DEVELOPING AN ECOTHEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK
BASED ON MATTHEW 5-7

By

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ABSTRACT

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The rationale for this research stems from the complexity, diversity and contradictions in South African Christianity as far as environmental issues are concerned. This complex mix of biblical and theological traditions is reflected in Christianity’s diverse approaches to ecological justice as well as to social justice. In this dissertation, therefore, I enquire into the main trends in ecotheological thought prevalent today among the different South African Christian traditions. Although this research’s focus is on the South African church in particular, it is recognised that the church in this part of the world does not exist in isolation from the global church. Rather, many churches in this sub-continent are linked to others across the planet through denominational, ecumenical, or theological connections. Naturally, the uniquely local ecotheological perspectives of South Africa’s particular, sub-Saharan environmental and theological context are recognised. Accordingly, this research enquires into the various South African ecotheologies prevalent in our day as well as the ecotheological common ground that may exist between and among the different Christian traditions. A key benefit derivable from this analysis is the possibility of discerning relevance, unity, and order, if any, from the seeming incompatibilities, diversity and randomness of the ecotheological models in vogue. This very quest for common ground largely informs this research’s focus on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), reading it from an eco-ideological perspective. This particular text is selected mainly because it can be viewed as an integrated summary of Jesus’ message to his disciples then, with equivalent implications for Christian discipleship today and because this discourse has an arguably universal acceptance across the spectrum of the global Christian community.

It is envisaged that this research can contribute to the mobilisation of the South African church’s participation in global efforts to save our threatened environment, through contributing relevant insights regarding the role and practice of the church as a significant social justice and ecojustice agent. It may also provide the wider public with a paradigm that transcends mere empirical facts and consequently may be inspired to better care for the
earth’s ecosystems. In short, therefore, the problem this research seeks to tackle is this: How can an eco-sensitive reading of Matthew 5–7 contribute to the quest for a common ecotheology germane to an authentic spirituality and praxis? Related questions are: How can we meaningfully identify and differentiate the complex body of ecotheologies currently available? How can that knowledge be integrated into an authentic spirituality and praxis with respect to the church’s involvement in environmental issues? How can the socio-justice and ecojustice implications of the Sermon on the Mount empower the South African church to respond to environmental issues more cohesively?

My methodology comprises, firstly, a critical review of selected ecotheological literature, such as that by authors from the Earth Bible Project stable (particularly Habel, Balabanski and Leske), other ecojustice authors who demonstrate the eco-feminist hermeneutic well, authors on different Christian denominations or ecotheological persuasions, as well as authors providing a specifically South African point of view. The performance of conceptual analyses comprises a key feature of this study’s methodology throughout. So also is the evaluation and re-interpretation of prevailing ecotheological assumptions by means of the six-principle theoretical model of ecojustice developed by Habel and the Earth Bible Project: The Principles of Intrinsic Worth, Interconnectedness, Voice, Purpose, Mutual Custodianship and Resistance.

I perform a critique of the current SA ecotheological voices and discover that, while they are not totally devoid of some ecological merit, all of them are ecotheologically inadequate if they are considered each on its own. Due to its prevalence in the ecotheological conversation, the dominion-stewardship ecotheology is critiqued first. Then seven other denominational ecotheologies are explored, namely: Catholic, Lutheran, Evangelical, Pentecostal-Charismatic, Conciliar, Covenantal and Sacramental ecotheologies. This survey of the “greening of theology” in a variety of traditions suggests a remarkable consensus, characterised by a common recognition of the validity of a theological basis for the greening of mission, and a common admission of Christians’ individual as well as corporate complicity in the environmental crisis, which calls for authentic repentance and action. At least three areas of faulty theological thinking that require radical paradigm shifts become apparent: all Christian traditions call for a shift from an anthropocentric to a Theocentric understanding of creation; they all call for a shift from a personal to a cosmic view of salvation; and all call for a shift from an eschatology of abandonment to one of restoration. There also seems to be
ecclesial consensus that the church’s redemptive mission to the world cannot be divorced from justice in society or from the healing of the wounds of nature wrought by an exploitative human industrial system.

I then do an ecotheological exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount using the hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval and the six ecojustice principles. This entails, in addition to what may be termed “conventional” exegesis, the evaluation of prevailing ecotheological assumptions pertaining to the biblical text by means of the six-principle theoretical model of eco-justice developed by the Earth Bible Project. Use is also made of an adaptation of the basic hermeneutic of feminist scholars, namely, suspicion and retrieval, which compels exegetes to suspect that there may be anthropocentric, patriarchal or androcentric biases embedded in some biblical texts with a view to supersede these prejudices. After a survey of the six ecojustice principles, a structural analysis of Matthew 5–7 is done, followed by a consideration of the passage in the context of the Gospel’s allusions to nature, as well as an investigation of the discourse in the context of Old Testament allusions to nature. Then a discussion of the implications of the Sermon on the Mount for ecojustice becomes possible.

The passage’s ecojustice implications revolve around the kingdom of God ethic (regnum Dei) which incorporates ecojustice, the imitatio Dei which emulates God’s attitude to creation, the Beatific ethic which guarantees ecojustice, the Agape principle which assures ecojustice, the Metanoic orientation which demands transformation and the Pragmatic ethic which demands environmental praxis.

Next I explore how a universal Christian ecotheological framework can be formulated, using the aforementioned Sermon, as well as other building blocks. A brief consideration of the possibility of a valid Christian worldview follows this, before discussing the nature of the church’s mission with a view to determining the compatibility of the missio Dei and ecotheology. I then examine the role of the six ecojustice principles in the quest for an ecotheological synthesis. It emerges that conditions favourable for a common ecotheology do exist already, rendering the ecotheological framework derived from the exegesis of Matthew 5–7 quite realistic. The resultant integrative framework comprises the kingdom of God (regnum Dei) ethic as the substratum, and a superstructure consisting of the imitatio Dei, Beatific, Agape, Metanoic, and Pragmatic dimensions.
KEY WORDS

Ecotheology, traditions, Sermon on the Mount, suspicion and retrieval, ecojustice, spirituality, ethic, framework, substratum, superstructure

January 2011
DECLARATION

I declare that *Developing an ecotheological framework based on Matthew 5–7* is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

Joshua Chigorimbo

January 2011

Signed:
Sincere thanks are due to the Head of the Religion Studies Department at the University of Johannesburg, Professor Lilly (SJ) Nortje-Meyer, who is my Supervisor, for her invaluable guidance, support and leadership throughout the stages of this research. I am also indebted to the University of Johannesburg’s Library, Administration, Humanities Faculty, Religion Studies, and Finance staff for their kind assistance in my study at this level.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Specification of Research Problem and Study Rationale</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Discussion of Relevant Literature</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Description and Justification of Research Methodology</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 An Overview of Structure of the Research</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 2: EXPLORING EXTANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD OF ECOTHEOLOGY</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Dominion Theology</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Denominational Ecotheologies</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Covenantal Ecotheology</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Sacramental Ecotheology</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Denominational Consensus</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 3: AN ECOIDEOLOGICAL READING OF MATTHEW 5-7</th>
<th>39</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Summary of the Six Ecojustice Principles</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 An Overview of the Contents of Matthew 5-7</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Matthew 5-7 in the Context of Gospel’s Allusions to Nature</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Matthew 5-7 in the Context of OT Allusions to Nature</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 The Implications of Matthew 5-7 for Ecojustice</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4: TOWARDS AN ECOTHEOLOGICAL SYNTHESIS</th>
<th>77</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 The Possibility of a Common Christian Worldview</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Dimensions of Mission</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Integrated Mission</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Role of the Ecojustice Principles</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 5: CONCLUSIONS</th>
<th>86</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Summary</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Proposed Ecotheological Framework Based on Matthew 5-7</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Suggestions for Further Research</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>APPENDIX</th>
<th>100</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 101 |
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAEC: Association of African Earthkeeping Churches
AIC: African Independent Church
COP: Copenhagen Convention on Climate Change
EBP: Earth Bible Project
ICWE: International Congress on World Evangelisation
NAE: National Association of Evangelicals
SACC: South African Council of Churches
SADC: Southern African Development Community
SAFCEI: South African Faith Communities Environment Institute
USCCB: United States Council of Catholic Bishops
WEA: World Evangelical Alliance
WCC: World Council of Churches
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Specification of the research problem and a rationale for the study

The Christian church at large consists of a complex mix of biblical and theological traditions. This broad spectrum is reflected in Christianity’s diverse approaches to the environment as well as to other social justice issues. Thus, as Habel (1999:114) asserts, we are not dealing with just a single and uniform ecotheology, common throughout a monolithic church, but with multiple ecotheologies. Thus, a critique of the church’s involvement in ecological issues calls for an examination of the various ecotheologies in vogue to date across the church.

Although this research’s focus is on the South African church in particular, it is recognised that the church in this part of the world does not exist in isolation from the global church. Many churches in this part of the world are linked to others across the planet through denominational, ecumenical, or theological structures (cf. Effa 2008:171). Therefore, the same trends that obtain abroad also affect and influence the South African church’s involvement in ecological matters here. Of course, the uniquely local ecotheological perspectives of South Africa’s particular, sub-Saharan environmental and theological context must also be recognised. These peculiar local perspectives include, among others, the sub-continent’s ecumenical movement (the SACC) and indigenous Christian groupings (AIC). Thus, in this research the South African context is seen and interpreted in terms of the universal. It is also envisaged that the ecotheological framework based on specifically Christian principles formulated for South Africa can as well serve for a universal Christian ecotheological ethos.

Accordingly, this research enquires into the main trends in ecotheological thought prevalent in our day as well as the synergistic possibilities that may exist between and among the different Christian traditions as far as the earth’s ecological situation is
concerned. The theological concerns and reservations that render certain sections of the broader church less sensitive to eco-justice or even antagonistic to environmental matters will be explored, with a view to addressing them honestly and theologically. As Scott (1997:1) points out, an analysis of the usefulness or otherwise of certain ecotheological models—such as stewardship and custodianship—will need to be done. Similarly, whether the church’s mission, the *missio Dei*, can legitimately include environmental care, will also be investigated (Effa 2008:171). Furthermore, the presence of an ecotheological common ground, if any, will need to be sought, alongside the pursuit of what Schwarz (2005:54) calls the “spiritual balance” of all three of the broad church’s “colour zones”. According to Schwarz (2005:46–47) “red” churches are those that tend to focus on evangelism and discipleship, “blue” churches tend to focus on spiritual power and emotional health, while “green” churches tend to prioritise social and ecological justice. Spiritual balance is achieved when the church reflects the fullness of God’s light by blending all the colours harmoniously together (Schwarz 2005:50).

It is this very quest for common ground which, at least in part, informs this research’s focus on the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7), reading it from an eco-sensitive paradigm. The rationale for selecting this particular biblical text lies mainly in that it can be viewed as an integrated summary of Jesus’ message to his disciples then, with equivalent implications for Christian discipleship today (Allison 2006:424). It contains the essential core of the universal Christian ethos and faith, because the “new” torah/law replaces the old one (Matt 5:20) (cf. Carroll 1994:30). The intent is to critically assess whether this masterfully crafted literary section advocates for the church’s involvement in issues of social and ecological justice. For instance, does the concept of church as salt and light not imply an integral part thereof, but with a distinct influence therein? Thus, an evaluation will also be performed of whether the message of this New Testament text has not been unfairly restricted to purely anthropocentric purposes, resulting in the downplaying of the socio-justice, as well as the eco-justice, implications of the Matthean message (Carter 2001:367). The exegesis of Matthew 5–7 therefore, will be done from an ecotheological viewpoint, while taking its literary and socio-cultural contexts into account.
In the light of the critique of the church’s environmental involvement and of the ecotheological message of the New Testament (as illustrated by the selected Matthean passage), the specific shape and forms that such involvement may assume today can then be outlined. Besides helping to ascertain, and to mobilise, the South African church’s participation in global efforts to save, serve and preserve our common habitat, this research should also contribute vital information and insights regarding the role and practice of the church as a significant social force and player in our part of the world. It may also provide the wider public with a metaphysical basis for involvement in environmental concerns. That is, even those who may not be particularly religious, but are spiritual enough to seek a basis that transcends mere empirical facts, may be inspired to better care for the earth’s ecosystems.

As Conradie (2002:22) observes, there is an abundance of ecotheological literature from a mosaic of perspectives and contexts that have been published in recent decades. Our challenge is to make sense of all this cumulative wealth of ecotheological information. How can the disjointed Christian voices attempting to address environmental issues be blended into a harmonious symphony? The idea of a “symphony” here is used in recognition of the diversity of ecotheological voices but also represents a desire to attempt to harmonise these sounds much like in an orchestra. It is envisaged that such a harmonisation will not deny the distinctive contributions each tradition brings to the ecotheological table. Instead, it is hoped that the perceived discord in our ecotheology will be corrected.

This research, therefore, intends to investigate the problem: How can an eco-sensitive reading of Matthew 5–7 contribute to the quest for a common ecotheology germane to an authentic spirituality and praxis? Related questions follow below:

- What are the main ecotheological models prevalent today and how can the complex body of ecotheologies currently available be differentiated meaningfully?

- How can that knowledge be integrated into an authentic spirituality and praxis with respect to the church’s involvement in environmental issues?
• How can the socio-justice and ecojustice implications of the Sermon on the Mount empower the South African church to respond to environmental issues more cohesively?

1.2 Discussion of relevant literature

The ecotheological conversation in recent years has been characterised by various—and often even conflicting—voices, ranging from what may be termed ultra-conservative, to somewhat liberal, and to ultra-radical positions. The intervening space, of course, is occupied by a plethora of other voices, with their own particular emphases and innuendos. Thus, while some Christian voices betray a deep suspicion toward ecotheology and the environmental movement, others are willing to dialogue with other spiritual traditions (religions), as well as Christian traditions per se (Ruether 2000:604). The former tend to view the environmental movement as the rise of a new “nature worship”, which is totally contrary to “biblical faith” (Ruether 2000:603). The latter represent those who consider themselves at liberty to engage in a critique and re-interpretation of biblical and Christian traditions (Ruether 2000:604).

Such a critique would include, inter alia, the role biblical apocalyptic thought has played in some churches’ ecological group psyche, and an analysis of the covenantal and the sacramental ecological theologies (Ruether 2000:604). In the same vein, the call by the South African Faith Communities Environment Institute on religious leaders to place environmental justice at the forefront of their agenda, to promote a value-based economic system and take steps to safeguard the future of our children and planet earth, is a good illustration of the dialogue possible among diverse spiritual traditions (SAFCEI 2005:1, 3).

Of special relevance to the South African context, is how Cock (in SAFCEI 2005:3) views the conflict between the conservation emphasis over against people’s needs as a direct product of the nation’s apartheid history. This suggests, consequently, that this research will need to take into consideration aspects in our historical context that can affect ecotheological perceptions. By so doing, it is hoped that this research will contribute to the elimination of suspicions former victims of apartheid may harbour about
the genuineness of environmental initiatives. Along similar lines, Trost (2007:247) calls attention to theologians’ responsibility to bring a relevant message of grace for our time and context in light of the fact that the natural world, the sciences and technology are impacting our existence significantly, if not perilously. Indeed, a key task of church leaders and theologians, according to Trost (2007:248), is to serve society by interpreting the Word of God for our time, including the analyses of current trends as well as science’s influence on them in relation to theological doctrine and tradition.

According to Conradie (2002:24) greater benefit can be derived from ecotheological analyses which consider the specific contexts of Catholic, Evangelical, Feminist, Liberation, Lutheran, Orthodox, Pentecostal, and Reformed theology. Similarly, Habel (1999:114) cites the following current “versions” of ecotheology, besides such secular approaches as the Gaia hypothesis: creation theology, process theology, biblical theology and natural theology. By so doing, the aim is not to keep these ecotheologies in watertight separation. Instead, the appraisal of the distinctive value that each tradition holds can contribute to the discovery or formulation of an ecotheological model which is cognate to an authentic Christian spirituality and praxis, and beneficial to all humanity.

Daneel (2000:534) investigates the surprisingly pragmatic, grassroots-based, environmental praxis of an African Independent Church, which in turn belongs to the 150 member Association of African Earthkeeping Churches (AAEC), whose approach comprises the church’s earth-healing mission as an extension of Christ’s healing activities, since the church functions as the keeper or guardian of creation. This Christian tradition, though hailing from a rather modest socio-economic position, still challenges the world church to put its ecotheology into practice. Then the church can be willing to “re-vision its task, institutional shape, worship, and service from within the struggle rather than from a position of discreet, controversy-free distance” (Daneel 2000:549). Furthermore, given the widespread reach of the AIC phenomenon throughout South Africa, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and beyond, the potential impact of such an ecological theology, which takes cognisance of African cosmologies, thereby contextualizing its mission, can be dramatic.
At least two remarks made by Robra (2000:554) in response to Daneel’s discoveries above, are quite instructive for the purposes of this research: first, that even very basic Christian symbols are adaptable to African cultures, and second, that the relationship between the gospel and culture is not simply one of either “accommodation” or “opposition” or “radical critical revision”, but a complex mixture of those three basic relations described by H Richard Niebuhr. Furthermore, Robra (2000:555) observes that The Theology of Life Approach, which involves moving beyond the level of theoretical reflection to introducing transformative impulses on the level of social and religious practices, is well illustrated by the tree-planting rituals of the AIC liturgies. This approach, borrowed from a World Council of Churches analysis, may be quite amenable to this research’s efforts seeking to arrive at some sort of a universal eco-theological framework.

Such a synthesis calls for a wider conceptual consultation, beyond the confines of ecotheology per se, to the consideration of the nature of a valid Christian worldview. Bartholomew (1997:41–44) tackles this notion commendably in his article aptly titled, The Relevance and Contours of a Christian Worldview, in which he discusses the contours, functions, as well as the varieties, of such a comprehensive framework. Similarly, Scott (1997:1–14) devotes serious attention to the church’s eco-theological worldview, by addressing the issue of the relation between ecology and the idea of God, observing that “social” interpretations of ecology seem to fit with traditional Christian models, such as stewardship, for grasping the relation between humanity and nature, whereas “deep” interpretations of ecology, in which nature is understood to encompass humanity, appear, by contrast, less amenable to assimilation by Christianity, and then grappling with the question of choice. Does the Christian theologian opt for “social” ecology because it best addresses the issue of human embedment in nature or because it fits better with prior metaphysical commitments, or should not the ecotheologian be thinking through at a fundamental level the character of God’s relation to the world, since Christianity does not have to be confined to “religious” readings of ecology (Scott 1997:2)? “Religious” readings of ecology in this context refer to interpretations of ecology that rely exclusively on sacred texts (such as the Bible) and shun any so-called “secular” interpretations.
Trost (2007:247) illustrates well how Lutheranism can be eco-theologically appraised, by affirming the Christian tradition’s fundamental tenets and simultaneously validating environmental values. His analysis of this tradition’s basic theological foci (such as a doctrine of grace that includes graced nature, the Triune God’s very self gift in creation, reconciliation and sanctification, and the gift of God’s dwelling in the cosmos) with respect to ecology, as well as his advocacy that an increased knowledge of science contributes to a healthier approach to the church’s mission by giving a theological basis for ethical action in the world, are invaluable for the purposes of this research (Trost 2007:251–253).

On the other hand, instead of focusing on a single Christian tradition, Effa (2008:171–176) surveys the “greening of theology” in a variety of traditions: Catholics, Conciliar Churches and Evangelicals. A remarkable consensus, characterised by a common recognition of the validity of a theological basis for the greening of mission, coupled by a common admission of the church’s complicity in the environmental crisis, which calls for repentance, is outlined well (Effa 2008:174). Even more significant is the clarity of the conclusion: there are at least three areas of faulty theological thinking that require radical paradigm shifts, namely: all Christian traditions call for a shift from an anthropocentric to a Theocentric understanding of creation; they all call for a shift from a personal to a cosmic view of salvation; and an eschatology of abandonment to one of restoration (Effa 2008:174). Noteworthy, too, is the bold assertion by Carroll (1994:31) that Christ was an ecologist, and that the fourfold central Christian tenets (love your neighbour as yourself, avoid idol worship, avoid the sin of pride, and live simply) are overwhelmingly ecological, a point he argues quite cogently.

As far as the complicity charge cited above is concerned, Carter (2001:358) offers a view contrary to it, and also contrary to Lynn White’s famous 1967 thesis that the present environmental crisis is the product of the Christian doctrine of creation. Carter rejects the view that the ecological crisis is a direct result of the Christian tradition, by tracing the problem way back to the Scientific Revolution which in itself was a philosophical revolution with Cartesian, Baconian as well as Newtonian influences (Carter 2001:358–359). The same paper contends further that, in the first place, the ecological crisis must be
understood within the wider secularity crisis in which the sacredness of nature is diminished, and also of the fact-value dichotomy that limits truth to the empirically verifiable (Carter 2001:358). Secondly, these developments have been legitimated by Christianity by means of an accommodating Christian culture, and thirdly, that the atomistic anthropology, which is a heritage of mechanistic philosophy, as well as the facts-values separation is central to the environmental crisis (Carter 2001:358). This author’s avoidance of a simplistic apportionment of blame is commendable and instructive. Equally commendable is the author’s avoidance of unmerited exoneration of the church. This analysis’ value lies in its exposure of ecotheological blind spots, which may alert today’s church to the perils of repeating the errors of previous generations who gullibly connived with secularity or fell prey to a science that was in fact “a facade of objectivity that is the mask of ideology” (Carter 2001:370).

Archer (2007:304) argues that Pentecostalism is a distinct Christian tradition which is often erroneously subsumed into the category Evangelicalism, thereby risking the broader church’s forfeiture of its unique theological contribution. Given the rise in Pentecostalism in South Africa, as well as in the rest of the developing world, this tradition will also be given sufficient ecotheological consideration in this research. Among others, this will include the proposition that the church’s possession of a conjunctive integrative theology that places orthopathos as the interlocutor between orthopraxy and orthodoxy, is well worth considering in the quest for a relevant ecotheology and common Christian spirituality and praxis (Archer 2007:310).

Commenting on the “dominion” doctrine, Tarakeshwar et al (2001:402), having discovered that more conservative groups may be more resistant to environmental causes, suggest that future research should examine more closely the specific elements of this religious worldview that contribute to less support for the environment. Furthermore, having noted an association between a stronger belief in the sanctification of nature and greater pro-environment beliefs and behaviour, Tarakeshwar et al (2001:402)—on the basis of empirical research—concluded that religious institutions have the potential to support or discourage care for the environment. This sheds useful light on the possible causes for the apathy to environmental care evident in sections of Christendom.
Habel (1999:115) attempts to explore how a selection of key ecojustice principles may be reformulated if we assume the fundamental perspective of theologica crucis as our guiding methodology. His interrogation of the Principle of Intrinsic Worth, for instance, may make a valuable contribution to this research’s aim of helping allay some churches’ ecotheological misapprehensions. This is so because Habel (1999:117) argues that from a theological standpoint, the worth of the earth is not grounded in its existence as such, but in the very act of God creating the earth, in God’s choice of the earth to mask God’s presence, and in God’s act of dying on the earth for the whole cosmos. In similar fashion Habel continues to interrogate the other ecojustice principles (of Interconnectedness, of Voice, of Purpose, of Mutual Custodianship and of Resistance) from a theological perspective in ways that probably carry possibilities for the proposed integrated eco-theological paradigm amenable to a biblical spirituality and praxis.

