Martin Luther's Tacit Eco-theological Ethic¹

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Abstract

Evangelical Christians and conservative Protestants are often thought to be less supportive of ecological concerns and the sustainable use of the earth's natural resources. As a result, their actions and inactions toward the environment are interpreted and understood to have contributed to its degradation. This indifference towards God's earthly creation and its present and future condition may stem from the evangelical emphasis on soteriological and eschatological concerns, at the expense of extant earthbound concerns. This paper contends that an apathetic attitude regarding the environment does not reflect the thinking of Martin Luther, the progenitor of the Protestant Reformation and founder of classic evangelicalism. Despite growing up in Germany's most industrialized region, an area that reflected the environmental consequences of copper and silver mining, Luther revelled in God's creation. His writings reflect a *tacit eco-theologic ethic*. Luther admired nature's beauty and intricacy but was profoundly aware of and observed people's ignorance of and indifference toward it, in their greedy consumption of creation's resources. Luther contends that with the fall into sin, humanity had "curved in on itself," distorting its obedience of the command of Genesis 1:28—such that humanity retains dominion as a *bare title*. Understanding that it is Christ who has and exercises true dominion over creation, Luther cherished the natural world all the more. Coupled with Christ's dominion and transcendent lordship, Luther proclaimed divine immanence in his Eucharistic theology, establishing Christ's ubiquitous

1 This article is a revised version of a paper that was presented at the interdisciplinary theology conference, "Evangelical Theology—New Challenges, New Opportunities," co-sponsored by the Canadian-American Theological Association and Northeastern Seminary, held at Northeastern Seminary, Rochester, NY, on October 21, 2017.

presence within all of creation. Luther's thinking and his affirmation of the intrinsic goodness of the created world, can therefore provide an impetus for Christians, who have been called to collaborate with the Creator, to participate with Christ in the care of creation.

Evangelicals and the Environment

This year marks the major anniversary of several publications that have in some way shaped modern thought. Along with the quincentenary of the promulgation of Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* that set in motion the Protestant Reformation, 2017 also marks the notable anniversary of another seminal document. It was 50 years ago that the historian Lynn White famously argued that the earth's environmental crisis stemmed in part from the attitudes and actions of Christians. In an essay published in 1967 in the journal *Science*, White articulates that Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion because Christians held that the sole purpose of creation was to serve humanity.² The anthropocentricity of a Christian understanding of creation coupled with humanity's distortion of the divine injunction in the book of Genesis to have dominion over the earth has contributed to the exploitation and impairment of the natural environment. And while Christianity was but one of the contributing factors in White's argument, it was the one that garnered the greatest attention and has since been repeatedly cited by environmentalists.³ In the past 50 years, since White's publication, have the actions—and inactions—of Christians continued to validate his charge?

Popular sentiment and scholarly papers alike contend that Christians, particularly evangelicals and conservative Protestants,⁴ are less inclined to support causes that safeguard the environment and the planet's future.⁵ It is interpreted

2 Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155.3767 (1967): 1203–1207.

3 Bron Taylor, Gretel Van Wieren, and Bernard Daley Zaleha, "Lynn White Jr. and the Greening-of-Religion Hypothesis," *Conservation Biology* 30.5 (2016): 1000–1009. Taylor et al. reveal that White's article had 924 citations in the Web of Science's core collection and 4,600 citations in Google Scholar's collection.

4 The terms evangelical and conservative are not necessarily synonymous when describing communities within the Christian faith. In addition, there is not a strict definition for either term that is supported by general consensus. There is ambiguity associated with both terms and diversity within their communities. Nevertheless, I am employing the popular understanding of evangelicals which I consider to be theologically and socially conservative Protestants.

5 Taylor et al., "Lynn White Jr. and the Greening-of-Religion Hypothesis," reference numerous studies that conclude evangelical Christians remain less supportive of environmental issues. Many of these studies are also identified in Paul A. Dube and Patrick K. Hunt, "Beyond the Lynn White Thesis: Congregational Effects on Environmental Concern," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48.4 (2009): 670–86, and Darren E. Sherkat and Christopher G. Ellison, in "Structuring the Religion-Environment Connection: Identifying Religious Influences on Environmental Concern and Activism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46.1 (2007): 71–85. However, these works also cite reports that indicate the relationship between religion and environmental

that evangelical Protestants focus on soteriological and eschatological concerns, while disregarding ecological ones, such that they fixate on “heavenly” matters while forsaking earthly ones.⁶ And yet, as one scholar observes, a “focus on the afterlife . . . when taken by itself . . . denigrates the creation left behind.”⁷

This discussion contends that Martin Luther, the seminal figure of the Protestant tradition and classic evangelicalism, did not share such an indifference towards the earth; he certainly was no enemy of the environment. As suggested from numerous others reading Luther, this essay maintains that the reformer’s theology contains a *tacit eco-theological ethic*.

