

18A CHRISTIANS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

Our starting point should probably be: Is there, in fact, an environmental problem?

*Calvin DeWitt, in his book *The Environment and the Christian*, lists seven degradations of the earth.*

First, land is being converted from wilderness to agricultural use and from agricultural use to urban areas at an ever-increasing rate. Some of these lands cannot be reclaimed at all, at least not in the near future.

Second, as many as three species a day become extinct. Once a species has disappeared, it is gone. Neither the species nor the role it occupied in the ecosystem can be retrieved.

Third, land continues to be degraded by the use of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers. Just because DDT is no longer used does not mean that potentially harmful chemicals are not being used in its place.

Fourth, the treatment of hazardous chemicals and wastes continues as an unsolved problem. Hazardous chemicals seep into water sources from previously buried dumping grounds.

Fifth, pollution is rapidly becoming a global problem. Human garbage turns up on the shores of uninhabited South Pacific islands, far from the shipping lanes, and DDT has been found in Antarctic penguins.

Sixth, our atmosphere appears to be changing. Is it warming due to the increase of gases like carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels? Is the ozone layer shrinking due to the use of chemicals contained in refrigerators, air conditioners, spray cans, and fire extinguishers? Though these questions cannot be answered easily, they must be asked.

Seventh, we are losing the experiences of cultures that have lived in harmony with the creation for hundreds or even thousands years. Cultures such as the Mennonites and Amish, as well as those of the rain forests, are crowded out by the expansion of civilization. [1]

Painter describes eight significant environmental Issues: [2]

1. Clean water
In the 1960's the Cuyahoga River was one waterway contaminated by oil leaks and industrial runoff.
2. Air pollution
Waste gases harm respiration and brain health.
3. Soil erosion and mineral depletion
4. Deforestation in the tropics
5. Overexploitation and animal poaching
6. Disappearance of wetlands (which filter our water)

7. Oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico
8. Waste and trash in the waterways

Environmental Thinking

Kevin de Laplante [3] states that environmental thinking (environmental philosophy) revolves around two questions:

1. *Do human beings have moral obligations to protect or preserve the natural environment? If so, what are they, and to whom, or what, are they owed?...*
2. *What are the root causes of contemporary attitudes and practices with respect to the natural environment, and how can we change them?*

The answers to these questions depend, not surprisingly, on our worldview. For the naturalist, this world is all there is and we must protect it at all costs. For the Christian who thinks about these issues, the earth belongs to God and we answer to Him for our use of the earth. Using His resources is good and right, but human sin, including greed, leads to destruction.

Our approach to the environment must be Biblical and Theistic, not naturalistic (no value to the earth) nor pantheistic/New Age/neo-pagan (worshipping nature, placing nature above humans). Ingram observes that many places of spectacular natural beauty (like Sedona, AZ and Boulder, CO) have become centers for New Age nature worship. By focusing only on the creation, they have lost sight of their Creator. [4]

Pantheism is often touted as the ideal worldview for those concerned with the environment, but this is a mistaken position. Francis Schaeffer wrote-

For many thinking men, however, pantheism is proposed as an answer to our ecological dilemma. But is it the answer? Pantheism (the belief in the various forces and workings of nature as gods) is not the answer. As the West turns to pantheism to solve its ecological problems, man's unique value will be even more decreased, and he will become pragmatic. Impersonal technology will reign even more securely...

The value of nature derives from the fact that God created it, thus it deserves high respect. The tree in the field is to be treated with respect. It is not to be romanticized. When you drive the axe into the tree when you need firewood you are not cutting down a person; you are cutting down a tree...If God treats the tree like a tree and man like a man, shouldn't I, as a fellow creature, do the same-treating each thing in integrity in its own order? [5]

We do not exercise dominion in an autonomous way but as stewards. Schaeffer does not use the term "stewardship" but he draws the parallel to the parable of the talents. We exercise dominion, but in a way that acknowledges the fact that only God is sovereign and that it all belongs to Him. We have dominion over the fish and so we treat the fish as a fish. We can use it for food, but we don't treat it as though it is a "nothing" or with contempt. Schaeffer states, "On

the one hand it is wrong to treat the fish as though it were a human baby; on the other hand, neither is it merely a chip of wood.” ...