The exegesis of Matthew 6:25–34 performed by Leske (2002:15–27) is a good illustration of an ecotheological reading of a Gospel passage. The approach can be extrapolated to the whole Sermon on the Mount. The “greenness” of Matthew’s Gospel is abundantly clear, as Leske (2002:16–18) demonstrates by citing at least five categories of references to the natural order therein, namely tree metaphors, seed metaphors, animal metaphors, heaven-and-earth references and Earth community parables. Relevant to this research also is the way Leske (2002:25–27) recognises the inter-textuality of the Sermon on the Mount, the treatment of the eschatological theme, the inclusion of nature in the healing Jesus was administering in the narrative, and the way the ushering in of the Kingdom effected a holistic transformation that integrated the whole earth community, the natural and the human worlds, as well as heaven and earth. Focusing on another part of the Sermon on the Mount, specifically the Lord’s Prayer, Balabanski (2000:151–161), acknowledges the unique role the prayer has played in shaping Christian theology, and challenges the spatial dualism implied by the structure of the prayer which separates the first section, the “Thou” petitions, from the second, the “we” petitions. The observation that this prayer is able to contemplate the reality of “evil” is very relevant to our catastrophe-threatened environment, and so is the depiction of the earth community, not as passive recipient of divine action, but as “co-creators” who can invoke God, resist evil and collapse the spatial and temporal separations of privilege, as well as serve the
prayer’s telos, which is God’s kingdom on earth, and not in heaven (Balabanski 2000:160–161). I think, therefore, that the whole Matthean Gospel in general, and chapters 5–7 in particular, is loaded with ecotheological themes we would do well to study further in view of the church’s environmental responsibility.

1.3 Description and justification of research methodology

Although a more detailed coverage of this research’s methodology will be done in chapter 3, a brief outline thereof is in order in this section. My research is a theoretical study in which I will critically review selected ecological theological literature in the form of academic books, journal articles and academic researches, theses and websites. The performance of conceptual analyses comprises a key feature of this study’s methodology throughout. So also is the evaluation and re-interpretation of prevailing ecotheological assumptions by means of the six-principle theoretical model of ecojustice developed by Habel (2000:42–53) and the Earth Bible Project team: The Principles of Intrinsic Worth, Interconnectedness, Voice, Purpose, Mutual Custodianship and Resistance.

The model has three main purposes: firstly, identifying the ecological orientation of the Earth Bible series, secondly, embracing specific ecological values consistent with the basic approach, and thirdly, providing a basis for articulating the key questions we pose as we seek to read and interpret the Bible. This will be done with a view to re-formulate ecotheological paradigms amenable to a biblical Christian spirituality and praxis in the context of our environmental situation. My methodology will also involve an eco-ideological exegesis of Matthew 5–7 within its literary and socio-cultural contexts.

1.4 An Overview of the Structure of the Research

The structural layout of the research follows the format below:

Chapter 1: Introduction
Chapter 2: Exploring extant contributions to the field of ecotheology
Chapter 3: An Eco-ideological Reading of Matthew 5–7
Chapter 4: Towards an Ecotheological Synthesis
Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusions

Bibliography

Critical to the possibility of discerning and developing an ecotheological synthesis in the South African context is an understanding of the nature of ecological theology at present in this country’s Christian traditions. That is why the next chapter surveys the potpourri of ecotheologies in vogue in South Africa, with a view to recovering sense from the apparent chaos.
CHAPTER 2

EXPLORING EXTANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD OF ECOTHEOLOGY

According to Effa (2008:171), due to the growing consensus that the planet may be heading toward an unprecedented ecological disaster, the Christian community is re-examining some of its theological assumptions and seeking to plug the holes in its conception of the *missio Dei*. Because theology is not developed in a vacuum, but emerges in response to concrete situations or crises that provoke study and reflection, the addressing of each new crisis—such as our current environmental predicament—offers an opportunity for the enrichment and enlargement of our perspective on the nature of the Christian mission (Effa 2008:171). However, as pointed out in the previous chapter, the Christian community is not a singular, homogeneous faith community, but a multifarious mosaic of traditions. This chapter, therefore, surveys the miscellany of Christian “voices” scrambling for attention, as it were, in the South African ecotheological conversation today—by enquiring into the main strands of current ecotheological thought.

A key benefit derivable from this analysis is the possibility of discerning relevance, unity, and order, if any, from the seeming incompatibilities, diversity and randomness of the ecotheological models in vogue. A characteristic of the potpourri of perspectives and approaches to environmental care and the ecological crisis surveyed below is the presence of overlaps between and among the various ecotheological voices. The discovery of such common ground as well as distinctive features among the traditions may contribute to the quest for a more comprehensive Christian ecotheology. Indeed, according to Scott (1998:9), there are compelling reasons why a sound ecotheological typology is both urgent and imperative. In the first place, a system of classification provides a useful overview by mapping the area of ecotheology, enables users to
recognise existing tendencies among the different ways in which ecotheology tries to address the ecological crisis, and aids users to identify new directions (Scott 1998:9).

2.1 Dominion Ecotheology

The rationale for beginning this analysis of ecotheologies with “dominion theology” is that, according to Scott (1997:1), the terms “stewardship” and “dominion” are proving to be difficult to displace from their position as the prominent models for interpreting Judeo-Christian responsibility for the natural order. Showing no signs of ebbing, the debate over these models’ relevance, usefulness and validity in the exploration of the relationship between humanity and the natural order persists. Questions about the association between the models with the metaphor of oppression, questions about whether they lead to the desacralisation of nature and about the consequent mastery of nature, abound (Scott 1997:1). Such critics as Lynn White, place the blame for the current ecological crisis squarely on the shoulders of Christianity, contending that the Bible’s “dominion theology” was the basis Western societies used to mercilessly exploit the earth and its resources (Bouma-Prediger 1995:4). Such a view thus attributes the current global environmental disaster, not so much to overt human activities (such as mining, toxic waste disposal, and the like), but to the underlying attitudes and mindsets, the root causes.

This ongoing debate is illustrated by the fact that whereas some theologians argue that stewardship-dominion models are still useful as they are, others suggest that these models can be rendered relevant by revising them, while others advocate for the outright rejection of any model which bears any resemblance to stewardship-dominion whatsoever (Scott 1997:1). Anthropocentrism, an earth-keeping attitude that values the environment in terms of its use to humans, described by Conradie (2005:4), is archetypical of the model. Douglas John Hall exemplifies the revisionist approach, as he holds that the anthropological substructure of stewardship is crucial, argues in favour of the development of a biblical-theological anthropology which can locate both the differences and the continuities between humanity and nature, and asserts that the model of stewardship is recoverable, albeit after considerable theological development (Scott
1997:1). The argument then would be that the custodial responsibility given to humanity is defined biblically in the context of accountability to the Creator, and as such is necessarily incompatible with a worldview which devalues creation. In contrast, other theologians hold that the traditional Christian metaphysical schema, which has tended to put the spotlight on humanity and God as the primary actors in the drama of salvation history, with nature relegated to the background, is the real problem. In this view, therefore, what is required is not so much the improvement of traditional models (such as stewardship), but the reconstruction of the Christian understanding of God and world, and the rejection of the “erroneous” models (Scott 1997:1). This view is comparable to what Conradie (2005:4) describes as the intrinsic value approach to earth-keeping, that is, a paradigm which values nature for its own sake. Yet “oikos” theology, the earth-keeping approach which holds that human beings are all members of God’s household, offers an alternative to the typical stewardship-dominion doctrine (Conradie 2005:4). It is an alternative that emphasises all creation’s egalitarian value instead of the dominance of one species over others.

Commenting on the “dominion” doctrine, Tarakeshwar et al (2001:402), infer from their empirical research that more conservative groups tend to show greater resistance to environmental causes, and suggest that future research should examine more closely the specific elements of this religious worldview which contributes to less support for the environment. The same authors also note an association between a stronger belief in the sanctification of nature and greater pro-environment beliefs and behaviour, and conclude that religious institutions have the potential to support or discourage care for the environment (Tarakeshwar et al 2001:402). Given the prevalence of the stewardship-dominion model cited earlier, the implications of these researchers’ findings are both revealing and alarming. The urgency of revisiting this ecotheological model and others becomes acute, if further harm to the environmental cause is to be averted.

Indeed, according to Scott (1997:1), despite their divergences, these positions agree on the one point that our idea of God (our theology) affects our view of nature (our ecology). Thus, the issue of ecological degradation raises the issue of our views of nature, which in turn is linked to our idea of God. Therefore, if the theological task is the explication of
the God-world relation, the way ‘nature’ is understood in that ‘world’ then assumes high significance (Scott 1997:1).

Similarly, Cock (2005:3), specifically arguing from a South African perspective, castigates the popular notion of sustainable development as a flawed concept because of its silence about justice, as it regards nature as simply a warehouse of resources. *Prima facie*, this lambasting of what appears to be an improved version of the stewardship-dominion model is unjustified. That is until one follows the argument further. Then one realises that the notion that the state must have a minimal role in development allows the market to callously determine how production and distribution occur, with the consequent ruthless exploitation of people and natural resources (Cock 2005:3). Furthermore, even environmental justice *per se* is flawed, since mainstream environmentalists historically concerned themselves—largely on account of the erstwhile apartheid ideology—with conservation, issues of pollution, genetically modified food and toxic waste, at the expense of people’s needs and to the neglect of concerns for biodiversity (Cock 2005:3).

Such a critique suggests a stance that refuses to be hoodwinked by the mere disguising of the stewardship-dominion model by means of terms that appeal to societal sensitivities yet without addressing the fundamental issues and concerns of a humanity under the threat of environmental disaster. On the other hand, many traditional Christians, according to Ruether (2000:603), have reservations and suspicions toward the ecological movement, and also fear being deceived by ‘nature worship’ in the cloak of theology or religion, contrary to “biblical faith”. The implication of this popular ecotheological stance is that any attempts at revisiting the stewardship-dominion model must be done advisedly. Perhaps a plausible approach argues from a solid biblical basis in the first place, such as a portrayal of the church’s redemptive mission to the world in terms of its integral connection to societal justice, as well as to “the healing of the wounds of nature wrought by an exploitative human industrial system” (Ruether 2000:603). Moreover, an authentic biblical Christianity is holistic in perspective and does not divorce individual salvation from society and society from creation, as Ruether (2000:603) argues. Such a view of the *missio Dei* is comprehensive, embracing the entirety of God’s creation,
human and non-human, flora and fauna, organic and inorganic. In contrast, the Christian worldview that Bartholomew (1997:43) describes as “Christ against culture” holds that because human cultures are fallen, Christians must withdraw from secular cultures and witness to the world. Such a paradigm is typical of the apocalyptic thinking which, according to Ruether (2000: 604), until recently underestimated the human capacity to destroy the earth.

While admitting that the Genesis creation narrative and the Judeo-Christian tradition can be misconstrued through crude and superficial analyses, devoid of the wider theological context, to engender, encourage or perpetuate exploitative anthropocentric attitudes, Carter (2001:358) rejects the view that the ecological crisis is a result of the Christian tradition in any direct sense. He argues instead that White’s 1967 account of the history of exploitative attitudes reflects his (White’s) own misperceptions and also reveals a history of misperceptions (Carter 2001:358). In the first place, posits Carter (2001:358), the ecological crisis must be understood within the wider secularity crisis, as a result of the diminution of nature’s sacredness through the configuration of nature as object, and also of the fact-value dichotomy that restricts truth to that which is empirically verifiable. Secondly, the fact that these developments took place within “an accommodating Christian culture” means that Christianity effectively legitimated them, argues Carter (2001:358). Thirdly, the now normative model of the human person as atomistic individual, which is itself a legacy of the Cartesian-Baconian-Newtonian mechanistic philosophy of the Scientific Revolution which detached nonhuman creation from God’s sight, and the facts-values separation are integral to the environmental situation, according to Carter (2001:358). Therefore, science has had a directing role in society with an ideological component, which in due course would impact central developments in all aspects of modern culture, leading to the shaping of the social and intellectual beliefs that gave rise to the competitive, imperialist, and secular hegemony (Carter 2001:359). “Science became the paradigm of intellectual authority while theology and metaphysics were marginalized. Science was understood as the engine of progress in all things” (Carter 2001:360). Thus, the ecological crisis is effectively a manifestation of the broader problems of secularism, as the sense of the sacred and respect for divine law is
It must be noted, however, that although the above author rejects the *direct* ascription of the ecological crisis to “dominion theology” and Christianity, he acknowledges the validity of an *indirect* association. That is why he argues that secular humanism was to some extent the creation of a certain dualistic theology, and that the Reformations of the 16th century planted not only the seeds of secularization but also of privatized religion and extreme individualism (Carter 2001:359). Therefore, Christianity cannot be entirely exonerated from complicity in the ecological crisis.

It follows, therefore, that the task of eco-theologians today must include the elimination of those elements in our schema that desacralize and tend to silence the voices of nonhuman members of creation. As will be made obvious later in this paper’s treatment of the six eco-justice principles, a responsible exegesis of the biblical text will discard the implicit Cartesian construal of nonhuman life as machinelike, which has robbed it of its status as part and parcel of God’s creation. The undue emphasis on humans’ innate capacity to reason, which provided the basis for Christianity’s rationalization of the brutal treatment of nonhuman life, cannot be further countenanced (Carter 2001:360). Humans’ so-called intellectual superiority does not grant them an inalienable license to domineer the rest of nature.

Interestingly, instead of tracing back the origin of a tyrannical stewardship-dominion only as far as the Enlightenment-Reformation-Renaissance periods, Tubbs (1994:3) attributes it to the influence of ancient Stoic and other Greek philosophers upon such early church fathers as Origen and Aquinas, who consequently adopted a hierarchical and ideological understanding of created nature. Furthermore, Tubbs (1994:4) points out that even the more biblically-oriented Reformation writings of Luther and Calvin have echoes of the instrumental, nature-for-human-use interpretation of human dominion. This implies that early Christian theologians’ exegesis of the creation narratives were necessarily contaminated, as it were, by “alien” ideologies. Such a conclusion has redeeming possibilities for current exegetes, for then they can approach the biblical text afresh,
without subsuming the historical notions of (brutal) domination. Unfortunately for those seeking the wholesale exoneration of Christianity’s culpability in the ecological crisis, the above observations only partially acquit Christianity. Christians of previous generations certainly must shoulder at least some of the responsibility for our present environmental disaster. But to be fair, so do other sectors of human society—such as ancient scientists, philosophers and theologians. By the same token, Christian scholars and disciples of our generation run the risk of repeating the mistakes of history, unless we take due cognisance.

While some Christian voices, as discussed above, advocate for the relevance of the stewardship-dominion model to varying extents, others radically differ. Ruether (2000:604), for instance, goes as far as asserting that the biblical, Christian traditions are neither unique nor adequate in their offer of wisdom for the reclamation of the sanctity of the earth, body and woman. Thus there must be genuine dialogue, mutual enrichment, critique and re-interpretation of Christianity and other faiths, including “the great Asian religions” and the vastly misunderstood native religions of indigenous peoples, among others (Ruether 2000:604).

2.2 Denominational Ecotheologies

According to Conradie (2002:24) greater benefit can be derived from ecotheological analyses which consider the specific contexts of Catholic, Evangelical, Feminist, Liberation, Lutheran, Orthodox, Pentecostal, and Reformed theology. Similarly, in addition to secular approaches, Habel (1999:114) cites the following current “versions” of ecotheology which permeate and influence various denominational ecotheologies: creation theology, process theology, biblical theology and natural theology. The aim of reflecting upon the various denominational ecotheologies is not to keep these ecotheologies in watertight separation. Instead, the appraisal of the distinctive value that each tradition holds should help in the process of developing an authentic and common Christian ecotheology. In light of the scope of this research, the exploration of the Christian ecotheological voices in South Africa prioritises the theologies stemming from
the major denominations of this nation. Therefore, any ecotheological “versions” discussed in this chapter are admitted only insofar as they relate to a specific Christian tradition. By the same token, “feminist” ecotheology is reserved for the next chapter, where the methodology of the Earth Bible Project, is discussed in considerable detail. Although the denominational categories considered below may not necessarily be exhaustive of all South African churches, they certainly are representative of the lion’s share of the Christian community.

**Catholic**

Carroll (1994:30) discusses what he terms Catholic approaches to ecology, based on the fourfold tenets of Jesus’ Christian ethic as represented in the Gospels. As far as he sees it, the central tenets of Christianity are overwhelmingly ecological and in synchrony with the principles of ecology (Carroll 1994:30). The fourfold central tenets of Christianity, which appear in other faiths, too, are: *love your neighbour as yourself, avoid worship of false idols, avoid the sin of pride* (or false pride), and *live simply* (Carroll 1994:31).

Regarding the first tenet, *love your neighbour*, Carroll (1994:31) argues that although most people accept other humans as neighbours, history records that certain fellow humans (such as women, children and certain indigenous peoples) have been denied that recognition. That restriction of the status of neighbour has also certainly affected other animals, flora and inorganic members of creation, due to a narrow interpretation of this tenet, in spite of our current scientific and ecological knowledge (Carroll 1994:31). Then the argument is extrapolated, quite persuasively, to the link between loving our neighbour and loving our God. He argues that since God is in creation, that is immanent in all creation, as supported amply by scriptural interpretation, whether Protestant or Catholic, we must love creation if we are to love God: “Hence a broadening of *neighbour* and recognition of God in creation seem necessary. The impact of truly following this command would be profound. Or should we avoid this profound change and stop calling ourselves Christian?” (Carroll 1994:31). This notion is well-corroborated by the late Pope John Paul II who, according to Effa (2008:171), offered significant leadership in formulating a Roman Catholic response to the environmental crisis, by, *inter alia,*
acknowledging the integrity of all creation, calling for an “ecological conversion”, and coupling the development of a peaceful society with the mandate of caring for nature.

Carroll (1994:32) further argues that many have relegated the commandment to avoid false idols to history, as an archaic practice done in the past by primitive peoples who worshipped false gods. Yet, he argues, money is the false idol to which we pay homage today, considering it to be the end rather than a means to an end, and thus, our society runs the risk of invoking its own demise through breaking the first commandment by worshipping the idol of money, substituting money for God, creation and neighbour (Carroll 1994:32). If the overriding profit-motive were to be dislodged from our common psyche, as we replace it with a consciousness of God in our neighbour and in creation, a profound ecological, social and spiritual impact would result (Carroll 1994:32).

Turning to the third Catholic tenet, avoid false pride, Carroll (1994:32) asserts that the degree of Christian concern over the sin of pride has fallen over the years as the sin itself acquired weakening qualifiers (such as overweening, false and excess), whereas to earlier Christians the sin is pride, pure and simple. This reflects our drive for superiority over all, encouraged by the Cartesian-Newtonian-Baconian and Enlightenment mindset, which asserts that humans are central, dominant, know best and should use their power to mould, manipulate, command, and control nature, creation, and ultimately God (Carroll 1994:33)! In his own inimitable style, Carroll (1994:33) concludes succinctly:

The world has become our toy, there for us to tinker with and play around with, to use as we would. We have become separate from Creation, and somehow above it. We yielded to the temptation to power, and have savaged the planetary ecosystem, many fellow human beings, and generations yet unborn.

Catholic ecotheology is heavily indebted to one of its leading theologians of the last century, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who saw the plan and purpose of God as embracing both humans and the cosmos, and whose hopeful picture of the cosmic future and his call to partnership in the divine plan inspired subsequent links between the church’s mission and ecological concerns (Efua 2008:171). Such a holistic paradigm of God’s purpose for
the whole of creation leaves no room for false pride. In the same vein, Karl Rahner, who shaped the theology of Vatican II and beyond, argued that the resurrection of Jesus not only guaranteed the promise of eternal life for human creatures but also opened the door for the final transformation of all of creation, and hence the resurrection of Jesus should be seen as the beginning of the redemption of creation, as “pledge and beginning of the perfect fulfilment of the world” (Effa 2008:172). Similarly, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in its statement *Renewing the Earth*, cast the environmental crisis as a moral challenge, called for holistic conversion, linked creation-care with the pursuit of justice and the protection of the disadvantaged, and even called for increased sharing of green technologies and resources with developing countries (Effa 2008:172).

According to Carroll (1994:33) Catholic Christianity also commands that we *live simply*, compelling us to distinguish our needs from wants and bridle our consumerism, such that we do not take more than what we need. He compares the excessive consumerism of the Western world to the rest of the world, noting how the United States constitutes only 5.6 per cent of the world’s population but demands over 25 per cent of the world’s energy and natural resources (Carroll 1994:33)! The tendency for Westerners to confine the global population debate to the numbers of people in third world countries, and not on their own per capita consumption and the need to change their own behaviour, is a despicable scapegoat which steers the discussion away from living simply, argues Carroll (1994:33). Furthermore, the readiness to confuse living simply with asceticism, which results in the disposal of that tenet as unreasonable and unacceptable “is a deliberately gross distortion of the argument, designed to avoid the issue” (Carroll 1994:34).

On a different note, Canadian Catholic bishops refer to creation’s sacramental nature as a revelation of the Creator’s generosity and of God’s dynamic presence, as God speaks in the life forces of our planet, the universe and in our own lives (Effa 2008:172). Thus, the ecological crisis is a profoundly religious crisis, on account of the fact that since God’s glory is revealed in the natural world, the destruction of creation limits our ability to know God (Effa 2008:172). The theological link between creation and the incarnation is another key element in this Catholic reflection, as it suggests that when Jesus took on
flesh, he embraced not only our humanity but also all of creation: “Thus all creatures, great and small, are consecrated in the life, death and resurrection of Christ” (Effa 2008:172). Then, quite pertinent to our third-world South African setting, the Social Affairs Commission of the Canadian Catholic bishops explores the connection between advocacy for the poor and care for the environment, suggesting that the preferential option for the poor can be extended to include a preferential option for the earth, made poorer by human abuse, and concludes with a call for a threefold eco-justice response:

- The **Contemplative Response**, which calls for a deeper sense of awe for the beauty of creation as a means of knowing the Creator;
- The **Ascetic Response**, which calls for a restrained consumerism and fasting from actions that pollute;
- And the **Prophetic Response**, which calls for preaching and community action that address the ecological crisis as a social justice issue (Effa 2008:172).

**Lutheran**

Trost (2007:247) singles out the Lutheran Christian tradition, to illustrate how its fundamental tenets can be affirmed while simultaneously upholding environmental values. Given the magnitude of the South African Christian voices emanating from the Reformed tradition, the significance of this analysis is enormous. By far the vast majority of churches with Protestant roots hold to significant elements of Lutheran theology. In fact, even Catholicism has had to come to terms with Lutheran theology, as illustrated in Vatican II (Trost 2007:251). The author analyses, with respect to ecology, this tradition’s basic theological foci, namely: *a doctrine of grace that includes graced nature; the gift of the Triune God’s very self in creation, reconciliation and sanctification; and the gift of God’s dwelling in the cosmos* (Trost 2007:251). He further argues that an increased knowledge of science contributes to a healthier approach to the church’s mission by giving a theological basis for ethical action in the world (Trost 2007:253).

