

*Chapter Three*

*Confession and Absolution*

*based on*

*A Theology of Alienation and Homecoming*

**Confession:**

We confess the sins we have committed against God and creation,  
both individually and collectively.

We also confess that we have become alienated from Earth as our  
home by the forces of heavenism, dualism  
and deeds of domination.

We remember positive links with Earth in the past  
and re-connect with Earth as our home.

**Absolution:**

We hear the word of Christ that our environmental sin is forgiven  
and our alienation from Earth can be healed.

**Assurance:**

We hear the invitation of Christ to return home to Earth  
and to serve rather than dominate creation.

## *Chapter Three*

# **Confession and Absolution: A Theology of Alienation and Homecoming**

### **Introduction**

It is appropriate in our worship during a season of Creation that we make confession of our sins, or more specifically our environmental sins. How have we polluted or desecrated this sanctuary called Earth. What crimes have we committed against creation? How have we, individually or collectively, contributed to endangering life on our planet?

With an increasing awareness of the various ecological disasters facing us, we are given many opportunities to reflect on what past generations have done to contribute to the current crisis. This awareness, however, is relatively recent. Suddenly, our generation in particular finds itself facing the wrongs of the past and, to some extent, feeling guilty for what has happened. Before we confess the environmental sins of our generation, however, it seems important to ascertain why we find ourselves in this position.

Why is the Western world now examining its environmental conscience as never before? Why are God-fearing Christians who have thanked their Creator for ‘all good gifts around us’ faced with a creation that has been seriously depleted by human greed? Why are we about to confess sins that few ever thought existed?

We cannot fall back on old clichés and say with St Paul that ‘we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God’. We cannot glibly assert that original sin has yet again caught up with us. We cannot assume that the religious authorities has found yet another iniquity that we as ‘poor miserable sinners’ ought to confess.

To understand our situation, I believe, we need to come to terms with three key factors that have shaped our thinking over the years. We have been programmed, as it were, by both Western and popular Christian thought in a particular way that has left us alienated from Earth and disconnected from creation. For most of us, this has happened without our knowing. We are often unwitting products of our age—socially and spiritually.

In the light of recent analyses of our crises, I believe that the fundamental problem is that we have become alienated from Earth in a number of ways and that we have taken this condition for granted. In particular, I have identified three underlying causes of this alienation, each of which we shall explore in some detail. These causes are heavenism, Western dualism and dominion ideology.

Before exploring these forces, we need to be acutely conscious that these developments are especially evident in so-called Western society—and the affluent West in particular. Peoples in Indigenous societies, including the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, celebrated a spiritual kinship with creation and especially with the land. While it may be foolish to romanticize these societies, they certainly believed that they were custodians of species and sacred places throughout the land. For most of us who were educated in Western Christian society, however, the story is quite different.

## **Heavenism**

The process that separated—and ultimately alienated me—from Earth goes back a long way. As a child I was told to kneel at my bedside, close my eyes and pray to God—in heaven. God was in heaven looking down on Earth ready to bless little people like me. In the imagination of my simple faith, I was with God in heaven, far removed from my bedside on Earth. I was transported to a spiritual domain—through prayer.

God and the spiritual world were in heaven—separated, distinct and superior to Earth. At least that is what my teachers implied. The world of heaven was a world apart, where God dwelt in splendour and majesty. This world was not only more glorious than Earth, it was also more valued and pure. Heaven was holy and very high. This valuing of heaven as God's abode above meant a consequent devaluing of Earth as a mere footstool. In the word of God from the prophet: *Heaven is my throne and Earth is my footstool* ((Isa. 66.1). A footstool indeed!

In my church we were conditioned to view heaven as the superior abode of God in the hymns we sang and the prayers we said. Day after day we repeated the words of the Lord's Prayer: *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name*. Heaven was separate, above, spiritual, pure. God was in charge, transcending all created things.

