

God After Darwin

5. Evolution, Ecology, and the Promise of Nature

August 27, 2006
9 to 9:50 am in the Parlor
All are welcome!

St. John in the Wilderness

We give you thanks, most gracious God, for the beauty of earth and sky and sea; for the richness of mountains, plains, and rivers; for the songs of birds and the loveliness of flowers. We praise you for these good gifts, and pray that we may safeguard them for our posterity. Grant that we may continue to grow in our grateful enjoyment of your abundant creation, to the honor and glory of your Name, now and for ever.

Book of Common Prayer, p. 840

J o h n F. H a u g h t



God After Darwin

A Theology of Evolution

**God After
Darwin. A
Theology of
Evolution.** John
F. Haught,
Westview Press,
2000. ISBN 0-
8133-3878-6
(Chapter 9)

Background image on the
PowerPoint slides is
taken from the cover art
of *God After Darwin*

John F. Haught
**Responses to
101 Questions
on God and
Evolution**



**Responses to
101 Questions
on God and
Evolution.**

John F. Haught,
Paulist Press,
2001. ISBN 0-
8091-3989-8



John F. Haught is the Landegger Distinguished Professor of Theology at Georgetown University, and Director of the Georgetown Center for the Study of Science and Religion.

Photos captured from the on-line interview with Dr. Haught at: <http://MeaningOfLife.tv>

The background is a collage of three distinct images. At the top, a DNA double helix is rendered in a light blue and green color scheme. In the bottom left corner, a close-up of a human hand is visible, with fingers slightly spread. On the right side, there is a bouquet of flowers, including purple and pink blooms, tied with a white ribbon. The overall background color is a dark, muted blue.

Review

Review

What Evolution Tells Us

✚ The modern theory of evolution (= the “**neo-Darwinian Synthesis**”) says that the great diversity of life can be *naturally* explained by the combination of **chance, law, and deep time**:

- 1. **Chance**: accidental, chance events or contingencies:
 - a genetic mutation that lead to new characteristics in an organism
 - a natural disaster that changes the environment that an organism must adapt to
- 2. **Law**: the deterministic laws of **natural selection** (nature “selects” as survivors organism who best adapt to the environment; all others perish), chemistry, and physics
- 3. **Deep Time**: enormous depths of time

Review

What Evolution Tells Us

✚ Evolution tells us human beings are the result of billions of years of a meandering, haphazard process of “**natural selection**,” a journey marked by untold pain and suffering, loss, waste, and in the end, extinction for most species.

- More than 99% of all species born in the crucible of evolution have died out under the relentless jackboot of natural selection.

Review

Why Might God Create In Such a Way?

- ✚ Why might God choose to create in such a way?
- ✚ Why might God create a world characterized by the meandering, wasteful, painful path of evolution?

Review

Why Might God Create In Such a Way?

✝ We suggested that the answer lies in a fundamental, eternal characteristic of God: God is **self-emptying (=kenosis) suffering love.**

Review

God's Self-Emptying Love

- ✠ Love needs an “Other” that is not oneself to love. Without an “Other” who is *independent* of oneself, love cannot be actualized.
- ✠ God's **self-emptying, self-giving love** is manifest in:
 - allowing creation to come into being **independent** of God's self – to be “Other” than God – and
 - endowing that creation with the ability to **evolve** = to be “**self-creative and self-ordering**”
- ✠ Such a universe is really the only kind of universe that could be the product of love – for love desires the **independence** of the “Other.”

