

# CREATION

## The backdrop or the mainstage for Christian Education?

By Chris Parker

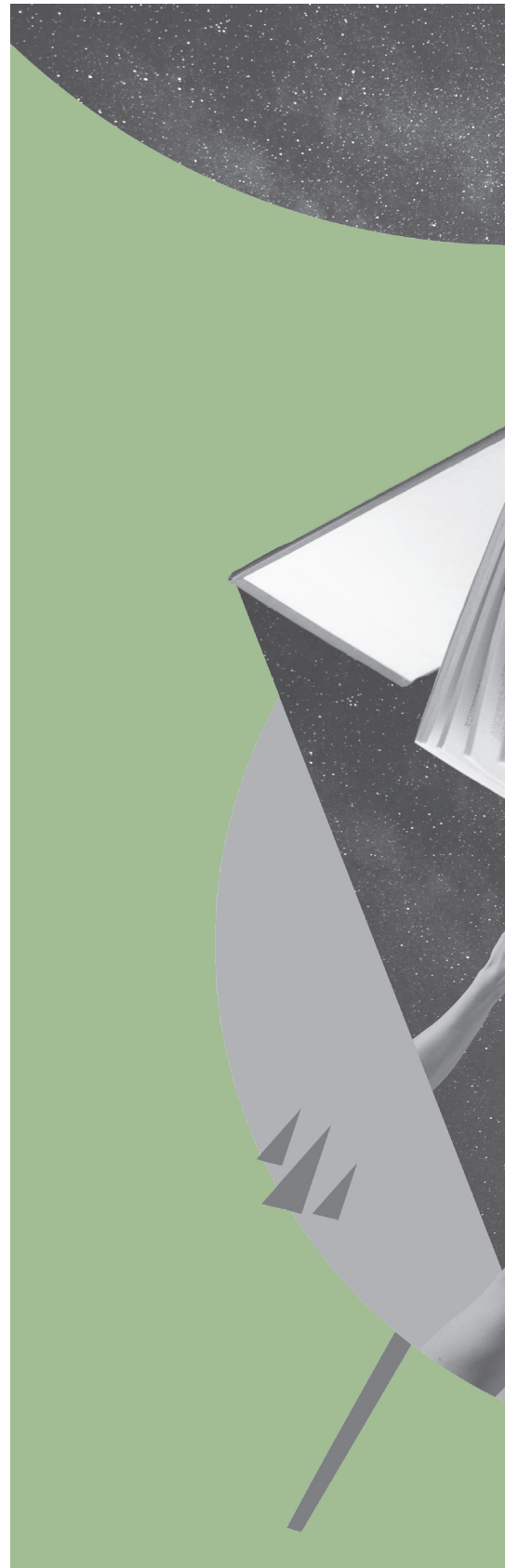
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**ABSTRACT** Chris Parker served on the *CTJ* editorial committee from 2006 to 2010. He began working for Christian Education National and as lecturer for the National Institute for Christian Education in 2009. With Suzanne Mitchell retiring in 2013, Chris was appointed as editor of *CTJ*. Through until 2021, Chris was instrumental in keeping the journal faithful to the mission and vision of Christian education. He brought a fresh approach to its presentation, working alongside Tanya Deenick at Taninka Visuals in the graphic design work. It is the outstanding quality of not only the content of the journal, but also its visual excellence that is so appreciated and cherished by its readership and a credit to Chris' keen mind and attention to detail.

Chris was asked to submit an article for this 30th anniversary edition of *CTJ*, honouring not only his significant past editorial influence and contributions as a writer, but also as a continued strong voice in Christian education. His extensive years of work in schools position Chris well to ponder the cultural landscape of Christian education.

Chris currently serves on the teaching team at Wycliffe Christian School.

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### **Creation:**

#### **In the beginning**

The gospel, or the good news of the Bible, flows unapologetically out of the full revelation of Scripture from first page to last. Therefore, a claim that the gospel begins in Genesis 1 should not, on the theological surface at least, cause any great concern for evangelical, Bible-believing Christians, and therefore for Christian educators. However, when we plumb the depths of this claim—as many Christian schools have done—we don't unearth a gospel of personal salvation sitting merely within a backdrop of creation. When we begin at the beginning, we uncover an expansive good news about life and living unfolding within a planned, precious, and purposeful creation that includes a rich array of cultural potential for humans to subdue and cultivate. Unfolding the creation to young people through schooling will not only invite them to understand the creation through the lens of the gospel, but will invite them to participate in the richness of the full creation, motivated by the gospel.