A more comprehensive study of Lutheran theology will dispense with the common tendency to a narrow anthropology, which extracts humans from the world and concentrates on God’s activity on behalf of humans as if apart from nature. This
theology’s inordinate emphasis on humans is largely due to the tradition’s emphasis on “forensic justification”, that is, a view of humans’ salvation which uses a court of law metaphor (Trost 2007:249). In such a view, humans who receive the gospel are declared not guilty, acquitted from the penalty of sin, as it were, in a legal, forensic sense. Non-human creation is thus presumed to be excluded from this salvation, or irrelevant to the whole transaction: hence the criticism of its narrowness. This otherwise valid Reformation emphasis on Jesus’ vicarious death, whereby God’s grace makes the sinner righteous, is not the entire story of a gracious God, says Trost (2007:249). Regrettably, the history of theology has revealed a very complex interpretation of the relationship of the grace of God to the world of nature, and has tended toward a dichotomous understanding of “nature” versus “grace” (Trost 2007:251).

Rather, according to Trost (2007:251), Luther progressively discovered that the notion of grace must be understood in terms of God’s triune self-giving and applies to all God’s acts from creation to redemption to sanctification. Therefore, the grace of God is not restricted to the cross. God’s Trinitarian action is gracious in that from the beginning it aims at establishing communion between the Creator and his creatures, and the way in which God engages creation in the self-giving of the Son and the Spirit takes the very materiality of created existence into the act of divine self-giving, argues Trost (2007:251). Moreover, if the logic of God’s Trinitarian self-giving is well understood, the need to explain the nature-grace relationship becomes redundant, since creation is part and parcel of the gracious act of God in the first place, to the extent that we can safely conclude that there is no such thing as un-graced nature (Trost 2007:251). Thus, all nature is graced. The ecotheological implications of the last statement are enormous. Trost (2007:251–252) captures the implications succinctly: “The grace of God in creation, reconciliation and sanctification that includes the whole world of nature means that we humans can no longer stand apart from the rest of graced nature, ignoring its needs and its network of supporting and life-giving systems”.

Another Lutheran theological focus which addresses ecology significantly pertains to the indwelling Christ’s basis for ethics, as Trost (2007:252) explains further. Luther’s basic argument is that the finite is capable of bearing the infinite (*finitum capax infiniti*), that is,
material creation bears the divine (Trost 2007:252). Moe-Lobeda (in Trost 2007:252) develops Luther’s thought, proving that the indwelling God extends to all creation, that the creatures indwelled by God are not limited to the human. Rather, Christ (as both humanity and divinity) is actually present in all created things, including humans (Trost 2007:252). The significance of such a legitimate Lutheran doctrine which affirms the material universe as not only created but also indwelt by God, cannot be overemphasised ecotheologically. To start with, it eliminates the spiritual-secular dualism that has tended to afflict the church and to militate against environmental care. If God dwells in ‘nature’, as well as in us, how then should we treat and relate with it? Surely, a greater sense of awe, respect and responsibility toward the earth’s ecosystems would be engendered.

It can be safely concluded from the above summary of Lutheran-cum-Reformed Christianity that this tradition’s theology is certainly compatible with environmental care. Thus any qualms pertaining to the legitimacy of ecological considerations cannot be justified on the basis of Lutheran theology. If there are reservations, they cannot be predicated on this theology’s silence, because this Lutheranism’s eco-theological voice is not silent at all. Perhaps the real challenge pertains to whether the church is paying attention to that clarion call within Lutheranism. Furthermore, how seriously is the environmental message received? Perhaps what dulls the effectiveness of the message is the poor clarity and loudness of the voice. Perhaps the environmental message is submerged in other emphases and obscured by the anthropocentric prejudice of the church. In that case, it is incumbent upon ecological theologians to help clarify and articulate the environmental message loud and clear, hence the relevance of such researches as this one.

**Evangelical**

The influence of North American Evangelicalism on the global Evangelical community in general, as well as its interaction with and reception in Africa in particular, justify the wisdom of tracing ecotheological developments in that Western continent. According to Effa (2008:173), although Evangelicals are independent churches without a single global communion to address concerns such as environmental justice, yet common
understandings have emerged from consultations and congresses in the past thirty-five years. The founding of the International Congress on World Evangelisation (ICWE) in 1974, which resulted in the Lausanne Covenant, was a defining step toward affirming a broader understanding of the church’s mission (Effa 2008:173). Although the Covenant did not specifically mention the responsibility to the environment, it nonetheless opened a door to subsequent reflection on issues of social justice. At a later forum, the ICWE focused on the imbalance of wealth, development needs, the pursuit of justice and peace, and denounced the environmental destruction, wastefulness and hoarding prevalent in the world, acknowledging that “Creation Ethics” are an important part of humanity’s responsibility to our earthly home (Effa 2008:173).

The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), the largest nonbonding global organization of evangelicals, with a constituency of some 160 million, at the end of the 20th century identified the ecological crisis as one of the major challenges in our world today, and called for all Christians to commit themselves to ecological integrity in practicing responsible stewardship of creation and to become involved in environmental care and protection initiatives (Effa 2008:173). The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation subsequently convened a forum on holistic mission (2004), with theological constructs remarkably similar to those found in Conciliar and Roman Catholic pronouncements:

“The biblical message of salvation points towards “new heavens and a new earth” and that means that we cannot view salvation as separated from creation. The purpose of salvation is not merely endless life of individual souls in heaven but the transformation of the totality of creation, including humankind, to the glory of God. A person’s conversion to Christ is the eruption of the new creation into this world: it transforms the person, in anticipation of the end time, in a wonderful display of God’s eschatological purpose to make all things new” (Effa 2008:173).

The same Evangelical forum further argues that the church’s mission is multifaceted, since it is driven by the missio Dei, which includes the whole of creation and the totality of human life, concluding that the resurrection of Jesus is a power which makes the
kingdom manifest in the present, in every sphere of human life, and in the whole of creation (Effa 2008:173). In addition, the conference deplored an anthropocentric and apocalyptic view of the natural world, advocating instead for a covenantal approach which recognises God’s delight and care for his handiwork, and his promise to redeem it all, including humanity (Effa 2008:173).

In 2004 the Sandy Cove Covenant, under the auspices of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), USA, resolved to make creation care a permanent dimension of Christian discipleship and to motivate the Evangelical community to fully engage environmental issues in a biblically faithful and humble manner, urging members to participate in the healing of God’s creation, and thus help the advance of God’s reign (Effa 2008:173). This same body gave birth to a document similar to (and perhaps the inspiration for) the climate change document produced five years later by our own SACC (see below): Climate Change: an Evangelical Call to Action (Effa 2008:173). One NAE official, Richard Cizik, calling upon evangelicals to devote less passion to the defence of a particular cosmogonic theory, but to focus more on responsibility toward creation, succinctly articulates a valid clarion call for the whole church:

I don’t think God is going to ask us how he created the earth [evolution or creationism], but he will ask us what we did with what he created (Effa 2008:173, emphasis mine).

Pentecostal-Charismatic

According to Thomas (2002:122), the heart of Pentecostalism can be defined in terms of the fivefold gospel, which simultaneously reveals its similarity and dissimilarity with other Christian traditions: Jesus is the Saviour, Sanctifier, Holy Spirit Baptiser, Healer, and Coming King. Interestingly, this fivefold gospel paradigm obviates Pentecostalism’s kinship with the Holiness movement, Catholic and Orthodox traditions on one hand, but reveals fundamental differences with sections of Evangelicalism, on the other hand (Thomas 2002:122). Perhaps it is the abovementioned kinship which eventually helped birth the Charismatic movement from other Christian traditions, as Yong (2006:128) alludes to. In fact, Cartledge (2004:178) admits that the terms “Charismatic” and
“Pentecostal” are often used interchangeably and that it is theologically difficult to draw a clear demarcation between the two terms. Nonetheless, Charismatics include those who adopted central features of Pentecostal spirituality, such as crisis experiences of being overwhelmed by the Spirit and the use of the gifts of the Spirit in worship and ministry, but hailing from different theological traditions such as Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy (Cartledge 2004:178). Therefore, from the discussion above, it is sensible to treat the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition as one, broadly speaking.

As far as articulating its theology is concerned, however, Pentecostal-Charismatics have
one major hindrance: much of their theology is published at the level of non-academic, popular literature, its media being song and testimony as opposed to creed and doctrine, and as a popular movement, technical, academic literature would be largely incomprehensible to its constituency (Cartledge 2004:178).

According to Czegledy (2008:286), at least a quarter of the South African population is affiliated with the broader Pentecostal tradition, including the African Independent Churches (AIC), such as the Zionist Church which boasts a membership of over six million. Daneel (2000:534) investigates the surprisingly pragmatic, grassroots environmental praxis of an AIC which belongs to the 150 member Association of African Earthkeeping Churches (AAEC). This tradition’s approach comprises the church’s earth-healing mission as an extension of Christ’s healing activities, regards the church’s function as one of a keeper or guardian of creation, and incorporates African cosmologies, in an effort to contextualise the Gospel (Daneel 2000:548). It is significant that one of Pentecostalism’s central tenets—divine healing—is applied in this case, not only to individuals but to the earth. Though hailing from a rather modest socio-economic position, this tradition still challenges the world church to put its ecotheology into practice and be willing to “re-vision its task, institutional shape, worship, and service from within the struggle rather than from a position of discreet, controversy-free distance” (Daneel 2000:549). Given the widespread reach of the AIC phenomenon, in conjunction with Pentecostalism, throughout South Africa, the potential impact of these eco-theological voices can be dramatic.

A less flattering analysis of Pentecostal, Charismatic, and AIC theologies is done by Lenka-Bula (2008:294), who asserts that these groups tend to promote hermeneutical approaches to the Bible and to being Church which are unhelpful to the flourishing of everyone, particularly women, through maintaining a literalistic view of revelation, the inerrancy of scripture, an escapist mentality and the consolidation and transmission of injustices. These theologies’ over-emphasis on personal conversion results in privatised, inward-looking, overzealous, and one-directional attitudes to the Christian faith which undermine the social, political and ecological implications of faith, argues Lenka-Bula
further (2008:299). Their endorsement of dispensationalist theologies which emphasise the separation of Christians from the world, the imminence of the *eschaton*, as well as an anthropocentric focus, conspire to produce a utilitarian and dualistic attitude toward nature, resulting in little or no concern for ecological justice (Lenka-Bula 2008:299). What an indictment! Although this author’s analysis of these Christian traditions may be somewhat over-generalised, severe and polemic, similar judgment has been meted out to Christendom in general (cf. Lynn White’s thesis referred to by Carter 2001:358). Therefore, the singling out of this particular grouping need not detract from the main issue at stake here: an ecotheological scrutiny of the Christian traditions in vogue in South Africa today hardly leaves any unscathed. Furthermore, it may be more prudent for analysts to intentionally seek to discern the underlying eco-theological value inherent in this Christian tradition and others, and thus going beyond the blame theology discussed elsewhere in this paper.

**Conciliar Churches**

The Collins Dictionary defines conciliar as of, *from, or by means of a council,* especially *an ecclesiastical one.* Thus, in the particular context of this study, Conciliar churches are those churches belonging to the ecumenical movement, such as the World Council of Churches (WCC), which seeks to offer a united voice for more than three hundred churches worldwide including Orthodox, Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Reformed, as well as United and Independent churches in over 110 countries (WCC 2010). The South African Council of Churches (SACC) is an affiliate of this ecumenical community and boasts 27 member denominations and associated para-church organisations, of similar diversity to the WCC, and representing about half of all the Christians in South Africa (SACC:2010). Naturally, developments in the WCC, including those pertaining to the eco-theological discourse, have a direct bearing on the South African stance, besides the specifically local SACC thrusts. In its mission statement, the SACC articulates its divine calling in terms of working for moral reconstruction in South Africa, focusing on issues of justice, reconciliation, integrity of creation and the eradication of poverty and contributing towards the empowerment of all who are
spiritually, socially and economically marginalized (SACC:2010).

Given the proportion of the South African ecumenical community relative to the rest of the SA church (about 50%), what the SACC has to say about ecology becomes extremely significant. Does the SACC have a specific ecotheological message, then? Indeed, in a recent publication, the SACC answers the question affirmatively, specifically and directly. A Christian response, argues the SACC (2009:v), is three-fold and entails that the followers of Christ must act in a priestly, prophetic and royal-servant manner to the challenges of climate change our planet faces today. Building on Niebuhr’s thesis that to be Christian necessarily demands paying attention to the world around us, the SACC (2009:v) posits that as those who adhere to an ethos of justice, peace and the integrity of creation, we must pay attention to the plight of our natural environment which God loves deeply. Priestly Christian living involves the expression of love through paying attention and showing compassion for God’s world, specifically for the most vulnerable peoples, communities and ecosystems, thus helping to prevent Christians from repeating that classic apathy which stems from inattentiveness (SACC 2009:v). This sums up the first Christian response.

The second Christian response to the climate change, according to the SACC (2009:vi), calls for a lifestyle characterised by prophetic faith, that is, in which the prophet proclaims the vision of an alternative society where the most vulnerable, such as the earth, are safeguarded. Such a prophetic role includes the church’s serving as “perceptive visionaries, courageous and constructive critics, empathetic narrators of the plight of the poor and the environment, vigorous technical analysts and prophetic participants in justice seeking policymaking” (SACC 2009:vi). It is impressive that this group of South African churches, via this SACC document, practically trumpets its eco-theological voice, in synchrony with the United Nations and other players, secular or religious, concerned about our common habitat before the Copenhagen Convention on Climate Change (COP 15, replacing the Kyoto Protocol) held in December 2009 (cf. SACC 2009:vi). The relevance, timeliness and cooperation of the church in this regard are surely commendable.
Thirdly, according to the SACC (2009:vi), Christian living entails that we live with *royal hope*, which stems from our knowledge of Jesus as Lord—the crucified One who is also the resurrected Saviour, the ascended One who is seated at the right hand of our heavenly Parent, our Creator God who still reigns, and in whose hands the whole world lies. Thus we seek earth’s well-being out of loyalty to God and participate therein with hope-filled hearts, celebrating God’s love for the world, energised by the work of the Spirit to have more hope and thus moved to action (SACC 2009:vi).

Admittedly, the terminology of *priest, prophet and king, which the SACC espouses as a valid response to the environmental crisis*, has—from a feminist perspective—nuances of androcentricism and mastery. Therefore, notwithstanding the presence of some value in this ecumenical movement’s three-fold ecotheological response, the perceived prejudice inherent in the terminology may render the response itself inadequate. If this movement’s efforts are to be genuinely ecumenical—embracing all inhabitants of God’s “house”, regardless of gender, ethnicity and class—perhaps they should consider revisiting these problematic terms and similar ones.

Significantly, the South African ecumenical movement promotes dialogue between the consumer classes and the poor, refuses to adopt an attitude of being on moral high ground over against civic leaders and others, and acknowledges our need for a genuine and fundamental change of heart, attitudes and actions—repentance (*metanoia*)—in light of the pervasive consumerism, which indicates that our real problem is moral and spiritual, more than the technological and ecological ones (SACC 2009:7–8). That being the case, the reflection and analysis of the church’s theological substrata become essential. Such inadequate theological trends as *mastery theology, escapist theologies, inculturation-consumerist theologies, blaming theologies* and *the prosperity gospel* have inhibited an appropriate Christian response, argues the SACC (2009: 12–16).

Regarding *mastery theology*, the SACC (2009:13) effectively rejects the “softening” of the “theology of dominion”, castigating it for the way it accords humanity an inordinate amount of authority, power and entitlement in God’s creation, a stance which makes little
cosmological sense and is liable to abuse in the endorsement of unsustainable practices. Notably, this ecumenical movement’s views on this issue tally considerably with those explored under “dominion theology” in an earlier section.

Some Christians’ quest to resist the reduction of the gospel to a purely social agenda may result in what the SACC (2009:13) describes as escapist theologies. As a consequence, such believers tend to emphasise the spiritual over the material, the soul more than the body, heaven more than earth, the next life more than this life, and perceive of our redemption in Christ as salvation from the earth at the expense of the salvation of the whole earth, not acknowledging the redeeming-God as the same Creator-God (SACC 2009:13). Such Christians have no concern for climate change since they expect the destruction of the universe, interpreting the threats of looming environmental, climatic, nuclear and other catastrophes as signs hastening the parousia after which Christ rescues the elect from the perishing earth (SACC 2009:13). What is the likely outcome of such a mindset as far was our response to climate change and other environmental matters are concerned? The SACC (2009:13) sees a direct link between such an escapist attitude and the evocation of fear, rather than hope, resulting not only in the incapacitation of others to confront our cosmic challenges, but also in the discrediting of the Christian witness in sight of outsiders. On the other hand, emphasising Christian hope would inspire Christians to work for the coming of God’s reign on earth, as it is in heaven (SACC 2009:13).

Having lambasted the aforementioned escapist theology, the SACC (2009:13) does not encourage wholesale conformity to the thought patterns of this age either, decrying what it terms inculcation theologies in the context of consumerism. While the affirmation of various expressions of God-given culture is upheld, yet the easy identification of the gospel with any particular culture, the emulation of the selfish and greedy consumerism of our generation are denounced because of their potential to blunt the gospel’s critical cutting edge, especially in light of the challenges of climate change (SACC 2009:14). Therefore, the church is expected to be simultaneously in the world and society, without losing its distinct perspective and influence. This ecumenical movement’s efforts to
espouse a balanced Christian position and worldview in this regard are commendable.

Similar balance is evident in the way the SACC (2009:14) derides what it terms *blaming theologies*, which characteristically generalise all humanity’s equality of guilt regardless of the culpability of oppressors, the psychological numbness of the oppressed, and the indiscriminate proclamation of the same forgiveness to people of divergent situations. Instead of a theology of blame, the SACC (2009:15) advocates for a pastoral sensitivity that encourages us to accept our collective responsibility with respect to the environment, without painting everyone with the same brush, as it were. This entails the church’s alerting the consumer class to the reality that their rampant appetites have fuelled the dog-eat-dog economy, as well as alerting the aspiring middle class to the tragic potential the ‘love of money’ possesses, without downplaying the priority of the issues of justice and equity (SACC 2009:15). We must not exonerate the consumer class for their contribution to the environmental crisis, nor should we elicit a counter-productive sense of guilt among them, but neither should we pile guilt upon the innocent (SACC 2009:15). What a balancing act this entails!

Regarding the so-called *prosperity gospel*, the SACC (2009:15) admits that it has elements of truth, coupled with heretical elements. Thus, while the poor can experience genuine divine blessing as their daily needs are met, and their lifestyles are transformed through sober, wholesome habits, personal development, and enhanced responsibility, the SACC (2009:15–16) holds that the portrayal of the gospel in terms of success, prosperity and wealth may easily be misused to legitimise a sense of “upward social mobility”, to encourage overt forms of affluence and to give a divine blessing to institutionalised selfishness and greed. The exposure of the South African society, through TV, other media and the growing popularity of prosperity-friendly forms of Pentecostalism, makes this issue a real and present danger, suggests the SACC (2009:16). Apparently, the point here is that Christianity may be further exacerbating the ecological crisis by means of a gospel which fuels human greed and flagrant consumerism—all in the name of God’s “blessings”.
The beauty of this publication lies also in the practical responses it advocates for the churches of South Africa: educating themselves on how greenhouse gases are being emitted through the use of fossil fuels, through the products that we consume and through what is done in the public sphere on our behalf; assisting the victims of climate change, such as environmental refugees from other African nations; encouraging the integration of wealth-production, a more equitable wealth-distribution and wealth-redefinition (SACC 2009:21–25). Religion’s power to inspire a uniquely powerful moral vision, helping society to envision alternatives to the current calamitous global economic order, promising meaning, survival power, deliverance, healing, and well-being must not be underplayed (SACC 2009: 37–40).

Interestingly, by exposing our submission to the entrapment of wealth, the lure of consumerism and hedonism, and the seduction of idolatry, the SACC (2009:40–41) reveals a remarkable resonance with Jesus’ message according to Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (as discussed in the next chapter). Similarly, the view that God’s law in the Jewish-Christian tradition is not burdensome but a source of wisdom and joy, offering an acceptable sense of direction for believers and society, is also significant in light of the Matthean Gospel (SACC 2009:72).

On the other hand, Effa (2008:172) finds it remarkable that the World Council of Churches’ most comprehensive statement on mission, titled Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation (1982), has no specific reference to care for creation as a participation in God’s mission, although it infers that the biblical promise of a new earth and a new heaven where love, peace and justice will prevail invites our actions as Christians in history, and makes only a brief allusion to stewardship and restoration of creation as one of those actions (Effa 2008:172). Furthermore, the Affirmation points out that the Gospel addresses the totality of life, including all of creation, “which groans and travails in search of adoption and redemption” and that the Christian witness must “show the glory and the humility of human stewardship on this earth” (Effa 2008:172).
A later WCC conference reflected on God’s call for humans to exercise stewardship with justice, to maintain the integrity of creation, to use and share the earth’s limited resources and to sustain and fulfil the lives of all, with much of the discussion revolving around God’s ownership of the earth and human activities that destroy the land, often resulting in the unjust distribution of land, and concluded that the church’s mission included responsibility toward the earth and bringing the gospel of hope—rooted in Christ’s resurrection—to all creation (Effa 2008:172). Thus, churches must endeavour to reverse the “greenhouse effect”, help remedy the destruction of strip-mining, stop the production and dumping of toxic wastes, advocate for the ban of the hunting of endangered species, and help fight the pollution of our seas, while addressing justice, peace, and the integrity of creation not as separate problems but “as an intricately interwoven complexity requiring common action on the part of the church” (Effa 2008:172). Similarly, the World Convocation on Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation (1990) established its theological basis on the belief in God as giver of life and repented of the misuse of biblical statements such as “to have dominion” and “subdue the earth”, as delegates dedicated themselves to the conservation and work towards creation’s integrity on account of both its intrinsic value and for the sake of sustained justice (Effa 2008:172). Subsequently, the council established a working group to forge partnerships and create a common base for action on climate change, actively participated in global conferences on climate change in Montreal and Nairobi in 2005 and 2006, respectively, beside other environmental initiatives (Effa 2008:173).

2.3 Covenantal Ecotheology

Ruether (2000:604) suggests that the ecological theologies of Christian inspiration fall into two different types, namely the covenantal and the sacramental. In the covenantal tradition we find the basis for a moral relation to nature and to one another that mandates patterns of right relation, enshrining these right relations in law as the final guarantee against abuse (Ruether 2000:605). This theology in part counters the anti-nature reading of the Bible popularised by late 19th and early 20th century German scholarship which “read into the Bible its own sharp dualism of history against nature, setting the true God
of history against the gods of nature” (Ruether 2000:605). Covenantal ecotheology, however, recognises that although God created nature and is not merely an expression of it, yet nature is alive and enters into lively relation to God, who delights in creation, with the creatures also reciprocating in joy and praise (Ruether 2000:606). Consequently, divine blessing is viewed as inundating the earth as rain, while the mountains skip like a calf, the valleys garland themselves with grain and all shout and sing together for joy, as typically portrayed in Hebrew Scripture (Ruether 2000:606).