Review

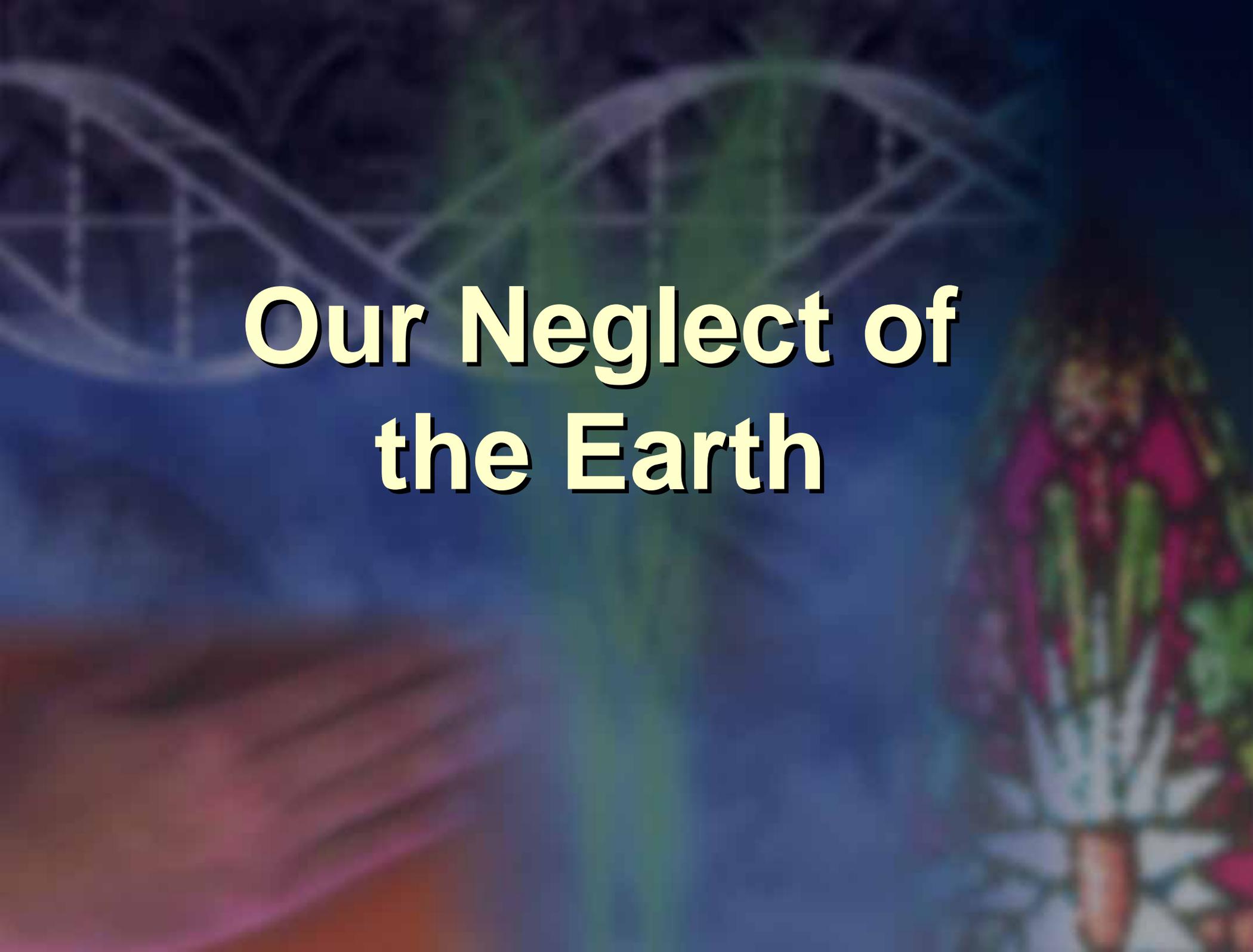
God Comes to Us From the Future

- ✚ As the world evolves, self-creates, self-orders itself, God comes:
 - from the “future,”
 - from “the sphere of the not-yet,” of “not-yet-being,”
 - from the “realm of possibility and potentiality,”
 - from “that which might come / is to come”
- ✚ and God sustains the world continually at:
 - the cusp of where the future meets the present,
 - the threshold between “not-yet” and “now”
- ✚ where God offers to Creation possibility, novel informational patterns and orderings,
- ✚ and God lures, persuades, but does not force Creation towards God’s vision of Creation’s fulfillment and completion.
- ✚ God is, in other words, the “Power of the Future,” more Omega than Alpha

Review

Today

- ✚ Today we discuss how this vision of Creation as
 - something allowed out of God's self-emptying love to be "Other" than God,
 - something unfinished, evolving, self-creating and self-ordering,
 - continually lured and persuaded by God towards God's vision of Creation's fulfillment and completion;
- ✚ Impacts our views on:
 - The Christian basis of concern for the well-being of nature (that is, concern for **ecology**)
 - What we as Christians may ultimately hope for (= **eschatology**)
- ✚ and how evolution intertwines these two subjects together

The background is a composite image. At the top, a DNA double helix is visible in shades of blue and green. Below it, a globe of the Earth is shown in a similar color palette. In the bottom right corner, a hand is seen holding a small plant with green leaves and a pinkish-red flower. The overall background is a dark, textured blue.