#### **What is creation?**

When flying south out of Sydney airport heading to Canberra, Melbourne, or Hobart, the plane performs two banking manoeuvres that provide quite contrasting

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scenes. When the wings dip one way, views of the city are evident. The airport is in a highly developed part of the city—roads, stormwater canals, car yards, factories, houses, schools, office blocks, apartments, tennis courts, waste disposal facilities, trampoline centres, retail strips, hospitals, and so on. After a few minutes of this city vista, the plane climbs, turns, and banks, and a completely contrasting scene appears. Out of this side of the plane we are introduced to the Royal National Park (Australia's first)—expansive stretches of eucalypt forest and coastal heath meeting up with magnificent sandstone coastal cliffs pounded by the bold blue waves of the Tasman Sea with the cliffs interrupted intermittently by small bays backed by a blonde beach and the turquoise blue of shallow water.

Which of these panoramas is most likely recalled when reflecting on the creation account of Genesis 1 and 2? The tendency to suggest the National Park might come from a limited appreciation of the scope of God's creational work. Could it be that the ordering, structuring, and developing of creation, seen in the landscape of the city, is only possible due to the rich potentialities that God has created and woven into the creation? Deeper behind the scenes of the city are created norms like family, community, leadership, language,

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honour, humour, innovation, justice, and work. When these cultural potentials are subdued, ruled over, and cultivated, humans are fulfilling the call of God, and the result can look like the southern suburbs of Sydney. If sea kayaking and being humbled by the grandness of the vast ocean and blue sky, can foster an appreciation of God as Creator, so too can visiting a community meeting in your suburb where new methods of waste removal are discussed in a well-led community forum.

This understanding proposes a creation that is oozing with potential to be developed. Watkin (2017) suggests a human partnership with God to continue the creation task in His image:

God entrusted Adam and Eve with a world that they and their offspring were to order and subdue. Similarly, today God does not unilaterally cook our meals, service our computers, or find a cure for our illnesses. He has left us this gap in the world to strive to bring to completion the work of creation (a task that will not be completed before the second coming of Christ). God has given us a world not to accept just as it is, but to improve and help flourish. (Watkin, p. 115)

When answering the question of “What is creation?” the answer must highlight that God created in a way that is physical and non-physical (cultural). However, the answer needs also to explore the centrality of Jesus in the creation. Paul suggests in his letter to the church in Colossae that the cosmos was created by Jesus, created for Jesus, and that the creation is sustained and unified in Jesus (Colossians 1: 15-17). Plantinga (2002) concludes that Jesus, therefore, not only has a role in redemption but also in creation, “we can now see that those mysterious places in the New Testament that speak of creation happening

through Christ reveal that the agent of redemption is also the agent of creation” (p. 21).

The full creation narrative of Scripture—from creation to new creation—presents Jesus as being centrally involved at creation, then humbly becoming part of the creation as a baby, then being resurrected in a way that ushers in the beginning of a new physical creation, and ultimately ruling over this new created order when everything is brought to fulfilment. Keller (2014) highlights that for Christians, matter matters, and that Jesus' incarnation is pivotal in a full exploration of what is creation:

Indeed the biblical doctrine of creation harmonises with the doctrine of the incarnation (in which God takes upon himself a human body) and of the resurrection (in which God redeems not just the soul but the body) to show how deeply “pro-physical” Christianity is. For Christians, even our ultimate future is a physical one. (p. 51)

### The creation gospel

#### *The beginning*

The framing of the good news of the Bible as the creation gospel, doesn't, and ought not, suggest that salvation is found in, or through, creation. It is shorthand for good news that flows from the fullness of Scripture—good news that has its beginning, and a call to response, flowing out of Genesis 1 and 2.

The alternative is a gospel having its grounding, and implications, begin at, and flow out of, Genesis 3—rebellion and sin. Both gospels, with their differently emphasised starting points, acknowledge the centrality of the cross and therefore the reality of sin and the need for salvation outside of human capacity. However, when sin becomes the launch pad for the gospel, the scope and implications may be significantly diminished. The gospel will tend to focus on, and



emphasise, the salvation of souls, with a lived response emphasising personal piety and the preaching of the gospel for the salvation of souls. Creation simply becomes the setting, or backdrop, for where this occurs.

