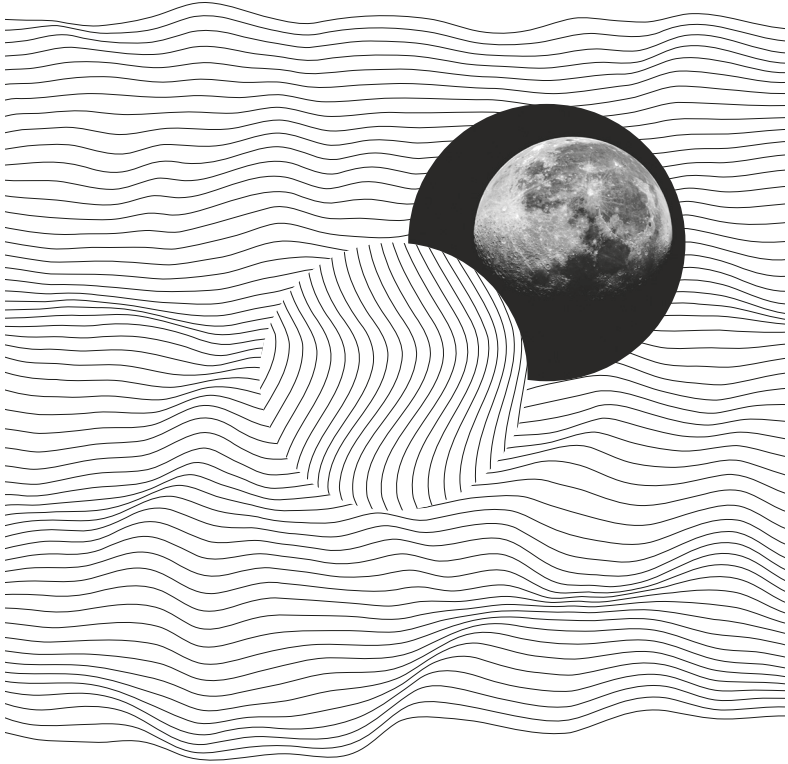


**Chapter 8**  
Chris Parker



**The Creation Gospel**  
The Heartbeat of Christian Education

## 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, Christian educators. When we plumb the depths of this claim, however — 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**

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.

If the gospel of the Lord Jesus is the *heart* of Christian education, then an expansive creation gospel, that begins “in the beginning”, is the *heartbeat* of the adventure that is Christian schooling.

## My Experience

I remember the moment well: my friend and I sitting in our sea kayaks on the rolling ocean, half a kilometre outside the heads of Sydney harbour; a beautiful blue, big-sky, spring day. As we were being thrown up and down over the two metre swell, with the vast expanse of the eastern horizon disappearing and reappearing, my friend made a comment that both resonated and unsettled me. He said, “You know, Toff, this is the sort of situation, out in God's amazing creation, where I feel God's presence the most!” My unsettledness flowed from my good evangelical background giving me a deep hesitancy towards encouraging a God-is-in-nature pantheism. Surely the richest expression of God's revelation comes from Scripture, and we feel His presence most when we experience His saving grace and forgiveness in Christ. Isn't this the good news of the Bible?

There was something about his comment, however, that also resonated deeply. It began a journey to determine if this resonance was just a Christian “hippy heresy” shaped by emotions and a loose theology (after all, I was born in Mullumbimby, in the hinterland of Byron Bay...), or was there perhaps a deep theological truth to be found — one that was being de-emphasised in the preaching I was hearing, and the theology I was reading?

It was my subsequent involvement with Christian schooling — schooling that had been shaped by an all-of-life reformational theology — and my study with the National Institute for Christian Education, that began to settle the unsettledness. I was drawn to appreciate that the good news of the Bible related to more than mere personal salvation — a gospel with implications far wider than personal piety, prayer and a call to preach. The gospel I came to see flowing from the whole of Scripture — while still pivoting on, and culminating in, the cross of Christ — was one grounded in the good creation and not merely beginning at the starting point of human rebellion and sin. I came to see significant liberating implications for both my personal faith and its outworking. I began to see a wider role and purpose for humanity. I came to appreciate what might be referred to as the “creation 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 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, etc. 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 shallowed water.

Which of these panoramas comes most to mind 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 scene of the city are created norms like family, community, leadership, language, 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.

Creation is more than the physical cosmos. When the works of God's creative hands are considered, we realise a wide array of cultural potential and norms that are also "good". When humans develop and cultivate this wider "goodness," we see the best examples of human flourishing. In considering the impact of the repeated phrase in Genesis, "it is good", Watkin suggests that it is "hard to think of three words ... (apart, perhaps, from Jesus is Lord) that send out deeper or broader shock waves throughout the whole Bible and through the whole of reality" (Watkin, 2017, p. 70).