We succeed to the extent we exercise dominion over nature with self-restraint. It is this self-restraint that separates us as unique members of God’s creation. It sets us apart as human. A cow simply eats the grass, it can do no less. But as humans we have a self-limiting principle. Specifically Schaeffer calls us to practice self-restraint in the areas of greed and haste, which he sees as the primary causes of our ecological problems. If we, as Christian individuals, business people, consumers, etc. would give up on greed and would demonstrate patience, we really could seek substantial healing in God’s creation. [6]

Is care for the earth a legitimate concern for the Christian? Absolutely, but it’s not our first concern (“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind.”). Nor is it our second concern (“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”) Nevertheless, it is a responsibility that we must address.

I believe that as Christians, we have a responsibility to the earth that exceeds that of unredeemed people. We are the only ones who are rightly related to the Creator. We should be showing others the way to environmental responsibility.

Christians of all people should not be destroyers. We may cut down a tree to build a house or to make a fire, but not just to cut it down. We have the right to rid our house of ants, but we should not forget to honor the ant in its right habitat. While there is nothing wrong with profit in the marketplace, in some cases we must voluntarily limit our profit in order to protect the environment. [7]

While God clearly grants preeminence to human beings in His creation and human life demands reverence as created in His image (Gen. 1:26), all life deserves respect. We have the right to use animals and plants for human good. We do not have the right to disregard living things or to treat them as inanimate objects. We have the right to domesticate and raise cattle and other livestock for human sustenance. We do not have the right to act in a callous, cruel or cavalier manner toward any living creature.

We have the right to use, as painlessly as possible, animals in research to better human health. We do not have the right to abuse animals or to cause them discomfort merely to develop new cosmetics. [8]

Biblical starting points

1. God made the earth-nature and all its beauty. He called it good. He enjoys His creation and cares for it. “The entire created order has its origins in the sovereign, creative, and sustaining power of God.” [9]

“And the earth brought forth grass, the herb yielding seed according to its kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed is in itself, according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.”
Gen 1:12

“The earth is the Lord’s and all it contains.” (Psalm 24:1)

“Praise the Lord, all his works, everywhere in his dominion. Praise the Lord, O my soul.” (Ps. 103:22)

“Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and marked out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?” (Isa. 40:12)

“The Lord’s tender mercies are over all His works.” (Psalm 145:9)

“He has made everything beautiful in its time.” (Eccl. 3:11)

2. “As the Creator, God is the primary author of the meaning and value of creation. The inherent goodness and beauty of creation is a consistent theme in ancient Israel’s theology of creation.” [10]
3. “Central to the Biblical notion of creation is the idea of order. God creates order out of primordial chaos. This order is moral as well as physical. It requires ethical behavior to maintain the harmonious working of creation.” [11]
4. God has given the earth to mankind to use (food, animals, resources,...) We were given dominion over the earth.

“And God blessed them, and God said unto them, ‘Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’” (Gen. 1:28-29)

“In this context our role in creation is not characterized by royal dominion but by the vocational activity of farming or shepherding.” [12]

5. We are not the only inhabitants of planet earth. All creatures of land, sea, and air were created by God to live on the earth. (Genesis 1-2)
6. There is a true hierarchy in creation (Ps. 8:3-9). Humans are more valuable than plants or animals. Only humans are created in God’s image. It isn’t wrong, in fact it’s God’s plan, for us to use and eat lower parts of creation.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And yet not one of them shall fall to the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Therefore, do not fear. You are of more value than many sparrows.” (Mt. 10:29-31)

“In everyday life, this means that while unnecessary killing is deplorable, it is not sinful to sacrifice that which is lower on the creation hierarchy of life for that which is higher. To sacrifice animals to sustain human life is moral.”[13]

7. As we use the earth we must not destroy the earth.
“Both those who ‘destroy the earth’ (Rev. 11:18), on the one hand, and those who ‘worship and serve the creation’ (Rom. 1:25) are under the condemnation of God.” [14]
8. After Jesus returns there will be not only renewed, resurrected believers but a renewed heaven and earth, free from sin, death, (and pollution). (Rev. 21-22)

John Bergstrom develops a theology of the environment based on Biblical principles:

In what follows below in this section, three general principles of a Christian environmental ethic are discussed. These three principles are: (1) God created and therefore values all of his works of creation (Principle of Creation Value); (2) God created and sustains all elements and systems in his creation within particular orders to meet certain ongoing purposes (Principle of Sustained Order and Purpose); and (3) Everything in the created world and universe is subject to corruption by sin and ultimate redemption through Jesus Christ (Principle of Universal Corruption and Redemption). The three general principles of a Christian environmental ethic are consistent with a careful study of God’s Word found in the Holy Bible as illuminated by a number of historical and recent authors. [15]

In addition to providing food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and energy, nature provides instruction for us. “The waters speak of life, the fires of judgment, the trees of strength, the vineyards of spiritual fruit. The ants teach industry and the eagles of mounting up toward God.” [16]

“But ask now the beasts and they shall teach you, and the birds of the air, and they shall tell you. Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach you, and the fish of the sea shall declare unto you. Who does not know that the hand of the Lord made all these?” (Job 12:7-10)

Guidelines

There are God-imposed limits on our use of the earth and animals.

