



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT *with* RELIGION *and* FAITH *in the* 21ST CENTURY

Revisiting Christian Spiritual Activities: Humanitarian, Environmental, and Social Engagements

KRIT NIRAMITTHAM

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the United Nations issued a universal call to action—to eradicate poverty, preserve the planet, and increase the welfare of every human being. To this end, the “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” was established, in which 17 goals have been set to address the global challenges and issues concerning peace, prosperity, poverty, inequality, justice, and environmental degradation; these goals are to be achieved by the year 2030 (The United Nations, 2015). Subsequently, there has been an evident increase in awareness of humanitarian, social, and environmental issues among various institutions, both non-religious and religious (e.g., Ager & Ager, 2016; Anderson et al., 2017; Razavi, 2016; Tomalin, Haustein, & Kidy, 2019).

Historically, Christians have played significant roles in doing humanitarian works (Miller, 2016;

Wright, 2020), promoting creation care (Berry, 2000; Liederbach & Bible, 2012; Peskett & Ramachandra, 2003; Wilson, 1990), and addressing social issues (Gushee & Stassen, 2016; Platt, 2015). However, under the influence of a pessimistic eschatological view that looks for “a general worsening of the circumstances of human existence” (Erickson, 2013, p. 1060), many evangelical Christians believe that human existence and the earth are rapidly moving closer and closer towards destruction. They also understand the notion of *salvation* as an escape from the present human existence and the current falling world (Erickson, 2013; Jung, 1969; Peskett & Ramachandra, 2003; Wright, 2011b; 2018; 2020). Subsequently, their primary spiritual activities tend to revolve around saving souls from this declining earth and hell. Some Christians have emphasized more about the afterlife in heaven and are less concerned about earthly issues such as creation care, humanitarian works, and social issues, “picturing their evangelistic responsibility as

if they were pulling people from a burning building” (Peskett & Ramachandra, 2003, p. 256; see also Erickson, 2013; Jones, Cox, & Navarro-Rivera, 2014; Jung, 1969; Taylor, Wieren, & Zaleha, 2016; Wright 2020).

Thus, it is evident that a certain doctrine (e.g., eschatology) can influence how Christians respond and react to a particular situation. Nonetheless, not all Christian doctrines are derived from faithful interpretations of the Bible, although they might be commonly held (Erickson, 2013; Hill & Walton, 2009; Osborne, 2006; Rydelnik & Vanlaningham, 2014; Sailhamer, 2011). In particular, as Wright (2018) describes, the belief that “Christians are meant to devalue this present world and our present bodies and regard them as shabby or shameful” (p. 18) is actually rooted in Platonism, which understands heaven as a place of “nonmaterial reality” (p. 111) and denies “the goodness of creation itself” (p. 262).

Nevertheless, it is evident that the youth of this generation, including evangelical Christians, are more aware of humanitarian, environmental, and social issues than previous generations (Platt, 2015). There have been numerous movements that revolve around addressing poverty, prostitution, persecution, prejudice, and pollution (e.g., Liederbach & Bible, 2012; Platt, 2015; Rae, 2018). While this awareness can be generated by compassion, it can also come from certain political agendas (Peterson, 2021; Platt, 2015). Consequently, the Christian youth of this generation who seek to live a spiritual life may wonder how to integrate their Christian values and engage in such issues without being coerced by political propaganda, further searching what the Bible actually says regarding earthly issues.

As the Bible has been regarded as the supreme spiritual and ethical source for Christians (Frame, 2018), it may be instructive for the Christian youth of this generation to revisit and review its theological messages carefully, further seeking to understand

the place of their faith in supporting and advancing the societies they live in (Ager & Ager, 2015; Berry, 1993). Following this particular call, in this paper I revisit Christian spiritual activities through the lenses of Genesis 1–2 and Revelation 21–22—the beginning and the end of the Christian Bible. As the introduction (Sailhamer, 1984) and closing scene (Wright, 2011a; 2019) of the Christian Bible, these specific chapters have played a fundamental and crucial role in Christian doctrines and traditions (Erickson, 2013; Fee & Stuart, 2014; Goldingay, 2018; Phillips, 2001; Wright, 2011a). While the first book of the Christian Canon—Genesis—invites the readers to see the beginning of the creation “as a whole” (Goldingay, 2018, p. 1), the final—Revelation—offers “visions of God’s ultimate purpose for the whole creation” (Wright, 2011a, p. x).