Luther’s teaching on creation is implicit within his writings, interwoven and scattered throughout his sermons, catechisms, and biblical commentaries. These works reflect Luther’s appreciation for the natural world and reflect his understanding of Christ’s dominion over and ubiquitous presence throughout it. Luther viewed the material world as a divine blessing. He did not uphold Platonic philosophy which esteemed the spiritual while denigrating the physical, a philosophy that greatly influenced medieval Christian theology. The reformer rejected Gnostic dualism, and its assessment of the inherent evil and inferiority of this temporal domain.⁸ Rather, Luther reveled in God’s creation and proclaimed the intrinsic

stewardship is more ambiguous or reports which reflect Christianity exhibiting a concern toward the environment. Although organizations, such as the Evangelical Environmental Network, the Evangelical Climate Initiative, and countless church-based grass-roots initiatives, might suggest that Lynn White’s indictment is weakening, there remains among some evangelicals hostility towards the environmental movement. For an articulation of this notion in the popular press see John Collins Rudolph, “An Evangelical Backlash Against Environmentalism,” *The New York Times*, December 30, 2010 and Molly Redden, “Whatever Happened to the Evangelical-Environmental Alliance?,” *The New Republic*, November 3, 2011.

- 6 It is contended that the evangelical’s expectation of the great tribulation to come, Christ’s imminent return, and God’s promised future restoration of all things has contributed to a disregard or at least an indifference towards the earth’s current environmental condition. In *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision of Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), Steven Bouma-Prediger considers some evangelical theological interpretations and how Christianity contributed to the ecologic crisis. A discussion on the possible root of conservative Christianity’s failure to promote and preserve the environment is also presented by Michael S. Northcott in “BP, the Blowout and the Bible Belt: Why Conservative Christianity Does Not Conserve Creation,” *The Expository Times* 122.3 (2010): 117–26. In addition, Calvin B. Dewitt has outlined a number of stumbling-blocks that he contends many evangelicals have created for themselves that inhibit embracing a reverent attitude, and engaging in responsible action, towards the environment. See Dewitt’s “Creation’s Environmental Challenge to Evangelical Christianity” in *The Care of Creation*, ed. R.J. Berry (Leicester, England: IVP, 2000), 60–73.
- 7 David Rhoads, “Reflections on a Lutheran Theology of Creation: Foundations for a New Reformation,” *Seminary Ridge Review* 15.1 (2012): 7.
- 8 Luther’s rejection of Platonic idealism is seen foremost in his clash with those who denied the salvific efficacy of Christ’s physical body and instead confined it to His spirit. God’s incarnation was fundamental to Luther’s theology. As such, he countered the teaching of his opponents with “I do not know any God except Him who was made flesh. Nor do I want any other. And there is no other God who could save us besides the God incarnate. Therefore, we shall not suffer His humanity to be underestimated or neglected.” Luther’s retort is from the Marburg Colloquy of 1529 as quoted in Hermann Sasse, *This is My Body: Luther’s Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing, 1977), 203.

goodness of the sensible world and divine immanence with it. If rightly understood, Luther's theology can contribute to a contemporary dialogue on ecological concerns and perhaps affect evangelicals—for that matter, all Christians—to respond favorably to the environmental movement and celebrate the gift of creation through the sustainable use of its resources.

Luther's World: Mansfeld, Mining, and the Environment

However, before considering Luther's appreciation of nature and his implicit eco-theologic ethic, reflection upon humanity's exploitation and despoiling of the natural environment in Luther's world is necessary. The landscape of 16th century Germany was not pristine. Luther's homeland reflected the effects of many years of mining. And Luther would have observed the destructive consequences from the consumption of natural resources. Indeed, his father, Hans Luther, was a miner and smelting master, operating numerous copper mines and ore smelters around Mansfeld, in the Harz region of Germany.⁹

Luther's writings make scant mention of his early years, but there is no indication that his childhood in the Harz hills was an unhappy one. Still when the time came, young Martin showed no interest of following in his father's footsteps, admitting years later of his rather limited knowledge of mining.¹⁰ Perhaps too, the elder Luther envisioned a future for his son far from the dampness of the mines and the smoke from the smelters. Instead, Martin took up academic studies, and left Mansfeld at age fourteen. Nonetheless, he retained a fondness and concern for the region and its people his entire life.¹¹ Luther's lifelong loyalty to Mansfeld is manifest in his advocacy for the area's miners and smelters in their dispute with the Mansfeld nobility, whom wished to nationalize the mining industry. Although

9 Hans' surname was actually Luder. Martin had adopted the Humanist-tradition of using the Hellenized form of his family name, Eleutherios, which he later shortened to Luther.

