



Our dependency upon creation

With COVID-19, we can no longer imagine we are separate from the earth

by Kelly M. Kapic

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➔ “I can’t work.” Concentration, creativity, and prolonged focus elude me. Hearing the early morning birds announce the start of a bright Spring day, I feel fairly dark on the inside. I am overwhelmed by troubling news, not just in my city and my country, but across the entire globe. The physical, psychological, and economic toll from COVID-19 is staggering. Between naïve optimists on the one hand and fear-mongering pessimists on the other, none of us actually knows when things will truly get better.

Even before COVID-19 hit, there was a confounding level of serious need in my community, country, and world. It was just easier to ignore. Many people were already feeling the pains of unemployment, isolation, trauma, hunger, and anxiety over access and effectiveness of healthcare. I am not trying to trivialize the seriousness of this current emergency, but what many of us feel with great intensity right now is the fairly common experience of those who are materially poor, relationally impoverished, or physically compromised. These recent events have only made their situations much worse.

In truth, we are no more vulnerable now than we were in November, we are just more aware of it. We continually depend on our relationship to the earth and to each other, but it was easier for us to pretend otherwise six months ago. We are always tempted to ignore our need for others. We love the myth of “independence.” Circumstances like this remind us that part of being human is that God designed us to live in relation to—which includes healthy dependence on—God, neighbor, earth, and self. Tragically, sin has affected all four of these relationships, so that rather than loving God, we harden our hearts toward him. And rather than loving our neighbors, we often view them as competition, or a burden, or at least a complication to avoid.

In contrast, the gospel tells us that, precisely because Jesus Christ has united us to Himself in love, we also respond in love both to Him and to our neighbor. In evangelical circles, however, those are often the only two relationships we are comfortable thinking about. Yet sin has affected not just how we relate to God and our neighbor but also to the rest of creation and even to ourselves.

Because sin has affected the entire creation it also changes how we exist in this world, bringing disharmony that Paul describes as creation’s “groaning.” The Puritan John Owen believed humans were called to help the rest of creation praise the Creator (by making musical instruments, building spaces for gathering, and so forth.). Instead we often take the earth for granted and rarely see how our interdependence with it either fosters or disrupts healthy relationships. When our lives are humming along steadily, we happily pick up paychecks and as many eggs as we desire, we go see doctors and greet one another unhesitatingly with a handshake, and we naïvely imagine we are separate from the earth.

But as a new virus ravages the entire globe, we see afresh that our rootedness in the earth affects everything, from breathing to finding employment, from gathering in corporate worship to having neighbors over for dinner. Having a concern for all of God’s creation is not just an environmentalist matter, it is a requirement for living as a human being, and thus a Christian requirement. We must neither worship the earth nor reduce it to disposable commercial units. Instead, we live in and with it as part of God’s wonderful creation that nevertheless groans under harmful disruptions and disharmonies. How is this the case? Well, that is a hard theological question. But that it is the case seems to me to be something we neither should, nor can, deny.

That is why it is always dangerous to over-spiritualize material poverty or famine or plague, ignoring the interconnected physical, mental, and relational toll they take. Don’t get me wrong, God is also sovereign over all earthly difficulties and disruptions, but that doesn’t mean we are allowed to ignore either their materiality or complexity. Often the unemployed feel abandoned by God, and believers struggling to breathe can be tempted to think God is angry and not compassionate toward them. How we physically feel and our ability to do good work in the world are inseparable from our spiritual condition, whether we acknowledge it or not. This is partly why faithful ministry aims to be as holistic as possible. Consequently, vaccines matter for Christians, just as employment matters and greeting one another with a holy kiss matters. We pray and work to see the disharmony between us and the earth overcome, both for our present good and for what was and is to come.

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