

# The Christian Challenge of Caring for the Earth

## Our current environmental crisis

Throughout human history, some have looked after their environment with great care making sure that they could pass their land on to their children and grandchildren in even better shape than they received it. Others have exploited their environment for their own ends without thinking of the future consequences, or have been polluters of the air, the land or the seas doing damage which in some cases has been irreversible. We are only too aware in the developed nations of the world of the spoil heaps and contaminated land and rivers which remain a legacy of the industrial revolution.

During recent decades large efforts have been made with considerable success to reduce pollution especially that of air and water which occurs on a relatively local scale. However, with large increases in human population and in the scale of human activities, we are now faced with environmental degradation on an enormous scale and with pollution that is global in its extent.

Problems of the global environment are firmly on the agenda of politicians, many industries and of people all over the world. Environmental problems are, however, not the only problems of global extent facing the world. There are many others: poverty, the availability and use of resources, security and population growth. All in their turn influence the environment; they all need to be taken together. Christians and the church need to be addressing them all, not shying away from them because of their difficulty.

## Stewardship of the Earth: A Christian view

The relationship between humans and the Earth which is often presented is one of stewardship. That we are stewards of creation brings in fundamentally the notion of responsibility, first to God as the one whose stewards we are – we are to look after the Earth, not as we please, but as God wants it looked after. Second, we have responsibility to the rest of creation as ones who stand in the place of God.

A helpful picture of stewardship is found in the Judaeo-Christian tradition in the story of creation in the early chapters of the Bible. Adam and Eve were placed in a garden, the garden of Eden, ‘to work it and take care of it’ (Genesis 2.15 NIV – note that the word for ‘work’ is often translated

## Three Global Environmental Problems

### Ozone Depletion

Pollution of the atmosphere by compounds containing chlorine (CFCs) used in some industrial processes, in spray cans and in refrigeration has led to partial destruction of the ozone layer that protects life on Earth from the sun’s harmful ultraviolet radiation.

### Climate Change

Due mainly to the burning of fossil fuels, the emissions of carbon dioxide and other so-called ‘greenhouse gases’ into the atmosphere are rapidly increasing. If no action is taken to slow down these emissions, the climate is expected to change more rapidly than at any time during the last 10,000 years. This will bring severe problems to many countries especially those affected by sea level rise and by the likely incidence of a greater frequency and intensity of climate extremes such as floods and droughts.

### Deforestation

In tropical countries, forests are being cut down at a rate such that *an area of forest equivalent to that of Britain* is being lost every year. Loss of forest brings loss of soil and an enormous loss of biodiversity.

‘serve’). We are presented with a picture of the Earth as God’s garden and humans as its ‘gardeners’. What does our work as ‘gardeners’ imply? Here are four things:

1. A garden provides food and water and other materials to sustain life in all its forms and human industry. Note that the Genesis story not only mentions food and water but also mineral resources (Genesis 2.12).
2. A garden is to be maintained as a place of beauty. The trees in the garden of Eden were ‘pleasing to the eye’. As we contemplate creation, we experience a sense of awe and wonder at its scale, intricacy and magnificence (cf. many Psalms, especially 104 and 148). Millions of people each year visit gardens which have been specially designed to show off the incredible variety and beauty of nature.

3. A garden is a place where humans can be creative. We are created in the image of God (Genesis 1.26) which implies that we, like God, are to be creative. Humans have learnt to use their scientific and technical knowledge (e.g. to generate new plant varieties) coupled with the enormous variety of the Earth's resources to create new possibilities for life and its enjoyment.

4. A garden is to be kept so as to be of benefit to future generations. Much of our planning and planting of gardens clearly has future generations in mind! We all want to pass on to the next generation a better Earth than the one we inherited.

How well do we humans match up to ourselves as gardeners caring for the earth? Not very well, it must be said; we are more often exploiters and spoilers rather than gardeners. Some Christians have misinterpreted the 'dominion' given to humans in Genesis 1.26 (AV) as an excuse for unbridled exploitation. However, the Genesis chapters, as do other parts of scripture, insist that human rule over creation is to be exercised under God, the ultimate ruler of creation, with the sort of care exemplified by this picture of humans as 'gardeners'.

### **Much talk but little action**

Many of these principles of stewardship of the 'garden' are included at least implicitly in much that is written about the environment. The Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 was the biggest international conference ever with upwards of 25,000 attendees; millions of words resulted from its conventions and resolutions. Awareness of environmental issues has become much more apparent. We are not short of statements of ideals or of desirable action. What seems generally lacking, however, are the capability and resolve to carry them out. Lots of talk but comparatively little action.

