

The Green Good News

— *Christ's Path to Sustainable and Joyful Life* —

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Preface

GOOD NEWS CAN BE hard to find. Every day we are bombarded with horrors from around the world. The headlines speak of gun violence, deep political and cultural divides, floods, wildfires, and the abuse of power from politicians, business leaders, and even clergy. This daily deluge is so overwhelming that it can be difficult to find our footing long enough to even think about, much less address, the underlying problems. It is easy to miss how often these catastrophes find their source and are intensified by the historical plagues of racism, patriarchy, poverty, and militarism. And if these problems from our past that grip our present were not enough, the growing ecological crisis and emerging reality of climate change threaten to bring about a future that is much more difficult. As sea levels rise, weather patterns become more erratic, deserts expand, ecosystems collapse, and fragile balances on this planet are pushed off kilter, the news could become much worse. In fact, it already has.

The buried headline of the ecological crisis is the good news that this interconnected web of problems has a beautiful and joyful set of responses. It is possible that climate change could ultimately threaten the corporatized, consumerist, individualistic orders that are striving to colonize the entire planet. The privileged way of life that dwells in the suburbs and highrises is unsustainable and inequitable. It would take more than five earths for everyone on the planet to consume as much as the *average* person in the USA.¹ But is the average privileged consumer even finding an abundance of joy, love, peace, and faithfulness in their lives? The possibility remains open in the unwritten news of the future that what we have to lose are our overfull work weeks, our isolated and compartmentalized daily lives, our unhealthy food systems, our rented storage containers, our long commutes, the constant barrage of assessment, our futile striving for happiness in prideful

1. Benton-Short et al., *Regional Geography*, 14.

success or selfish accumulation. The good news is that it is only by losing these lives that we may save our lives.

Jesus Christ guides us on a path of love that calls beyond our gated safe-houses into the space of risky but joyful community. We are not called to cast off our own chains and find a separate peace, but to work for the biblical vision of peace and justice. This is not a feeling that one could ever experience alone. It only emerges from a right relationship between our neighbors, God, and the land. We will save our lives and find lives of joy by giving them to others, by seeking to cultivate habitats where everyone and everything thrives.

The savior that offers us this hope may sound a bit different from the one that is preached about in many churches or that is vaguely known in mainstream culture. Yet, this message begins to leap from the pages of Scripture once we situate Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection within the context of the Roman Empire. Jesus was a peasant who resisted the inequitable and destructive structures of the Empire that desecrated the land and left many in subjugation and poverty. Christ responded to this injustice with an inspiring vision and transformative practices.² He led a movement that sought to bring about an alternative kingdom and a new covenant. Jesus was anointed to renew and radicalize the simple and sustainable covenantal life of agrarian villages and cities to heal all of creation.³ Fleshing out these contexts of resistance to empire and the renewal of communities built on radical justice opens up constructive connections between the Scriptures and our own lives.

In the Gospels Christ provides us with a vision (which we will explore in Part 1) and a set of social experiments, spiritual practices, and forms of relationship (which are charted in Part 2) that could guide us in our work for justice and sustainability. We can see this more clearly if we come to

2. While the point of emphasis in ecotheology is almost always placed on the cosmic Christ, the path of this book proceeds more by the way of a "Christology from below"—beginning with Jesus' life and ministry. I have fleshed out this vision for philosophical theology in greater detail in *Exercises in New Creation*.

3. Attending to this political, economic, and social horizon brings together issues of environment and justice that are often kept separate both in activist and academic circles. The primary focus in ecological hermeneutics, for example, has methodologically bracketed much of political and social life in its focus on the non-human elements of the Scriptures. In bringing the insights of scholarship on Jesus and the Empire and agrarian readings of the Hebrew Scriptures, together with work on environmental justice, political ecology, and constructive theology, I hope not only to fill a hole in the literature (an agrarian and environmental justice reading of the Gospels) but even more to foster connections between movements for justice and environmentalism. Because my focus is on this broader audience, I have bracketed issues of scholarly debate and limited my reference to contemporary scholarship to footnotes.

