

The Biblical Basis for Creation Care

The Bible gives us a very simple and clear-cut basis for a Christian doctrine of the environment:

1. Creation belongs to God.
2. He has entrusted it to us.
3. We will be held accountable, not only for the way we treat our environment, but also for our acknowledgement of and abuse of its Owner.

Looked at this way, a failure to look after the environment is disobedience to a divine command. It is a sin. This is very different from the common Christian view (particularly among Protestants) that the world is merely the stage for God's saving work. We congratulate ourselves for emancipating ourselves from the Greek view that matter is evil and spirit good; we insist that both inanimate and animate nature is neutral. We are careful to point out that God and creation are separate. We are not animists or pantheists, seeing God in the rocks or the animals, but theists worshipping a God who is distinct from His creation although using natural processes for His own purposes (as in the plagues in Egypt or stilling the storm in Galilee). We fail to understand that God has specifically and explicitly appointed us as His stewards (or trustees or managers or tenants - there are disagreements about the best word to use).

The Bible tells us that "the Earth is the Lord's" (Psalm 24:1) and that "the Earth he has given to mankind" (Psalm 115:16). There is no conflict between these statements: the Earth belongs to God by creation and to us by delegation; God has not handed His creation over to us in such a way as to relinquish His ownership, but He has delegated to us the responsibility of looking after it on His behalf. This means that we must avoid both the deification and exploitation of nature; our calling is co-operation with God in conserving and developing the environment for the common good.

It is not novel to read scripture in this way. In the second century AD, Irenaeus, faced with gnostic claims now recycled as New Age philosophy, made a similar point. John Calvin in his Commentary on Genesis 2:15 wrote: "The custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam, to show that we possess the things which God has committed to our hands, on the condition that being content with the frugal and moderate use of them, we should take what shall remain."

Notwithstanding, for centuries we have maltreated our world with little compunction or conscience; it seemed clear to us that any damage was rapidly 'repaired' by natural processes. We now know that this was wrong. To the discredit of Christians, these

errors surfaced because of their physical consequences rather than their moral implications. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher surprised many people in 1988 when in a lecture to the Royal Society she said: "For generations we have assumed that the efforts of mankind would leave the fundamental equilibrium of the world's systems and atmosphere stable. But we have unwittingly begun a massive experiment with the system of this planet itself."

Christianity Blamed:

In a frequently quoted book (*Design with Nature*, 1969) Ian McHarg described God's command to "have dominion" over all living things (Genesis 1:26,28) "as one text of compounded horror which will guarantee the relationship of man to nature can only be destruction, which will atrophy any creative skill ... which will explain all of the despoliation accomplished by western man for at least these 2000 years ... The Genesis story in its insistence upon dominion and subjugation of nature, encourages the most exploitative and destructive instincts in man, rather than those that are deferential and creative ... God's affirmation about man's dominion was a declaration of war on nature."

An even more influential attack on Christianity was made by Lynn White in a paper 'The historical roots of our ecologic crisis' (*Science*, 155: 1204-7, 1967). He wrote: "We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim ... Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance towards nature that no solution can be expected from them alone."

This understanding of God's Genesis command is faulty on two counts:

1. Although the word translated 'dominion' is one used of kingly, authoritarian rule, it should be remembered that the Hebrew ideal of kingship was the servant-king, typified by David or Our Lord Himself. Our dominion is properly exercised as a caring support for creation, not as an absolute right to plunder – see Psalm 72.
2. The command to "have dominion" was given in the context of humans "made in God's image" which implies responsibility and trustworthiness.

In other words, the first command to the human race, made right at its beginning, was to undertake caring stewardship for God. Far from having a licence to exploit creation, we are given a charge to care for a 'cosmos' (the Greek word translated 'world' in John 3:16) which God loves and Christ has redeemed (Colossians 1:20).

We are not asked to look after a world that is only a 'thing'; we are required to be God's agents in managing a world which He created, redeemed and sustains.