This truncated gospel comes at the expense of fully embracing and engaging with the good creation—both the physical creation and its interwoven cultural norms and potential. This might be described as a salvation emphasised gospel, as opposed to a gospel that embraces the redemption of all things—including creation—through Christ. A gospel emphasising redemption begins and ends with creation and new creation respectively. It appreciates the scope of what was achieved on the cross to be the redemption of all things, including God's people. Hence the term creation gospel.

This holistic redemption is described by Plantinga (2002) to include souls and bodies, and all that human communities cultivate:

At their best, reformed Christians take a very big view of redemption because they take a very big view of fallenness. If all has been created good and all has been corrupted, then all must be redeemed. God isn't content to save souls; God wants to save bodies too. God isn't content to save human beings in their individual activities; God wants to save social systems and economic structures too. (p. 95)

This shift in the framing of the gospel might, on the surface, seem a somewhat pedantic nuance. However, when this more expansive gospel is engaged and embraced, a paradigm shift unfolds that has significant, and unavoidable, implications for faith, life, and theology (and therefore Christian education). As Wittmer (2015) testifies, "If redemption restores creation, then creation counts for more than I had ever suspected" (p. 160).

One might counter-argue that

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building such an expansive theology on the opening account of the origins of the creation, is not allowing the full arc of the progressive revelation of Scripture to frame a full-arc theology. However, it is hard to escape the expansiveness of redemption also presented by New Testament authors. Although both Jesus and Paul, at many points, speak of redemption and reconciliation with a focus on God's people, when the context allows for a more expansive description, they boldly suggest it extends to "all things":

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Matthew 19:28)

With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. (Ephesians 1: 8b-10)

In the opening of Paul's letter to the church in Colossae, he emphasises the extent of the reconciliation of "all things" using a category listing that has absolutely no exceptions:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making

peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:19-20)

The grandness and import of the creation account of Genesis 1 and 2 makes it difficult for creation to be treated merely as background to the gospel, and a neutral stage-setting for the drama of our lives. The nature of humanity, and the task provided—bearing God's likeness and being creation cultivators—make it difficult to render engagement with the creation as a distant second in comparison to the pursuit of piety, prayer, and the preaching of Christ crucified.

Genesis 1 and 2 provide an invitation, inspiration, and a forthright instruction (often referred to as the creation mandate) for humans to engage as stewards of the full creation—both the physical and the cultural. Plantinga (2002) describes how this might impact a Christian's framing of purpose:

So when Christians strive to make God's purposes their own, they tilt forward toward God's restoration of all things, the final coming of the kingdom. They think about it, pray for it, study and work in ways that accord with it. Thinking personally as well as globally, they want the kingdom to come in their own hearts as well as in the whole world. (p. xii)

### *The end*

If our framing of the gospel emphasises Genesis 3 and human sin as ground zero, with an under-emphasis on the full view of creation and its redemption, then it may also tend toward a truncated end point—both in what is hoped for, and in terms of lived response as disciples. If the scriptural narrative ends at Revelation 21-22, is it reasonable that the good news of the Bible also culminates there? We see a "new heaven and new earth" prophesied by Isaiah (65:17, 66:22), and looked forward to by Peter when he states, "But in keeping with his promise we

are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells” (1 Peter 3:13). Quoting Isaiah, John shares this vision:

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God”. (Revelation 21: 1-3)

When the gospel includes the full framing of a redeemed, restored, and reconciled creation, it is oozing with Christian hope wider and deeper than a mere hope of personal salvation. Plantinga (2002) describes the scope of this hope:

Biblical hope has a wide angle lens. It takes in whole nations and peoples. It brings into focus the entire created order—wolves and lambs, mountains and plains, rivers and valleys. When it is widest and longest, biblical hope looks forward toward a whole new heaven and new earth (Rev 21) and in which the son of God receives the treasures of nations who parade into the city of God (Rev 21:22-26). (p. 13)

A salvation emphasised gospel can tend to bring the gospel train to a stop somewhat short of the platform. This gospel framing can tend to end at the final chapters of the epistles where the authors unfold implications for righteous living. In some extreme expressions of this gospel, the final paragraph of Matthew 28 (often referred to as the Great Commission), can become the strongest defining response. Even when the full Bible is recognised and read as God’s revelation, if the picture of the gospel is painted from a truncated Bible, we are not painting

with all the available colours. Our response, as disciples, may not be flowing from the full, beautiful, revealed vista.