In response to those who may be tempted to write this off as “mere poetic metaphor”, Ruether (2000:606) counters that such a misguided notion reflects a judgment devoid of the experience of I-Thou relation to nature, arguing that the modern nature-history split distorts the biblical view. Instead, in the biblical view, all things, whether they happen as human wars and struggles for liberation in and between cities, or whether they happen as rain that brings abundant harvests, or as drought that brings disaster to the fields upon which humans depend, are “events”, in which Hebrews recognised the presence and work of God, as blessing or as judgment, bristling with moral meaning, warning or promise (Ruether 2000:606).

While acknowledging that problems may stem from reading moral meaning and divine will into events in nature as such, yet Ruether (2000:606) insists that we can recognise the consequences of human misuse of the land, stripping the forest cover that held back the torrential rains and overgrazing the semiarid African soils, and thus admit human culpability in the environmental disasters occurring today. Furthermore, as humans increase their power and control over progressively more of the earth’s natural processes, the demarcation between what was traditionally viewed as ethnically “natural evil”, and what is blatantly sinful and culpable abuse of human liberty and power—also shifts (Ruether 2000:607). That shift then, is the weakness of the covenantal tradition, since it heavily relies on some sort of code that regulates our relationships among ourselves as God’s creatures and with God. When the very code’s goal-posts are liable to shifting, the reliability of the whole superstructure collapses. Then another framework is called for, and perhaps that is why sacramental ecotheology comes in handy.
2.4 Sacramental Ecotheology

In the sacramental tradition, Ruether continues, we find the heart, the ecstatic experience of I-and-Thou, of interpersonal communion, without which moral relationships grow heartless and spiritless (Ruether 2000:605). An example of a Southern African sacramental eco-theology are the earth keeping churches of Zimbabwe which work in a spirit of sacrificial yet celebratory service despite discouraging setbacks and where eco-justice takes shape as a lifestyle rather than a written code of conduct (Daneel 2000:549). This lifestyle translates into a spontaneous re-interpretation of the church’s mission, in turn leading to structured, ritual, and symbolic change within the church, the Gospel finding expression in wholeness, therapy and liberation relevant to the needs of African society (Daneel 2000:549). It is also based on an incarnational Christology, conversant with and easily understood within the framework of indigenous African worldviews, which prioritises earth-healing and human service to nature as opposed to human domination (Daneel 2000:549). It is remarkable in this case that eco-theological leadership should emanate from such an unlikely source, a humble AIC, as it pioneers new forms of ecological outreach as an integral part of church life and mobilises the entire church to put its earth keeping mission into practice (Daneel 2000:549).

Notably, Protestants have generally been stronger on the covenantal tradition that searched for an ecological ethic, while Catholics tended to stress the sacramental tradition which values the ministration of grace by means of holy ritual. Increasingly, however, these two traditions complement and learn from each other, each tradition supplying elements which the other lacks, aided by ongoing dialogue in Scripture and church history (Ruether 2000:605). It would seem that Pentecostals and Charismatics fall into the sacramental fold, broadly speaking. Apparently many Christian traditions have differing blends of covenantal and sacramental theology, in view of the analyses performed above.
2.5 Denominational Consensus

This survey of the “greening of theology” in a variety of traditions suggests a remarkable consensus, characterised by a common recognition of the validity of a theological basis for the greening of mission, and a common admission of Christians’ individual as well as corporate complicity in the environmental crisis, which calls for authentic repentance and action (Effa 2008:174). At least three areas of faulty theological thinking that require radical paradigm shifts become apparent: all Christian traditions call for a shift from an anthropocentric to a Theocentric understanding of creation; they all call for a shift from a personal to a cosmic view of salvation; and all call for a shift from an eschatology of abandonment to one of restoration (Effa 2008:174). There also seems to be ecclesial consensus that the church’s redemptive mission to the world cannot be divorced from justice in society or from the healing of the wounds of nature wrought by an exploitative human industrial system (Ruether 2000:603).

In the same vein, Matthew 5–7 exhibits an ethic which emphasises, inter alia, social and ecological justice. This discourse’s arguably universal acceptance across the spectrum of Christianity lends credence to the wisdom of investigating the ecotheological value of Matthew 5–7 in the next chapter. That should significantly advance the quest for a common ecotheological spirituality and praxis in the South African church.
CHAPTER 3

AN ECO-IDEOLOGICAL READING OF MATTHEW 5–7

The methodology in this chapter involves an eco-ideological exegesis of Matthew 5–7 within its literary and socio-cultural contexts. This entails, in addition to what may be termed “conventional” exegesis, the evaluation of prevailing ecotheological assumptions pertaining to the biblical text by means of the six-principle theoretical model of eco-justice developed by the Earth Bible Project team (Habel 2000:42–53). Moreover, use is made of an adaptation of the basic hermeneutic of feminist scholars, namely, suspicion and retrieval. Ecotheological readings which employ this hermeneutic compel exegetes to suspect that there may be anthropocentric, patriarchal or andro-centric biases embedded in some biblical texts with a view to bypass and supersede these proclivities. Thus biblical texts are reread in order to retrieve any submerged eco-friendly attitudes and values. Such eco-sensitive readings potentially evoke greater sympathy for the earth’s plight, as discerned in actual biblical texts or through a revision of our interpretations of the texts (Habel 2000:39). As a result, the propensity to devalue the earth and members of the earth community becomes correctable (Habel 2000:42).

Other relevant contributions to the ecotheological conversation are also considered in this chapter, whether they are compatible with the Earth Bible Project (EBP) model per se, provide a useful ecological foil, or supply another valuable ecotheological perspective. A brief discussion of the six ecojustice principles precedes a more detailed ecotheological exegesis of Matthew 5–7.

3.1 Summary of the Six Eco-justice Principles

The EBP eco-justice model comprises six principles, namely: the principle of intrinsic worth, the principle of interconnectedness, the principle of voice, the principle of
purpose, the principle of mutual custodianship and the principle of resistance (Habel 2000:42–53). Any impression that these are arbitrarily formulated principles is strongly refuted by Carley (2000:111), who explains that these principles are derived from legitimate emphases in the biblical traditions, represent the implications of God’s love for all creation, characterise his bias in favour of the disadvantaged, and accentuate humanity’s responsibility. By definition, ecojustice means respect and fairness toward all creation, human and nonhuman and thus implies a strongly ecological perspective, which views humanity in intimate interdependence with the rest of creation, and sees links between various types of domination, whether of class, gender, race or nature (Langmead 1999:163). Social justice and environmental care are seen as connected rather than in opposition, just as human transformation is only completely possible in a restored environment (Langmead 1999:163). Therefore, the value of the eco-justice hermeneutic, according to Habel (2000:34–35), transcends the growing practice of merely searching for ecological themes in the text, however useful that may be. Instead, an ecojustice hermeneutic emphasizes the process of identifying with the earth or the earth community. Such identification enables us to read the text, not as readers located high up in the hierarchy of creation, nor as stewards, but as relatives who exist within and belong together with the earth community (Habel 2000:35). Each of the six ecojustice principles is briefly explained below.

3.1.1. The Principle of Intrinsic Worth

According to Wink (1993:465) the primary cause of the abuse and ruthless exploitation of nature in our day is the anthropocentric worldview which justifies the treatment of nature instrumentally as something to be used, even used up, before the second coming. It is a belief system which devalues creation be it organic or inorganic, flora or fauna, human or nonhuman. However, the principle of intrinsic worth holds that the universe, the earth and all its components have intrinsic worth (Habel 2000:42). This principle avers that nature has intrinsic value by virtue of its very existence and ought therefore to be respected and accorded legal and moral rights (Habel 1999:115). Cosmic components have value in themselves, independent of humans’ perception of their usefulness, and
even apart from the fact that they are a reflection of the Creator’s handiwork and in spite of whether or not they are considered to be living entities (Habel 2000:43).

Do the voices in the biblical text respect and honour the earth’s intrinsic worth? Does a given biblical text reflect “the kind of dualisms we have inherited from the Western world” or not? If an alternative cosmology is discerned, does it honour the intrinsic worth of earth and its components or relegate earth to an inferior position? According to Habel (2000:43), asking such questions as these helps exegetes to recover the value inherent in nature but sometimes disguised in a given biblical text.

Such value, according to Habel (2000:44), is independent of God’s pronouncement of that value, as illustrated by God’s “discovery” of creation’s worth in the Genesis creation narrative. It is my view, however, emphasising the inherency of nature’s value in contradistinction to the divine approval may be stretching the argument somewhat, and may even be counterproductive to the goal of mobilising the church to be more eco-friendly. Such a stance can be construed as contradicting the sacredness we ascribe to nature as God’s creation, as well as contradicting the reverential ethos of a Christian spirituality. Perhaps such a viewpoint may even give believers and non-believers alike a “licence to kill” and to destroy the environment, without any qualms which stem from the sacredness of nature. It may even betray a degree of the same anthropocentric pride the model attempts to counter, because then humans would uphold and acknowledge the value of nature by denigrating the divine role. Interestingly, in a previous publication, Habel (1999:116) defends the principle of intrinsic worth on the basis of God’s approval:

From a theological point of view, therefore, the worth of the earth is not grounded in its existence as such, but in the very act of God creating the earth, in God’s choice of the earth to mask God’s presence, and in God’s act of dying on the earth for the whole cosmos. These acts all point to the extraordinary value God places on all creation and especially the earth. The earth has the utmost value because of these ultimate acts of God creating, indwelling, incarnating and redeeming.
3.1.2. The Principle of Interconnectedness

Otherwise known in biology as symbiosis, in ecojustice the principle of interconnectedness avers that the earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival (Habel 2000:44). Thus, human beings are in fact members of this earth community, are inseparably part of nature, and are in a kinship, symbiotic relationship with all other citizens of the earth’s complex of ecological systems (Habel 2000:45). Therefore, since their lives are necessarily dependent on such others as the wide diversity of life forms which inhabit the domains of fields, forests, trees, air and others, humans are not viewed as superior to the rest of earth’s citizens (Habel 2000:45).

The paradigm promoted by the principle of interconnectedness encourages exegetes to acknowledge that the history of the interpretation of biblical texts is fraught with anthropocentric chauvinism, characterised by the selective emphasis on texts which appear to obviate humans pre-eminence (Habel 2000:45). Furthermore, this perspective encourages exegetes to suspect that biblical texts themselves tend to betray an inordinate estimate of humans’ worth over and above other earthly inhabitants (Habel 2000:45). Naturally, exegetes who believe that the Bible is inspired divine revelation may struggle with the extent to which one can go in “suspecting” that the biblical text has inherent prejudices, while simultaneously attaching a normative role to scripture. However, if exegetes stick to this principle’s emphasis on the symbiotic relationships of humans and other earthlings, its relevance becomes incontrovertible. Moreover, if exegetes acknowledge that according to the creation narrative, everything—even the smallest bugs and plants—were created before humans, our interconnectedness becomes even more poignant. Similarly, when we acknowledge that Adam was created from the dust of the earth, a deliberate strategy to retrieve any covert affirmations of the human and nonhuman connectivity in nature becomes even more welcome. Indeed, according to Barron (2005:72), the reversal of the environmental crisis will only come about when we recover a deeper sense for the relationality of human life to particular ecosystems and
parts of the biosphere, and when we foster the virtues of justice and compassion, of care and respect for life, human and non-human, and of temperance and prudence in our appetites and desires.

3.1.3. The Principle of Voice

Contrary to traditional perspectives which view the earth community as dumb objects, the principle of voice holds that the earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice (Habel 2000:46). In an earlier publication, Habel (1999:117) phrases the same principle the principle of earth consciousness. In either case, the earth is understood as a living and all-embracing organism, both biologically and spiritually, a super ecosystem and a subject in its own right, but which also comprises a community of subjects (Habel 2000:46–47). Contrary to Western dualism, far from being passive, silent and devoid of any agency and capacity for worship, the earth and its residents speak in a symphony of voices, including the planet’s own distinctive “Earth language”, very much in the same league as humans who are deemed to evince intellectual, emotional and spiritual capacities and faculties (Habel 2000:47).

Of course, speaking of the earth and its parts as subjects does not mean that the earth as a whole or its parts have a consciousness identical with that of humans. However, the biblical tradition certainly speaks of the components of creation as more than inanimate bits in a great machine: God’s creatures are called upon to praise and celebrate their Creator whose glory is greater than all of them (Psalm 148); even the elements fire, hail, snow, frost and wind also fulfil God’s command; the oracles of Jeremiah explicitly depict creation’s suffering as a result of Israel’s corruption (4:23–28; 23:9–12); and thus a personal relationship exists between the Creator and all the parts of creation (Habel 1999:118). Therefore, birds, plants, forests, mountains and galaxies are sacraments of divine presence, are the self-expression of God, constitute “the ecstatic self-expression of divine fruitfulness”, and their wanton destruction would be tantamount to silencing and obliterating the “book of God” (Edwards 1999:133). The principle of voice thus considers
the earth a subject and definitely not just an object for human use, with each of earth’s components responding individually and personally to their maker (Habel 1999:118).

The principle of voice is employed in the exegesis of biblical texts through suspecting that the history of interpretation tended to suppress or ignore the earth’s voice and by attempting to retrieve the planet’s silenced language (Habel 2000:47). Among other means, this retrieval refuses to dismiss the voices of the earth and its residents as mere rhetoric, metaphor or “poetic licence”, but instead recognises how biblical texts mediate these voices as well as God’s voice (Habel 2000:47–48).

3.1.4. The Principle of Purpose

*The principle of purpose states that the universe, the earth and all its components are part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each piece has a place in the overall goal of that design* (Habel 2000:48). It is a perspective which recognises both the magnificent design and the purpose of the earth’s complex of interacting systems. Whereas the earth’s design is reflected in its well-structured beauty, its purpose lies in its life-sustaining goal (Habel 2000:48). This principle directly challenges the tendency to treat the earth as a transient and disposable materiality, a hallmark of traditional Christianity (Habel 2000:49).

Applied to the interpretation of biblical texts, this perspective asks several revealing questions (Habel 2000:49). Firstly, it asks whether the destruction of the earth is the legitimate dominant orientation of the New Testament. While acknowledging that some New Testament texts do articulate an apocalyptic stance with respect to the earth’s destiny, the question is whether such a cataclysmic expectation is the primary message of the Christian canon. Secondly, the principle questions our understanding of the earth’s life cycles in Scripture, and whether biblical texts stress the restoration of past life systems or their liberation and transformation into new ones (Habel 2000:49).

Akin to the methodology explained by Balabanski (2000:152), this principle critiques the
mythologies that devalue the earth as a decaying reality as opposed to heaven viewed as an eternal spiritual reality. Like the principle of intrinsic worth, the principle of purpose enables exegetes to overcome the tendency to treat the earth and its systems instrumentally. Instead, every cosmic component is understood to be part and parcel of an intelligent cosmic design (Viviers 2003:49). Everything is thus understood to exist for a purpose, certainly beyond and independent of purely anthropocentric pleasure or utility.

3.1.5. The Principle of Mutual Custodianship

*Earth is a balanced and diverse domain in which responsible custodians can function as partners, rather than rulers, to sustain a balanced and diverse Earth community,* states the principle of mutual custodianship (Habel 2000:50). It disputes the whole notion of human stewardship, regarding it as a thinly veiled form of anthropocentric, hierarchical, dominion mentality. Instead, argues Habel (2000:51), it is the earth and its community which have been the custodians of humans by graciously sustaining them through a variety of blessings such as food, shelter, and beauty. Therefore, humans cannot claim an inalienable right to the riches of the earth, but should humbly take their place alongside other citizens of the cosmic community as mutual partners. This aspect of the eco-justice hermeneutic enables exegetes to search biblical texts for underlying antagonisms between humans as “rulers” and the rest of creation, and to search for all possible earth-affirming traditions therein (Habel 2000:51).

Interestingly, Tubbs (1994:553) argues that while New Testament representations of the humanity-nature relationship do not deny that humans wield a degree of power over nature, any usual sense of power as dominance gives way to models of profound gratitude, humility, servanthood, and emptying oneself of egoistic claims. Furthermore, humans’ purported despotic license is indefensible within the context of Old Testament theology, and even more so in the context of Jesus’ teachings and New Testament Christological models, where selfish dominance in any form is inconsistent with the model of obedient, humble service we find in Jesus Christ, the New Adam (Tubbs 1994:553). Similarly, according to Tubbs (1994:555), exploitive and anthropocentric
attitudes toward nature are certainly precluded for those who believe, with Paul, that all of creation is subject to the redemptive, reconciling work of Christ.

The principle of mutual custodianship thus enables exegetes to read biblical texts with a view to retrieve a sense of reciprocal interdependence between human and nonhuman creation. It sets out to suspect that the language of human dominance present in a biblical text is symptomatic of the tyrannical scourge so unjust and harmful to the earth’s harmonious survival. Use of this principle can also deepen and broaden our appreciation and concern for the consequences of human decisions upon nonhuman beings (Tubbs 1994:556). Thus a sense of shared responsibility and mutual partnership displaces the presumptive despotic licence that has wreaked havoc upon our shared cosmic home.

3.1.6. The Principle of Resistance

Habel (2000:52) cites the principle of resistance thus: *Earth and its components not only suffer from injustices at the hands of humans, but actively resist them in the struggle for justice*. Notably, this principle has two related elements. The first element highlights the fact of the earth’s capacity to suffer, contrary to the instrumental construction of nonhuman creation. In an earlier publication, Habel (1999:119) stresses that we need to remember that the God revealed in the cross is the Creator God hidden beneath all creation, permeating the earth with *kabod* (numinous glory, presence, or power). Thus any component of the earth may be one of the masks of God (*larvae Dei*) through which God meets humans and behind which God’s glory is veiled (Habel 1999:119). Therefore, to violate the earth is to tear God’s masks, to scar God’s physical face, to desecrate God’s earthly dwelling, thereby corrupting, blurring and distorting the material medium through which God may be revealed to the eyes of faith (Habel 1999:119). Consequently, the capacity for humans to discern God in creation is reduced, as illustrated by how hard it is to see God’s glory in the sunset when smog fills the air, and how difficult it is to stand in awe of the rainforests when there is deforestation (Habel 1999:119). Sin has blinded us to the beauty of God’s masks and “those of us who know the compassionate suffering God of the cross must surely expect that this God in creation is now *suffering with creation*.”
(Habel 1999:119, emphasis mine).

On the other hand, far from being mere victims, the earth—like other oppressed groups—actually resists injustice and withstands oppression by means of a variety of methods often present, but subliminal in biblical texts (Habel 2000:52). The task of exegetes, then, becomes the detection of suppressed and explicit stories of defiance imbedded in the biblical text which relate to the earth and nonhuman members. This principle requires exegetes to further inquire into whether there are earth voices in the text resisting the construction of the earth as a victim (Habel 2000:52). It also inquires whether it is just for the earth to suffer as a direct consequence of human mischief and also whether the earth suffers in sympathy or solidarity with humans (Habel 2000:52). Thus the rhetorical devices biblical authors employ freely but which betray implicit or explicit victim constructs are scrutinised with this principle in mind. Similarly, any literary imagery which portrays nonhuman creation as purely insensate material, incapable of pain, is also scrutinised and challenged. True to the eco-feminist hermeneutic, this principle’s aim is to retrieve the underlying but suppressed resistance stories imbedded in the biblical text.

It will be seen from the exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount below that all the eco-justice principles discussed above are profoundly relevant to the contemporary eco-theological conversation, both globally and in the South African context. Before these principles can be applied to the message of Matthew 5–7, however, benefit will accrue from a consideration of the section’s literary structure. Of course, the Sermon on the Mount must be interpreted within the literary context of the whole Gospel of Matthew. Apparently, Matthew has a clear strategy and rationale for structuring his Gospel in the manner he did (Brooks 1992:27). It will be seen that there is remarkable eco-theological significance in the relationship between the evangelist’s rationale for the chosen layout and the discourse’s message.
3.2 An Overview of the Contents of Matthew 5–7

Critical to an understanding of the structure of the Gospel of Matthew as a whole is the book’s intertextuality, where intertextuality refers to a relation of “co-presence” between two or more texts, which usually takes the form of the effective presence of one or more texts in another (Luz 2004:123). In turn, this intertextuality takes various forms, such as hypertext, hypotext, pretext and metatext. By “hypotext” is meant a preceding text on whose basis another text (the “hypertext”) is written, but where the latter is not a formal commentary on the former, whereas by “metatext” is meant a text which serves as a commentary on another by explaining its “pretext” while preserving a critical distance between itself and its pretext (Luz 2004:123).

The Matthean metatext displays such a great degree of intertextuality in relation to the Gospel of Mark that the latter determines the whole structure of Matthew's Gospel, to the extent that the Gospel of Matthew can be rightly considered an expanded and revised edition of Mark’s Gospel (Luz 2004:125). As will be seen below, Matthew’s redactional work is strategically deliberate, and utilises not only the other evangelist’s document, but also the Old Testament.

Thus, the Gospel of Matthew reveals a remarkable intertextuality with the whole Bible as such, through its numerous fulfilment citations from Old Testament prophetic books and its numerous references to the names of biblical persons, such that these names function as abbreviations which evoke various biblical texts in readers’ minds (Luz 2004:128). Even this Gospel’s title in Matthew 1:1 can also be an allusion to the book of Genesis, which serves as his hypotext: Βιβλος γενεσεως θεου Χριστου υιου Δαυιδ υιου Αβρααμ (Luz 2004:128). Here Matthew captions not only the first chapter, but the whole book of Matthew as “the book of Genesis”, yet qualified as the new “Genesis of Jesus Christ”, a probable reference to Γενεσις, the Greek name of the first book of the Bible which is already widely recognised in the first century CE (Luz 2004:129). By so doing, Matthew makes an implicit claim to biblical authority, with a view to relating a foundational story for the people of God, just as the Hebrew Bible does, the difference being that his
foundational account is a new one—that of Jesus Christ (Luz 2004:129). Similarly, the evangelist’s use of frequent reminiscences of Moses throughout his Gospel, such as his depiction of Jesus’ authoritative delivery of his “law” from the Mount (5:1–2; 7:28–29), akin to Moses’ Mount Sinai experience, accords his book a Scripture-like feel (Luz 2004:129).