This biblical responsibility is commonly misunderstood and ignored. Christians are blamed for 'de-sanctifying' nature, degrading a sacred earth into mere matter. During the 1960s in particular, many people turned to the pantheism and mysticism of Eastern Religions, in the belief that they somehow offered salvation for the environment. This proved vain. Jaques Delors, the President of the European Commission commented: "The Oriental religions have failed to prevent to any marked degree the appropriation of the natural environment by technical means ... Despite different traditions, the right to use or exploit nature seems to have found in industrialised countries the same favour, the same freedom to develop, the same economic justification." [1]. Japan and the former Eastern Bloc countries are among the most polluted in the world, although they owe comparatively little to Christianity.

Another attempt to find a truly 'green religion' has been through the New Age, an amorphous creed marked by the world moving from astrological rule by Pisces (the symbol of Christianity) to the barrier-less Aquarius (the water-carrier), where all things blend together so that we are submerged into a massive cosmic unity, with no distinction between spirit and body, or between god(s) and humanity. New Age adherents often claim credibility for their beliefs through Jim Lovelock's Gaia which is a scientific hypothesis postulating complex feedbacks between life and atmosphere, i.e. that the cosmos functions as a vast single organism (called Gaia after the Greek Earth goddess). As science this hypothesis has been valuable in stimulating research, but the assumption that the Earth and life form a single unit is more mythical than realistic. It should not be used to support religious beliefs.

An unfrocked Roman Catholic priest, Matthew Fox has attracted a considerable following in the U.S.A. by his invention of 'creation spirituality', in which he seeks to combine so-called 'traditional wisdom' (native myth and religion) with cosmology; he argues that 'fall/redemption' theology (i.e. conventional Christian belief) should be replaced with a creation-centred theology, which he sees as an optimistic progression. For him, Crucifixion and Resurrection are transferred from the historical Jesus to Mother Earth; Easter is the life, death and resurrection of Mother Earth, a constantly sacrificed paschal lamb. Fox rejects Bible teaching: "The stewardship model (that God is an absent landlord and we humans are serfs, running the garden for God) does not appeal to the young or to our hearts - it is just one more duty, one more commandment to follow ... We need mysticism - God IS the garden." [2]

A number of more conventional theologians have proposed ways to make their understanding of Christianity fit more comfortably with their perception of the environment. This is not the place to summarise

all these, see [3], but it is worth mentioning process theology and its associated panentheism, because it is widespread in much Christian environmental writing.

Process thought is based on the assumption that God cannot be insensitive to the suffering in the world and therefore interacts and changes with time; consequently God's attributes alter, and His timelessness disappears, and with it the historical certainty of the atonement. God is seen as incorporating the universe within Himself, although he is more than the universe (panentheism). This is obviously much closer to orthodoxy than the views of (say) Matthew Fox and is helpful in emphasizing God's immanence, but it carries implications at variance with traditional Christianity and its basis in the eternal saving work of Christ.

God and the Environment:

We can restate the Biblical basis for creation care in four propositions:

1. God works in the world. The best way to understand the connection between divine and natural causes is complementarity. For example, a painting can be described 'scientifically' in terms of the distribution of chemicals on a surface, but it can also be described in terms of the plan and intention of the artist. We can have two (or more) descriptions of the same object which do not overlap or contradict in any way; we call them complementary. In the same way, God can be understood as working in the world (by faith: Hebrews 11:3) without conflicting or diminishing any scientific (or rational) knowledge we may have of the same event.
2. God is separate from creation. The world is not an extension or emanation from God. Although it is not explicitly stated in Scripture, from early Christian times it has been believed that God created "from nothing"; if he had used existing material, this would mean that he was dependent on something outside of Himself, and hence not "before all things". As humans we are a part of nature but we are unique in being made in God's image and, as we have seen, responsible to Him.
3. Christ has redeemed *all things* by his death on the cross (Col 1:20). Christians often base their teaching about creation care solely on God's creating work as described in the early chapters of Genesis. That ignores other significant elements in the Bible. The Christian faith is trinitarian, not unitarian. As the Father creates, so the Spirit upholds that which Christ has redeemed.
4. Our response is stewardship, involving active management not dedicated preservation. The man who concentrated on guarding his talent so as to hand it safely and unchanged back to his master was the man who was roundly condemned as a "useless servant" (Matthew 25:30). The statement in Genesis 2:2,3 that God had "finished" His work refers to a pattern of rest and workings for the seventh day, not to a situation where creation was ended. After all, the creator never rests (Psalm 121:4; John 5:17).