10 Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke*. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. *Tischreden*. 2. Band. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1913), 556, as noted in Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther; Volume 1: His Road to Reformation, 1483–1521*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 6. As a result of Luther's ignorance of mining he did not incorporate the subject into his sermons as did his friend, and one of the transcribers of his *Tischreden*, Johann Mathesius. See Warren Dym, "Mineral Fumes and Mining Spirits: Popular Beliefs in the Sarepta of Johann Mathesius (1504–1565)," *Renaissance and Reformation Review* 8.2 (2006): 161–285. Following the time he spent at Luther's table, Mathesius became a pastor in Joachimsthal a significant silver mining region in the Ore Mountains of Bohemia. There Mathesius became friends with George Agricola the town physician who was also the author of the pioneering treatise on mining and metallurgy *De re metallica*. Agricola stimulated Mathesius' studies in mining, so much so that Mathesius the mineralogist (rather than the pastor) was recently honored by the scientific community with having a newly discovered mineral named after him. See Jakub Plášil, František Veselovský, Jan Hloušek, Radek Škoda, Milan Novák, Jiří Sejkora, Jiří Čejka, Pavel Škacha, and Anatoly V. Kasatkin, "Mathesiusite, K₃(UO₂)₄(SO₄)₄(VO₃)(H₂O)₄, A New Uranyl Vanadate-Sulfate from Jáchymov, Czech Republic," *American Mineralogist* 99.4 (2014): 625–32.

11 Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Prophet and Renegade* (London: Bodley Head, 2016), 17 and Brecht, *Martin Luther*; 9.

the reformer may have acknowledged his ignorance regarding the exploration for minerals and the excavation of mines, he was familiar enough with the economics of the industry to understand and believe that nationalization threatened the livelihood of the locals. As one of Europe's leading thinkers, even late in his life, Luther remained cognizant of his mining roots and all the time exhibited an affection for Mansfeld, asserted that he was "ein Mansfeldisch Kind."¹²

The roots of mining ran deep in Mansfeld. By the time Hans Luther plied his trade in the Harz Mountains, for hundreds of years the region had already been a major mining area and a significant source of silver, copper, and lead in Europe. But it was during the elder Luther's career that the area would undergo phenomenal growth, as it rode the mining boom sweeping the continent. The mid to late 15th century experienced an explosion in population across Europe, including Martin Luther's birth in 1483. And with that growth came economic expansion and increased manufacturing, trade, and resource development. The era saw the rise of the modern money-based economy and with it the demand for metals. Silver and copper coins were needed to fund commercial trade and everyday transactions—including the payment of papal indulgences. Copper metal was also needed for the printing press, launching the book publishing industry of the late 1400s. Metal movable type and engraved plates also turned out the certificates of papal indulgence, and consequently the tracts and treatises in response, that spread the Reformation's teachings.¹³ This prodigious demand for metals was met with unprecedented production.¹⁴ New technological developments helped deepen mines, extract more ore, and better refine copper and silver. Yet even with much improved technology, mining was still labor intensive. It is estimated that several thousand laborers worked the mines and stoked the smelters around Luther's hometown in those boom years.¹⁵ During the Reformation, the Mansfeld copper

12 Martin Luther, "Nr. 4157, Luther an die Grafen Philipp und Johann Georg von Mansfeld, Mansfeld, 7. Oktober 1545" in *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Briefwechsel*. 11. Band (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1948), 189.

13 Andrew Pettigrew in *Brand Luther* (New York: Penguin, 2015) presents a detailed description and an informative look at Luther's relationship with the publishing trade and the early printing industry.

14 Almost cotemporaneous with Luther's lifetime (1483–1546), there was a four to five-fold increase in metal production across Central Europe between 1470 and 1540. John U. Nef, "Mining and Metallurgy in Medieval Civilisation," in *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe Volume II: Trade and Industry in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. eds. M.M. Postan and Edward Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 755. Roper notes that by the late 15th century Mansfeld was among the largest producers of silver in Europe and produced a quarter of its copper. Roper, *Martin Luther*, 17.

15 Nef, "Mining and Metallurgy in Medieval Civilisation," 735. Fessner estimates that by 1525 the mining and smelting industry in Mansfeld employed well over 3,000 workers. See Michael Fessner, "Das Montanwesen in der Grafschaft Mansfeld vom ausgehenden 15. bis zur Zweiten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts," in *Montanregion als Sozialregion*, ed. Angelika Westermann (Husum: Matthiesen Verlag, 2012), 301; cited in Roper, *Martin Luther*, 436 n. 41. Roper remarks that around this time Hans Luther probably employed about 200 workers in his seven smelting operations (27 and 436).

mines, the Upper Harz and Rammelsberg silver workings, and the waterworks that powered them, made the Harz Mountains Germany's most industrialized region.¹⁶