Our Neglect of the Earth

Our Neglect of the Earth

✝ All over the earth, as a result of increasing human consumption and numbers:

- Freshwater sources are diminishing
- Forests are being destroyed
- Top-soil is eroding and being lost
- Deserts are spreading
- The stratospheric ozone layer is thinning
- Land, sea, and air are being poisoned with chemical toxins
- Other species are disappearing at an alarming rate

✝ *As Christians*, should we care about any of these things? If so, why?

Our Neglect of the Earth

- ✚ There are many people who feel that Christianity is an **enemy** of any concern about nature.
- ✚ The Australian philosopher John Passmore says Christianity is irreformably anti-ecological. *The problem:*
 - Our Christian belief in God and the “next world” removes any serious sense of obligation for *this* world.
 - We consider the “next life” and “next world” to be what matters. *This* world for us is just a brief stay in an unimportant wayside inn on our journey to God and heaven

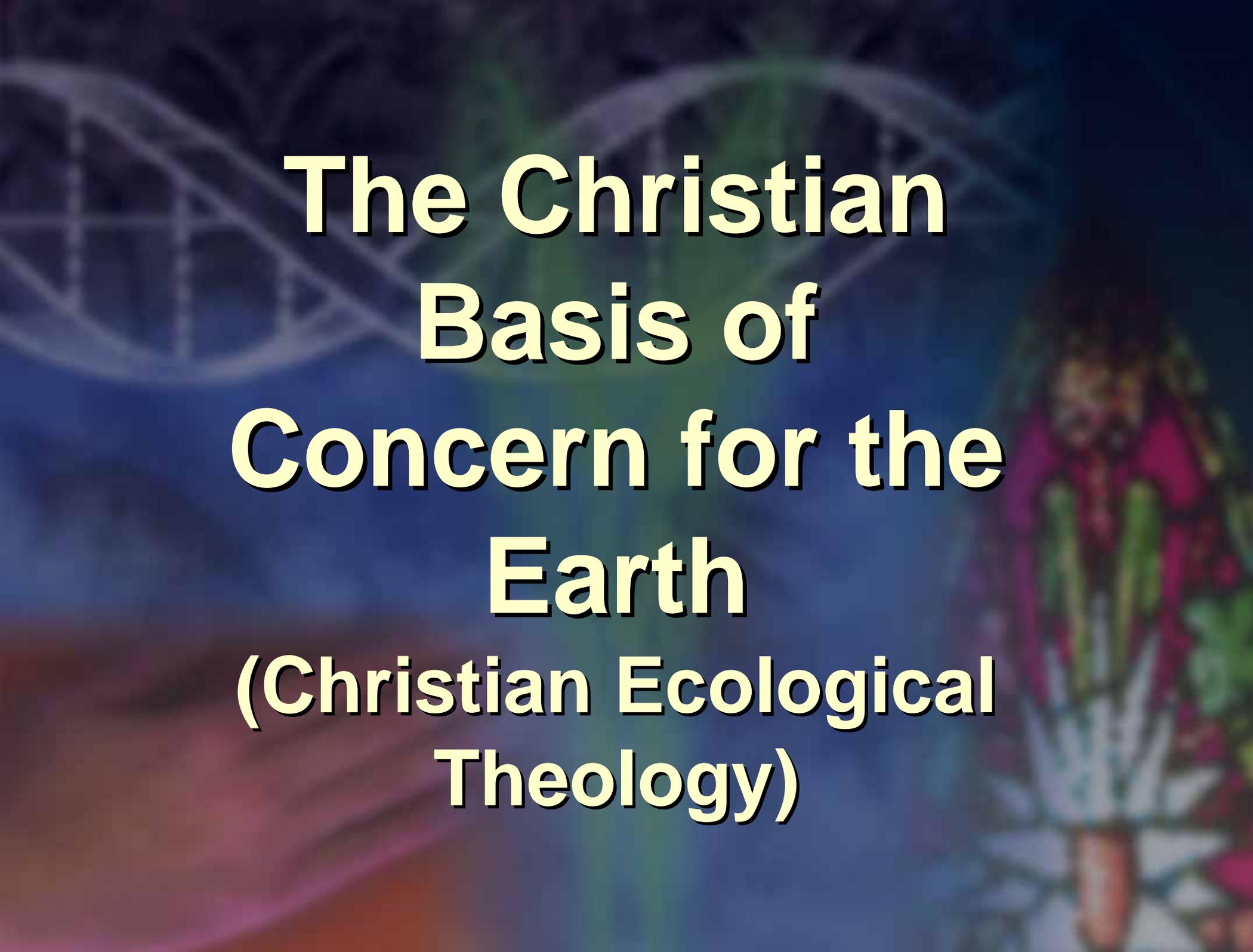
Our Neglect of the Earth

✝ Thus, the Christian environmentalist Gerald Barney was told:

“You have done some very important work, but just think of how much more you would have done if your parents had not exposed you to the pernicious influence of Christianity.”