The preachers I heard may well have emphasised that God was everywhere and in control of Earth. My faith community, however, continued to pray to God in heaven—especially in moments of crisis on Earth. In times of drought on the farm, a power outside of Earth was always invoked. Heaven was the source of real power and ultimate meaning. Earth was but one of God's creations, one of the worlds controlled from heaven.

In our faith we separated ourselves from Earth and directed our hearts toward heaven. While we lived on Earth physically, we lived in heaven spiritually—at least in church. For some the gap was much greater than others, but for all of us in the Christian tradition the words of Jesus—*Our Father who art in heaven*—helped maintain the separation, even if that prayer were never intended to function that way.

In short, we became alienated from Earth as our home.

*With God located in heaven and paying necessary visits to Earth, the theology that many of us learned tended to reflect this alienation. We knew a theology of heaven, of God above. We emerged with a theology of distance, a kind of spiritual schizophrenia—even if we did not sense any contradiction in our cosmology.*

The force of that theology of alienation still influences us. Our inner self, our spirit, has been separated from Earth as its original home and been relocated with God the Father in heaven. After a lifetime of looking heavenward, taking a spiritual journey Earthward is not easy.

My alienation from Earth was intensified over the years by what I now term **heavenism**--a belief that ultimately heaven above is our true home and Earth is but a stopover on the road to eternity. I followed the popular interpretation of certain passages in the book of Hebrews believing that, like Abraham, we are strangers and aliens on Earth desiring a 'better country, that is, a heavenly one' (Heb. 11.14-16). With this text ringing in our ears my community cheerfully sang:

*Guide me O thou great Jehovah,  
Pilgrim through this barren land.'*

Given this theological mindset, Earth is downgraded to an alien place far from home. Earth is a place of hardship and trials, a world filled with evil forces that lead humans astray. Yes, our home among the gum trees was considered a barren land!

As a boy I remember being impressed by hymns that directed our faith to a gleaming land above, a shining citadel with a high holy God enthroned in glory and celestial choirs far superior to the magpies that warbled in our wattle trees. That land was heaven or paradise. By comparison Earth was pathetic. Jerusalem the golden far outshone all the gleaming rainforests of Earth. At least that is how traditional hymns and Protestant preachers portrayed our cosmos.

The underlying problem with this portrayal is that it devalues Earth. Earth is considered material, this-worldly, inferior and corrupt. Heaven is spiritual, other-worldly, superior and pure. Heaven is where God dwells, Christ reigns and St Peter waits for us. Earth is where God visits, humans suffer and rabbits multiply. Earth is an alien place characterised by trials and tribulations; heaven is a domain of endless bliss. For Christians, it is better to be at home in heaven than be an alien on Earth.

The devaluing of Earth by heavenism is still common in much popular preaching. Among certain missions in Northern Australia, for example, there is apparently strong opposition to land rights for Indigenous Australians. 'Your land rights are in heaven,' is the cry of some missionaries. 'Seeking land rights on Earth is a temptation of the devil.' According to this orientation, we live in a dualistic cosmos: Earth is the inferior material domain

below where humans are obliged to dwell while heaven is the superior spiritual domain above where God dwells with the departed. The chasm between these two domains is enormous.

*Our worship in a Season of Creation needs to find a way to come to terms with the alienation we have experienced and celebrate a home-coming, a return to Earth. Our confession needs, first of all, to include a recognition that we have been alienated from Earth by a popular theology that made us view heaven as our only true home and Earth a barren land en route to heaven.*

## **Disposability and Dualism**

Another negative image that has been projected on Earth is that Earth is temporal, transient and destined for disposal. Earth is disposable while heaven is permanent. God created the Earth with a built-in obsolescence. Earth, therefore, is much less valuable than heaven. Some of us recall those old hymns which echo the refrain of how Earth will 'shrivel like a parched scroll'. According to some popular preachers, Earth will continue to deteriorate until its final destruction at the hand of God. Before that day of wrath, however, the faithful will be caught up in the rapture to escape the final conflagration. As the famous bumper sticker on some cars read: *In case of the rapture this car will be driverless.*

This orientation views Earth - and the entire physical universe - as living out its last hours before the end. Earth is corrupt, disposable and under judgement. Its condition is terminal. The preservation of Earth is, therefore, not a matter of paramount importance, something my great grandfather—as a farmer--never really accepted. Ecological movements merely defer the inevitable. A few nuclear blasts, holes in the ozone layer or devastating droughts, are simply portends of the denouement - the annihilation of Earth. After all, Earth is destined for disposal as cosmic waste. No wonder we have become alienation from Earth as our home, as God's sanctuary and a our biological parent.