God’s design for creation, even after the Fall, included divinely imposed limits on what man may do to God’s creation and those other creatures with whom God has entered into covenant. Throughout the Pentateuch we find divinely mandated limitations concerning what man may do with and to the rest of God’s creation:

- *Fields are not to be reaped to the border (Lev. 19:9).*
- *The grower may harvest only from trees five years old (Lev. 19:25).*
- *The land is to be idle regularly (Lev. 25:1-12).*
- *Fruit trees may not be used for siege works (Deut. 20:19).*

- *A mother bird is not to be taken with her young (Deut. 22:6).*
- *An ox is not to be muzzled when treading corn (Deut. 25:4).*

God continues as the landlord of His creation, with human beings His stewards and leaseholders who will give an account of their stewardship of His creation. [17]

Betsy Painter, in *A Christian's Guide to Planet Earth* [18] notes these guidelines:

In our dominion of the earth, we must rule as Jesus does –cleansing, healing, restoring, serving. (p.24)

“All things are reconciled to God through Christ, including creation and the land.” (p. 87)

“God is always working wonders through His creation and through our circumstances.” (p. 120)

“Our appreciation for nature’s beauty should be linked to our gratitude toward its provision-and give God glory.” (p. 134)

Care for the environment must include preserving energy and resources, recycling where possible, and taking reasonable steps to prevent air, water, and soil pollution.

Environmental Ethics

Fred Van Dyke writes-

(Ronald) Nash agrees that the very idea of an environmental ethic is a relatively recent phenomenon, appearing in the early 19th century in Thoreau, and continuing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the writings of John Muir and others. Perhaps the most eloquent of all would not appear until the mid-20th century in Aldo Leopold. Leopold was trained professionally as a forester but is considered the father of the science of wildlife ecology. [19]

Leopold, author of *A Sand County Almanac*, was the creator of the “land ethic.” He held that ethics is continually evolving. He argued that all life is part of a community of interdependent parts and included the land as part of the community. “Leopold portrayed Judeo-Christian ethics as a primitive, deficient system which could not speak to environmental dilemmas. Therefore, at least in humanity’s treatment of the land, Judeo-Christian premises were to be explicitly rejected.” [20]

Vesilind [21] considers two bases for environmental ethics: (1) Ethics based on instrumental value. (Environmental quality is important because it is valuable to humans. We should preserve nature for our benefit.) (2) Ethics based on empathy. (Empathy involves identification with the feelings of another. It is difficult to identify with the sensations of lower animals and plants.) I have heard teachers suggest that the tree feels pain when limbs are cut or that digging into the soil (especially with a steam shovel) wounds the earth.

Although some have attempted to do so, it is not possible to derive an ethic out of nature's behavior, which is amoral. We see both beauty and harmony, but also violent storms, volcanos, earthquakes, and viruses. [22]

We must be careful not to be environmental instrumentalists, seeing nature as useful only because it provides food, water, and useful resources. A Christian environmental ethic must be based upon nature having value beyond the use we make of it (since it glorifies God just by its existence) and handling nature along God's guidelines.

Christian environmental ethics constrain technology on the question of values in three ways: 1) they identify the value source as originating in God, not human beings (Gen.1), 2) they identify this God as continuing in covenantal relationship with His creatures (Gen. 9), and 3) they identify specific divine commands (Lev. 25, 26) which are given solely for the benefit of non-human creation. [23]

Conclusions

God made the world in an amazing way that reveals His character, wisdom, faithfulness, love, and beauty. Respect, love, and generosity should characterize how we act towards everyone and everything God has made. Besides harmonious relationship with God and others, said Wolterstorff, "Shalom incorporates right, harmonious relationships to nature and delight in our physical surroundings. Shalom comes when we, bodily creatures and not disembodied souls, shape the world with our labor and find fulfillment in so doing and delight in its results." [24]

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