Our Neglect of the Earth

- ✚ Is there a Christian theological basis for us to be concerned about *this* world?
- ✚ Haught argues:
 - there are several theological reasons why we as **Christians** should be concerned about the well-being of this world = ecology.
 - The *most potent reason* arises from the **impact of evolution** on our understanding of the Christian doctrines of “**Eschatology**” (“what we may hope for;” the study of the “last things:” life after death, heaven, hell ...) and **Bodily Resurrection**.



**The Christian
Basis of
Concern for the
Earth
(Christian Ecological
Theology)**

Christian Ecological Theology

Traditional Reasons

✚ There are several “traditional” theological reasons why we should be concerned about the well-being of *this* world:

- 1. Biblical Creation Theology and Its Injunction to Faithful Stewardship
- 2. The Christian Call to Live Virtuously
- 3. The Sacramental and Incarnational Character of Nature

Christian Ecological Theology

1. Biblical Creation Theology

✚ Genesis, Psalms, the Wisdom books, and the Prophet books in the Bible all move us to interpret creation as a *gift* deserving our reverence, wonder, and gratitude.

✚ We are called to care for and be good stewards of this gift.

Christian Ecological Theology

2. Call to Live Virtuously

✝ Christianity exhorts us to practice the virtues of:

- Love
- Humility
- Moderation
- Justice
- Gratitude

and to shun those vices that are largely responsible for our pillaging of nature:

- Human arrogance
- Greed
- Injustice
- Hunger for Power

Christian Ecological Theology

3. Sacramental Character of Nature

✝ Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican Spiritualities have tended to emphasize the sacramental and incarnational character of nature.

✝ The **sacramental character** of nature:

- Nature's beauty and diversity reveals to us something about God.
- In other words:
 - Nature is revelatory of God;
 - Nature can be a “door” or “window” or “portal” to the divine

✝ The related **incarnational character** of nature:

- By taking on human and material form in the **Incarnation**, God showed us:
 - Nature is fundamentally good
 - Nature somehow participates in the very holiness of God

Christian Ecological Theology

3. Sacramental Character of Nature

✚ The sacramental and incarnational visions of nature:

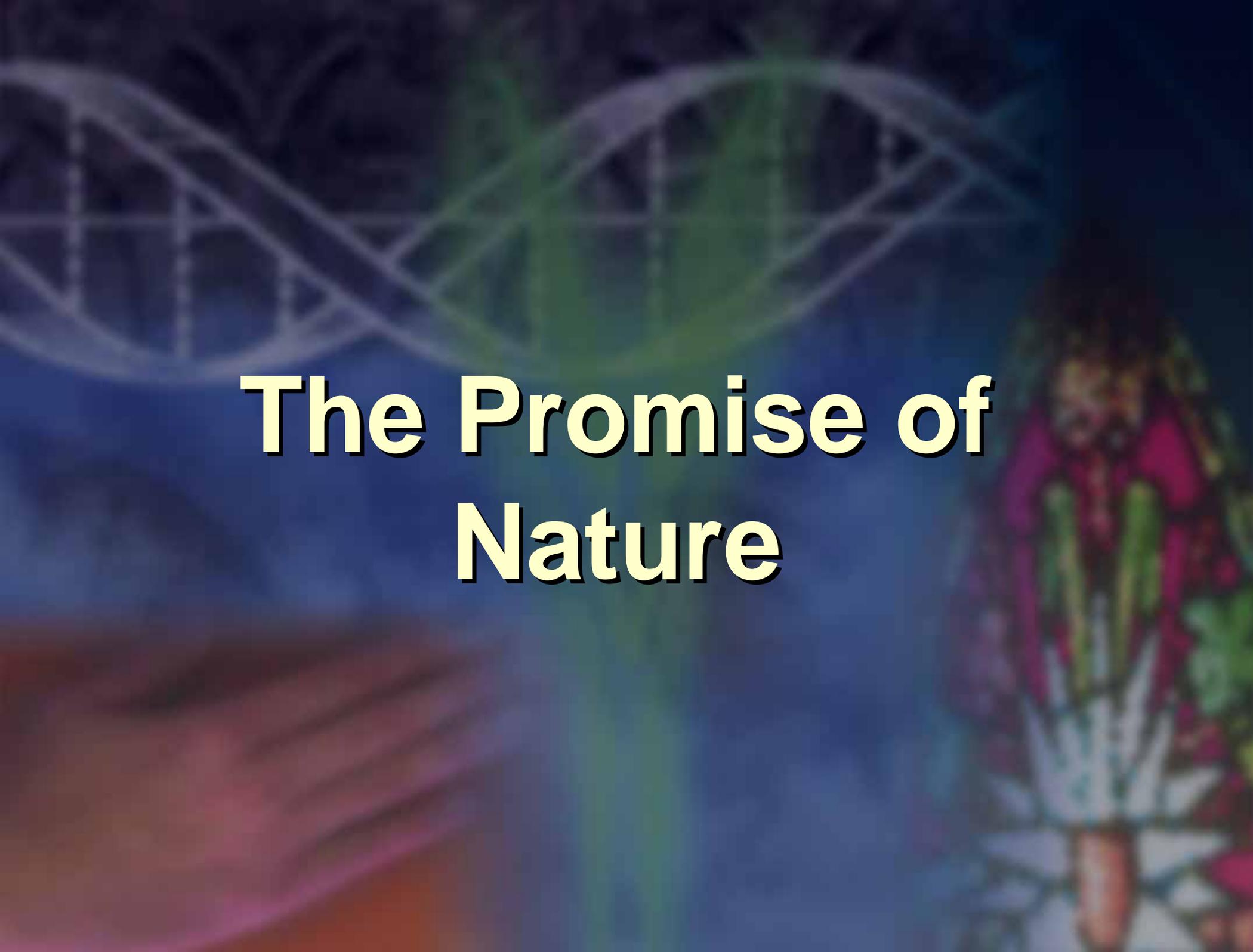
- Prevents us from viewing creation as mere raw material for human projects and consumption.
- “provides the deepest foundation for reverencing creation” (Michael and Kenneth Himes, “The Sacrament of Creation”)

Christian Ecological Theology

4. Nature as Promise

✚ To these “traditional” theological reasons why we should be concerned about the well-being of *this* world, Haught adds a fourth: “**The Promise of Nature**” that arises from the **impact of evolution** on the doctrines of **eschatology** (“what we may hope for;” the study of the “last things:” life after death, heaven, hell ...) and **bodily resurrection**:

- 1. Biblical Creation Theology and Its Injunction to Faithful Stewardship
- 2. The Christian Call to Live Virtuously
- 3. The Sacramental and Incarnational Character of Nature
- 4. **The Promise of Nature**

The background is a composite image. At the top, a DNA double helix is shown in shades of blue and green. Below it, a globe of the Earth is visible, also in blue and green tones. On the right side, there is a colorful plant with purple and green leaves. The overall background is a dark blue gradient.

The Promise of Nature

The Promise of Nature

Eschatology and Hope

✝ “Eschatology”:

- Comes from the Greek “*eschaton*,” meaning “last”
- The branch of theology dealing with the “last things”
 - the “last things” most commonly talked about are death, heaven and hell
- In a broader and more biblical sense however, **eschatology** is “what we may hope for.”
- In the Bible, especially in the books of the prophets:
 - the history of God’s people is defined by **God’s promises**,
 - the lives of God’s people are defined by **hope** for the fulfillment of **God’s promises**

The Promise of Nature

Eschatology and Hope

✝ **Eschatology**, “what we may hope for” is not the stuff of idle speculation, but the very foundation of faith

The Promise of Nature

Eschatology and Hope

✝ theologian Jurgen Moltmann:

- From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, **Christianity is eschatology, is hope**, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. **The eschatological** is not one element of Christianity, but it is the **medium** of Christian faith as such, the **key** in which everything in it is set, the **glow** that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day.... Hence **eschatology** cannot really be only a part of Christian doctrine. Rather, the **eschatological outlook** is characteristic of all Christian proclamation, of every Christian existence and of the whole Church. There is therefore only one real problem in Christian theology ...: the **problem of the future**.

