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Beginning with the Bible is what this volume on Creation Care is all about. It is an exegetical and theological journey into the Scriptures, beginning with Creation in Genesis. You will delight in the depth of teaching; you will be stretched with fresh insights; you may be surprised by how much the Bible says about creation care. Even when writers venture into specific applications of biblical teaching they keep going back to quoting the Bible. These authors are Christians who learn the Word first and then live the Word as a result.

We care for creation for God's sake and we care for creation for our neighbor's sake. Since creation of our earth was by God and for God, of course we want to love and respect God by taking good care of what belongs to him. But it is also about people. We know that the poor and vulnerable are hurt the most by the abuse of creation. Their families get sick from polluted water. Their children starve when crops fail. Their women are raped when they walk for miles into hostile territory to find firewood. Their men leave families behind when floods destroy jobs and they migrate to find work. Taking care of God's creation is good for God and good for people.

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*Scott Sabin*

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**Dieumème Noelliste, editor**





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*Tribune*. A contributing editor of *Creation Care Magazine*, he is the author of *Tending to Eden: Environmental Stewardship for God's People*.



# PREFACE

## Simple and Profound

As a 19 year old college student I enrolled in Journalism 101 at Northwestern University in Chicago. The professor was a good teacher but gave no hints of being religious. Halfway through the semester he began a class saying, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Then he added, “You can’t say anything more profound and you can’t say it more simply. That is good journalism.”

As Christians who believe the Bible, we affirm the simplicity and the profundity of Genesis 1:1, not primarily as an example of journalism but as the basis for our theology and worldview. We start with the God who was before any beginning and who created and sustains all that is. Out of this truth flows our faith and practice, including our commitment to care for God’s creation.

If you are looking for a policy piece on environmental politics, this volume is not what you are looking for. If you want to begin with a lot of specifics about countering degradation of our atmosphere, oceans and earth, you will be disappointed. But, if you want to build your attitudes and actions on creation care upon biblical theology and application, read every page.

## The Christian difference

Recently I went to a Tacoma McDonald’s for a breakfast of hot chocolate and an Egg McMuffin and sat in a booth next to six men discussing a broad range of political and cultural issues. They were pretty well informed on current events and quite articulate in expressing their very strong opinions. They argued about candidates, political parties and agreed that most voters in the Midwest aren’t very bright when they go into the voting booth. Since

I am from Minnesota I decided not to introduce myself to them. But, it was so interesting to eavesdrop that I returned the next three mornings to sit in a nearby booth and hear what they had to say.

In addition to this group of regulars there was a middle age man who also came to that McDonald's every morning for breakfast. He always sat in the booth by the door with his Bible open and his notebook and pen nearby. He was an interesting contrast to the breakfast club guys nearby.

These McDonald's moments impressed me with the difference between Christian and non-Christian discussions about important contemporary issues. The Christian discussion always begins with the Bible. We first ask God and then we listen to God through his Word. We dig deep and meditate on divine revelation before we turn on the television partisans, open a newspaper or read some advocate's blog. We are Christians who don't want our thinking to be shaped by the arguments of others before we first hear the mind of Christ. We really believe that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Sadly, we Christians too often succumb to the ways of the world. We express opinions that sound like we've never read the Bible and sometimes adopt the mean-spirited vocabulary of those who are advocates for their cause but not disciples of Jesus.

There is a very simple test we can give to our thoughts and conversations: *What does the Bible say?* On some topics the Bible says much. On other topics the Bible is uncomfortably quiet. Either way, as fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ we begin with God's Word. Whether alone at home, in a church-based discussion group or eating breakfast at McDonald's, be the Christian who always asks *What does the Bible say?*



## Creation Care

Beginning with the Bible is what this volume on creation care is all about. It is an exegetical and theological journey into the Scriptures, beginning with Creation in Genesis. You will delight in the depth of teaching; you will be stretched with fresh insights; you may be surprised by how much the Bible says about creation care. Even when writers venture into specific applications of biblical teaching they keep going back to quoting the Bible. These authors are Christians who learn the Word first and then live the Word as a result.

Because we believe the Bible and the Bible begins with God and Creation, we talk about “creation care.” That is another difference from those who prefer to be called environmentalists. It’s not that we may not share the same concerns but that we have a different starting point.

I’ve had some interesting experiences talking with amateur environmentalists and world class scientists about pollution, deforestation, climate change and all the related concerns. I casually refer to “creation care” when they are unfamiliar with the terms. Many ask why I use these words and what I mean. This quickly opens the door for me to explain what the Bible says and my conviction that God has called us to take care of his creation. I’ve been fascinated by what often happens next: 1) They are surprised that a Bible-believing Christian cares about environmental issues (somehow they have mistakenly thought that Christians don’t care); 2) They start referring to “creation care” in our dialogue!

## Two Commandments

My own journey in creation care has increasingly connected to Jesus’ two commandments: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is

the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt. 22:37-39).

We care for creation for God’s sake and we care for creation for our neighbor’s sake. Since creation of our earth was by God and for God, of course we want to love and respect God by taking good care of what belongs to him. But it is also about people. We know that the poor and vulnerable are hurt the most by the abuse of creation. Their families get sick from polluted water. Their children starve when crops fail. Their women are raped when they walk for miles into hostile territory to find firewood. Their men leave families behind when floods destroy jobs and they migrate to find work. Taking care of God’s creation is good for God and good for people.

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# INTRODUCTION

*Caring for Our Father's World* is the fifth volume in the Vernon Grounds Institute of Public Ethics Monograph Series. This issue focuses on the environment—an issue which has recently attracted a great deal of attention and evoked intense debate in the written page as well as in the highly publicized international forums which have been convened on the ecology.

While the sustained conversation that the new ecological awareness has generated has by no means produced consensus on every issue that relates to the environment, it has brought to the surface the unmistakable message that God's creation is in distress. The earth we are told time and again is experiencing pain and discomfort in all of its dimensions: land, air and sea. Deforestation, wanton waste disposal, the destruction of the coral reefs and pollution are taking a heavy toll on the embattled planet. Together, these environmental culprits have given rise to the phenomenon of ecological poverty which is limiting the planet's capacity to fulfill what it was created to do: sustain life—both human and nonhuman.

As the title of the book makes clear, its chief purpose is to prompt Christians to become involved in the effort to stem the tide of the environmental decline by taking seriously the biblical mandate to care for the creation that God has bequeathed to us. In one way or another, all the essays that form the content of the volume sound this note with unmistakable clarity. In his chapter, British missiologist and Old Testament scholar, Christopher J. H. Wright sees the obligation to care for the earth as a imperative

that is grounded in the biblical concepts of divine ownership and divine bequest. The earth which is God's by virtue of creation, he argues, has been given to us for inhabitation and dominion. But the dominion envisaged by the divine Giver was meant to be patterned after his own compassionate and caring approach to rulership. In his chapter, Edward Brown, director of the mission agency, Care of Creation, implores us not to shy away from the task of attending to the wellbeing of the creation on the pretense that such attentiveness to the material creation is prejudicial to our own welfare as humans. In a study of Psalm 8 in tandem with the Lord's Prayer of Matthew 6, Brown shows that God's intention is that both concerns be satisfactorily addressed. For his part, Matthew Sleeth, physician turned environmentalist, and director of Blessed Earth, presents a frontal apologetics for creation care by answering lucidly and patiently some of the main objections that are often raised against the effort. In his concluding chapter, Scott Sabin, director of Plant with Purpose, links creation care directly with social justice and shows convincingly that for those who depend on the soil for their livelihood, the most effective way to lift them out of the cycle of poverty is to heal the land by means of reforestation.

