

Toward a Biblical Theology of the Environment

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Part 1 of 2: Introduction and Creation

Introduction

Environmental issues like woodchipping of native forests or disposal of toxic wastes may still capture the headlines and arouse a measure of popular concern. There are indications, however, that the approach to environmental issues which relies on an appeal to an altruistic concern for the planet's well-being, or even to our survival instincts, may be short-lived. The Christian community ought to be motivated by deeper concerns, which arise from our knowledge of the God who declares this planet to be his footstool, and who has made it the sphere of his redemptive activity.

This article offers some biblical-theological considerations to be borne in mind in the ecological discussion. It does not deal with the practicalities of stewardship of the environment, but suggests a framework within which that stewardship can be fostered.

To raise, at this stage, the subject of a distinctively Christian theological approach to environmental concerns may seem to many to be typical of the Christian penchant for responding to issues too late to be of any real value. It may also seem somewhat impudent to speak of a Christian concern, when, in the eyes of many, it is the "Christian" capitalist economic system, with its emphasis on human enterprise and domination of the environment, which is largely to blame for our present ecological "crisis."

Christians must indeed admit our failure to be sensitive to the effect our actions may have on our physical environment, just as we must admit our failings in the breakdown of personal relationships. There are times when we allow ourselves to be motivated by selfishness and a desire for a greater share of the world's resources than can equitably be justified. We seek to minimise personal effort and maximise personal comfort, with little consideration for long-term consequences. We do not always love our neighbours as we love ourselves, particularly those "neighbours" of generations yet to be born.

But this moralising does not deal with the question: Is there a distinctively Christian *theological* approach to the environment? It may strike some as odd even to speak of theology and ecology in the same sentence. Does not theology have to do with God and our personal relationship with him, with the soul, with heaven, with “spiritual” matters? What bearing can this have on ecology, which has to do with the study of the physical environment, its complex interactions, and the measures to be taken to enhance the prospects of its preservation? Does the Bible not make a clear distinction between this world and the world to come? Did Jesus not say that his kingdom is not of this world? Can ecology, then, be of any concern to theologians as theologians?

A closer look at the Scriptures, however, indicates that the contrast intended by such language is not between the material world we experience with our eyes and ears, and a non-material world which will one day replace the material world and make it redundant. Such thinking, which regards the physical as unimportant, if not actually evil, has more affinity with pagan Gnosticism than orthodox Christianity.

One way of looking at theology is to regard it as the process of applying what we understand about God and his revelation to the whole of reality.¹ The Christian theologian looks at everything from the perspective of one who knows that this is God’s world, that we are dependent on him for everything, including our processes of thought. Our ultimate authority in all things is the mind of God in Christ as he has expressed this in the Scriptures, and the theological task will be to bring “every thought captive” to the mind of Christ.

On this basis, land degradation, for example, becomes just as much a theological issue as the atonement, for (as the author of Genesis observes) humanity has a close affinity with “the dust of the ground.” It is by cultivating the soil (on the dry land which God caused to be separated from the waters) that our life is sustained in the world in which God has placed us. It is this earth, no less than the heavens, which God has promised to renew on the basis of the work of Christ (2 Peter 3:13).

It may be asked: If Christian theology claims to be of value in dealing with environmental issues, why has it waited until the closing decades of the second Christian millennium to address them? Yet, it would be unreasonable to expect that Christian thinkers would have applied their minds to the implications of the biblical revelation for specific environmental issues such as global warming or the depletion of the ozone layer before there were any data to indicate these as problem areas. To require this is to misunderstand the nature of the theological task. It is only since the

¹ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, Presbyterian and Reformed (Phillipsburg, 1987), pp. 81-85.

industrial revolution that we have begun to have the capacity for environmental degradation on a global scale. And it is only in the last few decades that many of the consequences of our industrial activities have become apparent. Christians have long considered environmental issues at a theological level. The tradition of writing commentaries on the biblical text has ensured this, and it is further reflected to some extent in the treatments of the locus of “creation” in the works of systematic theologians. Christian voices have been heard, too, on ecological issues from the early days of the modern discussion.² If (with Frame) we hold that theology is the application of biblical principles to present needs, it is only when a problem (actual or potential) has been identified, along with the factors contributing to it, that the Bible may be interrogated specifically for the insights it may bring to bear on a solution.

The frame of reference which the biblical writers adopted is of fundamental importance for any Christian view of the world. The prevailing dynamic which structures biblical revelation is that of *creation, rebellion* and *resurrection*. These do not stand in isolation from each other, but represent the progression to be found in the Scripture. In particular, creation and rebellion form the backdrop for the redemptive work of God in Christ culminating in the resurrection and its outworking in the redemption of the cosmos.

Creation

It is generally the doctrine of creation which provides the focus of Christian considerations of the environment. This world is God’s world. The personal, powerful, wise and loving God designed it as a fit place for him to live with us and for us to enjoy him. All we need in order to sustain our lives in fellowship with him has been provided. The twofold account of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 makes it plain that God designed the world as a perfect place, with mankind as the focus of the physical creation. Mankind is the climax (chapter 1) and the primary concern (chapter 2) of God’s creative activity.