And with industrial development came environmental impairment. Mining was energy and water intensive. Large waterwheels powered the machinery that sank the mines, drained the shafts and adits of flooding groundwater, and ventilated them of noxious fumes. This water power also lifted the ore to the surface, crushed the rock with heavy stamps, and washed it of impurities. As a consequence, muddied and sullied streams ran off the mountains. Water was then needed to power the bellows and fan the flames that roasted and smelted the ore in furnaces, which belched forth heavy metal laden smoke polluting the mountain air. Such demand for water saw a network of excavated trenches, rerouted streams, and manufactured ponds begin to spread across the Harz landscape in Luther's time. It was a landscape already littered with shallow pits and slag piles reflecting hundreds of years of mining and smelting in the region. But the most significant devastation to the environment was the harvesting of timber, necessary to produce charcoal that fired the furnaces.¹⁷ The smelters demanded much fuel, and the dense hardwood forests of the Harz provided a tremendous resource to be exploited, causing extensive deforestation.¹⁸ Today the name Harz is a misnomer, for it had once referred to the thick stands of hardwoods. But beginning in the 1700s, after the harvesting of the oak and beech trees, the region was reforested with softwood spruce trees. The hardwoods were gone.¹⁹

This labor force is based on Westermann's estimate that each smelter likely involved 30 workers. See Ekkehard Westermann, "Der Wirtschaftliche Konzentration-prozess im Mansfelder Revier," in *Martin Luther und der Bergbau im Mansfelder Land: Aufsätze*, ed. Rosemarie Knappe (Stiftung Luthergedenkstätten in Sachsen-Anhalt, 2000), 70. Roper also notes that during this period of peak production there were 194 mine shafts around Mansfeld and nearby Eisleben (26).

16 Harzwasserwerke. "UNESCO-Welterbe Oberharzer Wasserwirtschaft, Die Anlagen des Oberharzer Wasserregals" (Marz 2011). http://www.harzwasserwerke.de/fileadmin/user_upload/downloads/files/pdf/Flyer/Flyer_UNESCO-Welterbe-Oberharzer-Wasserwirtschaft.pdf (accessed April 6, 2017).

17 An example of forest exploitation in another German mining district during the medieval and early modern era is provided in Johann Friedrich Tolksdorf, Rengert Elburg, Frank Schröder, Hannes Knapp, Christoph Herbig, Thorsten Westphal, Birgit Schneider, Alexander Fülling, Christiane Hemker, "Forest Exploitation for Charcoal Production and Timber Since the 12th Century in an Intact Medieval Mining Site in the Niederpöbel Valley (Erzgebirge, Eastern Germany)," *Journal of Archeological Science: Reports* 4 (2015): 487–500.

18 Charcoal was not only produced to fuel the furnaces but acted as a chemical agent during the ore smelting process to yield elemental copper. Roper notes that there were 40 smelting masters with operations around Mansfeld in 1508 (24). Like Hans Luther each master was probably overseeing more than one smelter. An information plaque at Luther's birth house in Eisleben indicates that circa 1500 there were 112 smelting furnaces around Mansfeld and that they used about 42,000 tonnes of charcoal annually. This amount of consumption would have required about half a million tonnes of timber. Additional quantities of timber were needed to construct the mines and the new mining towns that sprung up in the Harz region.

19 For a discussion on the removal of the hardwoods in the Harz and their replacement with coniferous trees see R. Schulz and M. Jansen, "Study Areas and Basic Data," 11–18; M. Jansen, W.

Martin Luther need not have ventured far to see the environmental consequences of medieval mining. Historian Lyndal Roper notes that from the Luther family house the environmental impact would have been visible, including the destruction of agricultural lands, and large pond outside the Mansfeld town walls contaminated with effluent from the smelters.²⁰ Consequently the town water was largely undrinkable. This is the world Luther grew up in, and yet *he loved it*.

Luther's Love for Creation and its Beauty

Luther had “a serious case of *biophilia*, a love of creaturely life, [as well as] *cosmophilia*, an utter awe in the presence of life, as described by Lutheran scholar Larry Rasmussen.”²¹ Luther proclaimed that while God richly provides and sustains humanity with all of the necessities of earthly living in the gift of creation, his extolling of creation is not limited to its practical benefits. Luther expounds upon the splendor of creation. While Luther would have witnessed humanity's destructive and exploitative impact upon the environment, his writings routinely reflect on the beauty and intricacies of the natural world.²² Whether it is illustrations from the animal kingdom, forests and meadows, or mountains and streams, Luther describes creation as “the most beautiful book.”²³ He insists that God has provided humanity “such an attractive dwelling place.”²⁴ Naturally Luther can admire the divine handiwork in the beauty of a rose,²⁵—but the reformer even esteemed rodents. He expresses an almost child-like glee when he describes mice as having “a very beautiful form—such pretty feet and such delicate hair . . . [and]

Schmidt, V. Stüber, H. Wachter, C. Naeder, M. Weckesser, and F.J. Knauf, “Modelling of Natural Woodland Communities in the Harz Mountains,” in *Spatial Modelling in Forest Economy and Management: A Case Study*, ed. M. Jansen, M. Judas and J. Saborowski, (Berlin: Springer, 2002), 162–75.