I remember preachers declaring that Earth is mere matter and characterised by decay. By contrast, God, the spiritual world, and heaven are changeless and eternal. I still recall the words of the famous hymn:

*Change and decay in all around I see,  
O Thou who changeth not, abide with me.*

This focus on the transitory nature of Earth applies also to humans on Earth. They are dust and will return to dust. Unlike all other creatures and creations of Earth, however, humans are given a core that does not die, a core that is variously called a soul or a spirit. This spiritual core is eternal, a piece of the spiritual world of God above dwelling temporarily in a decaying body here below. The body—flesh and blood—may be alive but it is not spiritual. The spiritual component is deep within waiting for its release to be with God above.

These sharp separations between the parts of the cosmos are often designated dualisms—fixed opposing divisions in reality. The following table identifies some of the most common dualisms we encounter in the Western world.

Heaven Values	-v-	Earth Values
spiritual	/	material
eternal	/	temporal
enduring	/	disposable
divine	/	human
immortal	/	mortal
spirit	/	flesh
soul	/	body
blessed	/	cursed
sacred	/	profane
reason	/	nature

From a dualistic point of view, Earth is considered inanimate matter, the stuff humans are destined to use as they see fit. It has no intrinsic worth, only utilitarian possibilities. The Earth is not spiritual, but material.

Western dualism can be traced back to Plato. According to Val Plumwood, the superiority of reason over nature permeates his writing. He maintains that ‘in each of these cases the lower side is associated with nature, the body, and the realm of becoming, as well as the feminine, and the higher with the realm of reason’ (1993, 81). For Plato, according to Plumwood, the ideal of human life involves the ‘maximal distancing between the higher and lower elements’ (1993, 91).

This can mean that death is valued over life as the ultimate escape from the lower to the higher realms. This sense of distance and alienation is apparent not only in Christianity, but also in a secular world where belief in an other world is largely dismissed. The legacy of Plato in our modern world involves retaining the supremacy of reason over nature, but without any vehicle for connecting the two. Plumwood maintains that:

An ecological identity which aims to resolve the legacy of alienation from the earth must seek a ground of continuity not in separation from nature but in connection with it. (1993, 102)

*Dualistic perspectives have become engrained in both Western thought and Western Christianity. These perspectives reflect a sense of deep alienation between the spiritual and material, between heaven and Earth, between spirit and matter. To return to Earth, to overcome this separation and celebrate the forest garden called Earth as our home is a daunting task given the continuing dualism of our Western thought world.*

## **Dominion**

Perhaps the most destructive form of this dualism developed as a result of the mechanistic approach of the philosopher Descartes who wrote: *I do not recognise any difference between the machines made by craftsmen and the various bodies that nature alone composes*' (Ponting 1991, 147). Philosophers and scientists of the seventeenth and eighteenth century pressed the dualism of medieval Christianity to its logical conclusion. They viewed Earth as a machine, God as the great designer of the machine and humans as beings fashioned to determine the workings of the machine and run it for the personal benefit.

Plato may have emphasised the process of separation from nature as a human ideal; Descartes views that ideal in human control over nature. It is natural, he argues, for humans to dominate the natural world. Nature is stripped of any value and reduced to inert matter to be used and controlled.