understand that the cross of Christ marks a path of nonviolent self-giving love. This path leads us beyond a vision of environmentalism as a special interest and enables us to see how the ecological crisis demands that we change our way of life (examined in chapter 1). The risen Christ is not a figure that escapes the earth, but, in the Scriptures, he is mistaken for a gardener. His purpose is to restore the goodness of creation and the human vocation to serve and preserve earthly life. Following Christ into actual gardens can help us find a starting point and a communal space to initiate this renewal (chapter 2). Christ implemented forms of organization and alternative economies in which people found abundance where others had only seen scarcity. The efforts of contemporary food movements offer avenues for similar forms of organization (chapter 3). Christ taught in parables that laid bare the cruelty, violence, and exploitation that hide behind the ruses of politeness and the gilding of status. We too must teach in ways that touch the imagination and speak to everyday life if we are to cultivate social change (chapter 4). Christ went to those who were broken and isolated by the social and political forces of the Empire and helped them find healing. Likewise, we are called to examine the rhythms of work and consumption that often damage our lives, so that we can mend our fractured communities and find wholeness (chapter 5). Christ brought together new communities through banquets and parties that tore apart social hierarches and fostered a radical change in life, values, and relationships. Similarly, in our own houses we can begin to incarnate transformative meals (chapter 6). Christ modeled a life of prayer that sustains body and spirit for the labors of love and resistance, and we can begin to pray as he taught us, taking seriously that our hopes are set *on earth*, as it is in heaven (chapter 7).

To see this good news, we will have to find healing from our ignorance and numbness to the suffering of the earth. We have closed ourselves off for good reason. Without a vision in which we can hope or tangible actions and life-giving relationships that animate us, despair seems inevitable. The good news of Christ provides us with hope *and* a path.

This path leads in the opposite direction of the striving after success and status that dominates our world. The very use of the term “good news,” a translation of the Greek term *euangelion* (which is also often rendered as “gospel”), points to this sign post marking diverging roads. In its common usage in the first-century Roman world, good news (*euangelion*) referred to public declarations of the good works of the Empire. Gospels were posted or proclaimed in public places as propaganda pieces that spoke of a military victory or of an abundant harvest (for which imperial officials wanted to take credit). The good news of the Empire whitewashed what I take to be its definitive characteristic: massive political, economic, and militaristic structures

that protect the interests and lifestyles of the elite by *extracting* wealth from the labor of the poor and the fertility of the land.⁴

Jesus' public declarations of good news, by contrast, did not celebrate the power of the Empire, but announced the world-transforming power of self-giving love. The gospels of the Roman Empire were like our advertisements about the power of wealth to make you successful, sexy, happy, secure, and admired. Jesus, who was executed by the Empire, stained its glossy airbrushed images with the frightening reality of how empires really function. But the good news was that the Empire and its violence did not have the final word. Instead, all of creation was finding reconciliation.

The *green* good news, the path of new life leading out of the ecological crisis, likewise will require that we see the empire of wealth that surrounds us for the unjust sham that it is. Speaking of the exploitative corporate and national power structures of our time in terms of empire serves to unveil aspects of our world that we take to be normal, natural, or even praiseworthy. More importantly, this critical move frees us to travel down an alternative path to joyful, just, and simple life.

4. Boer and Petterson, *Time of Troubles*, xi–xii. Brueggemann, *Tenacious Solidarity*, 42–44.

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Christ at the Crossroads of Earth and Empire

MY PATH TO A green gospel did not begin in the conventional origins of environmentalism in the United States. While I enjoy a nice walk in the woods, if I postured as an outdoorsman, anyone who knows me would laugh. Though I like to fiddle around in the garden, my family left its roots in farming generations ago. I am a white guy from a small suburban town that remembers thinking as a kid: “How are there still mosquitos? Why haven’t they solved this problem yet?” I come from a world in which it is intuitive to think that an entire species could or even should be eradicated because it irritates me. My turn to caring for creation did not demand leaving these neighborhoods or communities behind, but it is oriented by the hope of their redemption and transformation.

This journey started in and was guided by the church. I was raised by mainline Protestant communities, and my faith was deepened and expanded by the ecumenical movement—global networks of progressive Christian communities working for justice. This work with global Christians unveiled for me the destructive relationship between my white bread consumeristic life in the United States and the injustice of poverty, racism, violence, and ecological devastation that have colonized the world. For example, at the end of one meeting in Geneva, I bought some coffee from a friend from the east African nation of Burundi. In this simple exchange of coffee beans and money, we cut out the middle men of multinational corporations. Though I do not know the exact ratios of how much more money ended up in the hands of Burundian farmers, one study found that coffee, by the time it is sold in the United Kingdom, is marked up two hundred times the price paid to growers in Uganda.¹ This wildly imbalanced exchange has dire consequences for the people and the land. Burundi’s economy is largely centered on the

1. Patel, *Starved and Stuffed*, 18.

cash crop of coffee, even though the country tends to fetch lower prices from international markets than neighboring African countries. The meager proceeds from this exchange largely end up in the hands of elites. The land that is used to grow coffee is often degraded by fertilizer use and shortsighted farming practices. While this industry provides little benefit to the average farmer, it puts further constraint on the land that is available to grow food and contributes to a situation in which the agricultural production of Burundi does not meet the needs of the population. This in turn has led to further over-farming, ecological degradation, conflict, and violence.² On the other end of all the stories my Burundian friend had told me about his ministry with struggling communities, desperate families, and hurting children, was the supermarket down the street from my house. The coffee that was cheap for me came at a high price for other people and lands.