This understanding proposes a creation that is oozing with potential to be developed. Watkin 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, 2017, p. 115)

When answering the question "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 simply a phrase that is shorthand for a good news that flows from the *fullness* of Scripture — a 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 of these 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. When sin becomes the launch pad for the gospel, however, 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.

**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**



This truncated gospel comes at the expense of a full embracing of, and engagement 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 presents 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).

**A gospel emphasising redemption begins and ends with creation and new creation respectively**

One might counter-argue that 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'd 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 fulfilment — 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 - A New Heaven and a New Earth**

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 (Revelation 21) and in which the son of God receives the treasures of nations who parade into the city of God (Revelation 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.

These truncated end points may paint a picture for the Christian that the ultimate response to the gospel is to live morally and to evangelise. As good and as important as these are, they are responses that sit within a wider narrative — a bigger picture. Engagement with creation, and particularly its cultural strands, may become de-emphasised and culture seen as neutral or “worldly”. This emphasis can tend to render the creation mandate as historical background, or even paint it as obsolete and replaced by an evangelism mandate (the great commission). Again, the suggestion is not that evangelism is not a pivotal



part of our discipleship — it most surely is. However, the rendering of the creation mandate to be null and void through de-emphasis, allows the great commission to float to the top and assume a primacy that a full redemption reading of Scripture may not be comfortable with.

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 emphasis shift has implications for discipleship and responsive faithful Christian living and for wider human engagement with creation and its cultural potential — and, therefore, Christian education.

**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**

### **Further Reflections**

There are a few further reflections (and implications) that it may be prudent to mention. First of all, an objection to this shift in emphasis may be the claim that the seriousness of sin is being minimised. This would not be a fair reading. Personal sin is no less abhorrent, our sinfulness as humans no less apparent. We are saved from the wretchedness of our sin through grace alone. We are reconciled with the Father only through the atoning work of the Lord Jesus and His blood shed on the cross. Our sin renders us incapable of righteousness through our own merit. All this is no less true. In fact, it may even be that the effects of sin are given greater credence in an expression of the gospel that acknowledges a wider creational impact. Sin is no less serious in a full redemption gospel.

Secondly, a *salvation-emphasised gospel* may tend to foster a dualistic framing of life. If the day to day engaging-with-creation aspect of our lives is framed as secondary, then a tendency to divide life into two parts becomes stronger. Western Christians are already plagued by this mental and emotional demarcation. The pervasive influence of the dualism of the ancient Greek philosophers, as founding fathers of Western culture, still impacts the church's tendency toward a posture of cleaving life into sacred and secular, heavenly and worldly, public and private, good and bad. A gospel framing that turns its back on creation—or at least turns its shoulder away—may tend to provide fuel for this dualism.



Thirdly, we need to consider the rich tradition of Christians exploring the most faithful and God-honouring way to engage with culture. We think of the seminal work of Niebuhr (1951) in *Christ and Culture* and in more recent times Carson (2008), Crouch (2013), Dreher (2017), Hunter (2010), Staub (2008). Each of these authors, and others, propose a participatory engagement — not just a stepping into culture, but a recognition that all humans, including Christians, create culture. Christians are not seen as separate from human communities and their cultures, but as redeemed participants celebrating, critiquing and cultivating as they embrace and unfold the creation mandate. A *salvation-emphasised gospel* may nurture a passivity towards cultural engagement and a tendency to unthinkingly consume and conform. A reaction to passive conformity might be a tendency towards merely contending and confronting

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culture; though this too may flow from a *salvation-emphasised gospel* that doesn't fully recognise the good cultural potential of creation and our call to participate in its cultivation and redemption — as opposed to criticising from the sidelines.

Fourthly, a *salvation-emphasised gospel* may give weight to the tendency to view the current world we live in, and the current form and expression of our lives, as temporary. Although recognising this as God's world, the emphasised task becomes telling as many people as we can the gospel so that they can join us in escaping from here when we die - a sort of evangelistically energetic holding pattern! Wright (2011) points us to passages and a reading of Scripture that suggest that New Testament writers don't hold this view:

A massive assumption has been made in Western Christianity that the purpose of being a Christian is simply, or at least mainly, to “go to heaven when you die,” and texts that don't say that but that mention heaven are read as if they did say it, and texts that say the opposite, like Romans 8:18-25 and Revelation 21-22, are simply screened out as if they didn't exist. (p. 90)