At this point, it is relevant to consider the Fall. The man (Adam) was told in Genesis 3:17 that because of his disobedience “the earth will be cursed” i.e. there would be a significant change in creation from the state when God saw all that He had made and for Him “it was good ... very good.” What does this mean for ecology?

1. We need to be clear that when God declared His work to be ‘good’, he was speaking from His viewpoint not ours. There was certainly death in the world from the earliest days of biological life, because God gave the plants to the animals for food, and plant death is as much death as animal death. Moreover, there were many, many generations of animal death before humans came on the scene. The dinosaurs had flourished - and then become extinct. We know from their fossils that they suffered from bone disease, just as we do. [4] We are wrong to assume that there was no death or disease before the Fall.

2. The ‘death’ that entered the world with Adam (Romans 5:12; 1 Corinthians 15:21) was primarily separation from God, the source of that which makes us truly human. Our first parents ‘died’ the day they sinned; they were removed from God’s presence (i.e. evicted from Eden), but they survived for years and had all their children outside Eden. Through Christ’s redeeming death, we are raised to life, “born anew” by being reunited with God.

The key to understanding the Fall is in the New Testament. (Interestingly neither the rabbinic nor the Jewish apocalyptic tradition has any concern about a Fall. Judaism emphasises individual responsibility for our failings, not some intrinsic curse upon creation. The Fall is a Christian doctrine).

Probably the most important passage for understanding the Fall is Romans 8:19-22, where we are told that the created universe “was made subject to frustration ... yet with the hope that the universe itself is to be freed from the shackles of mortality ... Up to the present, the whole created universe in all its parts groans as if in the pangs of childbirth.”

This is a difficult passage, and most commentators are unhelpful. One theologian who gets to grips with it is Charles Cranfield in a magnificent *reductio ad absurdum* argument. He asks “what sense can there be in saying that the sub-human creation - the Jungfrau, for example, or the Matterhorn or the planet Venus - suffers frustration by being prevented from properly fulfilling the purpose of its existence? The answer must surely be that the whole magnificent theatre of the universe, together with all its splendid properties, and all the varied chorus of sub-human life created for God’s glory is cheated of its fulfilment so long as man, the chief actor in the great drama of God’s praise, fails to contribute his rational part. The Jungfrau and the Matterhorn and the planet Venus and all living things too, man alone excepted, do indeed glorify God in their own ways, but since their praise is destined to be not a

collection of independent offerings but part of a magnificent whole, the united praise of the whole creation, they are prevented from being fully that for which they were created to be, so long as man’s part is missing, just as all the other players in a concerto would be frustrated of their purpose if the soloist were to fail to play his part.” [5]

Derek Kidner uses the same analogy in commenting on Genesis 3: “Leaderless, the choir of creation can only grind in discord. It seems from Romans 8:19-23 and from what is known of the pre-human world, that there was a state of travail in nature from the first, which man was empowered to ‘subdue’, until he relapsed into disorder himself.” [6] Gordon Wenham puts it: “The sentences on the man and woman take the form of a disruption of their appointed roles.” [7]

God made and appointed us to be stewards, care-takers. By our disobedience, we have not only removed ourselves from fellowship with and support from our Creator, but have brought all the rest of creation into a state of disorder and inability to fulfil its role (Psalm 19, Psalm 148, etc.). The French theologian, Henri Blocher argues that “if man obeys God, he would be the means of blessing the earth, but in his insatiable greed ... and in his short-sighted selfishness, he pollutes and destroys it. He turns a garden into a desert (cf. Revelation 11:18). That is the main thrust of the curse of Genesis 3.” [8]