As was true of the previous titles in the series, this book emerged from the program of the Grounds Institute. For the entirety of the 2011-12 academic year, the Institute explored the theme of creation care through its three major activities: the Kent Mathews Lectures in Social Ethics, the Rally for the Common Good, and the Salt and Light Seminar. This year the Salt and Light Seminar took the form of a two-pronged event: Salt and Light Denver, and Salt and Light Haiti. Organized respectively on April 16 and May 25-31, the Seminar was a truly collaborative effort between the Institute and several organizations in both places. It saw the deployment of Denver Seminary students in practical work of creation care in the greater Denver area and Haiti.

Two of the contributors to the volume (Matthew Sleeth and Ed Brown) were keynote speakers at the Lectures and the Rally respectively. Brown's paper was delivered at the Rally, while Sleeth's chapter is an earlier publication that contains in succinct form the content of the four presentations that he made at the Kent Mathews Lectures. Its inclusion in the book is by the kind permission of Zondervan. While it was not delivered at an event of the Institute, Scott Sabin's chapter was written especially for the volume. As for Christopher Wright, his contribution was an adaptation of a chapter that appeared previously in a volume published by InterVarsity Press (IVP) under the title *"Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective."* The revised paper is published here with the permission of both Dr. Wright and IVP. Our thanks go to them both for their kindness.

Tying together the essays of our noted contributors is the forward written by Dr. Leith Anderson, President of the National Association of Evangelicals, member of the Grounds Institute's advisory council, and a former interim president of Denver Seminary.

We release this slim monograph with deep gratitude to all who contributed so graciously to its content and with the sincere prayer that it will be used of God to prompt his people to become enlisted in the urgent task of caring for his embattled creation.

*Dieumème Noelliste*





## Chapter 1

# **“THE EARTH IS THE LORD’S” BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR GLOBAL ECOLOGICAL ETHICS**

*By Christopher J. H. Wright*

## **Introduction**

The challenge of anthropogenic climate change underscores both the global and ethical dimensions of contemporary and environmental issues. Accidentally, incidentally and purposefully, in recent decades, human activity has had unprecedentedly negative impact on the earth.<sup>1</sup> As Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer write, “Considering... impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales, it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term ‘anthropocene’ for the current geological epoch.”<sup>2</sup> The human dimensions, both origins and implications, of climate change and other forms of global environmental change are both temporally and spatially ubiquitous, requiring ethical and practical calculus that extends both to future generations and to the ends of the earth.

Challenges of such magnitude are not merely technical matters; effectively addressing them will require reconsideration of values. For Christians, this reconsideration must be grounded in an understanding of God’s word. Thinking biblically about global

ecological responsibility requires that we grasp two interlocking dimensions of the Bible's worldview: its teaching about the relationship between God, his Old Covenant people and the land; and its teaching about God, his New Covenant people and the earth as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

Fully comprehending the depth and breadth of our obligations to biblically informed global ecological ethics requires us to unpack concepts of both divine ownership and the earth-as-gift.

## **Biblical Motivations For Global Ecological Ethics: God's Earth Under Divine Ownership**

*Heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God the earth with all that is in it. (Deut. 10:14)*<sup>4</sup>

This bold claim that Yahweh the God of Israel owns the whole universe is echoed in the familiar claim that God himself makes to Job in the context of the grand recital of all his works of creation: "Everything under heaven belongs to me" (Job 41:11).

The earth, then, belongs to God because God made it. At the very least this reminds us that if the earth is God's, it is not ours, even if our behavior boasts that we think it is. No, God is the earth's landlord and we are God's tenants. God has given the earth into our resident possession (Ps. 115:16), but we do not hold the title deeds of ultimate ownership. So, as in any landlord-tenant relationship, God holds us accountable to himself for how we treat his property. Several dimensions of the affirmation of the divine ownership of the earth have significant ethical and missional implications.

*God's creation is good.* The goodness of God's creation is one of the most emphatic points of Genesis 1 and 2.<sup>5</sup> Six times in the narrative God claims his work to be "good".<sup>6</sup> Several implications of this resoundingly simple affirmation may be noted. First, a

good creation can only be the work of a good God. This sets the Hebrew account of creation in contrast to other ancient Near Eastern accounts where powers and gods of the natural world are portrayed in various degrees of malevolence, and where some aspects of the natural order are explained as the outcome of that malevolence. In the Old Testament, the natural order is fundamentally and in origin good, as the work of the single good God, Yahweh. Part of the meaning of the goodness of creation in the Bible is that it witnesses to the God who made it, reflecting something of his character (for example, Ps. 19; 29; 50:6; 65; 104; 148; Job 12:7-9; Acts 14:17; 17:27; Rom. 1:20).

Second, creation is good independently of our human presence within it and our ability to observe it. In the creation narratives, the affirmation that the creation was "good" was not made by Adam and Eve but by God himself and that three times before God created humans. So the goodness of creation (which includes its beauty) is theologically and chronologically prior to human observation, not merely a human reflexive response to a pleasant view on a sunny day. Nor is it an instrumental goodness in the sense that the rest of creation is good simply because it exists for our benefit. Rather, this affirmation of the goodness of creation is the seal of divine approval on the whole universe at every phase of its creation—from the initial creation of light (Gen. 1:4) to the emergence of land animals (Gen. 1:25). So the created order, including our planet earth, has intrinsic value because it is valued by God, the source of all value. Indeed, our own value as human beings has its source in the fact that we are also part of the whole creation that God already values and declares to be good.

Third, creation is good in relation to the purpose of God for it, which has clearly included development, growth and change in "natural history," as well as human history. Of course, the meaning of being "good" includes the aesthetic sense that the creation is beautiful as a work of stupendous art and craftsmanship. But it

also has a functional sense—something is good when it works according to plan, operating according to its design. Viewed from this angle, we should not envisage the goodness of creation as some kind of original, timeless or changeless perfection. Time and change are built into the very structure of created reality.

Fourth, the goodness of creation has an eschatological dimension. Creation is not yet all that God planned for it to be, even apart from the effects of the fall. God built into creation an enormous capacity for procreation—inexhaustible resources of replication, fecundity and diversity. As we experience it, the world is also suffering the effects of human sin, from which it longs to be liberated (Rom. 8:19-21). So Paul locates the double hope of human redemption and cosmic liberation in the glory, the will and the Spirit of God. Nash rightly asserts that “the affirmation of the goodness of creation is also an expression of ultimate confidence in the goodness of God....The creation is going on to perfection, ultimately. It is very good because it is being brought to fulfillment by a good God.”<sup>7</sup>

These observations suggest there are surely ecologically ethical implications for regarding the created order as good in itself because of the value it has to God. It is not neutral “stuff” that we should commodify and commercialize, use and abuse for our own ends. Furthermore, as part of the whole creation, we humans exist not only to praise and glorify God ourselves, but also to facilitate the rest of creation in doing so. And if the greatest commandment is that we should love God, that surely implies that we should treat what belongs to God with honor, care and respect. Conversely, therefore, to contribute to, or collude in, the abuse, pollution and destruction of the natural order is to trample on the goodness of God reflected in creation. It is to devalue what God values, to mute God’s praise and to diminish God’s glory.