I was initially resistant to facing such a reality. This problem is not limited to coffee. It is like kudzu—its tendrils and vines cover and choke everything. This waste and exploitation are woven into the social fabric, showing up in the disposable plates at a potluck and the clothes on my back. Struggling with systemic injustice is deeply unsettling as it shows the cracks in a cultural foundation on which I and most of the people I love have built our lives. To try to come to terms with such a reality is not just to challenge the norms of pleasantness and politeness, but it is to question the goodness of the systems in which one is, ostensibly, inextricably bound. And so, back then, and still today, I struggle to even acknowledge this reality.

The plodding and slow turning of my work to these issues initially filled me with criticisms and frustrations. I felt called to resistance, but I lacked a vision of joy, love, and peace that would make such acts sustainable and sustaining. When I encountered the Christian food movement, I found a chance to be *for* something rather than just *against* everything.³ Hearing the green good news has been a bit of fresh air, or the movement of the Holy Spirit, that has breathed new life into my faith. Through community gardens, the support of alternative economic models, and joyful communities, I saw an opening to a beautiful alternative. While none of these acts were enough on their own, they provided nourishing first steps that inspired the imagination and cultivated alternative relationships and ways of life.

When I started reading the Scriptures with the concerns of food and environmental justice, I found deep wells of nourishing wisdom. Once the elements of creaturely life—fields, food, landscapes, bodies, lilies, illness, wine,

2. Oketech and Polzer, "Conflict and Coffee."

3. This phrasing is drawn from Bahnson, "Field, Table, Communion," 103.

birds, hunger—were no longer regarded as metaphors, but were figures concerned with the everyday, the Scriptures stopped seeming distant, confusing, or irrelevant. The green (or ecologically oriented) reading of the Scriptures shed a new (or green) light upon them, and in turn, opened a path to an entirely different way of life. The Scriptures and the gifts of faith communities, in turn, provided a more radical, holistic, joyful, and social way of addressing the ecological crisis than mainstream environmentalism.

Before we can embark down this path, in this chapter I want to address three stumbling blocks that could trip us up: mainstream environmentalism's focus on "*wilderness*," common understandings of Jesus' *cross*, and a narrow view of the title of "*Christ*." In addressing each of these stumbling blocks my point of emphasis will not be on criticizing forms of interpretation that I want to avoid; I will instead look for the green—which is to say new and life-giving—possibility at work in each.

Jesus Christ, Radical Environmentalist

In order to hear the green good news of Christ it helps to listen for his peasant dialect. Jesus was a carpenter, a lowly artisan, from the small agricultural village of Nazareth (which archaeologists estimate was composed of two hundred to four hundred people).⁴ Historians propose that as a carpenter he would have worked in the nearby city of Sepphoris. Moving between these worlds, Jesus saw the exploitative ways of the elite from the vantage point of the sustainable peasant community where he was raised.⁵

In Sepphoris, the client ruler Herod Antipas was rebuilding a new shining capital of the region of Galilee in the Roman style. He was rebuilding the city because it had been burned by the Romans around the time of Jesus' birth, after an insurrectionist named Judas led a revolt and raided the armory there.⁶ Judas was leading a resistance against a census the Empire was conducting. This imperial method of assessing the population and the land through a census would allow them to extract wealth in the form of taxes, and stood in tension with covenantal traditions whereby the land was God's and a source of commonwealth and mutual care.⁷ Roman soldiers defeated Judas, crucified more than two thousand rebels, razed the city, and took many of its people off in slavery.⁸ Herod Antipas was remaking

4. Crossan and Reed, *Excavating Jesus*, 32.

5. Oakman, *Jesus and the Peasants*, 167–73.

6. Crossan, *God and Empire*, 109.

7. Hengel, *Zealots*, 127–41, 331, 387–88.

8. Hendricks, *Politics of Jesus*, 51.

the ruins that Jesus grew up around in the image of the Empire and even renamed it “*Autocrator*,” meaning Emperor or World Conqueror, the first title of Caesar Augustus.⁹