Many of us in the Western world have been conditioned by this tradition, often quite unknowingly, to believe that human beings are superior to creation. We have been taught that human beings must harness nature, subdue the wild and transform the landscape into productive paddocks. Earth is here for the benefit of humans. Earth is wild and has to be tamed, an alien place that humans have made their temporary home, a cursed part of creation that will only reluctantly yield up its treasures.

The real problem for most us, however, lies with a deep-seated Christian belief that human beings have been commissioned by God to rule over all creatures and dominate Earth. Controlling nature is grounded in the mandate to dominate found in the *imago dei* text of Genesis 1.26-28, a classic text that is often considered the climax of the creation story in Genesis One. A standard translation of this text reads:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle and all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping things that creeps upon the earth. So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God he created them; male and female God created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth. (Gen. 1.26-28; NRSV)

One of the most powerful messages of this text is that human beings are created in 'the image of God.' Interpreters have argued for thousands of years about what that symbol means. What kind of God does the author have in mind? What kind of image? A king who rules from heaven or a compassionate spirit who dwells in Earth?

The difficulty we face when reading this text today is that human beings are apparently given a mandate to ‘rule’ over all creatures and to ‘subdue’ Earth. Are these the kind of actions that are supposed to reflect God’s image? Is this the kind of role for humans that will foster care and compassion for Earth?

Many have wrestled with this text long and hard over the years. The problem all along has been that we have been reading the text from the point of human beings—and, in particular, human beings who perceive God as the almighty king of heaven. When we now read the text with empathy for Earth and identify with Earth rather than heaven, we realise just how cruel and destructive this passage can be.

If we consider the Hebrew of this passage for a moment, we discover two key terms: ‘rule’ (*rada*) and ‘subdue’ (*kabash*). These are both harsh expressions. If I am honest with this passage, I cannot soften the language—as some suggest—and make ‘rule’ equivalent to ‘administer justice’ or ‘subdue’ equivalent to ‘care for’.

‘Rule’ refers to the action of a king controlling the forces in his kingdom, including his enemies. Some scholars cite Ps 72 as an example of how a king rules. The psalm begins with a prayer:

Give the king your justice, O God,  
And your righteousness to a king’s son. (72.1)

A king should indeed be expected to exercise justice, God’s justice for God’s people. Exercising justice, however, is not the same as ‘ruling’. If we read a little further in the same psalm we discover just how ‘ruling’ is understood:

May he (the king) *rule* from sea to sea,  
And from the River to the ends of Earth.  
May his foes bow down before him  
And his enemies lick the dust. (72.8-9)

In biblical Hebrew ‘ruling’ regularly involves having dominion over territory and forcing people to submit until they lick the dust. If, according to Genesis one, human beings are to be the kings ruling over the living creatures of Earth, then their task is to reduce them to subservient beings. Or in the words of the Psalmist, ‘You have put all things under their feet’ (Ps. 8.6). Such a hierarchical approach hardly promotes respect for the value and rights of Earth or the creatures of Earth.

The expression ‘subdue’ has similar negative connotations. This verb means to tread under foot (Mic. 7.19) or to take into bondage (Jer. 34.11). It is used to describe what Joshua did to the Canaanites when he crushed them (Jos 18.1). To ‘subdue’ is to reduce to a pawn, a slave or a victim. Once again, hardly a model of justice!

When I discover the meaning of these texts as an academic, the full force of their negative meaning does not always register. When I read this passage as an Earth child, I am staggered that such a cruel mandate should have ever been given. This text suggests that my parent Earth and my kin in creation are to be ruled as slaves.



This mandate to dominate is precisely the opposite of a calling to minister or nurture. If we now compare the verbs used in this passage with the first words of God to the first human in Genesis 2.15, we recognise that they reflect diametrically opposite images. Adam is told by God (in Genesis 2) to ‘till/serve the soil of Earth and protect/sustain it’. The verb to ‘rule’ and the verb to ‘serve/till’ are exact opposites. Likewise, the verbs ‘subdue’ and the ‘sustain’ are opposites.

rule/dominate – RADA	-v-	serve/till—‘ABAD
subdue/crush—KABASH	-v-	protect/sustain--SHAMAR

There is no obvious compromise between these two passages: the one focuses on ruling, domination and crushing. The other speaks of serving, sustaining and protecting.