Lastly, and especially relevant for Christian education, one's view of the nature and purpose of humanity (anthropology) will be impacted by how the gospel is framed and emphasised. When sin and salvation are the starting point of the gospel, a tendency may be towards a low anthropology as opposed to



the high anthropology of a wider creation gospel (Golsby-Smith, 2020). In the Christian school, additional to seeking the equipping and inspiring of responsive disciples (as discussed above), its default anthropology will impact approaches to behaviour management and discipline. For example, when human sin and rebellion are at the core of an anthropology, behaviour management may tend towards rigid boundaries, punitive consequences and suspicion. The sinfulness of students may become the starting point and end point of discipline and welfare policy and practice. Alternatively, when an anthropology has a starting point of humans as image bearers of the creator and an end point lens that see the potential of the redemption of all things in Christ, then behaviour management has a wider and more optimistic vista — a high anthropology. Grace and forgiveness will be part of the community dialogue in both cases, though varying levels of integration maybe evident - and at times only be on the surface.

A gospel shaped by the grand story of Scripture that recognises and embraces a full and rich view of creation doesn't minimise sin, frame life dualistically, passively consume nor actively oppose culture, see creational life as temporary, or default to a low anthropology. The implications of a creation framed gospel, for life and learning, are significant.

## 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 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.

A school that emphasises the good news of the Bible as the redemption of *all things* in and through Christ, however, 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, but 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, etc. (or even the act of teaching itself!). Keller (2014) explains:

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).

Creating and designing can conjure notions of humans being artists and designers, and although our response does include these expressions

(even if we are not all “artists” and “designers” per se), we paracreate in any situation where we transform the creation (physical and cultural) by bringing the goodness and truth of the Kingdom to bear on that situation. What do we create? We create tools. We create systems. We create relationships, families, communities. We create structures and interactions. We create the tangible and the intangible. Golsby-Smith suggests that:

We design intangible and not just tangible things, and I would summarise the objects of our design as Christians as *situations* — the complex interactions between people, systems, events, and circumstances ... we Christians are called to transform, or shift the shape of, situations. (2020)

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’re 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.

**Every “situation”  
in life has the  
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redemption gospel**

## Evangelism

Would you permit me one more personal reflection that I trust will help us to explore the place and nature of evangelism? I remember clearly (and with some post-trauma) a time during my studies at the University of Sydney when the Christian group I was connected with (The Evangelical Union) had decided to give out fortune cookies to fellow students as a campus-wide evangelistic mission. In these cookies were messages about the sinfulness, godlessness and folly of a life without Christ. I was allocated The Manning Bar at lunchtime! I was to wander around passing out the fortune cookies to the students milling



around sharing a lunchtime beer and a ciggy (or something a little sweeter smelling). I will not repeat some of the responses I received!

This was certainly one of the more courageous things I have done. Though courageous, I'm not sure it was wise. I am not suggesting that evangelising was *unwise*—it's a part of faithful discipleship. I question the fruitfulness of sharing the gospel beginning with a claim of personal sinfulness. This is not starting a conversation where the Bible starts its conversation. The message that there exists a mechanism that can rescue you from a life of sin (the work of Jesus on the cross), does provide hope. However, this is not the full hope that the Bible ends with. Wright (2011) proposes a reversed evangelism:

Instead of looking first at the promise to the individual and working up from that to the renewal of creation, we begin with the biblical vision of the future world—a vision of the present cosmos renewed from top to bottom by the God who is both creator and Redeemer. (p. 80)

**The message that there exists a mechanism that can rescue you from a life of sin (the work of Jesus on the cross), does provide hope**

Sometimes evangelism in the Christian school will consist of preaching that the blood of Christ has washed clean and purchased the souls of His people, and that this is graciously available to all who believe and trust in Him. Emphasising this as *the good news*, however, might distract from the wonderful opportunities to “preach” an expansive redemption gospel that provides big picture hope — and an invitation to participate — that is woven into the very nature of the task of schooling; that is, studying God's amazing creation. If the work of discipling within the school has similarities with the task of discipling within the church, then the words of Wright (2011) bring clarity:

As long as we see salvation in terms of going to heaven when we die, the main work of the church [Christian school] is bound to be seen in terms of saving souls for that future. But when we see salvation, as the New Testament sees it, in terms of God's promised new heavens and new earth and of our promised resurrection to share in that new and gloriously embodied reality ... then the main work of the church [Christian school] here and now demands to be rethought in consequence. (p. 197)

For Christian schools where the mission is to offer an holistic Christian education, evangelism is not the first and foremost expression of this goal.



Schools are about learning. However, if the curriculum of a school is seen as “creation studies” then this school will be no less evangelistic because the full and rich gospel of the redemption of all things will be wrapped around all curriculum and communal life.

## 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 - big story that includes their personal salvation as well as an invite to participate in the good news of the redemption of all things in Christ.

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