It is this unashamed anthropocentrism of the Bible’s account which attracts the criticism of non-Christians. Lynn White³ was one of the first to charge Christianity with being bankrupt of the values which would tend to the conservation of the planet, and with being responsible for the greed and arrogance of our species. It has become

² Two popular works which spring readily to mind are Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, Tyndale House (Wheaton, 1970).

³ Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* vol. 155 no. 3767 (March 1967).

commonplace among conservationists to applaud the spiritual values of animism, or of eastern religions, in which each living thing finds its significance apart from mankind, and either has its own spirit-force or is absorbed into the cosmic whole.

There is also considerable embarrassment on the part of many Christians and a rush to deny an anthropocentric cast to the Christian view of the world. Thus, Christian authors such as Ian Bradley⁴ would prefer a panentheist approach — God is immersed in everything, and everything including mankind is of equal worth. This obscures the biblical distinction between the Creator and the creature on the one hand, and between humans and the non-human world on the other.

The real problem is not that too much attention has been paid to the Bible's view of mankind and the world, but too little. It is only on the foundation of a Christian view of our preeminent position in God's world that concern for the environment has any basis. Just as it was the world view of Christianity which spawned modern physics and chemistry, so it is the Christian world view alone which can truly provide a foundation for a proper and an enduring environmental science.

The destructive effects of human activity on the globe will not be diminished by downplaying the position we occupy in the world. If we consider ourselves merely as one mammalian species which has managed to achieve a temporary dominance in the evolutionary struggle, the degradation of our habitat becomes simply the mechanism for our ultimate replacement by some other life-form better adapted to living in whatever our planet may become. On this view, we have no rationale, apart from selfishness, for preserving an environment to which we happen to be adapted, when the world has known innumerable climatic changes, some of which are less conducive to human life, but more so to other life forms. If what counts is the impersonal "gaia principle"⁵ (the planet conceived of as a single living organism, purposefully working in the interests of its survival), then the constituent parts lose rather than gain significance.

The biblical picture is very different. The earth with its teeming life was not designed for an existence independent of human care. Humanity as created is not an intruder in a universe which has no need for our species. Even in its state of perfection, the world required the human activity of working and caring for the earth. All animal life, all plants (with one, perhaps temporary, exception), and the minerals in

⁴ Ian Bradley, *God is Green: Christianity and the Environment*, Darton, Longman and Todd (London, 1990).

⁵ James E. Lovelock, *Gaia, A New Look at Life on Earth*, Oxford University Press (Oxford, 1979).

the earth are there for the use and benefit of the human race (Genesis 2). Even the functions of the sun, moon and stars are described in terms of human activities (Genesis 1, Psalm 104). The Psalmist reflects with awe on this exalted position of man, under whose feet all things have been placed (Psalm 8).

An instructive illustration of this man-focussed view is to be found at the time of the conquest of Canaan. The Israelites were not immediately to drive out all of the inhabitants (who were under God's judgment) for a sound environmental reason — Israel would need time to consolidate each stage of the conquest, or the wild animal populations would multiply without human control (Deuteronomy 7:22).

But there is no mandate in the Bible for a greedy exploitation of the earth's resources. While it is true that the words *kiv^esuha ur^edu* translated "subdue" and "rule" (Genesis 1:28) give a forceful impression, these are to be understood in the context of the preceding reference to man (male and female) as being God's "image." It is as a replica, in a sense, of God that mankind's authority over the creation is to be exercised. Our rule is to mirror God's. If God is concerned for long-term consequences in the manner in which he exercises his rule, then we must likewise be concerned. If God is interested in even the seemingly insignificant creatures (the wildflowers, the sparrows that are sold for a few cents), then so it should be with us.

This long-term commitment by God to the preservation of his world can be seen in the fact that (though he had every right) God did not destroy what he had made and pronounced "good." At every stage, God took measures to ensure the preservation of the creation. At the time of the judgment of the flood, provision was made for the preservation not only of the human race, but of all species. It is instructive to note that man was God's agent in this process. Further pointers to God's pattern for human care of the environment may be seen in the sabbatical year in which the land was to lie fallow and in the prohibition on taking both a mother bird and her eggs for food (Deuteronomy 22:6). That the eggs but not the mother may be taken is a simple paradigm of sustainability. Even in time of war, the physical environment is to be respected for the benefit it brings to people (Deuteronomy 20:19).

On a biblical view, each aspect of God's creation has value not at the expense of the centrality of mankind, but precisely in relation to that special place which we occupy under God. Nor can this value of the creation for mankind be reduced to economic terms — as though we had to find a specific use for a species to justify its preservation. There are the less quantifiable benefits of the richness, the beauty and the diversity which God's creation brings to our lives, leading us to a greater appreciation of the wisdom and grandeur of God (Psalm 104).

The creation cannot be understood apart from its purpose. True, individual elements of creation can be said to praise God, apart from any explicit reference to their relation to humanity. Trees, hills, and rivers, can be called upon to praise God, or are said to be there for God's glory and enjoyment, though even with such references, the contexts suggest that the knowledge by mankind of such activities or created purposes will affect our perceptions and responses.

But it is through relationship with the "image of God" that every aspect of creation finds significance. A point often overlooked is the role of Christ in the creation process. Not only is he the one through whom all things were created, but he is also the one (as the image of God *par excellence*, Colossians 1:15,16) *for* whom they were created. The anthropocentric focus is not superseded, but rather sharpened by the Christological.