- 20 Roper, *Martin Luther*, 20. Roper further indicates that the 16th century historian Cyriacus Spangenberg in his history of Mansfeld *Mansfeldische Chronica* provides “a detailed description of the environment, noting that many fields around Mansfeld had been destroyed by mining and . . . the vast quantities of wood and coal used in the mines.” 431 n. 2. Spangenberg (1528–1604) was also a theologian and a pastor in Mansfeld and had been a student of Luther.
- 21 Larry Rasmussen, “Waiting for the Lutherans,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37.2 (2010): 93. Bornkamm makes a similar observation and he notes that Luther took great pleasure in studying even the most insignificant created works and from which he revealed an astonishing observation for detail. Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought* trans. Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 185.
- 22 Schwanke reminds us that Luther, as an Old Testament scholar, developed his doctrine of creation from his study of Genesis; a part of Scripture that the reformer had a particular fondness for, and in which he wrote and lectured extensively on. See Johannes Schwanke, “Luther on Creation,” trans. John Betz *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (2002): 1.
- 23 Luther as quoted in Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, 179.
- 24 Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1–5,” in *Luther's Works*, vol. 1, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958) (hereafter LW 1), 39.
- 25 Martin Luther, “Table Talk,” in *Luther's Works*, vol. 54, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert, general ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) (hereafter LW 54), 355.

therefore here, too we admire God's creation and workmanship."²⁶ The 16th century saw the beginnings of the scientific revolution, and the emerging discipline provided Luther an opportunity to more closely study the wondrous workings of God's gift of creation.²⁷ His writings reveal a particular interest in biology. Possessing the curiosity of a scientist, he observes that if one gazed intently on a kernel of grain "you would die of wonder."²⁸ Even so Luther must have had a particular affection for trees, despite his curiosity. Envisioning a new earth, and perhaps lamenting the loss of the forests on the Harz hills, Luther conjectures that the eschatologically restored creation will "be adorned with many trees."²⁹

Luther's Environmental Assessment: Humanity's Ignorance, Indifference, and Greed

While Luther extolled nature's beauty and phenomena, he recognized that humanity's grasp of, and gratitude for, creation had been replaced with ignorance, indifference, and greed in the Fall. Luther contends that humanity's apathy towards the natural world was in part owing to its familiarity, suggesting that "we do not marvel at the wonderful light of the sun, because it is a daily phenomenon. We do not marvel at the countless other gifts of creation . . . it is a great miracle that a small seed is planted and that out of it grows a very tall oak. But because these are daily occurrences, they have become of little importance."³⁰ Employing a more visual invective, Luther likens human indifference and ingratitude to the earth's splendor to "cattle . . . trampling the most beautiful blossoms and lilies underfoot."³¹

Yet for Luther, the Fall did not merely result in ignorance or indifference toward creation; humanity's distorted state also produced a pronounced greed toward God's creational blessings. Regarding the beauty of a cherry tree and the thousands of cherries produced from one seed, he rather graphically preaches, "people do not see or heed [it] but pass it by and do [nothing] but gorge and swill

26 Luther, LW 1, 52.

27 For a discussion on Luther's view of the emerging sciences in relation to his theology see Duane H. Larson, "Martin Luther's Influence on the Rise of the Natural Sciences," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, published online November 2016. <http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-306> (accessed April 6, 2017).

28 Martin Luther, "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ – Against the Fanatics," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 36, ed. Frederick C. Ahrens, general ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959), 344.

29 Luther, LW 54, 41.

30 Luther, LW 1, 126. Likewise, Luther observes people's indifference to a hen laying an egg and the birth of a baby chick because it is commonplace, but "if we had never seen such an egg and one were brought from Shangri-la, we'd all be startled and amazed." Luther, LW 54, 200. Churchill stresses Luther's laments regarding humanity's insensitivity towards natural phenomena and everyday events due to their ubiquity in Steven L. Churchill, "'This Lovely Music of Nature': Grounding an Ecological Ethic in Martin Luther's Creation Mysticism," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 26.3 (1999): 183–84.

31 Luther, LW 54, 327.

all that grows. They are like swine that run across a field or wallow in [the] garden and devour what they find.”³² He further observes that humans “stalk about proudly, act defiantly . . . abusing all the good things and gifts of God only for our own pride, avarice, lust, and luxury.”³³

For Luther, greed was the manifestation of the sin of idolatry.³⁴ Greed may express itself as the despoiling of creation and the exploitation of others, but at its core it is rebellion against the Creator. Thus, the reformer considered greed the most dangerous and corrupting force in Christendom.³⁵ Commenting on the avarice of rich men who plundered the land of tenant farmers in the book of Isaiah, Luther voiced that though the world may not rebuke such immoral acts, “God . . . does not want the poor to be thrown off their property, but that they be helped.”³⁶