The Promise of Nature

The Cosmic Eschatological Vision

- ✚ What are God's promises whose fulfillment we may hope for?
- ✚ The vision of Creation that we have been discussing the last several weeks suggests that God's gracious promise:
 - embraces the totality of being,
 - covers the whole evolutionary sweep of creation.
- ✚ "What we may hope for" (= eschatology) is that a splendid fulfillment awaits the entire evolving universe.
- ✚ Evolution invites us to picture nature as the unfolding of promise.
 - The evolving creation is itself literally a promise.

The Promise of Nature

The Cosmic Eschatological Vision

- ✚ We should *not* imaginatively (and unbiblically) translate (as we commonly do):
 - “this present age” to mean “the natural world”
 - “the age to come” to mean “some other, supernatural world”
- ✚ Haught: “**eschatology** is **hope** for the fulfillment and new creation of **this evolving cosmos**, and not a wish to substitute another world for the one we live in now.”

The Promise of Nature

The Cosmic Eschatological Vision

† Haught: 'A complete discontinuity between "this present age" and "the age to come" would hardly be consistent with the good news of the coming of God's reign; such discontinuity would amount to a denial of the inherent goodness of creation and of God's incarnation in our present world. Just as believers can assume some continuity between their personal identities now and a glorified existence in the "age to come," they may also be permitted to assume that the coming of God's reign transforms or transfigures, and does not abandon or obliterate, the natural world whose life-forms have come about by way of the process of Darwinian evolution.'

The Promise of Nature

Ecology and Nature As Promise

- ✝ If the “world to come,” the “new Jerusalem” where God will reign with God’s people is to be a transformation, a transfiguration of *this* world, rather than a completely new world, the implications for our concern about *this* world’s well-being (=ecology) are enormous.
- ✝ Our destruction of creation and the environment potentially may:
- dull the promise embedded in creation
 - cause embryonic futures to perish
 - frustrate the visions God has for Creation’s fulfillment and completion

The Promise of Nature

Other Implications

- ✚ The vision of nature as promise also has other implications:
- 1. It helps restrain the human temptation to divinize nature
 - 2. It helps us accept the limitations of nature without falling into despair

The Promise of Nature

Other Implications

- ✚ The vision of nature as promise helps restrain the human temptation to divinize nature.
- ✚ No particular “present” can reveal God’s infinity exhaustively, for God – the ultimate source of nature’s promise – is primarily future, the “Power of the Future,” “more Omega than Alpha.”
- ✚ Nor can the human spirit find fulfillment in any given state of nature or in servility to its rhythms and cycles, for nature as promise means nature is currently unfinished and imperfect.

The Promise of Nature

Other Implications

- ✚ The vision of nature as promise helps us to accept the limitations of nature without falling into despair.
- ✚ Nature is promise, *not* perfection or paradise. We expect and anticipate perfection only in the future fulfillment of nature.
- ✚ Thus we can be reconciled to:
 - Nature's present inability to bestow upon us the limitless being we long and hope for
 - The finitude of nature's resources
 - The fragility and perishability of natural beauty
 - The inefficacy, waste, and suffering we see in the process of evolution

The Promise of Nature

Avoiding a Narrow Interpretation

- ✝ We should take care *not* to interpret the promise of nature too narrowly, too “anthropocentrically”
- ✝ We should assume that the promise of nature, and God’s vision for Creation’s fulfillment:
 - involves much more than just the fulfillment of human beings,
 - has levels of meaning and value that we cannot grasp