On his walk from his village to the imperial development, Jesus might have passed farmland that had also undergone radical changes.¹⁰ Many smaller farms had been seized through cycles of debt and consolidated into larger plantations.¹¹ The large landholders sought to extract wealth from the fertility of the land and the labor of the people to support their opulent lifestyles and the system of the Empire, a longstanding problem that the prophets often lamented (Isa 3:14–15, 5:8–10, 24:5–6). Consistent with the tendencies of farming practices that grow large fields of a single crop for profit (monoculture agriculture), Jesus might have noticed a lack of care for the long-term health of the land.¹² In patterns somewhat similar to industrial agriculture today, growers interested in profit or forced by debt push the land and workers to increase the production of one crop for sale. This leads to the expansion of fields, a disregard for the contours of the land, and a loss of biodiversity, all of which contribute to the erosion of soils, the loss of soil fertility, and the spread of harmful blights and insects.¹³ The consolidation of landholdings also contributes to the increasing divide between wealthy farm owners and impoverished and exploited farm workers, a dynamic Jesus constantly uncovers in his teachings, especially in the parables (and which we will return to in chapter 6). By contrast, village life organized around small land holders was animated by relationships of mutual support centered on the faithful *covenant*—relationships of love, care, and commitment between God, neighbor, and land (which will be a constant theme of this book, and explored in greater depth in chapter 3). Wheat, in the hands of a villager, was bread to be shared or seed to be stored. In the hands of a wealthy official, it was a commodity to be traded or an excess to be displayed.

The smaller farms were inclined to follow more sustainable and equitable patterns of life. On these farms, local families cared for themselves and their neighbors by growing a variety of crops throughout the year—wheat, barley, and legumes, planted during the winter on the flatter soils, and figs, olives, and grapes planted on terraced slopes and harvested in

9. Crossan, *God and Empire*, 102

10. Daly-Denton, *John*, 67. Fiensy, *Social History*, 55.

11. Freyne, *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean*, 45–46.

12. Freyne, *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean*, 46. Horden and Purcell, *Corrupting Sea*, 201–2.

13. Hughes, *Environmental Problems*, 122–27.

the early fall.¹⁴ The covenantal communities of peasant farmers followed principles that maintained the soil—keeping to agricultural diversity and simple living, which subsisted well below the carrying capacity of their land.¹⁵ The red soil of the region, which has a heavy clay content, and the reliance on rainfall (rather than irrigation) required the attention and care of wise farmers.¹⁶ The hilly topography, which called for the labor-intensive construction and upkeep of terraces, and the processing of grains, olives, and grapes required a profound amount of communal cooperation.¹⁷ The distant, extractive, profit-seeking ways of large landholders—who seized these former family farms—both fractured these communities and undermined their sustainable ways.¹⁸

In Sepphoris, Jesus would see the spaces where the commonwealth of village life had been funneled to support the lavish buildings and excessive lifestyles of the elite. This would be most clearly incarnated in the basilica, an administrative hub at the center of town that was visible from Nazareth.¹⁹ Though we associate the word *basilica* with a church or cathedral, in Jesus' time it referred to the center of administrative activity in the Roman Empire.²⁰ The basilica in Sepphoris sat on a footprint of about 200 by 260 feet, which dwarfed the average peasant house size of about 10 by 13 feet.²¹ As an epicenter of imperial power, governance, and economics, archaeologists think this basilica contained a market, a court, a dining area, conference rooms, and a small indoor mall for luxury items.²² In the shadow of imperial opulence in the city, Christ would have seen the growing numbers of the desperate and dying poor in the streets. This physical architecture that loomed over the peasant village several miles away was the manifestation of the tentacles of empire that reached out to the land and consumed its bounty, and which bound up the people and extracted their labor. Can you imagine how Jesus' heart ached or

14. Adams, *Social and Economic Life*, 83–84. At the heart of these sustainable practices were crop rotation, with legumes playing a central role in fixing nitrogen, and fallowing. Horden and Purcell, *Corrupting Sea*, 201–2. Though Leviticus 19:19 prohibited sowing more than one seed in the same field, Rabbinic texts indicate a good deal of latitude and leniency on this matter. Adams, *Social and Economic Life*, 85.

15. Boer and Petterson, *Time of Troubles*, 72–73. Echlin, “Jesus and the Earth,” 498.

16. Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 45–46.

17. Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 51.

18. Hughes, *Environmental Problems*, 122, 128.

19. Sawicki, *Crossing Galilee*, 178.

20. We should keep the basilica in Sepphoris in mind when we hear Jesus speak of a different order—the kingdom (in Greek, *basileia*) of God.

21. Reed, *Archaeology*, 118. Horsley, *Galilee*, 192.

22. Reed, *Archaeology*, 118.

his spirit was angered as he saw the roots of imperial development and success in the degradation of the land, the deterioration of social structures, and the exploitation of more and more people?