Based on the investigation of these particular biblical texts, this paper argues that the Bible’s primary concern is life on this earth, not heaven. Therefore, rather than detaching people from this world by only emphasizing life after death, Christians should bring heaven into realization on this earth by engaging in humanitarian works, creation care, and social issues, further acknowledging them as spiritual activities. I organize this paper into five sections: (1) rest: the goal of life; (2) relationships: the essence of life; (3) roles: the duties of life, (4) restoration: the renewal of life, and (5) realization: the meaning of life—implications and conclusion.

REST: THE GOAL OF LIFE

God saw everything that he had made and, behold, *it was very good*. . . . heaven and earth and all their array were finished. . . . on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. (*The Lexham English Bible*, 2012, Genesis 1:31–2:2)

Usually, people seek to rest at least once a week, having a day free from activity, labor, anxiety, and disturbance. For Christians, *rest* is a crucial feature of the Sabbath—a day they repose from secular works and participate in spiritual activities at church (Hasel, 1992; Spoelstra, 2014; Timmer, 2016). Following one of the Ten Commandments recorded in Exodus 20:10 (i.e., “the seventh day *is* a Sabbath for Yahweh your God; you will not do any work”), Christian adults and youth across the world are encouraged to go to church on Sunday (Timmer, 2016). Moreover, in many cultures, a good evangelical Christian must also serve voluntarily in various roles at church on Sunday (Ogne & Roehl, 2019). For many, activities on Sunday in the church are considered *keeping the sabbath* or *spiritual rest* (see also Dawn, 1989; 2006).

While it is true that keeping the sabbath is one of the most important spiritual activities for Christians and its theological significance can be found throughout the whole Bible (Babcock, 2016; Timmer, 2016), it is crucial to note that biblically, the sabbath has more connotations than just a day of spiritual or physical rest. The Hebrew root, understanding, and practice of the sabbath (*shabbath*, שַׁבָּת) can be traced back to Genesis 2:2, where the *divine rest* (*shavath* שָׁוַת) connotes not to what ancient pagans would understand—God’s laziness, but rather God’s enjoyment and satisfaction in the work that He had done in which He deemed “*very good*” (Beale, 2004; Walton, 2009; Wright, 2011b).

It is widely accepted in scholarship that the creation narrative recorded in Genesis 1:1–2:3 refers to the *cosmic temple*, where heaven and earth were built in a perfect condition for God and His creation to live in—a home (Beale, 2004; Levenson, 1994; Osborne, 2006; Rydelnik & Vanlaningham, 2014; Walton, 2009; Wright, 2011b). Thus, the divine rest in Genesis 2:2 can be understood as what Wright (2011b) describes: “Like someone building a home, God finished the job and then went in to take up residence, to enjoy what he had built” (p. 136; see also Rydelnik & Vanlaningham, 2014; Walton; 2009; 2015).

The notion of the temple as a place or home where God meets with His creation is theologically significant throughout the whole Bible. In the Old Testament, God gave the earth, garden of Eden, the tabernacle, the promised land, and the temple in Jerusalem for humans to experience the sabbath—*rest*—with Him (Hill & Walton, 2009). The New Testament explains that Jesus became the temple and the Lord of the sabbath, in which God Himself lived on earth (Fee & Stuart, 2014). Furthermore, through Him, every believer also becomes a temple of God, having an ability to experience the sabbath everywhere and anytime. As the apostle Paul expresses, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16).

It is crucial to note that the sabbath also possesses humanitarian and environmental dimensions. Drawing from Genesis 2:2, the writer of Deuteronomy records,

but the seventh day *is* a Sabbath unto Yahweh your God; you shall not do any work, or your son, or your daughter, or your slave, or your slave woman, or your ox, or your donkey, or any of your domestic animals, or your *resident alien* who *is* in your towns, so that your slave and your slave woman may rest as you *rest*. (5:14)

Hence, the Bible makes it explicit that the sabbath or *rest* is intended for not only the Israelites or believers but also for the whole creation, including every human being and animal. For Jesus, the authentic *rest* is to “heal,” “save life,” and “do good” on the sabbath (Mark 3:1–5; cf. Matthew 12:12). Therefore, the sabbath also has the notion of caring for lives and the environment (Elwell & Beitzel, 1988).