From beginning to end, the Bible speaks of our links with nature. Sometimes we are given direct commands, as when we are told “have dominion”; on other occasions, the instructions are implicit (the perils of a journey, the care needed for a farm or flock of animals, the mastery we should expect over wild animals or fierce weather). The Bible is full of expressions of environmental concern. For example, sin led to Noah’s flood and also to drought (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28); the food laws regulate hunting; a very positive attitude to nature is set out in Job, Proverbs and the Song of Songs; and so on. In all cases we interact with creation, a part of it as well as apart from it. But throughout is the parallel theme, that this is God’s world, that He has made a covenant with us which He will not break, and that both creation and ourselves were reconciled to God by Christ’s death on the cross.

God’s message comes to us in various guises; sometimes described as two books, one of words and the other of works. [9] He is faithful; He calls us to be obedient, and then we will enter into the inheritance prepared for us and the universe will no longer be groaning in frustration.

Where now?

How should we respond to the God who has called us to be managers of His creation? Clearly we need to be responsible for the way we treat the world, as gardeners, husbandmen and women, as planners, as industrialists, as tourists.

We need to examine our life-style, not for fashion's sake or to escape obesity or becoming embedded in our own pollution, but because we are living in a world made, redeemed and upheld by God.

Some of us will be called to be activists, perhaps with a general caring group like the National Trust or the RSPB, or perhaps with a Christian environmental organisation such as Christian Ecology Link, A Rocha, or the John Ray Initiative.

But above all, we must remember and proclaim that God is the Lord of All. He is not linked only to human affairs. He is not a Creator distant in time and space who finished his work and retreated above the bright blue sky, descending every now and again to adjust the workings of the world. A theology of the environment is above all a theology of a Creator who holds all things together.

Decades of debate about creation and evolution have obscured and confused our understanding of a triune God, who was and is and ever shall be. We need to remember that the transcendent Creator of the Universe is also the immanent Spirit of power, love and a sound mind. We must not attempt the spiritually impossible by worshipping a God who is infinitely distant whilst experiencing and praying to One who is with us moment by moment. Our God ought to be Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. If He is not, He is too small.

This paper was prepared for the John Ray Initiative by Prof R.J. (Sam) Berry, Professor of Genetics at University College London. Thanks are also due to Dr Paul Marston, Sir Timothy Hoare and the JRI Trustees for their helpful comments.

Notes

1. Delors, J. (1990). Opening address. In *Environmental Ethics: man's relationship with nature, interactions with science* 19-28. Bourdean, P.L., Fasella, P.M. & Teller, A. (eds). Luxembourg: Commission of the European Communities.
2. Fox, M. Lecture given in St. James' Church, Piccadilly, London in 1990.
3. Cooper, T. (1997) *Sustaining the Earth*. Nottingham: St John's College.
4. Rothschild, B & Martin, L. (1993). *Paleopathology: Disease in the Fossil Record*. London: CRC
5. Cranfield, C. (1974) 'Some observations on Romans 8:19-21' in *Reconciliation and Hope: New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology* 224-230. Banks, R. (ed). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
6. Kidner, D. (1967). *Genesis*. London: Tyndale Press.
7. Wenham, G. (1987) *Word Bible Commentary 1. Genesis 1-15*. Dallas, Texas : Word Publishing.
8. Blocher, H. (1984). *In the Beginning*. Leicester : IVP.
9. On the title page of *The Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin quotes Francis Bacon "Let no man think or maintain that a man can search too far or be too well studied in the book of God's word or in the book of God's works; but rather let men endeavour an endless progress or proficience in both."

THE·JOHN·RAY·INITIATIVE

The *John Ray Initiative* promotes responsible environmental stewardship in accordance with Christian principles and the wise use of science and technology. 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 Carl Linnaeus.

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