It is important to state that we are not talking about different gospels. The core of the gospel in both expressions is the same. What is being explored is a contrasting framing, and a subsequent contrast in emphasis—often implied, sometimes overt. This shift of emphasis has implications for discipleship and responsive faithful Christian living, and for wider human engagement with creation and its cultural potential—and therefore Christian education.

### **The creation gospel and Christian education**

A starting point for a discussion on the place of the creation gospel in Christian education is given by Keller when he states that, “Education is basically creation studies; therefore education principally involves the creation mandate” (2014, p. 58). Keller is speaking of education broadly. Whether the teacher or the learner is Christian or not, the task of education is to explore the nature of the world, how humans interact with the world, and the stories that humans tell about their interactions with the world. It is only the very narrowest views of education that focus on the preparation of the

**... there must be more thought (and much practice) given to the idea of how the Kingdom of God must shape the whole educational endeavour ...**

student to be trained and certified for life after graduation.

Many Christian schools speak of the intention to offer a gospel-centred education. If a school tends towards a salvation emphasised gospel, then this intention will usually express itself in an emphasis on preaching Christ crucified with a call to repent and be saved. The desire will be to take all opportunities to do this in the life and times of the school—there may even be specific opportunities strategically developed: chapel services, evangelistic parent assemblies, special guest speakers, and the like.

However, a school that emphasises the good news of the Bible as the redemption of all things in and through Christ, will express this intention more holistically during its life and times. It will seek to design curriculum from a conception of “creation studies”. It will develop classroom practices and cultures that invite, and inspire, students to partake in the creation mandate as responsive disciples (rather than merely learning for their own personal progression). It will communally design policies and procedures as an expression of God’s invitation to partner in the redemption of all things. In such a school, there may be no less commitment to unsaved members of the school community hearing the good news of what Jesus has done for them personally, however, this desire will be expressed within, and out of, a gospel that begins at the beginning.

The creation gospel, when embraced by schools, doesn’t limit the framing of the curriculum to creation studies. The commitment to participate in the ongoing expression of the creation mandate is richly evident in the full breadth of learning endeavours: agriculture, music, textiles, computer studies, and so on (and even the act of teaching itself!). Keller (2014) explains:

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## The world that we live in, and interact with minute by minute, is not neutral and of no eternal significance.

Farming takes the physical material of soil and seed and produces food. Music takes the physics of sound and rearranges it into something beautiful and thrilling that brings meaning to life. When we take fabric and make a piece of clothing, when we push a broom and clean up a room, when we use technology to harness the forces of electricity, when we take an unformed, naïve human mind and teach it a subject, when we teach a couple how to resolve their relational disputes, when we take simple materials and turn them into a poignant work of art—we are continuing God’s work of forming, filling, and subduing. (p. 59)

When we offer an education that invites students to participate in the “forming, filling, and subduing” of the world that God has entrusted to them—even while they are learning and preparing for life after school—we are inviting them to express their in-His-imageness. We have been created to create. We don’t create out of nothing as God does. However, when we work alongside God to further form, flourish, and bring the creation to fulfilment, we participate as paracreators (Watkin, 2017).

The good news that we have to share with students—which centres on the redemption that began with Jesus—is that their engagement with the world that they are studying isn’t irrelevant to, and separate from, their faith. The world that we live in, and interact with minute by minute, is not neutral and of no

eternal significance. Every situation in life has the potential for us to be celebrating and participating in the redemption gospel. Faithfulness doesn’t simply mean that we don’t need to wait for, or construct, opportunities to speak about Jesus—though we should do that too!

Inviting and equipping students to participate in this “supreme reformation project” (Plantinga, 2002, p. xii)—where all of life can be an expression of being made in His image and participating as paracreators—may well provide the richest possible education for children and young people. It is what many schools mean when they claim to be attempting a gospel-centred education.

### In the end (conclusion)

In the beginning I suggested that the gospel of the Lord Jesus is the heart of Christian education. When the gospel considers the full arc of the scriptural grand story beginning in the beginning and ending at the end, the scope of the adventure of Christian education is wide and deep. The invitation for students as they learn about the world—and their place within it—is to participate in the grand story of redemption. A big story that includes their personal salvation as well as an invitation to participate in the good news of the redemption of all things in Christ.



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