No wonder then that, according to Luz (2004:129), the evangelist also emulates the fivefold division of the Pentateuch by means of the five great discourses around which he structures the Gospel of Matthew. In fact, according to Douglas and Tenney (2008:346), the whole of this Gospel is woven around the five great discourses (5–7; 10; 13; 18; 24–25), each of which concludes with the refrain, “And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings...” After the prologue, Douglas and Tenney (2008:347) explain, Matthew’s Gospel consistently alternates narrative with discourse, with each discourse representing a specific kingdom focus successively thus:

- Matthew 5–7: The law of the kingdom,
- Matthew 10: The proclamation of the kingdom,
- Matthew 13: The growth of the kingdom,
- Matthew 18: The fellowship of the kingdom, and

As far as Brooks (1992:25) is concerned, the purpose or theme of the first discourse is obviated by the programmatic statements that Jesus went about proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 4:17, 23). Therefore, the Sermon on the Mount is a description of the virtues which should characterise those who belong to the kingdom of heaven, which is the reign of God in the lives of people in Jesus’ day, during the apostolic era and in subsequent ages (Brooks 1992:25). After admitting that there are as many outlines of the Sermon on the Mount as there are commentaries, Brooks (1992:26–28) proceeds to review a variety of scholarly outlines, such as those which view the Sermon as revolving around the three pillars of Simeon the Just, those which consider the Lord’s Prayer to be the Sermon’s organising principle, and others which attempt to determine the Matthean intent. Then he argues quite cogently that the evangelist does not
seem to employ a rigid structure to the Sermon on the Mount as such, yet seems to construct an organised, topical and coherent framework, which exegetes can configure in a myriad number of ways (Brooks 1992:27). This adaptation of the proposals by Brooks (1992:28), Allison (1987:437–438) and Powell (1996:462) does justice to its coherence, flow and simplicity and therefore suffices as a decent example of the structure of Matthew 5–7:

**Introduction: the crowds and the mountain (4:23–5:2)**

1. The blessedness of disciples, the Beatitudes (5:3–12)
   - (1) First strophe: 5:3–6 (4 Beatitudes)
   - (2) Second strophe: 5:7–10 (4 Beatitudes)
   - (3) Concluding Beatitude: 5:11–12 (9th Beatitude)

2. The character of disciples (5:13–16)
   - (1) Salt of the earth (5:13)
   - (2) Light of the world (5:14–15)
   - (3) Application (5:16)

3. The new Torah for disciples (5:17–48)
   **Introduction:** Jesus’ attitude toward the *Torah* (5:17–20)
   - (1) About murder (5:21–26)
   - (2) About adultery (5:27–30)
   - (3) About divorce (5:31–32)
   - (4) About oaths (5:33–37)
   - (5) About retaliation (5:38–42)
   - (6) About love of enemies (5:43–48)

4. The practice of piety by disciples, the Christian cultus (6:1–18)
   **Introduction:** the evil of ostentation (6:1)
   - (1) By almsgiving (6:2–4)
   - (2) By prayer (6:5–15)
   - (3) By fasting (6:16–18)

5. The avoidance of materialism by disciples, social issues (6:19–34)

6. On one’s neighbour, social issues (7:1–12)
   - (1) Against judging (7:1–5)
(2) Against sacrilege (7:6)
(3) Encouragement (7:7–11)

7. Concluding statement: the golden rule, the law and the prophets, 7:12

8. Warnings, the prospect of eschatological judgment, 7:13–27
   (1) Against worldliness (7:13–14)
   (2) Against false teachers (7:15–23)
   (3) Against hearing but not acting upon the word (7:24–27)

   Conclusion: the crowds and the mountain (7:28–8:1)

As alluded to above, the very topography in which Matthew situates Jesus’ first major discourse is theologically significant (Luz 2004:129). Eco-theologically, too, the discourse’s topographic *Sitz im Leben* is quite significant, as explained below. Besides the Mosaic reminiscences of law-giving authority and the messianic connotations the mountain imagery evokes, Jesus’ action of first ascending the mountain at the start of his Sermon (Matt 5:1) and then descending it after his discourse (8:1), serves as an ostensible affirmation of the value of natural land forms, from an ecotheological perspective. Indeed, while the intrinsic worth of this geographical feature may not be altogether obvious in this case, yet the *principle of mutual custodianship* or partnership is overtly illustrated here, even before we delve into the “meat” of the Sermon, by just the discourse’s setting which the author emphasises by means of the *inclusio*. Here the mountain is a partner in Jesus’ kingdom mission, as it plays key roles critical to the master’s business. Firstly, in providing a much-needed acoustic platform in the absence of a public address system, the mountain is far from being a passive, disposable materiality. Rather, it is Jesus’ party that needed the mountain, and not vice versa. Therefore, it is the mountain which played the custodial role to Jesus and his party in this case, by accommodating them upon the open-air “auditorium”; hence the principle of custodianship is well-illustrated here. Secondly, this particular mountain, along with a long list of others in the biblical tradition, such as Mount Sinai, Mount Carmel, Mount of Olives and so forth, represents the sanctity of nature on account of its sacred function (cf. Luz 2004:129). It has an undeniable purpose, and thus also illustrates the *ecojustice* *principle of purpose.*
Another ecotheologically significant feature which the structure of Matthew 5–7 reveals is its comprehensiveness, in that while 5:17–6:18 deals with instructions on the Torah and on the “cult-didache”, 6:19–7:12 deals with “social issues” (Allison 1987:436). This means that the Sermon integrates “spiritual” and “temporal” matters seamlessly. From an eco-theological perspective, Matthew’s approach here is quite telling, for it suggests that today’s Christian disciples should also aim for an integrated spirituality, one which covers so-called secular as well as sacred matters, and is characterised by relational soundness with God, as well as with human and nonhuman neighbours. It suggests a spirituality that dissolves our customary false dualisms of heavenly versus earthly realms, which translate into attitudes and behaviours which tend to privilege some over others (Howell 1997:234). Indeed, application of the ecojustice hermeneutic of suspicion to this discourse’s structure enables us to overcome “naturism”—the oppression and domination of the rest of nature (Howell 1997:232). Instead, we recognise that life comprises interconnected and interdependent processes (Howell 1997:233). That is the ecojustice principle of interconnectedness well-illustrated just by the structure of the discourse.

Similarly, according to Allison (1987:441), the structure of Matthew 5–7 has hermeneutical implications in the sense that the radical demands of Jesus’ ethic are counterbalanced by heaven’s grace. This is so because the discourse is introduced by 4:23–5:2 which relates that the crowds which gathered to hear Jesus had been the object of his compassion and healing, purely on the basis of grace, such that grace preceded imperative (Allison 1987:441). Then Jesus introduces his address by proclaiming God’s grace in the future by means of the blessings and promises in the beatitudes (5:3–12), and God’s grace in the present through the Father’s assured care and provision (6:25-39; 7:7–11), as Allison (1987:441) explains further. Thus, God’s grace is the overriding cosmic principle historically, presently and eschatologically. Furthermore, as shown in the discourse’s outline above, the “golden rule” in 7:12 not only closes the section on one’s neighbour and the larger section on social issues, but also closes the entire central section (5:17–7:12) of the discourse, and summarises the law and the prophets (Brooks 1992:27). Notably, according to Allison (1987:437), that the golden rule is equivalent to the “great commandment” of love is evident from Matthew’s conclusion that upon the love
commandment “hang all the law and the prophets” (22:34–40), after having previously concluded that the golden rule—to do to others what you would have them do to you—“sums up the law and the prophets” (7:12). Similarly, the evangelist concludes the list of commandments required for one’s entrance to life with the commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself (19:16–30). Evidently Matthew’s Gospel considers the love commandment as preeminent, and the golden rule as just another rendition of the love demand (Allison 1987:437). Therefore, the golden rule is the quintessence and epitome of Jesus’ teaching on discipleship in the first discourse, as well as in the whole first Gospel (Allison 1987:437).

The ecojustice implications of such a grace-ethic or love-ethic are certainly profound. *Inter alia*, a graced spirituality certainly has beneficial effects on how humans treat their human and nonhuman neighbours in the cosmic community. Alas, how much more successful international attempts of reaching a global climate agreement would be, were developed and developing nations negotiating in good faith and motivated by a grace-paradigm, instead of being driven purely by self-interests? Perhaps the North-South accusations and counter-accusations of our day, such as those which characterised the December 2009 Copenhagen global climate summit, and dashed the hopes of developing nations, would be replaced by a more constructive *esprit de corps* (Black 2010:1). Richer and poorer nations, operating in a grace-ethic, would accommodate each other better and recognise that they are mutual partners in this cosmos, and uphold the *principle of mutual custodianship* (cf. Black 2010:1).

Having briefly surveyed the ecotheological implications of the structure of Matthew 5–7, a more detailed consideration of the ecojustice implications of the discourse can now be undertaken.

### 3.3 Matthew 5–7 in the Context of the Gospel’s Allusions to Nature

An effective way of determining the ecological significance of the Gospel of Matthew in general and the Sermon on the Mount in particular, is to consider the Gospel’s allusions to the natural order. According to Leske (2002:16–18), this Gospel has at least five
categories of references to nature, namely: tree metaphors, seed metaphors, animal metaphors, heaven-and-earth references and earth community parables.

### 3.3.1 Tree metaphors

For instance, Matthew employs tree metaphors to depict people (Leske 2002:16). Thus, false prophets are readily identifiable by their bad fruit, that is, thorns and thistles—symbols of the Fall and the consequent curse—while authentic disciples are recognisable by their good fruit (Matt 7:15–20; 12:33–35). Similarly, the fruitless fig tree which Jesus cursed symbolised the fruitlessness of the Jerusalem priesthood (21:18–22). In order to depict the judgment designed for those whose lives do not please God, the text uses the imagery of the felling and burning of fruitless trees (3:10; 15:13). From an ecojustice perspective, however, the negativity of Matthew’s language in some of these tree metaphors—such as the cursing of the fig tree, the hewing of trees which bear sub-standard fruit, the burning of such trees and the uprooting of alien trees—is quite disconcerting. That an otherwise perfectly healthy tree should be condemned simply because it fails to gratify a human craving smirks of ecological injustice. Anthropocentric needs are paramount, and the welfare of nonhuman creation is secondary, so goes the logic which devalues floriae and consequently violates the ecojustice principle of intrinsic worth. Likewise, the text is insensitive to the suffering of the trees that are mutilated and hacked down. It is oblivious to the ignominy endured by the trees judged for infertility, and callous to the agony sustained by the trees that are either torched or have their lifecycle prematurely terminated. By so treating the earth’s trees, the text betrays an instrumental appreciation of vegetative creation, and consequently violates the ecojustice principle of resistance, which highlights the reality of all creation’s capacity for suffering as well as resistance.

### 3.3.2 Seed metaphors

The seed-metaphor parables of Matthew 13—the sower and the seed, the wheat and the tare and the mustard seed—illustrate the planting, growth and success of the kingdom of
God (Leske 2002:17). Thus, in this Gospel, plant life has a value far greater than the typically utilitarian one. Florae have symbolic and didactic value. As Howell (1997:234) asserts, valuing nature entails valuing the wisdom intrinsic to nature. Even such plants as thorns and thistles, which are usually viewed as inconvenient nuisances, are here portrayed as object lessons on productivity. They are not mere commodities, but demonstrate creation’s self-affirmation and have value in themselves, independent of their direct benefit (or lack of it) to humans, and therefore exemplify the ecojustice principle of intrinsic worth (cf. Howell 1997:234). Given that, according to Bond (2000:1), the rhetorical intent of parables is to generate narrative tension in hearers and thus to be “subversive” and unsettling to the status quo, the ecojustice implications of the abovementioned seed-metaphor parables become quite phenomenal. Thus, through the medium of these parables, and from the perspective of an eco-theological hermeneutic, nature’s struggle for liberation and for expression can be discerned in the text of Matthew’s Gospel. The ecojustice principle of resistance comes to the surface, as does the principle of voice.

3.3.3 Animal metaphors

In addition to the above metaphors which pertain to plant-life, Matthew also employs animal metaphors to depict spiritual truths. By depicting Jesus as having compassion for the multitudes who seem like sheep without a shepherd (Matt 9:36), referring to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt10:6; 15:24), sending his disciples as sheep among wolves, and urging his followers to be as shrewd as snakes yet innocent as doves (Matt10:16), the evangelist employs animal metaphors to great effect (Leske 2002:17). Similarly, Matthew depicts Jesus as a man of no fixed abode, unlike wild foxes and birds which do (8:20). The point of this imagery is to highlight the cost of true discipleship, in terms of its demand for greater trust in God for the basic necessities of life (Leske 2002:17). The ecological kinship that Jesus naturally assumes in all this imagery is remarkable. It is remarkable, not only because people are portrayed as sheep, wolves, snakes and doves, but also because Jesus himself has no qualms about being “inferior” to foxes and birds in terms of residence. Therefore, by depicting these animals as kith and
kin to the human species, coexisting with and fulfilling the role of behavioural models, Matthew depicts the ecojustice principle of interconnectedness. No wonder, therefore, that Carroll (1994:30) boldly concludes that if we consider the Christian ethic put forth by the initiator of Christianity and his early disciples some two millennia ago, we will find it to be overwhelmingly ecological, that Jesus himself was an ecologist par excellence! Admittedly, such an assertion may at face value be quite shocking. However, the value of an eco-theological reading of biblical texts lies, at least in part, in the possibility of retrieving exactly this kind of unexpected “revelation” from the sacred text, does it not? Therefore, in actual fact, the notion of Jesus’ own ecological relevance is not audacious at all, except that admitting such a view will place a matching demand upon all Christians. To folk accustomed to environmental desecration, that may be the really daunting and ominous prospect! Nonetheless, Matthew’s Gospel unequivocally portrays the ecojustice principle of intrinsic worth as far as faunae are concerned. Likewise, the animals in this Gospel certainly articulate a message that Jesus urges his followers to heed. Indeed, they have a voice, and therefore exemplify the ecojustice principle of voice.

3.3.4 Heaven–earth unity

Going beyond the allusions to florae and faunae specifically, Leske (2002:17) argues that the Gospel of Matthew also expresses the motif of a desired unity between heaven and earth in general. For instance, Jesus is depicted as praying to God the Father as Lord of heaven and earth (Matt 11:25), denoting God’s sovereignty over all creation. Likewise, Jesus is portrayed as one who teaches his disciples to pray that the heavenly Father’s will must be done on earth as it is in heaven (6:10), that the meek will inherit the earth (5:5), that men have authority on earth to forgive sins (9:6–8), that his disciples can prohibit or permit certain things on earth with corresponding heavenly consequences (16:19; 18:18–20), and that he himself had been granted all authority in heaven and on earth (28:18).

These references to the earth have an affirmative ring to them, in contrast to views that the Christian message is inherently apocalyptic. By acknowledging God’s interest in and authority over both heaven and earth, by promising the faithful to inherit the earth and in
triumphantly asserting his heaven-and-earth authority, Jesus endorses the intrinsic worth of the earth. The eco-justice principle of intrinsic worth is thus affirmed. Admittedly, some of these heaven-earth allusions betray an eco-theologically uncomfortable spatial dichotomy. However, while acknowledging the cosmological dualism implicit in the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:9–13), Balabanski (2000:156) points out that the prayer in fact reflects a continuum of the Creator and creation collaborating in a further creative act of ensuring the comprehensive recognition of God’s name, reign and will throughout creation, as the heaven-earth distinction is effectively collapsed. Thus, the eco-justice principle of interconnectedness is illustrated here by the inclusion of God—as both Creator and Saviour in the interconnection of creation and new creation: heaven and earth as part and parcel of one continuum (Balabanski 2002:156). Far from promoting a heaven-earth duality, the Lord’s Prayer promotes the collaboration and continuity of heaven-earth, motivated by a desire to see the gracious reign and benevolent purpose of God pervasive across one interconnected realm, especially when interpreted through the lenses of an ecojustice hermeneutic. Consequently, the traditional construction of a power-based, hierarchical relationship between heaven and earth is replaced with “reciprocity and mutuality” (Howell 1997:233). Thus, heaven and earth are considered to be part and parcel of one dynamic cosmic design within which each component has a place in the overall of that design: the ecojustice principle of purpose.

Yet, also from an ecojustice viewpoint, Matthew’s references to heaven as God’s throne and the earth as God’s footstool (Matt 5:34–35; 23:22), are quite perturbing on account of both the evident dualism and the degradation of the earth’s status. Such a depiction of the earth in an inferior light, as a mere footrest for God as opposed to heaven as God’s abode, evokes a sense of devaluation of the earth and connotes a violation of the ecojustice principle of intrinsic worth, in addition to the flouting of the principle of resistance. The latter principle applies to the earth here because, ecotheologically speaking, the earth is certainly not some insignificant, dispensable and peripheral reality, but a dynamic, living subject capable of offering resistance in the face of domination and injustice. The earth as a complex web of bio-systems cannot be relegated to the margins of relevance, as the Deity’s mere footstool. That would also be a travesty of the ecojustice principle of
purpose. In the same vein, Leske (2002:18) argues that the earth is not inferior, nor should there be tension between heaven and earth, since both belong in the kingdom of God, as interconnected cosmic relatives. In fact, according to Habel (1999:116), God’s presence is masked in all the created realities of the earth, such that none of the nuances of distance between the exalted, infinite Creator and the finite creaturely earth we imagine are valid. Their spatial distinction does not necessarily spell their ecological and spiritual separation. Heaven and earth may be different, but they belong together in the universe’s cosmic design. Thus, by means of the ecojustice hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval, we are able to discern concealed violations of the principles of intrinsic worth, resistance, and purpose and to recover the underlying heaven-earth continuity otherwise incognito in the text of Matthew 5–7.

3.3.5 Nature parables

Equally significant results can be retrieved from an eco-theological reading of those parables in Matthew’s Gospel which have allusions to nature, in addition to the seed-metaphor parables already discussed above (Leske 2002:18). The nature-parables are: the parable of the vineyard (Matt 21:33–46); the parable of the marriage feast (22:1–14); the parable of the faithful and wise servant (24:45–51); the parable of the wise and foolish maidens (25:1–13); the parable of the talents (25:14–30) and the parable of the great judgment (25:31–46). A key characteristic of these parables is the leitmotif of the obligation which those who live in harmony with God (that is, Jesus’ disciples) have to act as faithful servants who help bring all members of the earth community into harmony with God (Leske 2002:18). Similarly, Osborne (1991:239) explains that the purpose of parables is to encounter, interpret and invite the reader (or listener) to participate in Jesus’ world-vision of the kingdom. These “speech-events” never allow their audience to be neutral, but encounter and draw receptive nonbelievers to decision, teach disciples further truths and judge those who reject the presence of God in Jesus (Osborne 1991:239). Thus, these parables are designed to provoke a response in Jesus’ followers and in others. As noted above, as far as the “nature parables” are concerned, this response pertains to the disciples’ responsibility to harmonise the cosmic community with God’s will.
But how do Jesus’ followers achieve the apparently daunting feat of harmonising the earth community with heaven and the will of God? The answer lies not in the parables themselves, but in the Sermon on the Mount. By being the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt 5:13–16), argues Leske (2002:18), Christ’s disciples not only focus on the transformation of fellow-humans, but also aim to reconcile the whole earth community with God’s purpose. Similarly, according to Osborne (1991:243), being salt of the earth and light of the world is the “higher ethical stance” which characterises the lives of the citizens of the kingdom of God, on account of the present reality of God’s rule as well as on account of the future consummation of that reality. The potential ecojustice repercussions of such a kingdom-motivated, altruistic ethic are phenomenal. For instance, the motif of faithfulness which is highlighted in these parables has the potential to transform even the way South Africans look at economic development. This motif of fidelity not only to God, but also to fellow-humans and other members of the earth community, will spur us to pursue sustainable economic development, which balances economic growth with environmental care and socio-justice considerations (cf. Hattingh and Attfield 2002:66). Such a high ethical stance will also enthuse humans to think about life and all its processes and systems holistically, with the goal of being in sync with God’s purpose. The ecojustice principle of interconnectedness is thus illustrated, as is the principle of purpose. Furthermore, this section, and the Gospel according to Matthew as a whole, in addition to conforming to specific ecojustice principles, reveals a deep relationship with the very fabric of these principles. By this is meant that the Matthean text has a remarkable kinship with the very ethos of ecological theology: justice, which of course includes ecojustice.

The Gospel of Matthew, therefore, clearly has numerous allusions to the natural order. Our consideration of the Sermon on the Mount in the context of the whole Gospel sheds significant light on the eco-theological message imbedded in it. In the same vein, the inter-textual relationship of the passage with the Hebrew canon, as far as ecological allusions are concerned, is critical to this discussion.
3.4 Matthew 5–7 in the Context of Old Testament Allusions to Nature

3.4.1 A Pentateuch-like Discourse

Leske (2002:18) contends that this discourse does not quite belong to the genre of Jewish wisdom sayings, as some suppose, although the typical wisdom formula of arguing from the lesser to the greater in the hierarchy of beings in nature is discernible in the text. It has already been shown that this passage and the whole Gospel of Matthew is more like the Pentateuch, a Matthean new *torah*. The abundance of Semitisms, whether derived from Jewish traditions or from the Hebrew Scriptures, the pervasiveness of the fulfilment motif, as well as the overall style and substance of the book indicate that it was written by a Jewish Christian ostensibly for Jewish Christians—in order to reassure and remind them of the meaning and significance of Jesus’ teaching of the kingdom of God and his actions relating to it (Leske 2002:20). Thus, much of what Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount is traceable to the Old Testament, with Deutero-Isaiah, Malachi, Zechariah 9–14, Jonah, Daniel, Wisdom of Solomon, Parables of Enoch, serving as good examples (Leske 2002:20). Similarly, Luz (2004:134) avers that Biblical intertextualizations of Matthew's text by readers are among the creative acts of reading that the text makes possible. It follows that the presence of other texts of the Hebrew canon, such as those cited above, can be readily identified in Matthew, resulting in significant hermeneutical possibilities. With specific reference to ecotheology, such a realisation, *inter alia*, enables interpreters to understand certain Matthean texts’ view of nature in light of their Old Testament sources.

3.4.2 Ancient worldview of nature

Interestingly, according to Leske (2002:19), in the ancient worldview, animals were an integral part of nature, and thus were often held up as models for human behaviour without any sense of violating the so-called human hierarchical “superiority”. Therefore, for Jesus to hold up birds, animals and grass as objects of human emulation and instruction, as he does in this Gospel, is not far-fetched. Neither is the common
dependence of human and non-human nature on God’s provision. Thus, the symbiotic relationships among the diverse members of the earth community are not only ecologically valid, but are also biblically affirmed. It is a demonstration of the eco-justice principle of interconnectedness.