God’s creation is sacred. Some ancient Near Eastern cultures considered different forces of nature divine beings (or under the

control of distinct divine beings), and the function of many religious rituals was to placate or persuade these nature gods or goddesses into agriculturally beneficent action. The Bible, however, makes a clear distinction between God the creator and all things created—nothing in creation is in itself divine—ruling out nature polytheism, which was prevalent in the world around Israel.

However, an unfortunate side effect of the Old Testament's de-divinization of nature was the popular view that the Bible "de-sacralized" nature. This view then rendered the natural order open to human exploration and exploitation, unfettered by religious fears or taboos. On such a view, the sole purpose of the natural order is to meet our human needs. Nature is ours to command, so whatever we do to it, we need not fear we are insulting some inherent divine force.<sup>8</sup> Such a secularized view of nature is not at all what is meant here by the de-divinizing of nature.

The radical monotheism of Israel that set itself against all the so-called nature gods did not rob nature itself of its God-related sacredness and significance. There is a fundamental difference between treating creation as *sacred* and treating it as *divine*. To divinize and worship nature in any of its manifestations is to exchange the Creator for the created. But the sacredness or sanctity of creation speaks of its essential relatedness to God, not of it being divine in and of itself. The Old Testament constantly treats creation *in relation to God*. The created order obeys God, submits to God's commands, reveals God's glory, benefits from God's sustaining and providing, and serves God's purposes. This includes, but is not limited to, the purposes of providing for human beings or functioning as the vehicle of God's judgment upon them. So there is sacredness about the non-human created order that we are called<sup>9</sup> upon to honor—as the laws, worship and prophecy of Israel did.

*God's creation is distinct from, but dependent on, God the creator.* Affirming that "in the beginning God created the heavens



and the earth" (Gen. 1:1), the opening verse of the Bible implies a fundamental ontological distinction between God as creator and everything else as created. The heavens and the earth had a beginning. The two (God and the universe) are different orders of being. This duality between the creator and the created is essential to all Biblical thought and to a Christian worldview. It stands against both monism (the belief that all reality is ultimately singular—all is One, with no differentiation) and pantheism (the belief that God is somehow identical with the totality of the universe; altogether, everything is God). The biblical teaching on creation is thus a major point of contrast and polemic with New Age spirituality, which adopts a broadly monistic or pantheistic worldview.

Creation is distinct from God its creator, but it is also totally dependent upon God. Creation is not independent, or co-eternal. Rather, God is actively and unceasingly sustaining its existence and its functions at macro and micro levels (Ps. 33:6-9; 65-9-13; 104). The world is not, in biblical teaching, an autonomous self-sustaining bio-system.<sup>10</sup> The Bible portrays the whole universe as *distinct from* God (its being is not part of God's being); but yet *dependent on* God for its existence and sustenance. God is ultimate and uncreated; the universe is created and contingent. This is not to deny that God has built into the earth an incredible capacity for renewal, recovery, balance and adaptation. But the way in which all these systems work and interrelate is itself planned and sustained by God.

*The whole earth is the field of God's mission—and ours.* If God owns the universe, there is no place that does not belong to him. There is nowhere we can step off his property, either into the property of some other deity, or into some autonomous sphere of our own private ownership. Such claims were made in relation to Yahweh in the Old Testament (for example, Ps. 139). But in the New Testament the same claims are made in relation to Jesus Christ. Standing on a mountain with his disciples after his resur-

rection, Jesus paraphrases the affirmation of Deuteronomy about Yahweh (Deut. 4:39; 10:14, 17), and calmly applies them to himself: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18 NRSV). The risen Jesus thus claims the same ownership and sovereignty over all creation as the Old Testament affirms for Yahweh.

The whole earth belongs to Jesus by right of creation, by right of redemption, and by right of future inheritance—as Paul affirms in the magnificent cosmic declaration of Colossians 1:15-20. So wherever we go in his name, we are walking on his property. Our mission on God's earth is not only authorized by its true owner, but it is also protected, nurtured and guaranteed by him. Since we act on his authority, there is no place for fear, for wherever we tread belongs to him already.

*God's glory is the goal of creation.* "What is the chief end of man?" asks the opening question of the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession. It answers with glorious biblical simplicity: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." It would be equally biblical to ask the same question about the whole of creation and to give the same answer. The creation exists for the praise and glory of its creator God, and for mutual enjoyment (for example, Ps 104:27-28; 145:10, 21; 148; 150:6). That God-focused goal—to glorify and enjoy Him—does not set us apart from the rest of creation. Rather it is something we share with all creation.

We may not be able to explain *how* it is that creation praises its Maker—since we know only the reality of our human personhood "from the inside," and what it means to us to praise him. But because we cannot articulate the *how* of creation's praise, or indeed the *how* of God's receiving of it, we should not therefore deny *that* creation praises God, since it is affirmed throughout the Bible with overwhelming conviction. Eventually, the whole of cre-

ation will join in the joy and giving thanks that will accompany Yahweh when he comes as king to put all things right (i.e., to judge the earth, for example, Ps. 96:10-13; 98:7-9).

As we consider the task of bringing glory to God, it is worth noting that several significant texts link the glory of God to the fullness of the earth; that is, the magnificently diverse abundance of the whole bio-sphere—land, sea, and sky. The language of fullness is a feature of the creation narrative. From empty void, the story progresses through repeated fillings. For example, once the water and the sky have been separated, the fifth day sees the water teeming with fish, and the skies with birds, according to God's blessing and command (Gen. 1:20-22). Not surprisingly, then, the phrase "the earth and its fullness" becomes a characteristic way of talking about the whole environment—sometimes local, sometimes universal (for example, Deut. 33:16; Ps. 89:12; Is. 34:1; Jer. 47:2; Ezek. 30:12; Mic. 1:2).<sup>11</sup> This may give added meaning to the song of the seraphim in Isaiah's temple vision, "Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of hosts, The filling [or fullness]<sup>12</sup> of all the earth [is] his glory (Is. 6:3).

"The fullness of the earth" is a way of talking about the whole rich abundance of the created order, especially the non-human creation (when humans are in view, they are often added as, "and those who live in it" [for example, Ps. 24:1]). The earth is full of God's glory because what fills the earth constitutes (at least one dimension of) his glory (ct. Ps. 104:31).

As Paul reminds us, recognizing the link between the fullness of the earth and the glory of God means that human beings are confronted daily with the reality of God simply by inhabiting the planet (Rom. 1:19-20). Here again we recognize a truth of ethical and missional relevance. For all human beings inhabit a glory-filled earth which reveals and declares something of its creator and theirs. What we have done with that experience is another matter, of course. But this truth underlies not only the radical nature of

Paul’s exposure of universal sinfulness and idolatry, but also the universal applicability and intelligibility of the gospel. For by God’s grace and the illumining power of the gospel, minds that have suppressed and exchanged this truth about the creator can be brought from darkness to light, to know their creator once more as their redeemer through the message of the cross.