The Promise of Nature

Avoiding a Narrow Interpretation

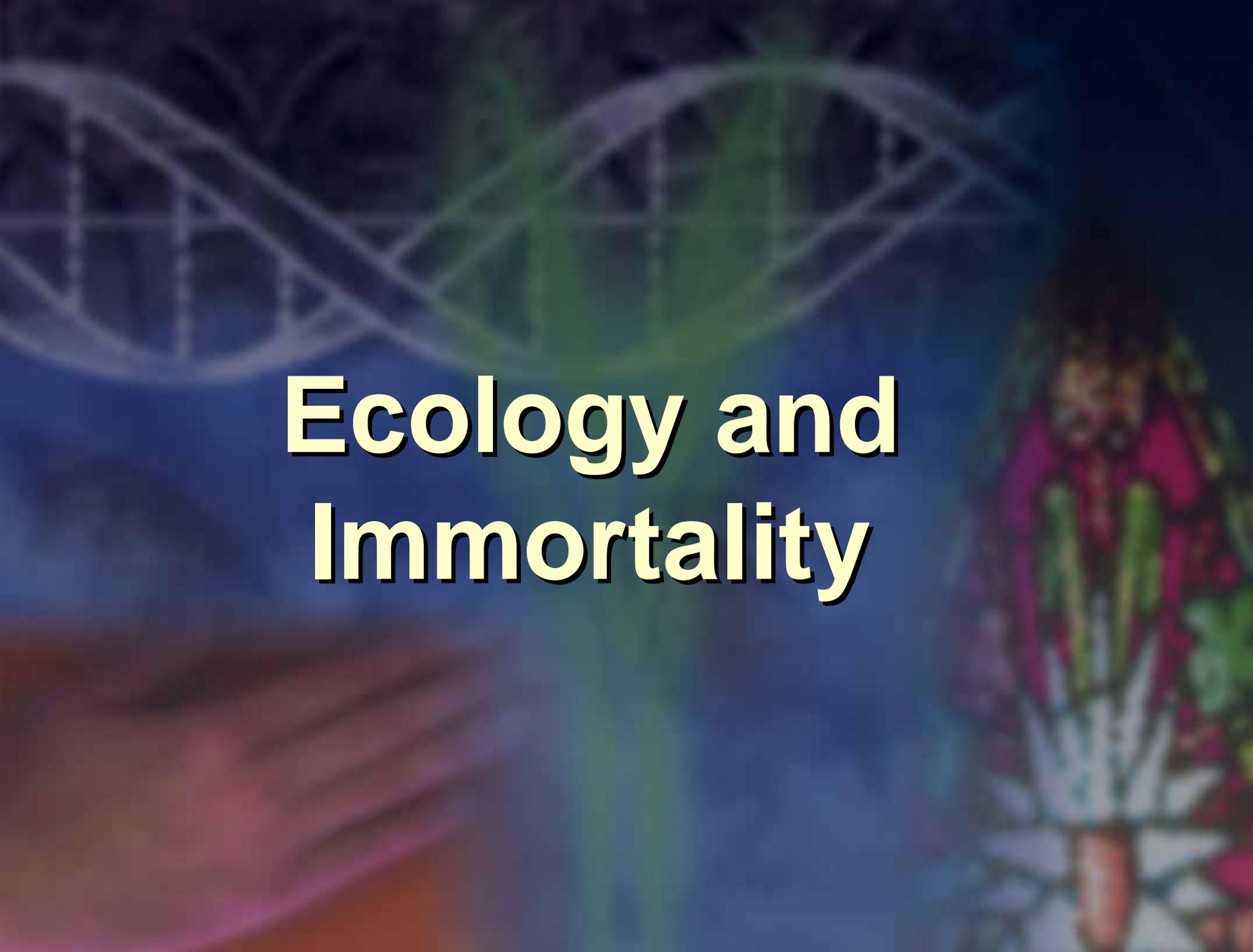
✚ Haught: “We need not assume that during the prehuman evolutionary span of fifteen billion years the only meaning the galaxies and stars in the heavens, or the diverse living creatures on Earth, had was to foreshadow the coming of human persons. Nor can we plumb the possible depths of significance the cosmos may have for God as it moves into the future, perhaps eventually without us.”

The Promise of Nature

Avoiding a Narrow Interpretation

✝ A robust creation faith demands that:

- we rejoice in the possibility that other species may have a meaning and value to God that is hidden from us,
- we protect nature's beauty, vitality, and creativity with all our moral energy so to allow the complete unfolding of God's vision for Creation,
 - even if we see no advantage for ourselves in doing so

The background is a composite image. On the left, there is a faint, light blue DNA double helix. In the center, a green and blue globe of the Earth is visible. On the right, there is a colorful, abstract plant-like structure with purple, pink, and green elements. The overall background is a dark blue gradient.

Ecology and Immortality

Ecology and Immortality

Our Personal Survival Beyond Death

† Eschatology = “what we may hope for,” involves not only the destiny of the universe, but also our own personal destiny.

Ecology and Immortality

The Immortality of the Soul

- ✚ A traditional teaching, borrowed from Greek philosophy, is that we have an “immortal soul” that is destined for heaven.
- ✚ This teaching has caused some to think that:
 - we are each “immortal souls exiled in material bodies,” and that
 - our bodies – as well as the material world out of which they evolved – are ultimately superfluous
 - This would not be very “good news” for the rest of creation, or provide much basis for a concern for the well-being of creation = ecology.