### 3.4.3 Old Testament view of righteousness

Similarly, the concept of “his righteousness” found in Matthew 5:6, 10; 6:33 is best understood in the context of its Old Testament usage (Leske 2002:22). It refers to God’s gracious act of covenant faithfulness in restoring his reign among his people, a “righteousness” (sedaq) that then enables those who seek it to also respond in faithfulness (sedaqah) as members of the kingdom of God (Leske 2002:22). Thus, experiencing God’s righteousness is seen here as prerequisite to one’s ability, in turn, to respond in righteousness. Consequently, righteous humans are able to treat each other and all creation justly and rightly. To Bailey (1993:88), this righteousness (dikaiosyne) is God’s way of setting everything in right relationships, it denotes a “rightness” which expresses the moral ecology of the kingdom of heaven, such that “where God’s kingship is fully effective, there all things are right”. Such a holistic view of righteousness, of course, can only have immensely positive effects on humans’ environmental responsibility. Accordingly, righteous humans will vigorously pursue what is in the best interests of, what is right for, all creation. Such a righteous paradigm calls for conscientious consideration for environmental care and will not countenance the dumping of toxic waste on the land, nor tolerate the thoughtless depletion of natural resources. It therefore recognises the ecojustice principle of purpose. Similarly, national economic interests must be pursued with this righteous ethic in mind. This will entail, inter alia, the quest for not mere development, but sustainable development, defined by the South African National Environmental Management Act as the integration of social, economic and environmental factors in the planning, implementation and evaluation of decisions to ensure that development serves present and future generations (Hattingh and Attfield 2002:66). As such, since this generation of humans has a moral responsibility to present and future generations, it cannot stand by and watch our natural resources decimated in
the name of economic or industrial development. That would not be a righteous response. Neither is silence, nor indifference. Today’s Christian voices must stand up and be counted, inspired by an ecotheological ethic of righteousness, or rightness. They, too, must uphold the ecojustice principle of voice, and the principle of resistance, for they are part and parcel of creation.

3.4.4 Banquet stories

The feeding stories in the Gospel of Matthew (14:13–21, 15:29–38, 22:1–14, 25:1–13), echo the Old Testament messianic banquets, such as the one portrayed in Isaiah 55:1–5, and have profound significance (Leske 2002:23). These banquet stories signify celebration of God’s kingship and the transference of the Davidic covenant to the people. Moreover, they signify that, since eating and drinking are an integral part of celebrating the kingdom of God, members of the kingdom need not be anxious anymore. Providence equally takes care of the birds of the air which rely on his goodness (6:26), and of humans who trust him (Leske 2002:23). Thus human and nonhuman creation can all feast by faith at the King’s banqueting table. In the same vein, anxiety about one other basic human need—clothing—is eliminated. The full import of how this particular anxiety is eliminated can best be grasped when we note that, from the Genesis 3 narrative onwards, nakedness had come to connote shame and humiliation, the consequence of the curse that would come on those who had forsaken God (cf. Amos 2:16; Ezek 16:7–39; 23:39). In contrast, argues Leske (2002:23), God clothes the transient grass of the field so well that other kingdom members (such as humans) need not be anxious about what to wear (6:30). They do not have to endure the humiliation of nakedness because their God-king is both caring and able to meet their needs. Therefore, human and nonhumans alike are mutual participants in God’s gracious provision. Their relationship thus showcases the ecojustice principle of interconnectedness. That Providence is depicted as specifically clothing nonhuman creation similarly accentuates the principle of intrinsic worth, for the grass of the field is adorned independent of humans’ use, admiration or presence. Purely for its own sake—what a rebuke to human arrogance!
3.4.5 Summative promise

An awareness of the intertextual link of the Sermon on the Mount with the Old Testament also helps shed light on the significance of the profound summative promise of Matthew 6:33. According to Dillon (1991:614), Matthew is in this passage at pains to evoke both the Septuagint in general and the Genesis narrative of the creation and fall (Gen 1–3) in particular. Likewise, as far as Leske (2002:23–24) is concerned, this verse expresses the fulfilment of the prophetic longings for eschatological restoration and a complete reversal of the Deuteronomy 28:48 curse. The curse was characterised by enslavement, hunger, thirst, nakedness and abject poverty. On the other hand, the phrase “all these things shall be added to you” denotes the bestowal of all the blessings of relationship and harmony in God’s realm and with all creation (Deut 28:2–6). Succinctly represented here is the arrival of the time of restoration, the presence of the reign of God, of life under the covenant blessings, and redemption from the curse. The curse is reversed. Similarly, in Jesus' injunction "do not be anxious" we can hear a release from the anxious "toil" placed upon both proto-parents by their Creator's sentence (Gen 3:16, 17), argues Dillon (1991:614). Since the phrases "birds of the air" and "grass of the field" characterise the whole sequence that includes creation (Gen 1:26–30; 2:5), the naming of creatures (Gen 2:19-20), and fallen man's punishment (Gen 3:18), they could evocatively reinforce the lessons about their grandeur and limits which humans learn from the first pages of the Bible (Dillon 1991:614). Instead of the curse, there is a solid assurance for all kingdom people: that when they ask, they will receive, when they seek, they will find, and when they knock, the door will be opened (Matt 7:7–11; cf. Isa 55:6; 65:1). Therefore, when the Sermon on the Mount is read through ecojustice lenses and in the context of the Old Testament, it has a definite emancipatory thrust—emancipation from the burden of the primordial curse, from the shame of nakedness and from the ignominy of poverty. Previously submerged, the principle of resistance thus becomes exposed, with ramifications for both human and nonhuman creation.

The prophets viewed human greed and selfishness as more than breaking the covenant with God; it also meant breaking covenant with God’s creation (Leske 2002:24). For
instance, Hosea laments that, as a direct consequence of the people’s covenantal infidelity, the land itself mourns, as all its inhabitants languish, wild animals, birds of the air and even the fish of the sea perish (Hos 4:3). Thus, there is an inalienable link between the coming of the kingdom and the natural order. Other prophets, too, describe the escape or extermination of the birds of the air and animals, leaving the land destitute, on account of human unfaithfulness (Jer 4:25; 9:9; Zeph 1:3). Therefore, restoration of a sound relationship with God necessarily implies a return to the wholesome relationship between humanity and the animal world as partners in the earth community, as it was meant to be before the Fall (Hos 2:18; cf. Isa 11:1–10). The eco-justice principles of mutual custodianship and interconnectedness are thus well-illustrated. Second Isaiah also exemplifies these principles effectively, as it depicts all creation sympathetically celebrating the redemption of God’s people, such that mountains and hills burst into song, trees applaud, and pines and myrtles replace thorns and briers (Isa 55:12–13). Therefore, Jesus’ climactic injunction in Matthew 6 for his disciples to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” is intricately rooted in the Old Testament. This realisation empowers us to transcend the prima facie meaning, and to access the fuller ecotheological import of the text. It is an import which surpasses purely atomistic, individual salvation, as it is far-reaching and has personal as well as corporate, human as well as nonhuman, current as well as eschatological, repercussions.

### 3.4.6 Weak-yet-promising-faith

Lastly, as Leske (2002:25) notes, in Matthew 5–7, and elsewhere in the first Gospel, Jesus addresses the community of believers as “you of little faith” (cf. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). These oligopisti have a rather week-yet-positive faith and can be encouraged to perceive the fullness of God’s kingdom better by God’s care for the seemingly insignificant aspects of his creation (Leske 2002:25). There is an implicit optimism in this depiction of believers as those who have “faith-in-progress”, to coin a term. Notwithstanding our human culpability and weakness, growth is not a lost cause as far as our spirituality is concerned. Neither is it a lost cause as far as our environmental responsibilities are concerned. South African Christian voices should speak up and be
heard, as they help avert an irreversible ecological cataclysm. It is in that optimistic hue that the ecojustice implications of the Sermon on the Mount can now be explored, in addition to the contextual exploration already undertaken.

3.5 The Implications of Matthew 5–7 for Ecojustice

The message of the Sermon on the Mount has far-reaching implications for social justice in general and for eco-justice in particular. The text bears a highly potent ethic, uniquely obviated by an eco-theological reading thereof, and explicable from several angles.

3.5.1 The regnum Dei incorporates ecojustice

To start with, it has already been seen that the central motif in Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount as well as in the whole Gospel of Matthew is the good news of the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God, the regnum Dei. According to Leske (2002:25), this reign of God is not just eschatological, but is also a present reality. The Beatitudes (Matt 5:3–12) enumerate kingdom blessings and attest to the fact that this reign of God is a gracious gift, obtainable by request and search. When the Beatitudes proclaim “theirs is the kingdom of God”, they allude to the new heaven and new earth (the new creation) mentioned in Isaiah, and the whole Sermon on the Mount constitutes an invitation to be part of this new creation (Leske 2002:26). Matthew illustrates the kingdom-now reality, that is, the present reality of the promised restoration, the new creation, by situating the healing miracles of the next two chapters (8–9) such that they immediately succeed this first discourse. Thus, the healing of the leper symbolises the restoration of Israel because the suffering servant of Isaiah (Israel) had often been depicted as a leper; the calming of the storm portrays the inclusion of nature in this healing process, since the ancients considered raging storms as symbols of God’s judgment on the wicked, in contrast to the calming of natural storms which symbolised divine blessing (Leske 2002:26).

Furthermore, Matthew integrates the praxis of the regnum Dei with the proclamation of the reign of God by means of the inclusio in Matthew 4:23 and 9:35, which describes how Jesus’ itinerant ministry programme comprised the teaching and preaching of the
good news of God’s kingdom, in conjunction with the healing of all manner of sickness (Leske 2002:26). It becomes clear, therefore, that the Christian *message* and the Christian *mission* are intricately interwoven. That is why Leske (2002:26) explains that the entry of the reign of God effects comprehensive transformation, through Jesus’ amalgamation of the whole earth community, human as well as nonhuman. Thus, as Israel’s historical failures precipitated the land’s ruin, so the restoration of the people would also lead to the earth’s renewal (Leske 2002:26). The life-transforming effects of the gospel then have ecological effects. By the same token, the restored (transformed) people pray for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. As Balabanski (2000:156) points out, such prayers are more than mere ritually placatory wishes, but implicate the speakers in the action. By so praying, such petitioners become participants in the divine agenda to dissolve the heaven-earth distinction. They do not stand aloof as independent critics, but seriously take up their Master’s call to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Matt 5:13–14). Such a paradigm rebukes the narrow focus that tends to dominate the typical Christian’s spirituality. We are forced to look beyond the four walls of the church, to become partners in co-creating the reality of God’s reign in our cosmic home (Balabanski 2000:156). We recognise that the earth is a community of interconnected, mutually dependent living things all within the *regnum Dei*, thereby upholding the ecojustice *principle of interconnectedness*.

### 3.5.2 The imitatio Dei spells ecojustice

The abovementioned community of restored people is acutely aware that God takes care of *all* members of his kingdom precisely because God loves *all* members of the earth community, whether they are humans, birds of the air or flowers of the field. It is highly significant that Jesus highlights the fact of God’s ongoing personal involvement with nature, beyond the initial creation story, by asserting that their heavenly Father personally feeds the birds of the air and clothes the grass of the field (Matt 6:26, 30). This is, of course, a far cry from the notion of a God who is so transcendent that He is distant from and largely uninvolved in nature. Rather, this is a picture of an immanently real, personally involved, and “hands-on” God—akin to a rancher who affectionately protects
and feeds his livestock, and of a horticulturist who tenderly grooms and preens her plants. If the infinite God holds finite, inconsequential, nonhuman nature in such high regard, surely it must be similarly valued by those who desire to be like their heavenly Father (Matt 5:48)—the *imitatio Dei* (Willimon 2003:63). Therefore, the *imitatio Dei* spells that human members of God’s reign cannot be in harmony with God and still devalue creation. Rather, the same personal, “hands-on” concern and appreciation God has for creation must be seen in human members of the *regnum Dei*. Thus, the *eco-justice principle of intrinsic worth* is well-illustrated in the Sermon on the Mount. Because each component of the earth community is thus appreciated as significant in the overall dynamic cosmic design, the ecojustice *principle of purpose* is also upheld.

At this point the value of an ecotheological reading becomes patently manifest. Although a typical “conventional” reading rightly concludes that we must not be anxious about our needs due to the fact that the God who provides for nonhuman creation will also provide for us, yet it falls short. It falls short because it is oblivious to the more far-reaching implications of Jesus’ point here. An ecotheological reading of the Sermon on the Mount goes a step further by sensitizing us to our responsibility to care for creation, in emulation of our heavenly Father’s personal responsibility for all life-forms. It is important to note here that this Christ-promoted paradigm is radically different from one which merely dissuades humans from harming the environment. Also going beyond merely discouraging neglect, this paradigm in fact mobilises humans to the imperative task of actively taking care of creation, in emulation of their heavenly Father: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). As imitators of God, humans then fulfil their custodial responsibility alongside other earthly custodians. They realise that the earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners with, rather than rulers over the earth and are keen contributors to the sustenance of its balance and diversity. Thereby the ecojustice *principle of mutual custodianship* is illustrated. Moreover, the church’s mission cannot be restricted purely to the indulgence of human needs, if it should conform to the Sermon on the Mount ethic. Rather, this ethic sensitizes us to the interrelationships between God, inanimate creation, nonhuman faunae, florae, and humans. All creation is connected to God and to each other...
in the one kingdom of God. The infinite and the finite intermingle in a connectivity which is not only biological, but also moral and spiritual. It is multi-dimensional and holistic. Thereby, Matthew 5–7 illustrates the eco-justice principle of interconnectedness.

3.5.3 The Beatific ethic guarantees ecojustice

According to Thompson (1999:113), the first strophe of Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:3–6) belongs to the category of apocalyptic beatitudes, which are typically eschatological, prophetic and paracletic in nature as they offer good news, promises and comfort to the dispossessed—the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. This alliterative stanza, according to Powell (1996:462), comprises references to the poor (ptōchoi) in spirit, those who mourn (penthoundes), the meek (praēis), and those who hunger (peinontes) and thirst for righteousness. These epigrams are highly influenced by Isaiah 61:1–8 where the promises of “good news to the poor”, that God will “bind up the broken-hearted” and “comfort those who mourn” are made (Thompson 1999:113). Similarly, Matthew’s fourth Beatitude, with its promise that the meek shall inherit the earth, is reminiscent of Psalm 37:11, and that these Beatitudes are basically promises to the dispossessed is very much in keeping with Jesus’ role as friend of sinners and outcasts (Thompson 1999:113). Thus, a strong “beatific ethic” comes to the fore here in this text, to coin a term. This beatific ethic essentially holds that an authentic Christian spirituality necessarily includes social justice, because God has vulnerable, underprivileged and disadvantaged humanity at heart. Moreover, given the holistic, all-inclusive nature of such an ethic, as reflected in the regnum Dei and imitatio Dei dimensions discussed above, it also follows that vulnerable, endangered, nonhuman creation legitimately figures in the ambit of a biblical spirituality. Thus, it is not a leap of faith to recognise the integrity of creation, nor is our advocacy for ecojustice far-fetched. Using the hermeneutical lenses of ecojustice in this fashion, nonhuman creation’s marginalisation can be reversed and the voices of the earth’s nonhuman members can be acknowledged. That is the ecojustice principle of voice in operation. Similarly, the suppressed resistance stories of such human and nonhuman earth-components as “those who mourn”, the “broken-hearted”, the “meek”
and others can be discerned and retrieved. That is the ecojustice principle of resistance in operation.

The second strophe of the Beatitudes (5:7–12) has an even stronger social justice and ecojustice ethic. In this case, these beatitudes function as kingdom “entrance requirements” with promises to the “merciful”, the “pure in heart”, the “peacemakers” and those who are persecuted because of righteousness (Thompson 1999:114). It is significant that the notion of “entrance requirements” is consistent with the whole Sermon on the Mount and the whole Matthean Gospel. For example, Jesus points out that a superior righteousness is a prerequisite for entrance into the kingdom of heaven (5:20) and that mere professing of his name is insufficient grounds for kingdom entry (7:21). A similar consistency applies as far as the motif of mercy is concerned. Thompson (1999:114) avers that the second strophe’s first beatitude (“blessed are the merciful”) anticipates the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt 18:21–35), anticipates Jesus’ recitation of Hosea 6:6 (“I desire mercy and not sacrifice”) and anticipates Jesus’ statement that the weightier matters of the law are justice, mercy and faith (23:33). These beatitudes in Matthew, argues Thompson (1999:115) have an obvious ethical orientation, unlike the Lucan ones. They describe the pattern of conduct by which the community of believers can be the “light of the world”, thereby challenging the church to be a counterculture and to reject the prevailing standards, and to follow Jesus’ example of humility (Thompson 1999:116).

Therefore, an attitude devoid of care for God’s creation—human, nonhuman, biological or inorganic—is inconsistent with a merciful, pure-hearted, peace-loving and unashamedly ethical (righteous) Christian spirituality. Justice is very much at the heart of the Beatitudes’ ethic (or the “beatific ethic”, as I have coined it). And, as has been established before, this justice is all-embracing and holistic, and therefore includes ecojustice. Consequently, the Christian community cannot consider itself to be “pure in heart” while simultaneously desecrating God’s earth, neither can it get away with restricting being “merciful” to human neighbours at the expense of nonhuman cohabitants. Likewise, authentic disciples cannot think of themselves as “peacemakers”
purely with respect to human relations, to the neglect of our nonhuman kin. Rather, an ecojustice hermeneutic enables the community of believers to work for an all-round harmony among all members of the earth community—humans, the environment, plants, domestic livestock, wildlife, cultural activities, and the like. Indeed, such believers recognise the intrinsic worth of all earth’s inhabitants (*principle of intrinsic worth*), and recognise their susceptibility to pain and suffering as well as recognising their right to resist oppression (*principle of resistance*).

### 3.5.4 The Agape-principle assures ecojustice

By means of a series of antithetic dyads or triads (as Allison (1987:438) prefers), Jesus moves on from a discussion of his portrait of the blessedness and character of kingdom disciples (5:1–20) to articulating his new law (Matt 5:2–48), while insisting that his mission was not to abolish the law but to fulfil it. According to Harrington (2007:421), it is significant that Jesus defines love of God and love of neighbour (Greek: *agape*) as the greatest commandments, on which hang all the law and the prophets (22:40). Radically, Jesus summons Christians to be as perfect in love as their heavenly Father who causes sunshine and rain to benefit the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous (5:43–48). In the viewpoint of Willimon (2003:63), this ethic is a strong rebuke on those whose primary motivation is solely utilitarian, with no notion of the overriding importance of the *imitatio Dei*—the ethic that we simply ought to be that which God is. The rationale of this *agape* ethic is this: if as the disciples of Christ we do *not* have the licence to hate our enemies, how much more do we *not* have a licence to hurt our neighbours—whether they are fellow-humans or nonhuman? Thus, Jesus’ teachings are the way of deliverance, steeped in grace and love and based on the breakthrough of the reign of God (Stassen 2003:269).

It is noteworthy that this love-law makes sense as the fulfilment of the Mosaic Law, due to its ability to address the root causes of interpersonal conflicts, personal sin, ulterior motives and impiety. Notably, Allison (1987:436) applauds the golden rule (Matt 7:12) as the climax of the entire central section of the Sermon on the Mount (5:17–7:11), as the
quintessence of the law and the prophets, as the heart of the entire Sermon on the Mount and as the very soul of Jesus’ entire teaching. Closer reading reveals that this epitome of Jesus’ teaching on discipleship is in actuality the love-commandment in disguise, as it equates exactly to the one which sums up the whole *Torah* (22:34–40). With specific reference to eco-justice, this ethic is highly potent because it inspires us to eliminate the inner greed and other drives that spur us on to harm each other and our environment. Furthermore, if our goal is the *imitatio Dei*, how can we find it so easy to desecrate God’s “mask” (creation) in general, or to devalue and disfigure the divine handiwork, and still purport to be in harmony with God? Such a violation of the eco-justice *principle of intrinsic worth* is inconsistent with Jesus’ love-ethic as the quintessence of the entirety of Scripture.

Likewise, the eco-justice *principle of voice* is demonstrated in the way Jesus exhorts his disciples to pay attention to the birds of the air, and to consider the lilies of the field in order to learn how to trust in God (Matt 6:26, 28). These nonhuman neighbours of ours apparently have a distinctive message (and voice) worthy of humans’ cognisance. While Matthew 5–7 primarily relates to the divine-human relationship, yet an undeniable kinship between humans and other members of the earth community, who all share in common judgments and blessings, belong to the one God who is God of *all*, who cares for *all* creation, and regards it *all* as very good, implies that every component of our cosmic community has its purpose and worth in God’s design (Leske 2002:26). The eco-justice *principles of purpose, interconnectedness* and *intrinsic worth* are thus again made apparent.

### 3.5.5 A Metanoic orientation embraces ecojustice

*Prima facie*, it is not easy to discern any connection between Matthew 7:1–5 and eco-justice. However, when we consider the underlying ethic Jesus advocates for, an absolutely relevant dynamic becomes conspicuous. The “transforming initiative of repenting”, as Stassen (2003:289) calls it, could contribute immensely to the reversal of current tendencies toward an environmental cataclysm. How? This is possible by
teaching us to develop the capacity for self-reflection, with a view to an authentic change in behaviour, as opposed to our typical blame-shifting propensities. This ethic seeks to redress the underlying human pride and arrogance that makes us set ourselves up as censorious demi-gods, who pass judgment on everyone else but us, keen on removing the speck from our brother’s eye, oblivious to the plank in our own eyes (7:3–5). It enables us to dethrone ourselves from our usurpation of God’s role as judge. The disastrous consequences of human presumptuous judgment are plain for all to see. According to Conradie (2005:286), what is required is a fundamental change of orientation, a *metanoia* (repentance) that recognises that the problem lies not outside but inside us, not in the ecosystem but in the human heart, and in our collective psyche.

When our anthropocentric pride is arrested, there can be hope that our fellow humans will receive due respect, as will our nonhuman fellow citizens in our common cosmic habitat. In the context of global warming, it is easy for developing countries (such as South Africa) to point fingers at the developed world for their alleged massive and inordinate contribution to the carbon footprint. However, a focus on other nations’ wrong-doing does not exonerate us from our own culpability. Being a Third World nation does not exempt us from our moral obligation to take care of the ecological systems in our part of the world. We must own up to our own mistakes, and we must step up to our own responsibilities. This *metanoic* ethic, therefore, prioritises acceptance of our own environmental responsibility more than hypocritically seeking to police others. As a consequence, we will not perpetrate eco-injustice by hiding behind the smokescreen of our developing world status. In the same vein, Conradie (2005:286) also maintains that science and technology alone cannot resolve ecological threats, nor can governments or the laws they promulgate. Instead, it is “inner governance”—laws which are internalised in our hearts and minds and the will to live by them—which makes a real difference (Conradie 2005:286). Therefore, the problem of judgmentalism addressed in Matthew 7:1–5 can be overcome through the kind of moral formation which typically occurs in faith communities (Conradie 2005:286). It follows that, while environmental activism and its accompanying programmes are relevant as far as ecojustice is concerned, one of the Christian church’s primary tasks must be to engender in its members a *metanoia*—
oriented morality. Surely, when we have a growing army of ecologically conscientious believers, the positive repercussions for ecojustice can only be phenomenal. When we are truly humble and remorseful for our abuse of nature, then there is hope that nonhuman creation can get a better deal in terms of respect for and recognition of all creation’s intrinsic worth and cosmic purpose. When there is a genuine fundamental paradigm shift in our ecological attitudes, therefore, then there is hope that the ecojustice principle of intrinsic worth and the principle of purpose will be upheld.