## **Biblical Motivations For Global Ecological Ethics: Earth As A Divine Gift And Human Responsibility**

*The highest heavens belong to Yahweh, and/but the earth he has given to the sons of Adam/humankind. (Ps. 115:16)*

As we have seen, the earth belongs to God just as much as the heavens do. But unlike the heavens, the earth is the place of human inhabitation, for God has given it to us. Of course, the earth is the place where all God’s non-human creatures also have their inhabitation, as Psalm 104 so evocatively celebrates. Yet the earth is never said to be “given” to the other creatures in quite the same way as it is given to humanity. So what is it about humankind that makes us the species to whom, in some unique sense, the earth has been given by God?

Both accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 point to the priority or pre-eminence of humanity within the rest of God’s good and valued creation. The ordered account of chapter 1 leads up to God’s decision to create humankind in God’s own image, as the penultimate climax of its sequences of days. Genesis 2 puts the human creature at the center of the whole landscape and discusses the creation of all else in relation to humanity’s physical and relational nature. The message of both texts seems clearly to be that human life is supremely important (both climatic and central) to God within the context of the whole creation. Creation finds its point and its true head in this human species (a point not contradicted by the New Testament assertion that Christ is the head of

the whole cosmos, for it is the man Jesus who occupies that role, cf. Ps. 8; Heb, 2).

However, only two things are said specifically about human beings that are not said about any other creature. God chose to make us in his own image, and he instructed us to rule over the rest of the creatures:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth"(Gen. 1:26 NRSV).

And having done so, God adds to the words of blessing, multiplication and filling (already spoken to other creatures), the unique mandate to "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" (Gen. 1:28 NRSV).

At one level, this is a theological expression of an obvious fact—human beings are the dominant species on the planet. We have colonized almost all of its land mass and have found ways of controlling and using almost every environment we encounter. But Genesis 1 affirms that this is much more than a simple biological fact or an accident of evolution. Rather, our position within the created order is by divine purpose and mandate. By making us in the image and likeness of God, he equipped us to rule. The two affirmations are so closely linked in the text there can be no doubt that they are meant to be related. Human beings are made to be like God; human beings are made to rule over the rest of creation.

It is going too far to identify the two completely—that is, to argue that our dominion over nature is exclusively what constitutes the image of God in humanity. For human beings are and do much more than all that is involved in mastering their envi-

ronment. In any case, we should not so much think of the image of God as an independent "thing" that we somehow possess. God did not *give* to human beings the image of God. Rather, it is a dimension of our very creation. The expression "in our image" is adverbial (it describes the way God made us), not adjectival (as if it simply describes a quality we possess). The image of God is *what we are*, rather than what we *possess*.

Nevertheless, if having dominion over the rest of creation is not what the image of God is, it is certainly what being the image of God *enables*. Among the many implications of being made in God's image, Genesis puts this one in the foreground: having been made by God in God's own image, human beings are instructed and equipped to exercise dominion. To put it the other way around, because God *intended* the human species to exercise dominion over the rest of his creatures, God purposely created this species alone in his own image.<sup>13</sup>

So God instructs the human species not only to fill the earth (an instruction given to the other creatures, as we saw) but also to subdue it and to rule over the rest of the creatures. The words *kābas* and *rādā* are often noted as strong words, implying both exertion and effort and the imposing of will upon another. However, these terms do not imply violence or abuse, as contemporary ecological mythology<sup>14</sup> likes to caricature.<sup>15</sup> On one level, the first term authorizes humans to do what every other species on earth does, which is to utilize its environment for life and survival. *All* species in some way or another "subdue" the earth, to the varying degrees necessary for their own prospering. That is the very nature of life on earth. As applied to humans in this verse, it probably implies no more than the task of agriculture. That humans have developed tools and technology to pursue their own form of "subduing" the earth for human benefit is no different in principle from what other species do, though clearly vastly different in degree and impact on the total ecosphere.



The latter word *rādâ* is more distinctive. It certainly describes a role or function for human beings that are entrusted to no other species—ruling or exercising dominion. It seems clear that God hereby passes on to human hands a delegated form of his own kingly authority over the whole of creation. God installs the human species as the image, within creation, by the authority that finally belongs to God, creator and owner of the earth.

Apart from that analogy, Genesis describes God's work in real terms, even without using the word "king". God's work of creation exudes wisdom in planning, power in execution and goodness in completion. These are the very qualities that Psalm 145 exalts in "my God and King" in relation to all his created works. Righteousness and benevolence are inherent in God's kingly power, which is exercised towards all that he has made.<sup>16</sup> So the natural assumption then is that a creature made in the image of this God will reflect these same qualities in carrying out the mandate of delegated dominion. Whatever way this human dominion is to be exercised, it must reflect the character and values of God's own kingship. "*The ideals*, not the abuses or failures; not tyranny or arbitrary manipulation and exploitation of subjects, but a rule governed by justice, mercy and true concern for the welfare of all."<sup>17</sup> According to Huw Spanner, "the *imago Dei* constrains us. We must be kings not tyrants."<sup>18</sup> The image of God is not a license for abuse based on arrogant supremacy, but a pattern that commits us to humble reflection of the character of God.<sup>19</sup>

***Servant-kingship.*** What model of kingship does the Old Testament set before us for the human exercise of dominion over creation? Possibly the most succinct statement of the ideal comes from the older and wiser advisors of the young King Rehoboam, who told him "If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them... they will be your servants forever" (1Kings 12:7 NRSV).

Mutual servanthood was the ideal. Yes, it was the duty of the people to serve and obey the king, but his primary duty of kingship was to serve the people, to care for their needs, provide justice and protection, and avoid oppression, violence and exploitation. A king exists for the benefit of his people, not vice-versa. The metaphor that expressed this attribute of kingly rule (and which was common throughout the ancient Near East and not just in Israel) was that of the shepherd. Sheep need to follow their shepherd, but the primary responsibility of shepherds is to care for the sheep, not to exploit or abuse them. The very word shepherd speaks of responsibility, more than of rights and powers (cf. Ezek. 3-4).

So, if human dominion within creation is a form of kingship, it must be modeled on this biblical pattern. Spanner writes,

If we have dominion over God's other creatures, then we are called to live in peace with them, as good shepherds and humble servants. We cannot say that we are made in the image of God and then use that as our pretext to abuse, neglect or even belittle other species, when God does none of those things. As kings, we have the power of life and death over them, and the right to exercise it in accordance with the principles of justice and mercy; but we have the parallel duty,<sup>20</sup> not only to God but to them, to love them and protect them.

A further dimension of the Old Testament concept of kingship was that it was to be exercised particularly on behalf of the weak and powerless. In Psalm 72, the psalmist prays that God will endow the king of justice so he can defend the afflicted and the needy. The essential nature of justice as conceived in the Old Testament is not blind impartiality, but intervening to set things right, so that those who have been wronged are vindicated, those who are being oppressed are delivered, the voices of the weak and vulnerable are heard, and their case attended to. Jeremiah 21:11-

22:5 holds out these ideals as the criteria by which the Jerusalem monarchy will stand or fall in God's sight (cf. 1Kings 3:5-12). And in the climatic chapter of the book of Proverbs, King Lemuel's mother holds up the essential challenge of kingship:

Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute.

Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy (Prov. 31:8-9 NRSV).

Accordingly, to rule over the rest of creation as king, to act as the image of God the King, is to do biblical justice in relation to non-human creation. To "speak out for those who cannot speak," is a task of human kingship that could as relevantly describe our responsibility toward the rest of creation as to the human subjects of a ruler.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, such compassionate justice is to be the mark, not only of kings, but of all human ethical behavior. And at least one text specifically extends the scope of such ethical duties beyond human relations to animals. "The righteous person knows the "soul" (*nepeš*) of his cattle. But the compassion of the wicked person is cruel" (Prov. 12:10).

Here *nepeš* seems to mean the inner, unspoken feelings and needs of the animal (as it could do for human beings). And it is a mark of biblical righteousness to pay attention to and care for ("to know") that animal *nepeš*, just as much for fellow humans. But the wicked (who do not care about justice, Prov. 29:7), have turned compassion to cruelty. Murray writes,

The implications of this epigram are profound. Of the Hebrew virtues, the most all-embracing (*sedeq*) and the most deeply felt (*rāhamim*), which are used of God towards humans and of humans toward each other, are here used in

speaking of right and wrong attitudes towards animals. Thus animals are brought into the sphere of human ethics.<sup>22</sup>

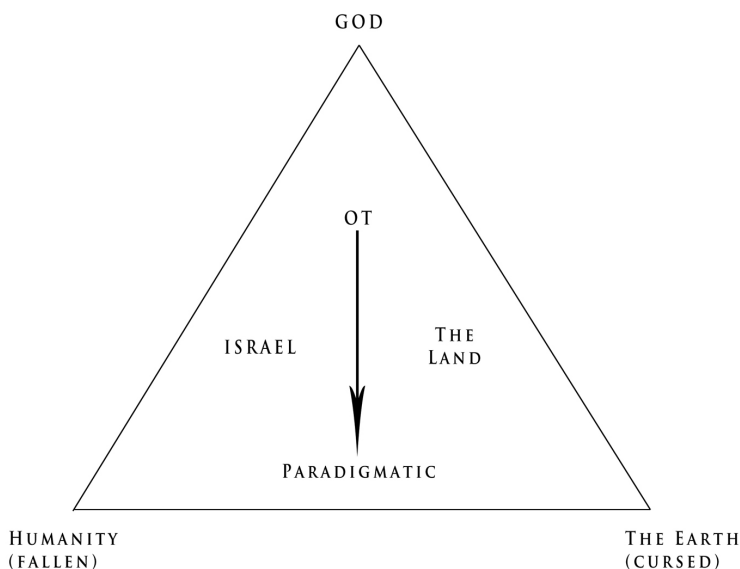
Finally, moving beyond the Old Testament, to regard our role within creation as that of kingship exercised through servanthood reflects precisely the pattern established for us by the Lord Jesus Christ. This is hardly surprising. We are called to act as the image of God within creation, and Christ is the perfect image of God. So we find that his model of lordship was expressed through servanthood. Servanthood for him meant loving generosity and costly self-sacrifice for the sake of those he came to serve. There is no reason why this pattern of Christlike service to fellow human beings is not also applicable exercise of responsibility to the natural world, which was created through Christ and for Christ. The Old Testament already gives us ample teaching about God's generous and loving care for all of his creatures. (Psalm 104 and 145 are the classic expositions.) Jesus assumed this characteristic of his Father to be so axiomatic that he could build other teaching upon it (Matt. 6:25-34).<sup>23</sup> Such servanthood is a properly biblical dimension of our kingship within creation.

We should note the balance that underlies what we have been discussing. On the one hand, created as the climax of the animal creation in Genesis 1, humankind is endowed with the necessary capacity to exercise dominion over the rest of the creatures as God's image in their midst. On the other hand, created in the context of the surrounding earth and its needs in Genesis 2, man is put in the garden of Eden "to serve and keep it" (author's translation).<sup>24</sup> *Dominion (Genesis 1) exercised through servanthood (Genesis 2) is the biblical balance for our ecological responsibility.*

Thus, the concept of human priority must be sensitively maintained by Christian ethics, in relation both to environmental issues and the emotive question of animal rights. Wherever a conflict exists between human needs and those of other animate or inanimate parts of creation—but *only when it is a conflict that can-*

*not be satisfactorily resolved by meeting the needs of both simultaneously*—then human beings take priority. Ideally we should promote a more holistic and sustainable regime, where environmentally friendly forms of land and water management contribute to human flourishing, and where human benefit is pursued in harmony with the good of the rest of our fellow creatures. As we shall see below, that is part of the eschatological vision of the future, but it should also guide our ecological ethics and objectives in the present.

*The hope of an eschatological new creation.* So the creation narratives point us back to the beginning, not just to tell us what we already know (that things are not what they should be), but also to explain *why* things are not what they were intended to be and once were. However, if Genesis tells us that sin and evil, suffering and pain, violence and destruction, frustration and loss, did not constitute the first word about our world, the rest of the Bible assures us that they will not be the last word either.



We begin by pointing out the close analogy between the triangle of redemption (God, Israel and their land). As we might expect, this interrelatedness is found not only in relation to ecological issues concerning life on earth now, but also in the Old Testament's expectations of God's redemption. Because Yahweh is both creator and redeemer, these two dimensions of Israel's are constantly interwoven.

We have seen already how important it is to include the Bible's strong doctrine of creation in our thinking about the earth—what we do with it, how we live on it, and for what it was created. But looking back to Genesis and affirming its great truths about our world is not enough. The Bible teaches us to value the earth, not only because of "from where it came" (or rather, because of "from whom it came"), but also because of its ultimate destiny. In other words, we need an eschatological as well as a creational foundation to our ecological ethics and mission.

The inspiring vision of Isaiah 65 and 66 portrays God's new creation as a place that will be joyful, free from grief and tears life-fulfilling, guaranteeing work satisfaction, free from the curses of frustrated labor, and environmentally safe. This passage and others present the Old Testament foundation for the New Testament hope, which, far from rejecting or denying the earth, or envisaging us floating off to some other place, looks forward likewise to a new, redeemed creation (Rom. 8:18-22), in which righteousness will dwell (2 Pet. 3:10-13), because God himself will be there with his people (Rev. 21:1-4). This eschatological vision is overwhelming positive, and must affect how we understand the equally biblical portrayal of the final and fiery destruction that awaits the present world order. The purpose of the conflagration is not the *obliteration of the cosmos itself*, but rather the *purging of the sinful world order in which we live*, through the consuming destruction of all that is evil within creation, so as to establish the new creation. The world of all evil and wickedness in creation will



be wiped out in God's cataclysmic judgment, but the creation itself will be renewed as the dwelling place of God with redeemed humanity<sup>25</sup> and restored for his glorious and eternal purpose.

