

The Environment - A Christian Perspective?

What is the environment?

The dictionary definition of the environment is the surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates. In the context of Christian theology, our environment is the world which God has created and human beings are part of that creation. This article seeks to explore whether there is a distinctly *Christian* ethic for protecting our environment and we shall find that this centres around the basic idea that

“The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.” (Psalm 24:1-2; NRSV)

Why is it a matter of concern?

Care for the environment has become an increasingly important global issue in the last thirty years. It arose from an increasing awareness in the 1960s of the human effect on the global environment through pollution, population growth, exploitation of natural resources, loss of wildlife habitats and changes in climate due to human activity. As the last three decades have passed, these concerns have continued to grow and measures to deal with some of these issues have become part of our lives - for example the giant wind turbine that towers over our own town.

Why Protect and Conserve the Environment?

The reasons why concern has arisen have been ethical ones and there are two broad approaches to why people are concerned with their environment. There are two broad approaches:

- the conventional scientific view which the environment is seen as something that is explained and managed according to natural processes and laws. We desire to deal with issues that destroy the global environment because we want to conserve it for the benefit of future generations. You can find plenty of sound scientific reasons for why that might be so.
- a "post modernist" view which is sceptical about traditional science and sees nature as a living organism. This approach is strongly influenced by new age thinking and it is a harking back to pre-Christian world view which views nature as divine although much of the modern basis is *parascientific*¹. People desire to protect “mother nature”.

What about Christian thinking? It hardly features! In fact Christians have been accused of ethics that are ecologically destructive, the most notable protagonist being Lynn White who in 1967 suggested that at the heart of the modern ecological crisis lay a Christian world view of dominion without regard to its global consequences². Ecologist Max Nicholson once stated that God licensed man to be the world's worst pest³.

What's interesting about Christian writers is that most are scientists and I usually feel that they search the Bible for reasons to support what they would see are sound scientific reasons for good conservation, or as they would see it, stewardship, of the environment. In one sense there are

¹ Such as James Lovelock's Gaia principle

² White, L, The historic roots of our current ecological crisis, *Nature*, 155, pp 1203-1206, 1967

³ Quotes in Russell, C A, *The Earth, Humanity and God*, UCL Press, 1994, p4

excellent scientific reasons for protecting the environment but is there anything that is distinctively Christian that we can bring to our understanding of it?

I would suggest there are three areas where we can bring a Christian perspective - all based on how we understand the nature of God and man from the Bible:

- ➡ **God made human beings as stewards of creation**
- ➡ **Environmental problems largely stem from human sinfulness**
- ➡ **The redemption of man involves the redemption of creation**

God made human beings as stewards of creation

Genesis 1: 27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 28 God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." 29 God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so (NRSV)

Further on we see Adam caring for God's garden and naming all the animals. The idea of being given dominion was as God's steward or manager. Being in the image of God means that we human beings have His creative potential. We have been given the ability to understand the environment, to modify it or to destroy it. That's where Christians do differ from many scientific or modern philosophies. They see us as part of "mother earth" - just a cog in the wheel of the environment. We may be part of God's creation, but we have immense power over it. That is what being in God's image is all about - the ability to create, modify and destroy and there is scarcely a corner of the planet left untouched by the human race. Although it is possible to point to environmental degradation in many parts of the world, critics also fail to point out the scientific and technological advances that has increased global population longevity, prevented mass starvation and improved the standard of living for large numbers of people. The power has been used both for bad - and for good.

In Swaffham we see evidence of environmental degradation as our soil is blown off and habitats are lost. On the other we see evidence of conservation and green energy. We have power to raise up and power to break down. We may have power, but having power is one thing, but how we exercise it is another. Adam was given responsibility with that power, to be a steward of creation, which brings us to our second point.

Environmental problems largely stem from human sinfulness

The whole purpose of the Genesis story is to state that the human race is in rebellion with God. Eve, then Adam sinned and through them the whole human race. As a result the first thing that happened was environmental degradation.

Gen 3:17 And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it," cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; 18 thorns and thistles it shall

bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. 19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (NRSV)

If we look in the world today at the most severe environmental problems, at the heart of them we will find human selfishness - the desire by individuals or societies to exploit the environment for their benefit irrespective of the consequences on others. The description we often use of this world is as a result of sin, the world is fallen. As we look at the beauty of God's creation in Swaffham, it seems hard to believe that the way we burn fuel, grow crops and use the world's resources can affect others - but it does. Our lifestyle brings disaster to others, either through our own exploitation of the environment or by them wanting the same! There is a verse we often quote from Romans 3:23 - *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*. Destruction of the environment is just one more evidence of the sin of the human race.