If we are to nurture Earth, I would argue, the time has come to make a choice. If we dare to identify with Earth as the victim in the mandate to dominate, we have no real choice but to denounce that mandate and endorse God’s injunction to minister. If we are to explore an Earth ministry and seek to nurture Earth, I believe we must declare where we stand. We are here to minister to Earth not to enslave our own parent.

*In discussion about these two passages, the mandate to dominate in Gen. 1.26-28 and the commission to serve in Gen. 2.15, the question often arises as to which biblical passage ought to be normative. Are not both texts viable words from God? How do we make a choice between these two opposing words from a biblical perspective?*

Ultimately, as people in Christ, our first answer must be Christological. We must decide the will of God in the light of the ultimate revelation of God in Jesus Christ. And that revelation can be summarised as the Gospel, a theology of the cross as opposed to a theology of glory. Is the way of the cross consistent with the mandate to dominate or the commission to serve? The answer is clear, I believe, from passages such as Mark 10.41-45 where the disciples desire glory and greatness. Jesus contrasts the ‘rule’ of the Gentiles with the way of Christ, the way of the cross. His final words base the commission to serve on the very purpose of Christ’s coming—to suffer and serve:

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many’ (Mark 10.45)

Without negating the stark contrast between the two traditions—‘ruling’ and ‘serving’ Earth—we may wish to explore the paradox that Christ who came to serve ultimately ‘rules’, Christ who reflects the image of God and the form of a ‘slave’ ultimately has a name before which every knee must bow (Phil. 2.6-11). In the light of that paradox, is there a model that would enable us to re-read Genesis One in the light of Genesis Two? I believe this is a possible line of theological inquiry.

## **Confession, Remembrance and Assurance**

Our confession in a Season of Creation could simply enumerate the long list of destructive deeds humans have committed in recent years. The list seems endless—pollution, poisoning with toxic waste, nuclear radiation, deforestation, excessive land clearance, breaching the ozone layer, extinction of species, and so on. Human greed and ignorance have brought the garden of life on Earth to the brink of disaster.

It would also be constructive to focus on the story of our alienation from Earth. This focus would include stirring past memories of times and places when we felt part of Earth or close to Earth—what we might call Earth memories from our youth or our past. For many of us, there are deep seated memories of times when we did not necessarily feel separated from Earth or aliens en route to heaven.

We also need to challenge the forces that have separated and alienated us from creation. We need to discover points in our past where Earth was more than a land of exile en route to heaven, more than disposable matter, more than the site of human sin. We need to discern, behind the beliefs of a heaven-oriented tradition, experiential evidence of Earth as a place where we felt at home and loved by creation.

The first step in a constructive confession, I suggest, is a word of remembrance. With that word we connect with the garden of Earth we may have loved as a child before we were conditioned to view that garden as a ‘barren’ land for pilgrims travelling heavenward. One technique for assisting in stirring our memories is to use a fragrant symbol such as rosemary or eucalyptus leaves. The aroma, like incense, has a capacity to stimulate not only our senses but our memories.

The second stage in this confession may be to identify those forces that have caused our alienation from Earth, forces such as heavenism, dualism and especially the drive to dominate that has been justified by passages from our biblical heritage. In such confession we recognise that our desire to dominate has conditioned our very relationship to our planet.

The third stage is an absolution and word of assurance from Christ. This assurance is first a word of forgiveness for all our sins, including our environmental sins, both personal and communal. To experience this forgiveness, however, may take some time if we remain conditioned to believe that Earth is a resource to be exploited.

Just as important is the word of assurance from Christ that we invited to connect again with Earth as our home and to serve rather than dominate creation. This serving is based

on the theology of the cross (Mark 10.41-45). We are assured by Christ, who suffered for us and all creation, that Earth welcomes us home.

## References

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