During the Peasants War of 1525 Luther may have sided with the German nobility when the rebellious peasants resorted to violence, but he put the blame for the revolt squarely on the shoulders of the princes who had exploited the poor.³⁷ In a tract entitled *Trade and Usury* Luther had earlier expressed his disgust against the exploitative practices of the profit economy. In particular, he highlighted the financial houses and trading companies whose manipulative and fraudulent practices oppressed the common people and small businesses.³⁸ And yet, Luther understood such abuse was not confined to the nobility, monopolists, or merchant bankers. He recognized that the emerging market economy presented opportunities for the lower classes to also engage in corrupt and exploitative business practices. According to Luther, thievery in its many forms was “the most common craft and largest guild on earth.”³⁹

Observing humanity’s insatiable hunger for all things and its disregard for the

32 Martin Luther, “Selected Pauline Epistles I,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 28, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, general ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973) (hereafter LW 28), 179.

33 Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” in *Concordia Triglotta: The Symbolic Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English*, ed. and trans. F. Bente and W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia, 1922), 193.

34 Ricardo Willy Reith, “Luther on Greed,” in *Harvesting Martin Luther’s Reflections on Theology, Ethics and the Church*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 163.

35 Martin Luther, “The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 167.

36 Martin Luther, “Lectures on Isaiah, Chapters 1–39,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 16, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1969), 61. The comment refers to Isa 5:8: Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land.

37 Martin Luther, “Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants of Swabia, 1525,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 46, ed. Helmut T. Lehman and Robert C. Schulz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 17–43.

38 Martin Luther, “Trade and Usury,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45, ed. Walther Brandt, general ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962), 244–308. For a discussion on Luther’s understanding of usury and the emerging market economy see Carter Lindberg, “‘Christianization’ and Luther on the Early Profit Economy” in *The Reformation as Christianization: Essays on Scott Hendrix’s Christianization Thesis*, eds. Anna Marie Johnson and John A. Maxfield (Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 49–78.

39 Luther’s commentary on the Seventh Commandment in *The Large Catechism* in *The Book of*

well-being of others, Luther often used the phrase *incurvatus in se*, for humanity had curved in on itself and sought only self-gratification. With the Fall, greed and self-centredness had entered the human heart, distorting humanity's obedience to God's mandate in Genesis to subdue the earth and have dominion over it. Because of this distortion, for many today the word *dominion* in the Genesis context is pejorative. Luther felt the same way, acknowledging that "we retain the name and word 'dominion' as a bare title, but the substance itself has been almost entirely lost."⁴⁰ Prelapsarian dominion has given way to postlapsarian domination.

In the context of his sixteenth-century understanding, Luther advocated against the abuse of nature, whether it was greed-driven exploitation or malicious destruction. In his commentary on Genesis, Luther appreciates that God has provided humanity the riches of the earth to enjoy but concludes that we are to do so "in proportion to [our] need."⁴¹ Along with encouraging modest consumption of nature's resources, Luther's writings also appear to promote nature's protection. For Luther, trees were not to be ravaged, but safeguarded. He likened the spring-time blossoming of trees to our own glorious resurrection and the coming restoration of all things. Thus he contends that when "Christians look at [trees] they do not think of gormandizing like swine; no, in them they see the work prefigured which God will perform on us."⁴² Even during warfare the earth was to be respected; Luther expected that invading armies not cut down the trees of their enemies, "not to devastate a land which has not sinned."⁴³ And if they do, Luther avowed that the sinless land does not suffer silently. He observes even an innocent tree "that is cut down does not tumble to the ground without a creaking noise."⁴⁴

In many of his reflections regarding creation Luther invoked Christ—the sinless one who did suffer silently—and it is Him that we now consider.

Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Eric Gritsch and Charles P. Arand, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 417.

40 Luther, LW 1, 67.

41 Luther, LW 1, 39. Churchill emphasizes Luther's limitation in Churchill, "This Lovely Music of Nature," 195.

42 Luther, LW 28, 180.

43 Martin Luther, "Lectures on Deuteronomy," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 9, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1960), 204.

44 Martin Luther, "Selected Psalms II," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 13, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 107. This audible response to suffering is reminiscent of the groaning of creation in Romans 8. Walsh et al. present a thoughtful study on "hearing the voices of creation," particularly those of trees that suffer abuse. In proposing a reciprocal relationship between trees and humans they consider the responsive nature of trees, scientifically and scripturally. Brian J. Walsh, Marianne B. Karsh, and Nik Ansell, "Trees, Forestry, and the Responsiveness of Creation," *Cross Currents* 44.2 (1994): 149–62. Stewart presents an imaginative discussion on the ecological suffering of creation at the hands of humanity in Scripture as an approach to encouraging an emotion-based environmental ethic. Alexander Coe Stewart, "Heaven Has No Sorrow that Earth Cannot Feel: The Ethics of Empathy and Ecological Suffering in the Old Testament," *Canadian Theological Review* 4.2 (2015): 19–34.