In sum, I have shown how according to the Bible, *rest*—the sabbath—involves not only spiritual and physical dimensions but also humanitarian and environmental aspects. In addition, it was created specifically to bring peace and joy to humanity. As Jesus declares, “The Sabbath was established for people, and not

people for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). It also carries space, time, and state, conveying the place, moment, and condition that the heavenly sphere (i.e., God) meets in *peace* and *joy* with the earthly sphere (i.e., humans and the creation) (Coble, 2000; Spoelstra, 2014). Having described *rest* as the ultimate goal of Christians, I proceed next to highlight the essence of life—relationships.

RELATIONSHIPS: THE ESSENCE OF LIFE

God said, “Let us make humankind in our image and according to our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of heaven, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every moving thing that moves upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the likeness of God he created him, male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26–27)

Based on the biblical texts above, there are three relational dimensions: God, human beings, and creation. As humankind was created in the image of God, the first obvious relationship is between God and human beings. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew term for “image” is *tselem* (צלם), which conveys two meanings. The first refers to *idols* or *statues* (e.g., Numbers 33:52; 2 Kings 11:18; Ezekiel 7:20). As the ancient pagans created gods according to their images—via human imagination (Psalm 115:4–8; Habakkuk 2:18–19), the author of Genesis may have employed this term to clarify that it was God who created humans according to His image.

The other use of *tselem* in the Bible is to depict the relationship between father and son. In Genesis 5:3, Seth was born according to the “image” of his father (Heiser, 2016). This connotation was also employed by various ancient Near East literature; however, it was

mainly reserved only for the kings and their lineage. In contrast, the notion of God’s image in the Bible “applies to all humanity, not just the king” (Walton, 2015, p. 89; see also Shapiro, 2019) as well as “equally presented in both sexes” (Rydelnik & Vanlaningham, 2014, p. 74; see also Sailhamer, 2011; Shapiro, 2019).

The second relationship is between human beings—*male* and *female*. It is interesting to note that as God has the ability to create, male and female who are created in “the likeness of God” also possess the ability to create through reproduction. This also indicates the aspects of family and society, where the differences of human beings (e.g., gender, age, race) can live in love and harmony, further supporting each other (see also Sailhamer, 2011; Walton, 2015).

Lastly is the relationship between humanity and the earthly creation. It is interesting to note that the phrase “the image of God” is employed in the Bible to apply only to human beings. While most of the Mesopotamian literature holds that gods created humans and everything to serve their needs—a solely theocentric view (Walton, 2009; 2015), the Genesis creation narrative suggests rather an anthropocentric view, in which “creation is not set up for the benefit of God but for the benefit of humanity” (Walton, 2009, p. 68). Together with authority to rule over the creation, humanity was thus created to be “the pinnacle of creation” (Rae, 2018, p. 351) and superior to the rest of earthly creation (Heiser, 2016).

However, this does not mean that humans are given authority to abuse Creation. Rather, this particular relationship signifies that humans are “held accountable by God for their stewardship over creation” (Rae, 2018, p. 351; see also DeWitt, 1994; Peskett & Ramachandra, 2003). Therefore, Christians and churches should be aware not to only or over-emphasize the “sacredness” of humankind being made in God’s image and diminish “respect for other parts of God’s creation” (Rae, 2018, p. 351).

In short, humankind was created in the image of God—to be like Him. The Father-children relation implies that humans were given the authority and ability to create, recreate, express feelings, care, and love, further ruling over the creation. However, this authority also comes with certain responsibilities and roles—the duties of life.

ROLES: THE DUTIES OF LIFE

And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of heaven, and over every animal that moves upon the earth.” (Genesis 1:28)

According to the biblical verse above, humanity was given some specific duties. The first duty is to be “fruitful and multiply.” This reproduction process requires both the roles of male and female, being in union and creating families as well as societies. Secondly, humans were called not only to “fill the earth” with children, families, and societies; but also to subdue them, governing societies orderly and morally. Lastly, as a representative of God—His image—humanity was entrusted to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of heaven, and over every animal that moves upon the earth”—the whole earthly creation. Therefore, it is clear that God designated humans with specific roles at the very beginning of the Bible.