This gloriously earthy biblical hope adds an important dimension to our ecological ethics. It is not just a matter of looking back to the initial creation, but of looking forward to the new creation. This means that our motivation has a double force—a kind of “push-pull” effect. It has a goal in sight. Granted it lies only in the power of God ultimately to achieve it, but, as is the case with other aspects of biblical eschatology, what we hope for from God affects how we are to live now and what our own objections should be. This eschatological orientation protects our ecological concern from becoming centered only on human needs and anxieties, and reminds us that ultimately the earth always has and always will belong to God in Christ. Our efforts therefore have a prophetic value<sup>26</sup> in pointing towards the full cosmic realization of that truth.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is an adaption of Christopher J. H. Wright's chapter that appears in *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), pp. 216-241. It is published by permission of the author and IVP.

<sup>2</sup> Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The Anthropocene,” *Global Exchange Newsletter*, no. 41 (2000): 17-18. See also Paul J. Cruzen, “Geology of Mankind,” *Nature* 415, no 3 (2002): 23.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Paul's sermon in the Jewish synagogue in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13:16-41 with his speech before the Areopagus in Athens in Acts 17:22-31. For the diagrammatic framework for understanding the ethical worldview of Old Testament Israel that I have developed, see C. J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 182-211.

<sup>4</sup> All Scripture is author's translation unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on the goodness of creation, see Ron Elsdon, *Green House Theology: Biblical Perspectives on Caring for creation* (Tunbridge Wells, U.K.: Monarch, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> For an intriguing culinary metaphor of creation see Huw Spanner, “Tyrants, Stewards—or Just Kings?” in *Animals on the Agenda: Questions About Animals for Theology and Ethics*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto (London: SCM Press, 1998), p. 218.

<sup>7</sup> James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> For a helpful discussion of the roots and effects of this distortion in Old Testament theology, see Ronald A. Simkins, *Creator and Creation: Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), pp. 82-88.

<sup>9</sup> Nash, *Loving Nature*, p. 96

<sup>10</sup> As originally proposed, the "Gaia hypothesis" involves the interconnectedness of the whole biosphere. See James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). Lovelock suggested that the earth seems to behave like a single organism, a huge living creature. Cf. Michael S. Northcott, *The environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 110-11. For a survey and critique of New Age ecological views and their influence on Christian thought, see Loren Wilkinson, ed., *Earth keeping in the Nineties: Stewardship of Creation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 181-99; and Wilkinson, "New Age, New Consciousness, and the New Creation," in *Trending the Garden: Essays in the Gospel on the Earth*, ed. Wesley Grandberg-Michaelson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 6-29.

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion of the notion of fullness, see Daniel I. Block's essay in Chapter 5 of *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP, 2011) pp. 116-140.

<sup>12</sup> For this understanding of Isaiah 6:3, I am indebted to Hilary Marlowe. For further discussion in relation to the concept of the whole earth as the cosmic temple of God, see G. K. Beale, *The temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, ed. D. A. Carson, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 49.

<sup>13</sup> This is the thrust of God's two statements expressed with two jussive clauses: "Let us make human beings in our own image and likeness, *so that* they may exercise dominion over the rest of creation".

<sup>14</sup> The source of the widespread idea that Christianity bears major responsibility for our ecological crisis because of its instrumentalist view of nature, allegedly rooted in Gen 1:28, goes back to Lynn White, "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-7. For decisive repudiation of White's arguments, see James Barr, "Man and Nature—The Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament." *BJRI* 55 (1972): 22, 30.

<sup>15</sup> For a survey of representative expressions of the notion that Christianity is therefore an intrinsically eco-hostile religion in Christian history, see Nash, "The Ecological Complaint against Christianity," in *Loving Nature*, pp. 68-92.

<sup>16</sup> On the Creator as King, see Robert Murray. *The Cosmic Covenant: Biblical Themes of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1992), p. 98.

<sup>17</sup> Murray, *Cosmic Covenant*, p. 98.

<sup>18</sup> Spanner, "Tyrants, Stewards—or Just Kings?" p. 222.

<sup>19</sup> For further discussion on the image of God in humanity and the verbs used to describe humanity's responsibilities in Genesis 1, see Daniel Block's essay in Chapter 5 of *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Spanner, "Tyrants, Stewards—or just Kings?" p. 224.

- <sup>21</sup> For further moral and biblical case for this point, see Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994), pp. 28-44.
- <sup>22</sup> Murray, Robert. *The Cosmic Covenant: Biblical Themes of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation*. (London: Sheed & Ward), 1992, p.113.
- <sup>23</sup> See further Bauckman, "Jesus and Animals," in A. Linzey and D. Yamamoto ed., *Animals on the Agenda: Questions About Animals for Theology and Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 33-60. For discussion of the extension of Christ's model of self giving generosity to our relationship with animals, see Linzey, *Animal Theology*, pp. 32-33.
- <sup>24</sup> This is the literal and simplest meaning of the two verbs, 'ābad and šāmar. While the first involves work and doubtless referred primarily to the task of tilling the soil, the verb denoted primarily service. For further discussion on this model of kingship/leadership, see the discussion by Daniel Block in Chapter 5 of *Keeping God's Earth*.
- <sup>25</sup> On which, see Douglas Moo's essay in chapter 1 of *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP, 2011), pp. 116-140. On the New Testament basis for environmental ethics, see also Northcott, *Environment and Christian Ethics*, p. 195.
- <sup>26</sup> Francis Bridger, "Ecology and Eschatology: A Neglected Dimension," *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, no. 2 (1990): 301.

## Chapter 2

# THE CHRISTIAN ENVIRONMENTALIST'S DILEMMA: PLANTS OR PEOPLE, SOULS OR SALAMANDERS? [BUT WHAT DOES GOD WANT?]

*By Edward Brown*

### What Do We Do With The People?

That is the burning question at the heart of the environmental movement today. It is patently obvious that the enormous upheavals and problems in God's creation today—that collection of symptoms and effects that we usually call the environmental crisis—is the direct result of human activity. Whether the problem is local deforestation and degradation of farm land, the global proliferation of toxic substances in air, water and soil or the problem of climate change, the conclusion is always the same: *It's our fault.*

In the fall of 2009 the city of Manila took a direct hit from Typhoon Ondoy. Half the city was under water. One of my friends, Melba Magaay, barely survived on the top floor of her house as the water rose through the night. Writing about the experience, Melba said this:

"I knew that this was nature striking back against all our environmental sins. God does not suspend natural laws he himself has built into creation. We violate these laws at our own peril."<sup>1</sup>

The nature of the sin varies: In Haiti, Kenya, and the Philippines, the problems of deforestation and land degradation are caused by mismanagement of natural resources because of extreme poverty and explosive population growth in these countries. The proliferation of trash in the oceans can be blamed on the rapid increase in the production and use of disposable products made of indestructible materials like plastic. And climate change, or global warming, is due to a complex combination of increased burning of fossil fuels, dramatic changes in land use due to increased human population and poorly understood but very real natural feedback loops. So many different 'sins', but the sinners are always the same. *We human beings are always the ones at fault.*

So what do we do with the people? That is the dilemma faced by anyone who takes the environmental crisis or creation care seriously. A radical environmentalist might say—or at least be accused of saying—that the answer is simple: Get rid of the people. Human beings are like scum of bacteria on the surface of the planet. The sooner the planet is rid of us the better off the rest of the place will be.