3.5.6 Negative references to nature evoke resistance

In our day, referring to fellow humans as “dogs” and “pigs” is certainly neither polite, nor politically correct, but is quite startling and jarring to our ears. So, what can we make of Matthew 7:6–12 which does exactly that in the middle of an otherwise wholesome teaching? After discussing and dismissing several possible interpretations—such as that Jesus here warns against Gentile missions, or warns against Christian apostates, or that there are limits to brotherliness—Stassen (2003:290) argues quite cogently that the point is: “do not give your trust and loyalty to the dogs and pigs instead of to God”. As far as the identity of the “dogs” and “pigs” is concerned, Stassen (2003:293) admits that Jewish tradition certainly referred to heathens (Gentiles) as dogs and pigs. The context in this part of the Sermon on the Mount suggests a specific group of Gentiles, the Roman Empire and the accompanying prestige and power. Thus the section’s message can be cast like this: as far as your trust and loyalty go, whether in prayer or lifestyle render them to God rather than to the power and temptations of imperial Rome (Stassen 2003:293). The application of this ethic in our day has quite sobering effects. Among other things, this ethic challenges the temptation for the church to have an uncritical loyalty to the political policies and systems in our generation, especially in the euphoria of post-Apartheid South Africa. Instead, the Christian community must maintain its prophetic role, in terms of personal salvation, yes, but also in terms of social and ecological justice.
Nonetheless, the derogatory connotations of calling fellow-humans “pigs” and “dogs” can neither be overemphasised nor overlooked. In the same vein, the “negative” references to nature in Matthew 5–7 cannot be swept under the carpet. Notwithstanding the moral import of Jesus’ tree-metaphor in 7:17–20 (as also in 12:33), from an ecojustice perspective it is quite unsettling that some trees and their fruit are labelled “bad” and destined for hewing down and “thrown into the fire”. Similarly, that the grass of the field is depicted as being here today and tomorrow thrown into the fire (6:30) betrays humans’ negative attitude towards nature. Likewise, the negative depiction of dogs and pigs as characteristically ferocious and sacrilegious (7:6) also betrays anthropocentric prejudice against nature. Even the depiction of bad people as a “brood of vipers” (12:34) casts snakes in very negative light. So does the previously discussed depiction of the earth as the footstool of God (5:35). These examples attest to the negative attitude humans have towards nature. An ecojustice hermeneutic is able to suspect that the text harbours anthropocentric bias against certain members of the earth community, such as pigs, dogs, certain trees, grass, snakes and others. Of course, such an attitude potentially leads to the needless slaughter and ill-treatment of animals deemed to be inherently “evil”, and to the callous destruction of flora. However, according to the ecojustice principle of resistance, these nonhuman cosmic members not only suffer from human injustices but actively resist them in their own struggle for justice.

3.5.7 A Pragmatic ethic demands environmental praxis

Jesus’ conclusion to his Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:13–27) presents his disciples with the radical choices that confront their lives. They are faced with two alternative ways and gates (7:13, 14), they face the danger of false teachers (7:15–20), they face the peril of mere verbal profession as opposed to obeying the Father’s will (7:21–23), and they are confronted by the inescapable choice of two foundations (7:24–27). The community of faith is thus confronted with this stark choice: to act or not to act? It is a praxis-oriented paradigm. It is pragmatic. Being doers of the Father’s will is the bottom line (7:21). In our pluralistic postmodern world, the ethic that Jesus promotes here is simultaneously alarming and empowering. This pragmatic ethic is alarming partly because it challenges
our generation’s shunning of certainty and absolutism in preference to de-centring of meaning and plurality of perspective (Henriksen 2003:90). Jesus’ pragmatic ethic also causes discomfort because its presentation of the available options challenges our human inertia and the fallacies of neutrality, apathy and indifference. This section’s message confronts us head-on, and compels us to make decisions with respect to our morality and spirituality. The community of believers must acknowledge that we are living in an imperfect world in which we must have the courage of our convictions. Ostensibly, Jesus teaches that walking in the comprehensive love of God does not preclude the wisdom of differentiating authentic ideas from phoney ones. It rouses us from the folly of the notion that when we do nothing, we are exempt from blame, oblivious to the fact that failure to make a positive choice is tantamount to choosing the alternative. Thus, ecotheologically speaking, when we do not play our part, however small in ecological care, we implicitly contribute to the ecological crisis. Admittedly, the poor economic circumstances in which many South Africans find themselves make environmental care seem like a far-fetched luxury, as Conradie (2000:287) explains. Nevertheless, the pragmatic ethic of the Sermon on the Mount still expects the faith community to make the right choices in the light of God’s will.

At the same time, this pragmatic ethic is empowering because of the blessings inherent in doing the will of God. In fact, according to Leske (2002:26–27), the prophetic background of this passage implies that members of the kingdom of God are summoned to share in the renewal process of all creation and thus to do their heavenly Father’s will (Matt 7:21). Likewise, authentic discipleship entails, not only understanding the Christian message, but also practising it. As Conradie (2000:286) puts it, an adequate response to environmental degradation will have to be at the level of praxis and not only of theory or awareness. Perhaps, if all of us would simply do what we can, where we are, we would all be assured of being in harmony with God’s will, and could help avert the looming environmental cataclysm. Even such modest steps as recycling, reducing the use of electricity, water, transport, chemicals, and reusing resources, though inadequate, yet can make a difference, besides helping to challenge our consumerist habits (Conradie 2000:287). It empowers and liberates us to courageously face the ecological and
theological fallacies which contribute to the desecration of the environment. Among others, we reject the fallacy which denies the *intrinsic worth* of nature, consciously recognising that ecojustice is an essential part of the will of the Creator and *the principle of interconnectedness* is a core theme in Jesus’ aphoristic teaching in Matthew 5–7 (Leske 2002:27). This grace-embedded-ethic frees us to care for God’s creation in a pragmatic manner, beyond mere verbal affirmations. For our human and nonhuman neighbours, *in everything, we do to others what we would have them do to us* (7:12). Then there is ecojustice for all.

Thus, the pragmatic ethic—in conjunction with the other principles discussed above and derived from an ecotheological reading of the Sermon on the Mount—exhibits tremendous ecojustice relevance. Combined with other relevant building blocks, such as those discussed in the next chapter, Matthew 5–7 contributes invaluable ecotheological material to the quest for a universally acceptable ecotheological framework.
CHAPTER 4

TOWARDS AN ECOTHEOLOGICAL SYNTHESIS

Having discussed the ecotheological message of the Sermon on the Mount in the previous chapter, this one explores how a universal Christian ecotheological framework can be formulated, using the aforementioned Sermon, as well as other building blocks discussed hereunder. As noted earlier, such a synthesis calls for a wider conceptual consultation, beyond the confines of eco-theology *per se*. It stands to reason that the possibility of arriving at an eco-theological common ground in particular across the South African church is predicated upon the possibility of finding a theological consensus in general. Therefore, this consultation first briefly considers the possibility of a valid Christian worldview, before discussing the nature of the church’s mission with a view to determine the compatibility of the *missio Dei* and eco-theology. An examination of the role of the six ecojustice principles in the quest for an ecotheological synthesis is what comes next. No illusions of this research’s ability to undertake an exhaustive synthesis of the ever-increasing volumes of ecotheological contributions are entertained, as Scott (1998:8) also admits. But it is envisaged that some key elements essential for the desired synthesis can be explored. The objective remains the search for an integration of the apparent potpourri of ecotheological voices affecting South Africa today into a paradigm germane to an authentic Christian spirituality and praxis. It will be seen that the ecotheological exegesis of Matthew 5–7 performed earlier does contribute to this quest.

4.1 The Possibility of a Common Christian Worldview

It is quite heartening that the possibility of arriving at a Christian worldview which is common to the broad spectrum of the church, at least in intent, is not altogether alien to the ecclesial psyche. The very existence of ecumenical movements, such as the World Council of Churches and similar bodies, is testimony to the reality of that hope. As has already been observed, the South African Council of Churches, arguably the largest
ecumenical grouping in the southern African sub-continent, unequivocally advocates for a concerted Christian mission in the world for God’s glory (SACC 2009:37). Similarly, the existence of scholarly contributions along the same basic lines, notwithstanding the diversity of terminology used, also evokes hope for an integrated church response to the challenges facing our planet. For instance, Bartholomew (1997:43) argues that Niebuhr’s transformational paradigm is one of the most biblical and coherent Christian worldviews. This paradigm is applauded because it does justice to the all-embracing nature of Christianity, typified by its comprehensive understanding of creation, the fall, redemption and consummation (Bartholomew 1997:43). In a capsule, Niebuhr’s paradigm avers that Christ is the transformer of culture, in light of the fact that as a result of sin, God’s good creation has been corrupted by being misdirected, and that redemption leads to the healing of creation and culture, as well as to the proper directing of culture (Bartholomew 1997:43).

The ecotheological relevance of this paradigm is difficult to miss. Its merit lies in its portrayal of a redemption that is not entirely anthropocentric, but more cosmic. In light of this research, another plausible aspect of this Christ-the-transformer-of-culture worldview is its rootedness in Christ’s role in creation and human culture. Thus Jesus’ message in the Sermon on the Mount can be viewed from the perspective of his attempt to re-interpret the biblical traditions with a transformative goal. Matthew 5–7, therefore, can easily be used as a vehicle for an integrated, holistic, Christian eco-theological ethic, universally acclaimed by the South African church at large. For instance, Jesus’ non-violence ethic so vividly articulated in the Sermon on the Mount can readily be recognized by Christians across the denominational divide. The resultant transformative power of such an ethic, if applied faithfully in matters of social justice and eco-justice at least, is potentially enormous. Similarly, one can single out Jesus’ love-ethic, otherwise known as the “golden rule”, and demonstrate how phenomenally transformative and revolutionary it can be in all spheres of human and nonhuman interaction and interface with the environment. How about the Sermon on the Mount’s salt-and-light ethic? Needless to overemphasise, when such an ethic is taken seriously by the whole church, our tendency to “fiddle while Rome burns” will become history! Instead, we will be ever-
conscious of our God-given mandate to be a positive influence in our world today. Suffice it to say that the Christ-the-transformer-of-culture worldview is a good example of a paradigm which is compatible with the underlying ethos of the Sermon on the Mount and (thus) compatible with the shared values of the multifarious Christian community.

Another plausible effort is Oelschlaeger’s, which seeks to engender some sort of solidarity among Christians of all denominations and persuasions towards the care of creation and the achievement of environmental sustainability (Scott 1998:10). However, the fact that Oelschlaeger defines his paradigm in terms of a four-fold typology may be somewhat counterproductive to the whole synthetic drive. His division of the Judeo-Christian eco-theology into conservative, moderate, liberal and radical groups may not be entirely helpful as far as integrating the disparate Christian belief systems is concerned (Scott 1998:10). The labels “conservative”, “moderate”, “liberal”, and “radical” may be problematic because of the manner in which they tend to cast sections of the church into set, water-tight, compartments. Moreover, as Robra (2000:554) says, oversimplifying the relations between the gospel and culture to such terms as “accommodation”, “opposition”, or “radical critical revision”, is unhelpful because the reality is more of a complex mix of these positions. Yet, our quest is the dissolution of all unnecessary hang-ups and divisions in Christianity, as we pursue common ground from which to tackle the ecological crisis with a united Christian front. Moreover, Oelschlaeger’s preoccupation with the concept of creation stories may obscure the range of theological substance operative in contemporary eco-theology, besides having other methodological, metaphysical and hermeneutical flaws (Scott 1998:12). Nonetheless, this effort still has value because it is avowed to enabling all Christians to converge their diverse accounts upon the centre of creation care. It exemplifies the hope that our differing Christian traditions need not stand in the way of concerted efforts towards owning up to our ecological responsibilities. Hope is there that South African Christians can yet blend their cacophony of eco-theological voices into a harmonious symphony.
4.2 Dimensions of Mission

Even more optimistic is the bold assertion by Bookless (2008:37) that environmental concerns have moved from the peripherals of missional concern to the very centre, precipitated by, *inter alia*, the growing awareness that climate change is hurting people in developing countries hardest and first. Notably, such an arguably conservative tradition as Evangelicalism, characterised by its four tenets of biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism and activism, now largely embraces environmental care as an integral part of the *missio Dei* (Bookless 2008:38). Biblicism refers to a particular regard for the Bible as the source of all spiritual truth, crucicentrism refers to a focus on the atoning work of Christ on the cross, conversionism is the belief that individual human beings need to be converted to Christ, and activism refers to the belief that the gospel needs to be expressed in practical outcomes (Bookless 2008:38). Thus the mono-dimensional view of the gospel is discarded in favour of one that acknowledges that the gospel’s eternal unchanging message must be expressed anew in changing contexts, such as our contemporary context of human-induced climate change, increasing resource depletion, climatic uncertainty, massive migration and unjust sharing of resources (Bookless 2008:39).

As a consequence, an insular definition of the church’s mission on earth is replaced by a multi-dimensional missional paradigm, which necessarily includes ecological concern. The propensity to constrict the gospel only to evangelism is dispensed with in favour of a more holistic missional outlook, which necessarily incorporates environmental care. In the light of such a changing missional context, we return to Scripture asking afresh what God’s mission is in God’s world today, and consequently what should ours be? (Bookless 2008:40). Likewise, Bevans (2003:50) names six elements of the church’s mission, from a Roman Catholic perspective, as (1) witness and proclamation, (2) liturgy, prayer, and contemplation, (3) justice, peace, and the integrity of creation, (4) dialogue with women and men of other faiths and ideologies, (5) inculturation and (6) reconciliation. Clearly, a comparison of the two descriptions of the church’s mission discussed above—the quadruple-dimensional version and the sextuple-dimensional version—reveals that there
is common ground between Evangelicalism and Catholicism, particularly in terms of the integrity of creation.

In fact, the common ground regarding the *missio Dei* across the wide spectrum of Christian traditions is greater than that dual commonality. According to Ringma (2004:434), there now is unanimity among Christians of such diverse traditions as the WCC, the Roman Catholic, the Eastern Orthodox, and the Evangelical Churches, that the church's mission is to announce the good news in Christ, denounce injustice, console widows and orphans, heal the broken-hearted, empower the poor, and bring the love, mercy, and justice of God in *all* spheres of life (*emphasis mine*). Obviously advocacy for God’s justice in all spheres of life necessarily includes ecological care. It is quite reassuring that while South African churches may haggle over their loyalty to Paul, Peter or Augustine, or squabble over spiritual gifts, church governance and so forth, there is no such dispute over their loyalty to the person and message of Christ. That, of course, includes universal loyalty to Jesus’ defining message as portrayed in the Sermon on the Mount. United around a “beatific ethic”, for instance, the generality of South African Christians can uphold and exemplify the kind of spirituality befitting disciples of the reign of God encapsulated by the Beatitudes. In sync with the new *Torah* promulgated by Jesus in Matthew 5–7, they can preach and practice a code typified by reverence to God, mutual respect for all humanity and care for their nonhuman neighbours. Thus, by rallying around the message of Matthew 5–7, South African Christian voices can all in unison articulate an eco-friendly message. This helps to explain the tremendous unifying potency of the Sermon on the Mount, with respect to the church’s societal responsibility in general, and pertaining to its ecological obligations in particular.

It is certainly heartening that the whole Christian church is becoming greener and greener. Even those traditions that were once considered exclusively “red” or “blue” can become greener, without losing their essential identity, but gaining the much-needed spiritual balance (cf. Schwarz 2005:54). Likewise, traditionally “green” churches can incorporate the missing “colours” in their spirituality and praxis in order to gain the requisite balance, while also retaining their cherished identity. Schwarz (2005:46–47)
explains that “red” churches are those which tend to focus on evangelism and discipleship, “blue” churches tend to focus on spiritual power and emotional health, while “green” churches tend to prioritise social and ecological justice. Arguing that the church’s mandate is to reflect the fullness of God’s light, which comes in various colours, Schwarz (2005:50) lends further weight to the possibility of ecclesial consensus. All of us must embrace the “creation revelation” (green colour zone), the “salvation revelation” (red colour zone), as well as the “personal revelation” (blue colour zone), in order to reflect the full-orbed light of the Triune God (Schwarz 2005:51). Therefore, every Christian tradition can broaden its experience to the colours of the “Trinitarian Compass” it does not quite reflect well. Consequently, mono-dimensional conceptions of mission become redundant. The whole church accepts the full spectrum of its missional responsibility, including environmental care. The beauty of the Trinitarian Compass lies in its affirmation of all the various Christian traditions without glossing over their typical shortcomings. By so doing, denominations are positively disposed to change without feeling pressured to abandon their priced ethos and identity. Thus, South African Pentecostals and Charismatics, Catholics and Protestants, AIC groups and the like, all gravitate towards a common centre, characterised by “spiritual balance”, as Schwarz (2005:54) advocates for.

4.3 Integrated Mission

On the other hand, the notions of “spiritual balance” and multiple dimensions of mission may not be as useful as they appear at face value. Such is the view of Thacker (2009:214) who argues that the very disjunction between the proclamation of the gospel and social responsibility is unbiblical and un-Christlike. Thus it is contradictory to the spirit of the Great Commission (Matt 28:19–20) for the church to view social action as “a bridge to evangelism”, and equally theologically untenable to view social and ecological justice as merely a consequence of evangelism (cf. Thacker 2009:214). Such a view smirks of spiritual bribery and implies ministry motivated by somewhat ulterior motives, and devoid of genuine care and compassion for human and nonhuman sufferers. Yet the Great Commission was never meant to be a tool for merely proselytising people, but as a mandate for making disciples for God’s kingdom, whose belief-systems and praxis
conform to God’s will. The fact that Jesus specifically instructs his envoys to not only make disciples of all nations, but also to teach them to observe all his teaching, signifies the comprehensive nature of the Great Commission, avers Thacker (2009:215). Therefore, the lingering sense of ambiguity can be dispelled if we understand the church’s integral mission in the world less in terms of the church’s activities and more in terms of what the church is called to be, not so much in the practical ‘balancing’ of our various activities, but rather in the firm refusal to draw unbiblical distinctions (Thacker 2009:216). Matthew 5–7 (as does the whole book of Matthew) demonstrates quite cogently the holistic nature of Jesus’ own gospel message, as illustrated by his seamless motion from human to nonhuman creation, often in one breath. Apparently, to Jesus, the pronounced distinction between nature and grace characteristic of traditional Christianity in our day was non-existent.

The point of this argument is that as long as the church considers its mission as consisting of a primary task (evangelism), and then additional tasks, such as social and ecological responsibility, it will not do justice to its Christian mandate. As long as the church dichotomises the sacred and the secular, certain aspects of its mission will suffer undue neglect. As long as the church divorces salvation from justice, it will remain complicit in the abuse and desecration of the environment. Rather, what is called for is an integrated sense of God’s mission, otherwise known as “holistic mission”. Such a mission will be effective only if we understand our own identity in terms of God’s identity, in which there is a perfect unity between words and deeds, character and action. Therefore, to the extent that we are truly united to Christ, our lives will similarly display a consistency between everything we are and do (Thacker 2009:220). For the South African church, therefore, it must be understood that our quest must not be purely to advance the ecotheological cause, but to promote a holistic gospel which necessarily includes ecological justice. This sub-continent’s church, then, will vigorously espouse a cosmic salvation transcending the anthropocentric soteriology rampant in ecclesial circles today.
4.4 The Role of the Ecojustice Principles

That, precisely, is what makes the six EBP ecojustice principles immensely desirable. They represent a hermeneutic which is simultaneously based on legitimate emphases in the biblical traditions and on the quest for a cosmic spirituality which goes beyond the confines of a purely personal salvation (cf. Carley 2000:111). Thus they are theologically sound enough to allay any fears of syncretism or heresy sections of the Christian church may harbour (Langmead 1999:169). Moreover, because they are principles, they comprise general guidelines which go to the underlying and common core values of the Christian faith community. Thus Christian interpreters need not fear the challenge of being bogged down in theological controversies, such as those emanating from doctrinal differences among denominations. The ecojustice principles articulate ecological truth at a deeper and shared conceptual level among believers. They are broad enough to accommodate the entire Christian community, and yet specific enough to help crystallise the church’s task succinctly. *Ipso facto*, these universal principles possess the potential to be the South African church’s rallying ground for reflecting upon and responding to the ecological concerns of our generation. Therefore, in the light of our pursuit of an ecotheological synthesis, they have a tremendous integrative potential.

Furthermore, because they are juridical, these principles help sensitise the broad church to their biblical responsibility to be envoys of justice, in imitation of our just God, in keeping with Jesus’ injunction in Matthew 5:48. Their particular focus on ecological justice is also significant, for they potentially encourage the church to realise the scope of its mission beyond social (human) justice to nonhuman (eco) justice. These ecojustice principles represent a radical ethic capable of rousing the church from its religious stupor to a mode of responsible activism. It is an ethic that breaks with unhealthy church tradition, rebukes our anthropocentric pride, our snobbish disregard for nonhuman creation, our oblivion to the divine purpose for all creation, as well as our false sense of security and impunity from nature’s resistance to our sacrilege. Its radical and revolutionary complexion is very much consistent with the spirit of Matthew 5–7.
However, what may be problematic to devout Christians is the apparent shunning of any direct reference to God in all the six ecojustice principles. While the divine role is certainly implicit in these principles, surely it would only aid the Christian environmental cause to unashamedly mention God in these otherwise worthy principles. That would most probably engender greater acceptability by the wider church, “where the tar hits the road”, beyond scholarly circles. Nonetheless, this set of ecojustice principles is extremely relevant to the South African context. They are accorded even weightier import in the South African context by this country’s history of racial segregation, economic inequity, and environmental damage. Applied in conjunction with the other building blocks discussed above—such as the Sermon on the Mount, the notion of the church’s integrated or holistic mission, the Trinitarian Compass, and the like—these principles can serve the church’s search for a valid and united response to our contemporary environmental situation enormously.

Up to this stage of this research, a significant reality with respect to Matthew 5–7 in the context of the South African ecotheological conversation has become increasingly clear. Besides its proven compatibility with the six ecojustice principles, the Sermon on the Mount has—in its own right—an integrative ethic that is amenable to ecological justice. It has a potent and relevant ecotheological framework that is acceptable throughout the Christian church in all its diversity. The next (and concluding) chapter primarily reviews the emergence of this Matthean ethic from an ecotheological exegesis and proposes how it can serve the cause of a shared spirituality and praxis particularly as far as environmental issues are concerned.
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Summary

This research set out to investigate how an eco-ideological reading of Matthew 5–7 can contribute to the quest to find, from the major South African Christian voices, a common ecotheological framework germane to an authentic spirituality and praxis. It became apparent in the earliest phases of the research that the Christian church in South Africa does not speak with a single monolithic voice, but comprises a potpourri of traditions and theologies. Early on, too, the fact of this sub-continent’s connectedness to the global church was noted, such that the ecotheologies that were deemed to be relevant here were duly discussed, even when they may not originate in Africa. Furthermore, specifically local ecotheologies were given due attention. Consequently, the main ecotheological versions in vogue in South Africa today were considered and critiqued from the perspective of the Habel ecojustice principles in conjunction with the methodology of the eco-feminist hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval. Because of its dominance in the ecclesial psyche at large in one guise or other, the stewardship-dominion model of ecotheology was critiqued first. Then denominational ecotheologies were analysed, followed by an exploration of the ecotheology of the ecumenical movement (conciliar churches). Having discovered that Christian approaches to the natural order can also be understood in terms of either covenantal ecotheology or sacramental ecotheology, these two versions were examined accordingly.