If Jesus is to have anything to say about environmentalism, it will likely not stop with replacing lightbulbs and buying certified organic products. Jesus' vision is more wide-reaching and touches on the entirety of life. It resonates with what is called the "environmentalism of the poor," or in the United States, "environmental justice" and "agrarianism." For those who live in neighborhoods (especially those populated by people of color) where toxic waste sites or heavy industry are located, or in regions that have been devastated by the legacy of mineral extraction, the links between nature and culture, the *environment*, and issues of *justice* are unavoidable.²³ Here, the soil is not ruined by natural processes or acts of God. Rather, neighbors develop cancer and water supplies are polluted through acts of boards—zoning boards and corporate boards that make calculations that render these places and people expendable. The perspective of *agrarianism*—a way of life rooted in the health of the land and the creatures that live upon it—clearly sees the social and political grounds of the ecological crisis.²⁴ Members of rural communities with deep roots in their place have seen policy changes and economic structures foreclose family farms, degrade soils, and hollow out entire towns. From this vantage point, environmental catastrophe is seen as deeply interrelated with the socio-economic structures of production and consumption.²⁵ Environmental problems are not simply technical matters in need of experts or a separate issue that requires small consumer changes, but they are social and moral failings that demand a social movement and profound changes in our ways of life. While cultural and geographic differences often inhibit communities concerned with "environmental justice" and "agrarianism" from joining one another, perhaps they both can find harmonious resonance in the green good news of Jesus Christ. This shared challenge and the wisdom of traditions hold the possibility for the fusion politics of a moral and social movement.²⁶ Walking between Nazareth and Sepphoris, Jesus might have seen the fault lines that cause the tremors of ecological devastation—those between the rich and the poor, the conspicuous consumption of the elite and the exploitation of workers, the use of land for profit and the stewardship of land for subsistence.

23. De la Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics*, 126–36. Cole and Foster, *From the Ground Up*.

24. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 1. Berry, *Art of the Commonplace*, 239–42.

25. Guha and Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism*, 18.

26. Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove, *Third Reconstruction*.

The car-bound affluent environmentalist typically does not see these problems, insulated by the closed highway of their commute and the pace of their travel and lives. My initial awakening to environmental issues was centered on seeking to protect the forest I hiked in, or the national park with mountainous scenic overlooks that I would visit on vacation. While such places are certainly worthy of protection, a limited attention to them betrays a naïve and closed-off vision of what counts as God's good creation.

This narrowing of the natural world to "the wilderness" is strongly correlated with a notion that nature and culture function in different spheres.²⁷ On this account, one is faced with either virginal landscapes that are to be chivalrously protected or natural resources that are commodities for our use.²⁸ This view of certain types of habitats and land as "wilderness" obscures the human role in habitats. It draws our attention to the parks that are playgrounds for the rich and allows us to imagine that these spaces are synonymous with "nature." This limited understanding of the natural world keeps many people from seeing the environmental issues and needs of the neighborhood across town. Furthermore, it turns our gaze away from the habitats and creatures that surround us in our yards and offices.²⁹ We might resist the developer who threatens "wilderness," but fail to see the ways our lifestyles require this destruction and the squalid living conditions of many people. This environmentalism of the rich obstructs the deep interconnection between the care of creation and the demands of justice.

Furthermore, our love of wilderness—of nature removed from the corruption of human action—has paved the way for a wrong turn into a false "sustainability." Inherent in this ambiguous term is the question: the ability to sustain what and whom? Without seeing the connection between socio-economic structures and ecological devastation, mainstream environmentalism has too readily adopted the myth of the Green Consumer Economy. This grand narrative tells us not to worry about climate change, that a green revolution in technology will actually lead to an economic renaissance. Because it has dressed itself in green garments, we have missed that what these merely technical solutions seek to sustain are not really ecosystems, habitats, or creatures, but the current economic order. If we are only familiar with our manicured lawns and the wilderness of our parks, we think that we live in a balance that could be sustained. But lost in this narrative are all the other people who *already* live in our sewage

27. Dickinson, *Exercises in New Creation*, 12–13.

28. Ruether, *To Change the World*, 64–66.

29. Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness." DeLuca and Demo, "Imagining Nature."

and habitats that have been irrevocably devastated. One does not achieve health by sustaining a cancerous growth.

We cannot simply make the present order more efficient through a turn to eco-business and pretend that we have addressed the worst effects of climate change. The expansion of production and consumption is wildly outpacing restraint or efficiency. Green consumption has not slowed down consumers or the expansion of markets. The savings that businesses find from efficiencies are reinvested into more factories, products, and stores.³⁰ For example, various efforts have decreased the use of plastic bags. Regulation in China alone has decreased consumption by as many as forty billion bags a year. The production of plastic, however, continues to increase as manufacturers produce three hundred million tons a year, most of which will end up in landfills and waterways. The oceans already contain at least five trillion pieces of plastic.³¹ There is a virtual continent of plastic in the Pacific Ocean, where currents have collected 79,000 tons of plastic debris in a patch three times the size of France, a collection that is increasing exponentially and is a small reflection of the estimated 8,000,000 tons of plastic dumped in the ocean each year.³² This is all to say nothing of the inequitable distribution of these resources, and the suffering tied up in their production. The changes needed are not simple tweaks in our operations, but a transformation of business models, the very logic of our economies, and the values and structures that shape consumerist ways of life.