They could be right, and anyone with an adequate doctrine of sin would have to agree at least partly. How else can one read this line from Genesis?

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually (Gen. 6:5 English Standard Version).

On the other hand, it is hard to find anyone in this group willing to stand in the front of the line to be the first to be ushered into oblivion on behalf of the planet. No, even extreme environmentalists have to find a place for people in the scheme of things.

The other end of the spectrum might be represented by the

stance adopted by Focus on the Family some years ago. In objecting to a pro-environment position being proposed by the National Association of Evangelicals on global warming, Dr. James Dobson stated that “Any issue that seems to put plants and animals above people, humans, is one that we cannot support.”<sup>2</sup>

That sounds hard to argue with. Who among us, particularly those with a Christian world view, would not want to put people ahead of plants and animals? It seems like a no-brainer. Until you think it over. What do you suppose the author of this sentence had for breakfast that morning? Chances are pretty good that he ate either plants or animals and possibly both.

Therein lays our dilemma: We can argue that people are more important than plants and animals; but we can't run the world that way. If *nonhuman creatures* are not cared for, along with all of the environmental systems that they need, *human creatures* will not long survive. We cannot afford to choose between plants and people. We have to have both. The problem is that we have been asking and trying to answer the wrong question. It's a false choice. We are painting ourselves into a corner.

So what question should we be asking? How about this: “What Does God want?” As Christians we believe that God is Creator. He owns this world and is the ultimate ruler over it. And we believe that we can know God's will—what God wants—from his revealed Word in the Bible. So why don't we ask him?

I've spent a lot of time asking this question. My career in Christian environmental stewardship revolves around the answer. And it was in Psalm 8 that I found a substantial answer to this dilemma.

Psalm 8 is an ancient Hebrew poem that happens to have in it one of the clearest statements in all of Scripture affirming the importance of people. Part of the Psalm reads:

What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower

than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet... (Ps. 8:4-6).

According to these verses, we human beings have not only been 'crowned with glory and honor' but have complete authority over the rest of creation. That would seem to be the end of the argument. People are not only the most important creatures in all creation, they're in charge and they can do whatever they want.

This is actually how many people, Christians and non-Christians, read these verses—the former to justify doing nothing about the environmental crisis, the latter to lay the entire blame for the crisis at the door of the church. This, however, is not the end of the story. As I studied this Psalm, I was drawn to the first and last verses which are identical: "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (vs. 1, 9, ESV).

In English, the first part of these verses sounds like poetic repetition—"O LORD, our Lord." The psalmist might be simply repeating God's title for emphasis. But in Hebrew and in many other languages it is clear that this is not the case. This is not repetition; two different words that are both translated "Lord" are in play here.

The first LORD (in all capital letters in most modern translations) represents God's personal name, YHWH, sometimes transliterated as Yahweh. God introduced himself to Moses with this name in Exodus 3, and throughout Scripture it is God's preferred name for himself and the most common way that his followers speak of him.

The second "Lord" in (v.1) is a translation of the Hebrew "adonai". This is a functional term that is used of anyone who is over or in charge of someone else. A slave serves his *adonai*, his master, for example.

Taken together, these two verses are far more than a poetic

reference to God. They are a powerful statement of God's rulership or dominion over us, his people. We can render them this way: O Yahweh, our master—How majestic is your name in all the earth!

Do you see what this means? Yes, the psalm is a clear statement of human dominion or mastery over creation. But it begins and ends with the reminder that we human beings are mastered by God himself. *In other words, our dominion over creation exists only within the limits of God's dominion over us.* It is not much of a leap, then, to suggest that our exercise of authority over God's creation should reflect God's exercise of authority over us. We should rule God's world in the same way, with the same goals that God has, as he rules over us. What are those goals? How does God rule over us? A study of Psalm 8 in tandem with the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, brings to the surface these fundamental propositions.

### **First, God Wants His Name Proclaimed.**

The psalm begins and ends with the affirmation, "How majestic is your name in all the earth" (v.1). You will also recall that when Jesus taught his disciples to pray with the model prayer we call the Lord's Prayer, he told us that our first request to God should be that God's name be honored. The Lord begins his prayer with: "Our Father in heaven, *Hallowed be your name*" (Matt. 6:9).

God proclaims his name on earth and throughout history in two ways: through direct revelation—*his word*—and through created things—*his world*. This two-channel revelation has been recognized in Christian theology from the days of the church fathers, and is clear in several passages of Scripture as well. Romans 1:20 is a classic reference. Here Paul declares: "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature have been



clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.”

Clearer still is Psalm 19, which begins with *the created world*: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands...” (v.1). The psalmist then moves quickly to *the written word*:

The law of the Lord is perfect...The testimony of the Lord is sure...The precepts of the Lord are right... (v. 7, 8).

If we are to honor God’s goals in how we exercise authority on this earth, we also need to make proclamation of his name a priority. This should be easy. Evangelical Christians in particular have always made the proclamation of the word their highest priority. In fact, the *evangel*—the good news of the gospel—is part of our name.

We have not proclaimed God’s *name* in the same way that God proclaims his *name*, however. Our proclamation, though energetic and at times even enthusiastic, has been for the most part limited to the *written word*. With a few exceptions, we have made the proclamation of God’s name through his *created world* incidental. Some of us, to our shame, have even suggested that to work to preserve God’s creation and to make that creation flourish is actually contrary to the true work of proclaiming the gospel.

How can that be? If God’s desire is that his name be proclaimed, and God himself proclaims that name through creation, how could doing the same thing God does be a contradiction? No! The contradiction is in an attempt to proclaim a written word that teaches a high view of creation while at the same time denying that truth in our lives and our practice.

If we want to rule God’s world in a way that is consistent with God’s rule over us, we must have two priorities. Yes, we have to work to proclaim his word verbally: The message of salvation

must continue to go forth; songs of praise must continue to rise to heaven. Everything else depends on this. But we must also, with equal energy and fervor, work to proclaim his word through a flourishing biological creation. These are two equally sacred tasks that can and must be pursued together.

## **Second, God Wants His Kingdom Established.**

If we return to the Lord's Prayer, we will notice that the second request in that prayer is also directed to God: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). But when does God's kingdom come? God's kingdom comes when his will is done—that is, when his rulership as king is recognized and acknowledged and obeyed. This kingdom theme is echoed in the next phrases of Psalm 8 as well. The word kingdom is not used, but the idea of God exercising his power and authority against those who would challenge his rule is clear. The psalmist declares:

Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger (Ps. 8:2).

The psalmist is reminding us that there is a cosmic struggle for mastery going on in the universe. God's name is not being proclaimed to a neutral audience. He is a king who is dealing with massive rebellion. His rule and authority have been challenged and thus his next goal is to re-establish his kingdom.

There is a clear connection between these two goals. The king cannot be acknowledged where his name is not known, so proclamation comes first. But establishing the kingdom requires more than the hearing of a name, which is why the second phrase in this line of the Lord's prayer is so important: "your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.”