Christ's Dominion, Immanence, and Ubiquity within Creation

While he contends that humanity has “dominion” in *bare title* only, Luther also proclaims who has and exercises *true* dominion. True dominion is only acquired through holiness, and thus it lies with Christ alone.⁴⁵ For Luther, “it is Christ the Lord, who was present at the time of creation of all things, not as a mere spectator, but as a coequal Creator and Worker, who still governs and preserves all and will continue to govern and preserve all, until the end of the world.”⁴⁶ By asserting that it is Christ who has dominion over all, Luther reflects a new and deeper appreciation for creation. Thus, he declares, “Now if I believe in God’s Son, and bear in mind that he became [hu]man, all creatures will appear a hundred times more beautiful to me than before. Then I will properly appreciate the sun, the moon, the stars, trees, apples, and pears, as I reflect that he [Christ] is Lord over all and the Center of all things.”⁴⁷

Yet while affirming Christ’s transcendent lordship, Luther is also always aware of his immanent presence. Christ has dominion over creation, but he is also present throughout it. Thus the reformer was wont to say: Christ “is, with[in], and under” all things. Luther’s awareness of divine immanence and Christ’s ubiquitous presence within creation is forcefully expounded in his debate regarding Christ’s real presence within the Eucharist, with fellow reformer Ulrich Zwingli. This is a crucial point in our discussion, one that is presented in the work of numerous Lutheran theologians, including Paul Santmire and Cynthia Moe-Lobeda. These scholars have observed in Luther’s Eucharistic theology, and in his affirmation of the goodness of creation, a tacit eco-theologic ethic that invites amplification.

Zwingli had argued that because the ascended Christ is now at the right hand of the Father, he cannot be present locally in the creaturely elements of bread and the wine. However, Luther countered that Christ was truly present in the Eucharist; he expounded:

that the right hand of God is not a specific place . . . such as . . . a golden throne, but [it] is the almighty power of God, which at one and the same time can be nowhere and everywhere . . . essentially present at all places, even in the tiniest leaf . . . [God] himself must be present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost

45 Martin Luther, “Lectures on the Psalms II,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 11, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962), 393. Luther’s contention is derived from his exposition of Ps 114:2.

46 Martin Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1-4,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 22, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia, 1976), (hereafter LW 22), 28.

47 Luther, LW 22, 496.

being, on all sides, through and through, below and above, before and behind.⁴⁸

In describing the divine presence within and throughout creation, Luther used a variety of prepositions, protecting the reformer against accusations of panentheism, Santmire contends.⁴⁹ God was not merely ‘in’ the creature, but also above it, below it, and within it. Nor was Luther a pantheist, having always maintained the Creator-creature distinction. God is not the creature, nor can God be contained within it.⁵⁰ For Luther, the Creator is always immediately present with creation, but He is also always separate from it and transcendent to it. As Santmire observes, for Luther, “our commonplace spatial categories simply do not apply to God.”⁵¹ The reformer recognized that divine transcendence and immanence is a mystery. While he acknowledged that these were “exceedingly incomprehensible matters,” Luther believed they were attested in Scripture.⁵² Citing Jer 23:23–24, Luther understood that God is both nearby and far off, that he fills heaven *and earth*.⁵³

Christ’s Eucharistic presence had given Luther the platform to proclaim divine immanence and ubiquity and in turn, has given contemporary theologians the occasion to observe in the reformer an eco-theologic ethic. Such an ethic can provide further motivation to respect and preserve the natural world, without idolatrizing it. As Moe-Lobeda offers, “if, as Luther asserts, God dwells not only in human creatures but also in all earth’s bounty, then . . . God’s presence there . . . obligate[s] us to live toward the healing and sustaining of creation.”⁵⁴

48 Martin Luther, “That These Words of Christ, ‘This Is My body,’ etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics, 1527,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 37, ed. Robert E. Fischer, general ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961), (hereafter LW 37), 57–58.

49 H. Paul Santmire, “Creation and Salvation according to Martin Luther: Creation as the Good and Integral Background,” in *Creation and Salvation Volume 1: A Mosaic of Selected Classical Christian Theologies*, ed. Ernest M. Conradie (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2012), 184.

50 H. Paul Santmire, *Before Nature: A Christian Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 141. Similarly, Westhelle relates, that for Luther, “God is *in* creation without being creation.” Vitor Westhelle, “The Weeping Mask: Ecological Crisis and the View of Nature,” *Word and World – Theology for Christian Ministry*, 11.2 (1991): 145.

51 Santmire, *Before Nature*, 139.

52 Luther, LW 37, 59.

53 Martin Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper – From Part I (1528),” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd edition, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 266.

54 Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, “Journey between Worlds: Economic Globalization and Luther’s God Indwelling Creation,” *Word and World* 21.4 (2001): 422. Bayer, as well, relates that because of our planet’s “ecological crisis, it becomes increasingly necessary to speak theologically about the immanence of God in the world.” Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 103. Similarly, Churchill highlights Luther’s Eucharistic theology and divine immanence to promote an eco-theologic ethic. Churchill, “This Lovely Music of Nature,” 187–88.