In Jesus' context the Roman Empire offered its own version of the green economy that asked its elite to simply believe in the status quo and the virtue of working hard within established structures. In the public square, through poetry, through festivals and sporting events, on coinage and buildings, the Empire declared that it had brought about a new age of peace and prosperity. The Gospel of the Empire heralded Caesar Augustus, the son of God and Lord, who had triumphed over the forces of chaos and ushered in a new creation. This golden age was to be an *eternal* empire built on an order that tied together the fertility of the earth, hard work, support of the status quo, family values, piety toward the gods, and military might.³³

The good news of Jesus stands in stark contrast with the celebration of the order of the Empire. He is a Lord that calls for the kingdom of God, a new creation of mutual service and love rather than an army of slaves who serve a few elites. Christ's good news does not look past the bodies

30. Dauvergne, *Environmentalism of the Rich*, 41.

31. Dauvergne, *Environmentalism of the Rich*, 124.

32. Mooney, "Great Pacific Garbage Patch."

33. Carter, *John and Empire*, 204–8.

broken by the Empire, or the communities and landscapes that have been decimated, but is addressed to them.

This book, however, is not addressed to peasants. Jesus' ministry, though it brought good news to the poor, was not limited to those who were impoverished. He also brought healing to the privileged by showing them how to turn their lives around. His strategies and visions were not limited to the politics of resistance; they were also directed toward the incarnation of joyful and sustainable ways of life. This is good news for the overworked, alienated middle managers of empire today. Christ's life provides us with a vision and ways of life that will help us to live and see otherwise.

They Paved My Old Kentucky Home and Put up a Parking Lot

These forms of living and seeing are brought into focus for me on a strip of God's good earth that I previously passed daily on my commute. This stretch of asphalt is almost indistinguishable from so many other places in the United States. It bears witness to both the numb amnesia of the good news of empire and the limits of simply wanting to preserve wilderness.

In the last decade, a number of stores have popped up on the west side of US 25 toward the southern edge of the city limits of Georgetown, Kentucky. Two dollar stores of different chains sit side by side, having opened within a few months of each other. Next to them is the new Pizza Hut, across the street from the abandoned building that housed the old one. Almost directly to the south is a pharmacy, which is across the road from a virtually identical pharmacy. For a certain way of looking at the world these developments mark convenience. Their signs announce the gospel of the abundance of empire. On my drive home, I can stop and pick up a prescription, some food, or a product I might want.

I have the gift of having a longer memory of this place. It is the town where I was born and raised and am now raising my son. For most of the people in this town, which has tripled in size since my youth, this space was never green and its loss is invisible. During my childhood this plot of land was a lush pasture, and the site of a sleepy family farm. In its place are the eyesores of consumerism. Loamy soil has been covered with blacktop parking lots and redundant stores that sell cheap products and unhealthy foods. Everything about this space is now built on buildings and products that are *designed* to be briefly used, easily discarded, and instantly replaced. The long arc of seasons and the renewing cycles of grazing and growing have been replaced with the ten-year business plan. Soon the Pizza Hut will likely

abandon this building for a new one. Before too long I will need to return to the dollar store to replace the cheaply made box-fan I bought there. But that soil will not soon return to fertile pasture.

The losses that these stores stand on are not simply confined to my memories of idyllic pastoral scenes or wilderness. Through the processes of globalization, these stores are linked to webs of production and transportation that wind around the globe. These stores are in the shadows of enormous factories, wastelands left behind from natural resource extraction, manure lagoons from factory farms, and bare monocultured fields. The fan I purchased in the store moves along obscure supply chains, stretching to southeast Asia—to factories where workers likely faced harsh conditions. It is made from plastic products derived from petroleum. Though I do not know the particulars of the human injustice or the ecological destruction upon which it was built, I can imagine.

I must imagine these paths of suffering so that my response does not stop short of thinking about deeper structural issues. The task is not simply to protect the green spaces that are still left (though we must do that). Nor is it to focus on my individual action as a consumer—which would leave in place all the deepest assumptions and structures of *consumerism*. The task requires that we seek to understand how our very ways of life are dependent upon and participate in this strange paved habitat.

Even more, we must look for ways and paths that allow us to live in a new manner. We do not just need to consume different goods, but we need to transform our economies. We need to transform our work lives and our relationships. We need to transform our ways of accounting, knowing, and seeing.