As mentioned earlier, the incomplete or imbalanced understanding of the sabbath may lead Christians to emphasize spiritual activities at church or physical inactivity at home on Sunday. The notion of having an exclusive relationship with God may also make some Christians ignore relationships with others and the creation. As Christians cannot and should not live as an exclusive group of people in this world, they should find the place of their faith in the societies they live in. As Jesus prays for the believers,

I do not ask that you (God) take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one. . . . Just as you sent me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. (John 17:15; 18)

While some religious people may deem that spiritual activities can happen only within a specific place and time, Jesus’ prayer seems to resonate with what was written at the beginning of the Bible: Christians were given duties on this earth, which involve not only Sunday or church activities but also social and environmental engagements. Accordingly, Christians should acknowledge social and environmental engagements as spiritual activities. Furthermore, as God intended this earth to be His temple where He can meet and interact with humanity and His creation, Christians should take care of His temple by being accountable and responsible for the roles and duties God has entrusted—creating a good, moral, and orderly world.

Notwithstanding, it is evident that historically and currently, there have been massive disruptions to God’s intentions: human beings fail to remain at peace, maintain good relationships, and fulfill their roles and responsibilities. Various forms of wars, poverty, famine, slavery, degradation, inequality, abuses, aggression, crime, and many more have emerged in different societies, begging for the restoration of this broken world.

RESTORATION: THE RENEWAL OF LIFE

I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea did not exist *any* longer. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard

a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God *is* with humanity, and he will take up residence with them, and they will be his people and God himself will be with them. And he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will not exist *any* longer, and mourning or wailing or pain will not exist *any* longer. The former *things* have passed away.” (Revelation 21:1–4)

Many Christians believe that the destination or final state of humans’ lives and souls is somewhere outside this earth (see also Erickson, 2013; Peskett & Ramachandra, 2003; Wright, 2011b; 2018; 2020). However, it is crucial to note that the notion of humans’ souls leaving the bodies and going either to heaven or hell is rather platonic and may not be an accurate interpretation that considers the biblical context (Ehrman, 2014; Hart, 2019; Wright, 2018).

In the last two chapters of the Christian Bible (Revelation 21–22), the complete restoration of the whole creation is when heaven comes down and joins the earth, creating the new heaven on the new earth (Wright, 2011a). Furthermore, the restored souls and bodies are not recorded going up to heaven but rather seeing the heavenly realm coming down on earth and witnessing God Himself dwelling among humanity (Wright, 2019). In this state of *restoration*, according to the two last chapters of Revelation, human beings will find a complete and perfect *rest*; there will be no tears, death, and suffering. The *relationship* between humanity and God will also once again be reaffirmed by God, renewing the image of God: “I will be his God and he will be my son.” Finally, the ultimate *role* of humankind is to “reign” the new heaven and earth with God “forever and ever” (Revelation 22:5).

Although the restoration is not yet complete, Christians should hope to see its completion shortly, further participating in this restorative process. It should be mentioned that throughout biblical history, heaven—the dwelling of God—has been constantly

established on this earth. In the Old Testament, the garden of Eden, the tabernacle, the promised land, and the temple were the places where God met with His people and His creation. In the New Testament, Jesus brought the kingdom of heaven down on earth, further giving the authority to the believers to do the same (Matthew 28:18–20). Furthermore, it is evident that Jesus’ kingdom of heaven has much to do with love, justice, morality, mercy, and peace (see also the New Testament). Therefore, Christians are responsible for bringing the heavenly kingdom on earth, not bringing earthly people up to heaven by only emphasizing the afterlife and ignoring mundane issues. In other words, Christians are called to realize heaven on this earth as Jesus teaches the believers to pray: “May your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as *it is* in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

REALIZATION: THE MEANING OF LIFE—IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This section aims to provide implications for the Christian youth of this generation who seek to live a spiritual life by integrating their heavenly values with the engagements in earthly issues to advance the societies they live in. First, it may be worthy of mentioning that before changing the world, young Christian individuals may first do what Peterson (2018) would ask, “Have you cleaned up your life?” (p. 154). They should not ignore their own issues at the individual level while being enthusiastic and burning with passion for making the world a more peaceful and better place. As Peterson (2018) advises, “Don’t reorganize the state until you have ordered your own experience. Have some humility. If you cannot bring peace to your household, how dare you try to rule a city?” (p. 155). Therefore, it may also be instructive for Christian youth to “Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world” (p. 156).