The redemption of man involves the redemption of creation

God's plan for man's sinfulness was to send His Son into this world to die for a fallen human race. The relationship that Adam had with God at the beginning is restored for each one of us when we personally accept that Christ died for our sins, accept His forgiveness and become sons and daughters of the living God. The word we use for the way in which God recovers that which is lost is called redemption. There is quite an interesting passage in Paul's letter to the Romans.

Rom 8: 15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" 16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ--if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. 18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (NRSV)

God's redemption of the human race also involves the redemption of creation. The idea is that God's desire is to restore that which was lost through sin. Just as God desires to redeem people, there is a day coming when God is going to restore His creation.

A German theologian called Jurgen Moltmann saw a connection between the redemption of man and the redemption of creation saying that "*in the justification of the godless and in faith we see the beginning of the transformation and the creation of the whole for the glory of God.*"⁴

The work of Christ that first Easter saw the beginning of a process where God seeks to redeem all those who would come to Him but the creation that fell. The theme of the NT is to see the termination of this process as the time when Jesus returns to finally to claim His people, His church.

You might not have heard any of that put that way before but I believe that is the consistent teaching of the New Testament and for that matter the Old - God seeks to redeem that which was lost. How

⁴ Moltmann, J, *The Future of Creation* SCM, 1979, p171

might that affect our attitude towards God's creation - the Environment.

I would suggest three areas that Christians can bring a unique perspective to the world

🕯 *We desire to care for God's creation as His redeemed people.*

Being a Christian is to recognise the sinfulness of men and women and that it has brought on the environmental crises that many parts of the world face. We need to understand that even though we may tell people that God made us as a race to be stewards of the environment, that isn't very helpful when they may recognise they have the power but don't recognise their responsibility before God.

If people are going to recognise their responsibility before God, they must recognise their sinfulness. It's not the selfishness of one that destroys our environment but the sinfulness of us collectively as a society. You deal with the sin of a society by dealing with the sins of the individual. That's why personal faith in Christ is important. We each of us need to deal with the question of our sin by accepting God's offer of forgiveness and a new way of living in obedience to Him.

What does God do? He makes us His children - part of His nation, His society, His church. Therefore our life as God's people, as God's society should stand as a testimony to His goodness to us, to live as we are supposed to live. The trouble is, that so often if the Church of God isn't invisible in our society, it is barely different in its values. Part of our testimony to a living Lord Jesus Christ who we are going to celebrate at Easter is His dominion in our lives and so that people can see by our attitudes that we do things differently - and that included our attitude towards caring for our environment.

I encourage you to become actively involved in whatever way we can to protect our environment, not because we think it's a good idea, but as God's redeemed people, we witness to the fact He is alive and part of our lives. We are under his authority and act as His stewards. As He transforms our lives, everything is transformed around us - society, environment. It does happen - but not here in England!

🕯 *We act as God's witnesses in caring for his creation.*

We desire to protect our environment because it stands as a witness to the Christ we follow. Ed Silvano has noted that Jesus himself used a model of mission with his disciples in Matthew 10 where they were encouraged to preach: "*The kingdom of heaven is near. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.*" (Matt 10:7-9 NIV)⁵. The disciples functioned by meeting the felt needs of people as well as communicating a message. As we take a practical interest in the world God has created, we stand as a witness to God's will for creation and therefore as a witness to the fact that God wants to redeem them through faith in Christ.

Our churches should also reflect this. In Matthew 28:17-20 Jesus calls on his followers to make disciples. A church is a growing community where people minister to one another holistically - both spiritually and practically and was part of the practice within the Church e.g. Acts 9:16, 1 John 3:16-18, James 2:1-4, Rom 15:26. There is no separation of felt needs and spiritual needs here either. Mission and ministry involves both aspects and loving relationships demand both words and actions that really do meet people's needs.

⁵ Silvano, E, *That None may perish*, Ventura, Regal, 1993

As God's people we also stand for balance. The focus of most environmental material is on the effects of modern industrial society and the environment and issues of social justice are often ignored. It may be desirable to close a polluting factory, but what of the jobs of people who work there? As God's people we also seek the transforming power of God in our societies. We don't stand for nature, but for what is right before God. Christians can give a distinctive message and can stand for issues of justice and redemption. As with other areas of social concern, the environment represents one area in which God's people may express the love of Christ to a fallen world.

And that's the challenge I leave you with. If you want to be involved in the transformation of creation, if you desire to conserve and protect the environment, then remember that God's in that business too: but that meaningful transformation only starts with a transformed life.

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