It emerged from the research that, whereas none of them are totally devoid of any ecotheological value and validity whatsoever, yet all of the various Christian traditions in the South African church are ecotheologically inadequate on their own. This obviated the need for a common, authentic, Christian ecotheological worldview acceptable to the entire church. It was then established that such a feat is actually possible, when relevant building blocks are employed, such as the re-definition of the Christ-culture relationship,
the re-interpretation of the church’s mission as an integrated mission, the six Habel ecojustice principles and the ethic derived from an ecotheological exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount. Interestingly, an unexpected discovery emerged from the ecotheological reading of Matthew 5–7: the passage reveals a potential and a scope greater than being merely a component of another paradigm. Rather, it shows the promise of more far-reaching implications for environmental issues as well as for general Christian spirituality and praxis.

5.2 A Proposed Ecotheological Framework Based on Matthew 5–7

As has been seen in the last chapter, Matthew 5–7 readily lends itself for use as a vehicle for an integrated, holistic, Christian ecotheological ethic, universally acclaimed by the South African church at large. An ecotheological reading of the section has revealed that a multi-dimensional ecotheological framework is derivable from the Sermon on the Mount, as indicated below. This framework is a result of an exegesis which goes beyond the mere search for allusions to and themes related to nature, but rather going for the underlying ecojustice ethic embedded in the text. Its compatibility with the six ecojustice principles is subsumed, on account of the discussion already undertaken in the last two chapters.

5.2.1 The Regnum Dei Dimension

This research discovered that the annunciation of the kingdom of God, the regnum Dei, is the central motif of the Sermon on the Mount as well as of the whole Gospel of Matthew. This reign of God is both a present reality and future-oriented (eschatological). Thus the beatitudes enumerate kingdom blessings and kingdom promises, and attest that this kingdom is a gracious gift obtainable by request and search (Matt 5:2–12; 6:33). Through their declaration “theirs is the kingdom of God”, the Beatitudes allude to the new creation (new heaven and new earth) mentioned in Isaiah and—with the whole Sermon on the Mount—comprise an invitation to be part of this new creation. The present reality of the promised restoration of the new creation is demonstrated by the interweaving of the praxis of the regnum Dei with its proclamation, as Jesus’ itinerant ministry programme
consists of kingdom teaching-preaching and healing miracles. Matthew achieves this by situating the chapters 8–9 healing miracles—such as the healing of the leper which symbolises Israel’s restoration and the calming of the storm which portrayed nature’s inclusion in the healing process—such that they immediately succeed the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5–7).

Furthermore, the breakthrough of the reign of God effects comprehensive transformation of the whole earth community, human as well as nonhuman. Thus the restoration and transformation of humans—who hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:6)—should also lead to the earth’s renewal. This is because the concept of “his righteousness” found in the Beatitudes and in the summative promise (6:33) is best understood in the context of its Old Testament usage where it refers to God’s gracious act of covenant faithfulness in restoring his reign among his people, with consequent positive repercussions on the natural order—the land, wild animals, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. Thus to Old Testament prophets, humans’ unrighteousness (such as greed and selfishness) were more than breaking covenant with God, but also meant breaking covenant with God’s creation. Likewise, Jesus’ references to “the birds of the air” and “the lilies of the field” (6:26, 28) have Old Testament intertextual import and ecological implications. Therefore, there is an inalienable link between the presence of the regnum Dei and ecological care. It follows then that the restoration of a sound relationship with God necessarily implies the restoration of the pre-Fall wholesome relationship between humanity and all creation as partners in the earth community. This righteousness (dikaiosyne) is God’s way of setting everything in right relationships; it denotes a “rightness” or fidelity which expresses the moral ecology of the kingdom of heaven, so much so that where God’s reign is fully effective, there all things are right. Such righteousness then enables those who seek it to likewise respond in faithfulness as members of the regnum Dei. Consequently, righteous humans are able to treat each other and all creation justly, ethically and rightly. Significantly, the ecojustice principles of interconnectedness and mutual custodianship are thereby echoed.

Such a holistic view of righteousness, of course, can only have immensely positive
effects on humans’ environmental responsibility. Accordingly, righteous humans will vigorously pursue what is in the best interests of and what is right for, all creation. The life-transforming effects of the gospel then have ecological effects. By the same token, the transformed people pray for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matt 6:10) and implicate themselves in the action associated with that petition. Thus, such petitioners become participants in the divine agenda to dissolve the heaven-earth distinction. Instead of being mere spectators and critics, they seriously embrace the kingdom vision, and function as “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (5:13–16). By so doing, the intricate interweaving of the Christian message and the Christian mission is demonstrated.

I see the regnum Dei paradigm of Matthew 5–7 impacting South African churches in two key ways. Firstly, this paradigm rebukes the narrow focus that tends to dominate the spirituality of certain South African Christian traditions. For instance, the “red” (Evangelical) churches’ over-emphasis on personal salvation is challenged by this Matthean kingdom vision’s comprehensive outlook. South African believers are challenged to look beyond the four walls of the church, to become partners in co-creating the reality of the will of God in our earthly habitat, in terms of piety, yes, but also in terms of social and ecological justice and responsibility. Likewise, South African “blue” (Pentecostal) churches’ tendency to overemphasise personal, spiritual power and emotional health, at the expense of other legitimate dimensions of life is also sharply rebuked. Even those South African churches considered “green” already are also subject to censure, from the perspective of the regnum Dei paradigm, not for ecological insensitivity, but because their deficiencies in other areas render their own Christian witness incomplete and incredible. It cannot be overemphasised that the Sermon on the Mount’s reign-of-God ethic does not seek to replace one deficient spirituality and praxis with one which has a deficiency in a different aspect. Rather, the aim is to complete each of our Christian traditions, with respect to their specific shortcomings and according to the regnum Dei yardstick. We are all challenged to be complete (perfect) as the Father is (Matt 5:48).
Secondly, the regnum Dei paradigm of the Sermon on the Mount reinforces the positive steps various South African Christian traditions have embarked on, however tentative or embryonic they may be. The clergy in our churches are thus reassured that when they include environmental care and justice in their sermons and liturgy, they are not deviating from the core of the Christian church’s mission. Any lingering qualms South African pastors may have over addressing environmental issues from the pulpit are thereby eradicated. It assures them that their indignation at the dumping of toxic waste on this country’s land and water-bodies is indeed righteous and consistent with an authentic spirituality. It confirms the legitimacy of their passion when they participate in environmental activism, such as lobbying their Members of Parliament with respect to certain unjust legislation or mobilising their communities in earth-healing rites. They understand that worship, Bible study, evangelism, the sacraments, environmental care, fellowship and the like, all belong together as part and parcel of legitimate regnum Dei business. None are peripheral, none are redundant, and none of them are superior.

Therefore, from an ecotheological perspective, the potency of this regnum Dei ethic is very difficult to miss. It has homiletic implications for ministers of the Gospel, because their sermons must be comprehensively relevant, and that obviously includes ecological matters. It has political ramifications for all members of the Christian faith community, because politicians set and implement far-reaching policies which the church cannot simply ignore and simultaneously be “light of the world”. It has integrative potential because it unites the church around one universal quest to see the will of God performed “on earth as it is in heaven”, regardless of our denominational allegiances. Under this regnum Dei banner, the creation revelation, the salvation revelation and the personal revelation of the broad church’s major colour zones (Schwarz 2005:51) are all accommodated and harmonised. Thus, all Christian churches and groupings—Catholic, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Orthodox, Ecumenical, AIC, Reformed, Charismatic, Covenantal and Sacramental, and others—can all serve humanity and creation under the banner of the kingdom of God, as depicted in the inimitable Sermon on the Mount.

Let me hasten to stress that, because the regnum Dei is the dominant theme in the Sermon
on the Mount as indicated earlier, the remaining components of this proposed ecotheological framework derived from Matthew 5–7 can be viewed as dimensions of the same kingdom-of-God ethic. Therefore, this proposed framework is constructed in such a way that the kingdom of God comprises the substratum, while the other five components described below comprise the superstructure which is dependent on the former (see Appendix 1).

5.2.2 The Imitatio Dei Dimension

Whereas the *regnum Dei* dimension is useful from what I would like to call an authoritative standpoint, the *imitatio Dei* dimension of Matthew 5–7 presents quite a different angle. Whereas the former appeals to God’s *authority*, the latter argues from the standpoint of God’s *character*. On one hand, the kingdom-of-God paradigm suggests that we must live on this planet cognisant of the legal parameters prescribed by the divine government. We are not at liberty to treat creation anyhow because all of us—human and nonhuman creation—are citizens in one divine realm, and answerable to that kingdom and King (God). On the other hand, the injunction to “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48), read in the context of the entire Sermon on the Mount, suggests that the driving motivation for our conduct and cult must be the character of God. We must model our own behaviour in the mould of the divine ethic in all life’s aspects, including as far as ecological justice goes. We must deliberately conform our lifestyles to the pattern of God’s own example. What is that example? Matthew answers this question by highlighting God’s ongoing personal involvement with nature, beyond the initial creation story, by asserting that the heavenly Father personally feeds the birds of the air and beautifully dresses up the grass of the field (Matt 6:26, 30). Thus, if the infinite God holds finite, supposedly inconsequential, nonhuman nature in such high regard, surely it must be similarly valued by those who desire to be like their heavenly Father. An ecotheological reading of the Sermon on the Mount, therefore, sensitizes us to our responsibility to care for creation, in emulation of our heavenly Father’s personal, “hands-on” responsibility for all life-forms. Therefore, the *imitatio Dei* spells that South African Christian voices cannot emulate God’s character and still devalue creation.
Rather, the same personal, “hands-on” concern and appreciation God has for creation must be demonstrated by our churches today.

South African churches’ obsession with upholding their respective dogmas and traditions can be overcome by the *imitatio Dei* ethic of the Sermon on the Mount. Churches in this sub-continent can be inspired by this potent ethic in at least three ways. First, they are *sensitised* to humans’ responsibility to care for creation, in emulation of our heavenly Father’s personal responsibility for all life-forms. Secondly, they are *prevented* from harming the environment, in emulation of God’s patience and tolerance toward us. Thirdly, they are *motivated* to mobilise other humans to the imperative task of actively taking care of creation, in emulation of their heavenly Father. In turn, these responses will be reflected in all ecclesial activities, from the pulpit to the pews, from the sacraments to the liturgy, from the board-room to the home-visitation, and from the sanctuary to the parish. The church’s sermons and songs, budgets and programmes, rites and creeds, will all be wholesome (perfect), in imitation of God’s wholesome (perfect) character and values (cf. Matt 5:43–48).

The implications of the *imitatio Dei* dimension for the various South African Christian traditions are identical to those discussed under the *regnum Dei* section above. Thus, by the same token, “red”, “blue” and “green” churches are all rebuked for their selective spirituality and selective theological emphases, because a spirituality that authentically emulates God’s character is necessarily well-rounded, according to the Sermon in the Mount’s *imitatio Dei* ethic. Similarly, the legitimate emphases various colour zones of the wide ecclesial spectrum are already holding are affirmed. This means, *inter alia* that green churches must not be apologetic for the well-founded ecological values they hold. However, they too must embrace the other elements of a legitimate Christian piety missing in their own traditions, with a view to approximating the completeness exemplified by the heavenly Father. If today’s churches take Jesus’ message seriously at all, surely they cannot continue to pride themselves in the uniqueness of their own brand of Christianity at the expense of the *imitatio Dei!*
5.2.3 The Beatific Dimension

This research also found that the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount constitute an ecotheologically potent ethic, coined a “beatific” ethic and which is an integral part of the regnum Dei underlying theme. The first strophe of the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3–6) is eschatological, prophetic and paracletic in nature as the Beatitudes offer good news, promises and comfort to the dispossessed—the poor (πτοχοὶ) in spirit, those who mourn (πενθοῦντες), the meek (πραισ), and those who hunger (πεινόντες) and thirst for righteousness. Evidently, they have a strong social justice and ecojustice paradigm. Likewise, the second strophe of the Beatitudes (5:7–10) has an even stronger social justice and ecojustice ethic. In this case, these beatitudes function as kingdom “entrance requirements” with promises to the “merciful”, the “pure in heart”, the “peacemakers” and those who are persecuted because of righteousness. Together, these Beatitudes—the two strophes of Beatitudes and the concluding summative one (5:11-12) —constitute an ethic in keeping with Jesus’ role as friend of sinners, the vulnerable and outcasts. It has been shown in this research that an ecotheological reading of the biblical text does not consider the disadvantaged in terms of humans exclusively, but includes nonhuman creation. Therefore, this beatific ethic essentially holds that an authentic Christian spirituality necessarily includes social justice, because God has special concern for vulnerable, underprivileged and disadvantaged human and nonhuman creation. As “entrance requirements” into the regnum Dei, the Beatitudes constitute a superior ethical code (righteousness) which is a prerequisite for entrance into the regnum Dei. They have an obvious ethical orientation and describe the pattern of conduct by which the community of believers can be the “light of the world”, thereby challenging the church to be a counterculture and to reject the prevailing standards in conflict with the will of God (cf. 5:13–16). An all-embracing, holistic justice—which necessarily includes ecojustice—is very much at the heart of the beatific ethic.

Consequently, the various sections of the South African Christian community cannot consider themselves to be “pure in heart” while simultaneously desecrating God’s earth, nor can they get away with restricting being “merciful” to human neighbours at the
expense of nonhuman co-habitants. Likewise, authentic disciples in the churches of South Africa cannot think of themselves as “peacemakers” purely with respect to human relations, to the neglect of our nonhuman kin. Rather, an ecojust-beatific hermeneutic enables the community of believers to work for an all-round harmony among all members of the earth community and God’s kingdom. Again, the beatific ethic challenges all Christian traditions in one way or another to fine-tune their spirituality to match Jesus’ beatific wavelength.

5.2.4 The Agape Dimension

This research has discovered that Jesus’ love-ethic, otherwise known as the “golden rule” (Matt 7:12) and here termed the agape principle, is the climax of the entire central section of the Sermon on the Mount (5:17–7:11). It is also the quintessence of the law and the prophets, the heart of the entire Sermon on the Mount and the very soul of Jesus’ entire teaching. Closer reading reveals that the golden rule, this epitome of Jesus’ teaching on discipleship, is in actuality the love-commandment in disguise, as it equates exactly to the one which sums up the whole Torah (comparing 7:12 with 22:34–40). Thus, Jesus defines love of God and love of neighbour (Greek: agape) as the greatest commandments, on which hang all the law and the prophets (22:40). While it constitutes Jesus’ new law (5:21–48), yet this ethic is designed to fulfil the Torah as opposed to abolishing it. The agape ethic can be phenomenally transformative and revolutionary in all spheres of human and nonhuman interaction and interface with the environment. It summons Christians to be as perfect in love as their heavenly Father who causes sunshine and rain to benefit the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous (5:43–48).

The agape principle makes sense as the fulfilment of the Mosaic Law, due to its ability to address the root causes of interpersonal conflicts, personal sin and impiety. Therefore this ethic is a strong rebuke on those whose primary motivation is solely utilitarian, with no notion of the overriding importance of the imitatio Dei—the ethic that we simply ought to be that which God is. Thus, Jesus’ teachings are the way of deliverance, steeped in grace and love and based on the breakthrough of the reign of God. With specific reference to ecojustice, this ethic is highly potent because it inspires us to eliminate the inner greed
and other negative drives that spur us on to harm each other and our environment. The rationale of this ethic is this: if as the disciples of Christ we do not have license to hate our enemies, how much more do we not have a licence to hurt our neighbours—whether they are fellow-humans or nonhuman?

If the South African Christian traditions of this generation would take this *agape* principle to heart in earnest, it would be reflected in their liturgy, sermons and activities. Church members would be mobilised to behave better toward the environment and to each other. They would also work together for the common good. Sacramental traditions and covenantal traditions alike would be chastised in their erroneous ways. Human and nonhuman creation would be allowed to be free to be what they can be on earth, for the God-kind of love does not seek to control and manipulate but to liberate.

### 5.2.5 The Metanoic Dimension

The “transforming initiative of repenting” of Matthew 7:1–6 is another critical discovery this research made. This ethic derives from the Sermon on the Mount’s teaching that rather than seeking to pass judgment on others, we should have a fundamental change of orientation (*metanoia*), which recognises that the problem resides not outside but inside us, not in the ecosystem but in the human heart, and in our collective psyche. This *metanoic* ethic could contribute immensely to the reversal of current tendencies toward an environmental cataclysm by teaching us to develop the capacity for self-reflection, with a view to an authentic change in behaviour, as opposed to our typical blame-shifting tendencies. It is an ethic which seeks to redress the underlying human pride which makes us pass judgment on everyone but ourselves, keen on removing the speck from our brother’s eye, oblivious to the plank in our own eyes (7:3–5). It enables us to dethrone ourselves from our usurpation of God’s role as judge. We then relinquish our self-imposed and prejudiced opinions of the actions and intents of others. This *metanoic* ethic, therefore, encourages acceptance of our own environmental culpability and discourages the tendency to hypocritically seek to police others.
Such a *metanoic* ethic has obvious personal, corporate and national implications as far as the South African Christian church is concerned. It requires the clergy to teach congregants to reflect on their own attitudes and conduct. It awakens the consciences of the various sections of the Christian church to the reality of their own fallibility and error in general and with specific reference to ecological issues. It also empowers the church to counsel political leaders to engage their international colleagues with an attitude of a shared culpability, perhaps helping to soften any hardened positions with respect to the signing of multi-national climate agreements.

### 5.2.6 The Pragmatic Dimension

Finally, this research found that Jesus’ conclusion to his Sermon on the Mount (7:13–27), presents his disciples with the radical choices that confront their lives, and by extension, our lives, too. The alternative ways and gates (7:13, 14), the danger of false teachers and false notions (7:15–20), the peril of hypocrisy (7:21–23), and the inescapable choice of two foundations (7:24–27) all challenge our human inertia and the fallacies of neutrality, apathy and indifference. It is a pragmatic ethic, in the sense of being practical and demanding action, as opposed to being purely theoretical or philosophical. The bottom line presented here is this: to act or not to act? This pragmatic ethic confronts us with the knowledge that we are living in an imperfect world in which we must have the courage to act upon our convictions. It rouses us from the folly of being non-committal and expects us to be doers of Jesus’ message. Thus, ecotheologically speaking, when we do not play our part in ecological care, we implicitly contribute to the ecological crisis. Failure to do something positive is tantamount to deciding in favour of the negative. Although the poor economic circumstances in which many South Africans find themselves make environmental care seem like a far-fetched luxury, the pragmatic ethic of the Sermon on the Mount still expects the faith community to make the right choices in the light of God’s will. South African Believers cannot settle for ecological inaction because doing so would make them as wicked as those who actively desecrate the environment. Such is the logic of the pragmatic dimension.
Furthermore, this research found that this pragmatic ethic is empowering because of the blessings inherent in doing the will of God, including the Sermon’s invitation to members of the regnum Dei to share in the renewal process of all creation and thus to perform their heavenly Father’s will (Matt 7:21). Likewise, authentic discipleship entails, not only understanding the Christian message, but also practising it, such that an adequate response to environmental degradation must transcend the level of theory and awareness, to reach the level of praxis. Therefore environmental activism must not be viewed as the preserve of the so-called “green” churches. An ecotheological reading of the Sermon on the Mount compels all Christian disciples, whatever their denominational persuasion, to roll up their sleeves and get involved in ecological care. They must move beyond reflection to implementation. The clergy’s messages must reveal that pragmatic thrust. The church’s liturgy must include such environmental activity, and its budgets must make corresponding provisions. Then ecojustice will not be merely a fantastic possibility, but a present and pragmatic reality.

To sum up, then, the ecotheological framework I propose, derived from the Sermon on the Mount, is established on the regnum Dei as the principal foundation. It is a foundation that connects everything to God’s authority and standards (righteousness), and infuses us with a reverence and humility that come from belonging in one realm of God alongside other co-habitants—human and nonhuman creation. Five other dimensions are built thereon: the imitatio Dei, the Beatific, the Agape, the Metanoic and the Pragmatic. The imitatio Dei dimension inspires us to care for all creation in emulation of the heavenly Father’s example. The Beatific dimension encourages us by the message of God’s compassion and comfort for all dispossessed and vulnerable creation. The Agape dimension teaches us a new love-law which transcends the bounds of friendship and the facades of religion, driving us to want to do unto others what we would want them do for us. The Metanoic dimension convicts our hearts with respect to our own blameworthiness in inter-personal relationships as well as in our interface with the environment. The Pragmatic dimension challenges us to “put our money where our mouth is”, that is, to do something beyond verbal profession, intellectual contemplation and religious pontificating. Apparently, this six-dimensional ecotheological framework holds real
promise for the aversion of further environmental degradation at the hands of humans by addressing the core of our deep-seated attitudes, aspirations and actions.

5.3 Suggestions for Further Research

Around the issues engaged in the research I undertook, it would appear that there are at least three areas that call for further research. They are briefly outlined below.

5.3.1 Empirical Liturgical Research

Of the Christian voices on environmental issues, this research was confined to a survey of scholarly and other literary sources only. The deficiency of this methodology is that it does not reveal the actual praxis in South African churches across the nation. Therefore, greater benefit could be achieved by an empirical research designed to assess the actual sermon and liturgical content aimed at addressing ecological matters in real congregations. Then a sense of the extent to which the church practically embraces the environmental message can be ascertained.

5.3.2 Adequacy of the Six Ecojustice Principles

While the six ecojustice principles are quite relevant and useful in addressing ecotheological matters, their completeness is not altogether certain. There is a sense that they may not be exhaustive enough. Similarly, the prudence of the language in which they are dressed may need revisiting, especially when the aim is to have a framework acceptable across denominations and beyond the academic community. What sort of lingo would be acceptable, for instance, to Pentecostal, Charismatic, Lutheran, Reformed, AIC, Evangelical and Catholic grassroots?

5.3.3 Full Extent of the Regnum Dei Ethic

It may be worthwhile to investigate further how much the regnum Dei ethic, as derived from Matthew 5–7, can impact and influence other spheres of human existence,
behaviour and interaction. This suggestion stems from the unexpected discovery of the potentially far-reaching potency, scope and depth of the kingdom of God concept both in the Sermon on the Mount and in the whole Gospel of Matthew. What benefit, for example, could be gained from the application of this ethic in matters of civic governance, general leadership and so forth? Perhaps the Christian community and society at large could benefit even more comprehensively from a more thorough understanding of the *regnum Dei* ethic.
Proposed Ecotheological Framework derived from the Sermon on the Mount, featuring the kingdom of God (*regnum Dei*) as the substratum, and five super-structural dimensions.
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