We are only too aware of the strong temptations we experience – both personally and nationally – to use the world's resources to gratify our own selfishness and greed. Not a new problem, in fact a very old one. In the Genesis story of the garden, we are introduced to human sin with its tragic consequences (Genesis 3); humans disobeyed God and did not want Him around any more. That broken relationship with God led on to broken relationships elsewhere too. The disasters we find everywhere in the environment speak eloquently of the consequences of that broken relationship.

When thinking of the sin and evil which results from a broken relationship with God, Christians generally think of sin against people not against the environment. But if we take seriously the clear responsibility of care for the Earth given to humans by God, we are bound also to recognise that to fail in

that task is not only a sin against nature but a sin against God. It has been suggested that this new category of sin should include activities that lead to 'species extinction, reduction in genetic diversity, pollution of the water, land and air, habitat destruction and disruption of sustainable life styles'. This new sense of sin could also include the sin of too much talk and too little action!

### **Incarnation and Resurrection: a future for the material**

You may well ask the question, has not human sin ruined it all? In trying to look after the Earth are we not facing a losing battle? Is there a future for the Earth? Some Christians think there is not. Picking on particular verses in the Bible which seem to suggest there is no future for the physical Earth, Christians have often argued against getting involved – it is only salvation from spiritual evil that matters, they say. Arguing that way, however, is to ignore the fact that the central themes of Christian theology – those of creation and salvation – are very closely tied together. They are joined through the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus.

So, although there is bad news, there is also good news. Human failure and sin have not put an end to God's purposes for human beings. When in Jesus, God became human in the incarnation, he demonstrated to the fullest extent possible God's commitment to the material world. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury sixty years ago wrote: "Christianity's... most central saying is, 'The Word was made flesh' (John 1.14)...By the very nature of its central doctrine Christianity is committed to a belief... in the reality of matter and its place in the divine scheme."

It is the resurrection of Jesus which is the key to our hope for the future. When Jesus rose from the dead he did not leave the material created order; rather he demonstrated his power of transformation over that order. Professor Oliver O'Donovan of Oxford has written, "It might have been possible... before Christ rose from the dead, for someone to wonder whether creation was a lost cause... The hope that we call 'Gnostic', the hope of redemption from creation rather than for the redemption of creation, might have appeared to be the only possible hope."

But we are not Gnostics. St Paul takes up this theme of the redemption of creation in a remarkable passage in Romans 8.20–21. "Creation is waiting", he says, "with eager expectation. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God".

Emphasis on resurrection and redemption continues in the book of Revelation where we are presented with the marvellous vision John had of new heavens and new Earth – a redeemed, transformed Earth and redeemed people to live on it!

So there is a future for the Earth! We need a theology of creation which includes as central themes both Incarnation and Resurrection – rocks on which a theology of creation has to be built. Jesus Christ is central to all our thinking about creation – and creation is part of the future that he came to establish.

### Partnership with God

Stewardship of the Earth in practice is beset by problems of human selfishness and greed which lead to over-exploitation of the Earth's resources; also by the problem of human impotence – we know what to do, but lack the will to do it. We may often despair that it is beyond the capability of the human race to tackle it adequately. It is, in fact, a spiritual problem.

But this is where the Christian doctrine of salvation is particularly relevant – it is not only 'salvation from', it is 'salvation for'. An important, in fact essential, religious message is that we do not have to carry the responsibility of looking after the Earth on our own. Our partner is no other than God Himself.

The Genesis stories of the garden contain a beautiful description of this partnership when they speak of God 'walking in the garden in the cool of the day' (Genesis 3.8). We may wonder what God and Adam and Eve talked about on those evening walks. They would surely have talked about the garden and how humans were getting on finding out about it and caring for it.

In the Christian message the material and the spiritual are closely linked together. Jesus once said to his disciples, 'Without me you can do nothing' (John 15.5). This is usually interpreted as relating particularly to the spiritual sphere and to religious activity but Jesus did not qualify it in that way - it can be applied to everything that we do. After all, taking care of the Earth is also very much God's work.

Further, Jesus explained to his disciples that he was not calling them servants but friends (John 15.15). Servants are given instructions without explanation; as friends we are brought into the confidence of our Lord. We are not given prescriptions of precise action but are expected to use the gifts we have been given to carry out our tasks in a genuine partnership.