Ecology and Immortality

The Doctrine of Bodily Resurrection

✝ However, the fundamental, orthodox teaching of the church, which we publicly proclaim each week when we recite the creed, is that:

“We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.”

Ecology and Immortality

The Doctrine of Bodily Resurrection

✚ The Doctrine of Bodily Resurrection seems to imply that:

- The whole physical universe, and
- Every part of the universe's evolution,

✚ must somehow share in our destiny,

✚ for how can we utterly disassociate our bodily form of existence from the rest of the physical universe out of which we evolved as embodied beings?

Ecology and Immortality

Evolution and Bodily Resurrection

- ✚ If there is any message coming from science and evolution, it is that **we belong to the universe**.
- ✚ We are products of the universe's long, meandering struggle to self-create, a struggle in which God is continually luring the universe towards a grand fulfillment.
- ✚ We are part of – but *only part of* – the **Promise of Nature**, of God's vision for the fulfillment and completion of God's creation.
- ✚ We belong to, are products of, are part of the Cosmos.

Ecology and Immortality

Evolution and Bodily Resurrection

- ✚ Our very identity as embodied beings is largely “relational” with the cosmos, that is:
- is defined by the innumerable complex “relationships” within the universe – from subatomic to social – that contribute to our embodied existence
 - is defined, in other words, by the complicated ways things are “tied together” in space and time

Ecology and Immortality

Evolution and Bodily Resurrection

† Haught: From the point of view of ecology,

“each human person is a deeply relational center tied dynamically into an evolutionary environment that includes numerous other complex living and nonliving systems.”

Ecology and Immortality

Evolution and Bodily Resurrection

- ✠ What happens to each personal center at death?
- ✠ We may speculate, given our complex relatedness with the evolving cosmos, that death need *not* involve a break with the cosmos, but instead may involve **entering more deeply in relationship with the cosmos**.
- ✠ This was the speculation of **Karl Rahner** (1904-1984), a German Jesuit theologian, generally regarded as the greatest Roman Catholic theologian of the 20th century.

Ecology and Immortality

Evolution and Bodily Resurrection

✚ Haught: ‘Resurrection, if it is truly bodily, could mean a person being set free from a **limited relationship** to nature in order to take on **an even deeper intimacy** with it, a relationship that Rahner calls “**pancosmic.**”’

Ecology and Immortality

Evolution and Bodily Resurrection

✠ Haught: “The Christian creed's belief in the doctrines of God's incarnation and the resurrection of the body emboldens us to think of death in terms such as these. Since in Christ God has already taken on the flesh and materiality of the world, a deeper relationship to the cosmos occurring in our own death would not be a distancing from, but a movement toward deeper intimacy with, an eternally embodied deity.”

Ecology and Immortality

Preparing for Death

- ✚ Saints and Philosophers have advised that the best way to live is to prepare for our death.
- ✚ Preparing for the death we have just described
 - would *not* mean we should *detach* ourselves from nature,
 - but rather that we should *intensify* our capacity to relate to the evolving cosmos, that we should expand our circle of relationships in the cosmos.

Ecology and Immortality

Preparing for Death

✝ Haught: 'Perhaps the pain of death consists, at least in part, of our undergoing the transition from a relatively narrow range of relationships "in the present age" to the wider web of relations that would pertain to a perfected creation. Such a prospect would fit an evolutionary spirituality that consists not so much of separating ourselves from the Earth as of deepening our sense of being forever a part of it and its future in God.'

Ecology and Immortality

Closing Quote

- † Haught: A Christian concern for the well-being of nature (= ecology) “can be seen as a manifestation of the **radically inclusive Spirit of Christ now**
 - extending out over the long stream of life,
 - and not just over the human species,
 - **calling all of creation** into the kingdom that will have no end.
- † The **Spirit of Life, the Holy Spirit**, groans
 - not only in our own hearts
 - but in the **depths of the still emerging and unfinished universe** as it seeks to be brought into final unity with God in Christ.
- † An ecological theology, as conceived in both a Darwinian and a Christian context, extends **Jesus’ inclusive compassion** for the unincluded toward all of nature, no matter how unintelligible, alien, or forbidding it may seem to our narrow human sensibilities..”