Moreover, the youth of this generation should be aware not to be led by certain political ideologies that aim to “fight patriarchy, reduce oppression, promote equality, transform capitalism, save the environment, eliminate competitiveness, reduce government” without providing precise detail and defining clearly the problems, as without this they are simply promoting “the resentful and lazy person’s substitute for actual accomplishment” (Peterson, 2021, p. 177). Instead, they should first conceptualize the problems “at the scale at which [they] might begin to solve them, not by blaming others, but by trying to address them personally while simultaneously taking responsibility for the outcome” (pp. 177–178). Furthermore, this process may help Christian youth avoid “a selective social injustice” and help them to reorganize their own lives, families, and societies with “a more consistent, Christ-compelled, countercultural response to the most pressing social issues of our day” (Platt, 2015, pp. 9–10).

Then, secondly, Christian youth should realize *rest*—knowing *rest* and making *rest* known. As the biblical *rest* is the goal of life, Christian youth may critically examine its theological significance and its implications for themselves, families, and the larger society. Knowing that the sabbath or *rest* involves spiritual, physical, humanitarian, and environmental dimensions, young Christians should not perceive or emphasize *rest* in an extreme way (e.g., only in Christian communities or only physical rest at home). Instead, Christians should expect to experience the sabbath not only on Sunday at church but also in daily life by setting aside personal time with God as well as engaging in humanitarian, environmental, and social works (Berry, 2013). As Walton (2015) expressed, “The Sabbath is most truly honored when we participate in the work of God . . . to resist our self-interest, our self-sufficiency and our sense of self-reliance” (pp. 48–49).

Thirdly, Christian youth should *rule* over God’s creation. It is crucial to mention that while many Christians have misunderstood the concept of *rule* and

thus neglected or abused the environment (Rae, 2018; White, 1967), the biblical emphasis on the authority of humans over the whole earthly creation actually calls humanity to take care of the environment. Therefore, the Christian youth of this generation are also accountable and responsible for taking care of God’s creation in the societies they live in. They should also promote the spiritual aspect of creation care in their Christian communities. Additionally, besides evangelism, eschatology, or evil, churches should draw from the Bible and address environmental issues such as animal care, food waste, and climate change, further providing practical implications for Christian youth (Peskett & Ramachandra, 2003; Rae, 2018; Wennberg, 2002).

Lastly, Christian youth should *restore* the broken society. As perversion, prostitution, persecution, prejudice, and poverty are still at large in various societies (Platt, 2015), instead of ignoring or resenting, a devout Christian youth of this generation may seek ways to address and engage in these issues practically, positively, and peacefully; bringing hopeful *restoration*, harmonious *relationships*, and holy *rest* to the broken society through their heavenly *roles*—faith and actions. As it is written in the letter of James,

What *is* the benefit, my brothers, if someone says *that he* has faith but does not have works? That faith *is* not able to save him, *is it?* If a brother or a sister is poorly clothed and lacking food for the day, and one of you should say to them, “Go in peace, keep warm and eat well,” but does not give them what is necessary for the body, what *is* the benefit? Thus also faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself. (2:14–17)

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper posits that rather than detaching people from this world by only emphasizing life after death, Christians should bring heaven into realization

on this earth by engaging in humanitarian works, creation care, and social issues, further acknowledging them as spiritual activities. By doing this, “Who knows what eternal heavens might be established by our spirits, purified by truth, aiming skyward, right here on the fallen Earth?” (Peterson, 2018, p. 156). I have also shown in this paper how the beginning and the end of the Christian Bible have many insights to offer the Christian youth of this generation in living a spiritual, meaningful, and peaceful life on this earth. Thus, it is instructive to encourage Christian youth to carefully and critically study the Bible, finding theological, spiritual, and practical implications for their lives and societies. Finally, I hope that this paper will create meaningful and further dialogues between Christians and people from different faiths, advocating for the youth of this generation to live out their moral and religious values to advance their societies practically, positively, and peacefully.

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