An Eco-theologic Ethic: Caring for Creation as Fellow Workers with Christ

Although Luther's theological teachings initiated reform of the ecclesiastical abuses perpetrated by the papacy 500 years ago, his teachings can also encourage reform of the ecological abuses committed by Christians today. Gazing upon the natural world with wonder, Luther mined Scripture to defend divine immanence within that natural world, and to proclaim Christ's dominion over it. These explicit pronouncements reflect a tacit eco-theologic ethic that can rouse Christians to engage environmental concerns. Yet, a further incentive remains; God desires that humanity participate with him in tending to creation.

There is an anecdote, perhaps apocryphal, that relates Luther's response to the question of what he would do if he knew the world would end tomorrow. He said, "I would still plant my apple tree."⁵⁵ In his essay on Luther's ethics, Gerhard Forde understands the story to imply that, when all is said and done and the Kingdom of God has come, Luther believed that God should find us doing what is intended of us—"taking care of creation."⁵⁶ For Luther, our calling and vocation from God, whether sacred or secular, great or small, goes hand-in-hand with ethics.⁵⁷ And we fulfill this, hand-in-hand with God in Christ. Luther reminds his readers of their role of collaborating with the Creator who "does not work in us without us, because it is for this he has created and preserved us, that he might work in us and we might cooperate with him."⁵⁸ Thus in the divine work of preserving and sustaining creation, God enlists and enables humanity to become fellow workers with Christ, as earthly agents of healing.⁵⁹

55 Luther's declaration may reflect in part his affection for trees, but, as Hendrix relates, the statement has not been found in any of the reformer's writings. Hendrix further indicates that scholars have attributed the anecdote to the German Confessing Church to inspire resistance against the Nazis during World War II. Scott H. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 90.

56 Gerhard O. Forde, "Luther's Ethics," in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays in Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 149.

57 Forde, "Luther's Ethics," 148.

58 Martin Luther, "The Bondage of the Will, 1520, Part V Rebuttal of Erasmus' Critique of the *Assertio*" in *Luther's Works*, vol. 33, ed. Philip S. Watson, general ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 243. While Schwanke notes Luther's frequent emphasis on the divine seeking human cooperation, Gregersen particularly references the quote cited above and applies this example of Luther's understanding of humanity's participation with God to the preservation of creation. See Schwanke, "Luther on Creation," 7; Niels Hendrik Gregersen, "Grace in History and Nature: Luther's Doctrine of Creation Revisited," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44.1 (2005): 24.

59 Rasmussen and Moe-Lobeda also emphasize that Christ works with humanity in restoring creation based on Luther's statement that Christ "is present in the sacrament and in the hearts of believers not really because he wants to be worshipped there, but because he wants there to work with us and help us." See Larry Rasmussen and Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, "The Reform Dynamic: Addressing New Issues in Uncertain Times," in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, ed. Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 138. and Martin Luther, "The Adoration of

If Luther is correct, and God has given humanity the privilege of collaborating with Christ in his dominion, it should provide evangelicals the impetus to embrace and safeguard their earthly home. However, Luther would be the first to remind the Christian that the ethical act of stewarding creation—or any ethical act, for that matter—in no way justifies one before God. The reformer proclaimed that one's reconciliation with the Creator is solely based on Christ's salvific work and righteousness that God graciously bestows on people. This is the crux of the Reformation. Justification by faith in Christ's work frees the Christian from attempting to justify oneself by one's own work. Instead, now empowered by the Spirit, the Christian responds to God's grace by freely serving God's people along with *serving* the planet. As Lutheran theologians Kolb and Arand observe, "faith in the God who justifies is at the same time faith in the God who created the world [and] thus, faith embraces the world as God's good creation."⁶⁰ Evangelicals who rightly admire and assert Luther's teaching on justification ought to also endorse his ethic that upholds creation and denounces its abuse.

Concluding Remarks

Fifty years ago, Lynn White argued that Christian arrogance had led to an ecological crisis. For White, the root of the problem was a religious one, but he also believed—and probably much to the chagrin of non-Christian environmentalists—that the solution was religious. Thus, White encouraged Christians to consider Saint Francis of Assisi, who was a friend to all creatures, and whom White called "the greatest spiritual revolutionary since Christ."⁶¹ In his assertion, White hoped to highlight both Francis' humble and reverent attitude toward creation, and his conviction of humanity's undomineering place within it. White concluded his essay by proposing Francis to be the "patron saint of ecologists."⁶² May I conclude this essay by proposing that another revolutionary also share that honor.

the Sacrament, 1523," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 36, ed. and trans. Abdel Ross Wentz, general ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 294.

60 Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 106.

61 White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," 1206.

62 White, "The Historical Roots," 1207.