Within the creation itself there is enormous potential to assist us in the task; the pursuit of scientific knowledge and the application of technology are an essential part of our stewardship. Both need to be approached and used with appropriate humility.

A clear understanding of the responsibilities we have been given coupled with trust in God's presence and trustworthiness is the mixture that makes stewardship both exciting and challenging.



### Why look after the Earth?

1. The Earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24.1). God is its creator and is Lord of Creation.
2. The unity of creation. The insights of modern science contain a strong message that we are part of the larger world of all living things. Increasingly we are aware of our dependence on the rest of nature and of the interdependencies between different forms of life and between living systems and the physical and chemical environment which surrounds life on the Earth.
3. It is a good creation – good because of its unity, its diversity and its beauty. The creation story right at the beginning of the Bible states this seven times – 'God saw all that he had made and it was very good'. The Old Testament continually illustrates this theme particularly in its poetry set very much in the context of the agricultural economy of the people of Israel and the land they were given. In the gospels we find Jesus taking many of his parables from the natural world which he clearly enjoyed and Paul in his epistles makes some very majestic statements about the creation. Not all religions or ideologies assert the goodness of creation. Many consider that matter is essentially evil, illusory or unimportant. Some Christians in emphasising the spiritual forget how central is the theme of creation – a good creation – to the Christian message.
4. Humans have been given clear instructions by God to care for the Earth. According to the Genesis creation story (Genesis 1.26, 2.15) a key part of God's purpose in making people was to care for the rest of creation.

## Summary Challenges

1. The world is facing environmental crises of unparalleled magnitude, including some on a global scale.
2. Looking after the Earth is a God-given responsibility. Not to look after the Earth is a sin.
3. Christians need to re-emphasise that the doctrines of creation, incarnation and resurrection belong together. The spiritual is not to be seen as separate from the material. A thoroughgoing theology of the environment needs to be developed.
4. Our stewardship of the Earth, as Christians, is to be pursued in dependence on and partnership with God.
5. The application of science and technology is an important component of stewardship. Humility is an essential ingredient in the pursuit and application of science and technology – and in the exercise of stewardship.
6. All of this provides an enormous opportunity for the church which has too much ignored the Earth and the environment and neglected the importance of creation and its place in the overall Christian message.

These themes could come over powerfully to modern people obsessed with the material and could help to demonstrate the value of the Christian faith to people who otherwise see no point in it and see no relevance in the spiritual message we want to bring. A strong challenge for today's church is to include environmental concerns as part of its mission.

This briefing was prepared for The John Ray Initiative by Sir John Houghton CBE FRS. It is based on a Drawbridge Lecture given in 1996 for the Christian Evidence Society. Thanks are due to the Trustees of the JRI and others for their helpful comments.

Sir John Houghton is co-chairman of the Scientific Assessment Working Group for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and a member of the Government Panel on Sustainable Development, and from 1991 to 1998 he was Chairman of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. He is the author of several books including '*Global Warming- the complete briefing*' and '*The Search for God – can science help?*'

### Further reading

*The Care of Creation* ed. R J Berry, IVP, 2000

Al Gore *Earth in the Balance* Houghton Mifflin, 1992

Global Environmental Outlook 2000, United Nations Environment Programme 1999, is available online at <http://www.unep.org/geo2000/>

Ron Elsdon *Greenhouse Theology* Monarch, 1992

Lawrence Osborn *Guardians of Creation* Apollos, 1993

Colin Russell *The Earth, Humanity and God* UCL Press, 1994

John Houghton *Global Warming: the complete briefing* (2nd edition) CUP, 1997

Ghilleen Prance *The Earth under threat: a Christian perspective* Wild Goose Publications, 1996

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The *John Ray Initiative* promotes responsible environmental stewardship in accordance with Christian principles and the wise use of science and technology. The JRI organises seminars and disseminates information on environmental stewardship.

Inspiration for JRI is taken from John Ray (1627-1705), English naturalist, Christian theologian and first biological systematist of modern times, preceding Linnaeus.

*For more information contact us at:* JRI, QW212, University of Gloucestershire, Francis Close Hall, Swindon Road, Cheltenham GL50 4AZ, UK.  
Tel: 012 4254 3580 Fax: 087 0132 3943

The *John Ray Initiative* is a company limited by guarantee and a Registered Charity  
Company Registration No: 3420063  
Registered Charity No: 1067614

[jri@glos.ac.uk](mailto:jri@glos.ac.uk) [www.jri.org.uk](http://www.jri.org.uk)