Christ's good news helps us do all of these. It follows the path of the cross, a path of nonviolent resistance that shows the cruelty of the dominant order and that cultivates compassion in his followers. The cross unveils both the beauty of creation that lies underneath the blacktop, and the web of suffering that the highways of consumerism weave. We begin with the cross because it is the aspect of Jesus' life that is most familiar to us. But underneath this suffering is a vision for another way of life that will help us to find justice, rest, joy, and love.

The Crossroads of The Imperial and Covenantal

Like the current ecological crisis, the cross of Christ marks the site of both catastrophe and new hope. For the Romans it was an instrument of execution that announced the defeat of their opponents, but for Christ it displayed

the alternative path of self-giving love. The cross marks the conflict between two ways of living in the world—one that seeks to extract wealth from the land and exploit the people, and another that seeks to live on the land and with one's fellow creatures equitably and sustainably.

Though our familiarity with the cross as a golden symbol has smoothed its rough edges, it is important to remember that crucifixion was one of the most powerful acts of torture and propaganda that the Empire used. This public form of execution was the punishment reserved for slaves and political insurrectionists—people who dared to upset the hierarchy of the status quo. The cross was a billboard upon which the Empire displayed its power. For the disciples who saw their teacher brutalized and murdered in public, this was supposed to communicate that resistance was futile.

As an act of protest and nonviolent resistance, Jesus' death instead unveiled the desperate violence of the Empire.³⁴ While the good news of the Empire proclaimed that their systems of justice brought peace, Christ's peaceful and dignified demeanor in their trials showed its violence and cruelty. Therefore, the cross did mark a crisis, but it was the crisis of an entire way of life that needed to be repented of and transformed.³⁵ The path beyond this imperial catastrophe—which had forsaken the land and twisted the people—was illuminated by the power of self-giving love. As Christ would say at his last meal with his followers, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). The cross marks the dual movement of both resisting the injustice of the Empire, and living a life entirely dedicated to love regardless of the cost.

These dynamics of the cross are often lost because Jesus' death is abstracted from his life and context. In so doing we have lost the relevance that the cross has for our lives. Jesus was executed in no small part because he challenged the economic and social injustice of the Empire and unveiled the role that local elites played in this exploitation.³⁶ In our cultural context, however, we fail to make these connections because our understanding of "religion" often separates the life of faith from the economic, the social, and the political parts of life. It is probably necessary, therefore, to trace back through the Gospels some of the conflicts that precipitated Christ's execution. During the final week of his life, Jesus staged a number of protests, delivered teachings, and even occupied the center of power in first century Israel—the Temple. In the midst of his work, the ruling elite sought to entrap

34. Gonzalez, *Luke*, 123–25.

35. I have explored these dynamics, especially in relation to Paul's account of Christ's cross in 1 Corinthians, in *Exercises in New Creation*, 69–80.

36. Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions*, 188.

Jesus by highlighting the subversive implications of his positive vision of renewing sustainable communities and forgiving debt.

One saying of Jesus is often taken as a proof-text for the separation of politics and religion. But when placed in context, it points toward the conflict between the imperial and the covenantal ways of life. In the Temple, during his last week, Jesus declared: “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17). This declaration is made in *response* to a question posed to him by “some Pharisees and some Herodians”—members of the royal court and some wealthy elites associated with the priesthood. These political *and* religious figures are interrogating Jesus because they hope to entrap him (Mark 12:13).

These elites ask Christ: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not” (Mark 12:14)? In this question they want him to either state boldly and clearly that he is opposed to the occupying force—thereby committing a crime—or to show himself to be a coward and collaborator. The Empire regarded the failure to pay taxes as rebellion. At the heart of the Empire’s economy and power structure was the demand for tribute and taxes. These taxes were *not* redistributed for the common good. Wealth flowed *upward* in the economic hierarchy and toward the center of Rome. These mechanisms radically redistributed wealth from peasants (who made up about 70 percent of the population) to the elites (the top 2 percent who controlled around two-thirds of the wealth).³⁷ The prosperity of the Empire was built on extraction—taking wealth from peasants, slaves from conquered peoples, and fertility and resources from the land. Like many imperial powers before them, the Romans used slave labor to transform the land. They drained swamps, cleared forests, terraced mountains, and cut roads to connect trade and build military power.³⁸ They transformed local sustainable agricultural economies into industries that produced a single crop that could be hoarded by a few and used for profit and trade.³⁹

By contrast, the peasant village economies of Galilee and Judea traditionally operated through mutual support and subsistence. They did not strive to produce an excess that could be sent elsewhere, but they worked to produce a healthy and sustainable balance whereby everyone had enough and the land remained healthy and fertile. Admittedly, village life was not without the presence of peasant landholders who would seek to gain power and hoard resources, but there were stronger mechanisms of shared

37. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 61.

38. Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, 14.

39. Crossan and Reed, *Excavating Jesus*, 62.

governance to challenge such impulses.⁴⁰ Archaeological evidence and Jewish tradition (though both paint a fragmented and contestable picture) suggest sustainable land use and limited hierarchical division.⁴¹

The imposition of taxes forced peasants to produce much more than was needed by the community. This shrank the bounty of the harvest, demanded more from the land, and made sharing difficult, which in turn tore at the social fabric.⁴² One could no longer rely on one's neighbors. Given a hard season, a farmer might have to go into debt. This debt started a downward spiral with predatory lenders who ultimately foreclosed on family lands and consolidated their holdings.⁴³

The Pharisees' and Herodians' question about taxes did not simply touch on a specifically political or economic issue, but on the conflict between two orders and ways of life. These orders—the imperial and the covenantal—organized people's lives, shaped their relationships, and cared for the land in starkly different ways. Christ highlights this with his question in return, asking if they will accept that everything belongs to Caesar *or* God. The answer to this question is a matter of faith, politics, and economics.

Much as in the case of the cross, Christ turned their efforts back upon them. He asked them to produce a coin, specifically the Roman denarius, and inquired whose image was on it. "They answered, 'The emperor's'" (Mark 12:16). By asking for the coin, Jesus performed an object lesson in the gospel of the Empire. The coin doubled as a piece of propaganda. The currency was minted with a picture of the Emperor and words that declared him to be the son of God and the high priest. As such, the coins were considered by many pious Jews to be idolatrous and to have them in the Temple was blasphemous. Yet, the elite who were trying to entrap Christ in the Temple were able to easily produce one.

They were able to produce this coin because the Temple was big business. It was, among other things, a central bank for Jerusalem. The Temple elite benefited from economic inequality and likely participated in cycles

40. Boer and Petterson, *Time of Trouble*, 68–69. To draw this contrast between the imperial and the local does not require that the latter was perfect. Even if competition, corruption, and inequality existed on this level, it is a false equivalency to say that all human systems are imperfect and, therefore, they are all the same. An Emperor with an extensive army, bureaucracy, and propaganda campaign is importantly different from a local crook or bully. Furthermore, Jesus was not simply trying to restore a forgotten romanticized peasant reality, or even a former Hebrew ideal, but he was seeking to radicalize them.

41. Horsley, *Galilee*, 204.

42. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic*, 78–80.

43. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 204–7. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic*, 72–77.

of predatory lending.⁴⁴ Christ was not simply showing that the Pharisees and the Herodians had committed a faux pas by bringing an idol into the Temple, but he brought out into the open the fact that the elite had made their loyalties clear. They were the agents of the Emperor and his exploitative and unjust practices. Christ, by contrast, is arguing that everything—except the idolatrous and destructive coins minted by the Empire—belongs to God. Ever so subtly, Christ calls upon people to give the coins (and the extractive, exploitative economy they brought with them) back to the Emperor and to live in a simpler, more sustainable covenantal relationship with neighbors, God, and the land. While this vision might inspire hope for some, the elite of the Empire knew that such a possibility meant rebellion, and so they responded with violence, using the only logic the Empire knows. They executed Jesus.

Jesus was killed because he challenged the ways of empire. The cross stands as the sign of a brutal order that builds its power on broken bodies. What the Empire calls peace and prosperity requires the destruction of habitats, slave labor, and broken communities. This brutality, however, is hidden by the pieties and propaganda of the elite. Christ's protest announces the crisis of the imperial order and points toward the path of another way of life. The cross of Christ asks us: to whom do we belong and which path will we follow—God's or Caesar's?

Occupy the Temple

Christ was protesting a crisis, much like our own, that was rooted both in the political and economic machinery of an unjust empire *and* the dominant moral and social visions of faithfulness and goodness. When he initially entered Jerusalem, Christ went straight to the Temple and even more directly challenged the ways that the religious and political elite collaborated with the Empire. We should not think of the Temple simply as a religious space. In addition to serving as a bank, it was also the central marketplace that bolstered Jerusalem's economy and the seat of the ruling council of elders and priests.⁴⁵ Though Herod Antipas was the client king of Galilee, the region to its south, Judea, was once again a Temple-state ruled by a council, called the Sanhedrin. Here, at the crossroads of religious, social, economic, and political power, Christ staged his first act of civil disobedience. He entered the temple and drove out those who were buying and selling things. He “overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who

44. Herzog, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign*, 136–37.

45. Thistlethwaite, *#OccupytheBible*, 42–45.