We proclaim his name through his word and his world—the same ways he proclaims his own name. And similarly, we establish his kingdom by seeking to do his will here (on earth) just as it is already being done there (in heaven).

Of course, what we are talking about is values. We’re talking about ethics. We’re talking about morality. We have in mind kingdom values expressed in such well known biblical injunctions as: “Be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect”(Matt. 5). “Love the Lord your God...” (Matt.22:37-39). “Keep my commandments” (John 15). And so on.

Just as there are implications for evangelism, for worship and for Christian involvement in creation care or environmental issues in the proclamation of God’s name, so also there are two dimensions in the establishment of his kingdom. There is the dimension of personal righteousness which obligates us to live our own lives in ways that reflect his kingship. And there is also what is sometimes called ‘social justice.’ Here we are enjoined to love and care for the poor and work to correct those parts of society that promote injustice, cruelty and oppression.

## **Finally, God Wants His People Cared For.**

In the Lord’s Prayer we now move from God’s name and his kingdom to a type of prayer request we are more accustomed to. Toward the end of prayers, Jesus declares:

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil (Matt. 6:11-13).

These verses are all about people. They speak of our practical need of food and of our spiritual need of forgiveness and protec-

tion from evil. God does care about people, and it is not wrong that often our own prayers (for most of us) tend to gravitate to this kind of very real need. We ought not to forget, however, that in the prayer those other two goals, concerning God's name and God's kingdom, precede our needs and must, therefore, take priority in our own minds when we come to God in prayer.

In Psalm 8 we also see a move toward the needs of people. But the psalmist's focus and emphasis are quite different than those of the prayer. The psalmist states:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him? And the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet... (Ps. 8:3-6).

Here God's provision for people is just as much in evidence, but the kinds of things he does for us are quite different. There is no mention of food, clothing or shelter. David, our psalmist, is gazing at the stars, overwhelmed by his own insignificance, and at the same time, amazed at what he knows God has done for him—and of course, for us as well. Under such a sky, looking out at the spread of the entire universe, it seems a bit petty to think about food. Maybe this is what Jesus had in mind when he told us a few verses after giving us the Lord's prayer to "...seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things [i.e. food, clothing, shelter] will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33).

David's perspective on God's provision for us is as high and broad as the sky itself (Ps. 8:5). He mentions *our unique position in creation*: "A little lower than the heavenly beings." This speaks to the fact that we of all creatures in the universe have been made

with a hybrid nature. We are dual beings, existing as flesh-and-bone animals in this material world, but also having spirit-souls like those heavenly beings David refers to.

I like the way Matthew Dickerson describes this in *The Mind and the Machine: What it Means to be Human and Why it Matters*. We are, he says, ‘incarnate creatures’ or ‘embodied selves’.<sup>3</sup> We need to see this particular aspect of our beings as a gift from God. We *experience life* through our physical senses, like the animals do. But we *process those experiences* with minds like the angels—minds that can imagine, anticipate, project, feel and create.

Our ability to taste, imagine and manipulate material things becomes an exquisite Italian meal. As we hear, feel, and create, sounds become a symphony. A purely physical action like moving around a room with other people becomes a dance. Two sets of eyes gazing at each other, two hands gently touching each other become a life-long love affair. David then describes *our special status*: We have been “crowned with glory and honor.” This is almost certainly a reference to Genesis 1:26-27 which reads:

Then God said, “*Let us make man in our image*, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man *in his own image, in the image of God* he created him; male and female he created them (Gen. 1:26-27).

What could be a greater ‘glory and honor’ than to be, of all the creatures God made, the only one chosen to be made in the very image of the Creator!

We do not have time or space to explore in any depth what this means. Theologians have used buckets of ink and reams of paper over centuries of time trying to understand what the image

might consist of.

I would suggest, first that being created in the image of God means that in some special way we are reflections of his being and person. This crown of the image of God is not any one human ability or even a group of them. What we have from God is a package that we can call 'human nature', a bundle that ties the material and nonmaterial aspects of our being together into a unity. This is the embodied self of which Matthew Dickerson spoke, and which in some mysterious way reflects God's own nature. You might say that being made in God's image we 'look like' God. I don't mean this physically, of course, but in all of these other areas. We communicate because God does. We create because God is a creator God. We love beauty, harmony, order because God loves these things. We have an ability and a need to love others and to be loved by others because God is a relational God. We are his reflections. Our crown of splendor and honor is our likeness to God himself.

But our crown of glory and honor is also found in something else. There was a custom in the ancient world that the author of Genesis may have had in mind when he wrote his account of our creation. Kings who had conquered a city would sometimes set up statues of themselves in the central square as a symbol of their authority. In a vast empire with slow travel and no modern media, most of a king's subjects would never actually see him in person. But the statue or image would be a daily reminder to the citizens of that town that they had a king who ruled over them.

In the same way, Adam and Eve were created to live in creation as God's representatives. And if it was true of them, it is true of us today. Made *in God's image*, we are *image-bearers*: If our human nature—our abilities and our relational capacities—in some ways *reflects* God's nature, so our very presence in creation *represents* God's authority.

And finally we come to the dominion verses that we began

with. Here David is addressing the *heavy responsibility* that God has placed on us: “You have given him dominion over the works of your hands” (Ps. 8:6).

This seems like an unusual way to describe the fact that God has given us authority over his world. There is a reason for this: In giving us *dominion* over creation, God was not rewarding us. No, he was giving us a job. Our task is to manage creation. It isn't about us—it is about the One who gave us the job and about those whom we serve as we go about this task.

When I was still in high school my first job was as a bagger at a supermarket. I stood at the end of the conveyor belt and put groceries in bags for customers, and often took them to their cars. In the small world of that supermarket, the baggers (all high school boys) were at the bottom of the social scale. Above us were the checkers—almost all girls. The checkers, in turn, were below the stock boys who spent their time restocking the shelves, and then department managers. At the very top, ruling over this kingdom from an office high above the line of cash registers, was the store manager.

To the teenage workforce, the manager was like God. We could hardly imagine the privileges that must come with a job like his, and we were sure he was wealthy beyond dream. As far as our lives in the store was concerned, he had the power of life and death over us. He determined work schedules and assignments. He decided who got the fun jobs and who had to clean the restrooms. He could promote us. He could hand out raises and bonuses. He could fire us. A visit to his office was about as traumatic an event as we could imagine.

Looking back, I now see that man very differently. I know there were privileges attached to his position, but I also know (now) that the responsibilities he carried were greater than I realized. He had to be sure the store was opened on time; he was almost always the one who locked up at night. If someone didn't

show for a shift he had to figure out how to adjust staffing. If there was a snowstorm, he had to decide if we would stay open or close up. If merchandise was stolen, if sales were down, it was all on his shoulders. As for wealthy beyond dreams? He and I could probably have a long laugh about that one.

As a bagger I looked at the manager and saw benefits and privileges. He looked out at the store and felt the burden of responsibility. And this is how we have to see God's "gift" of 'dominion' over his creation. A privilege, yes. But also, and much more, a burden.

When God gave us dominion or authority over his creation, he made us responsible for it. We have to answer to him for the condition of his creation, for the survival or extinction of his creatures, for the suffering of his people that might be caused by our own mismanagement of his world. It is, indeed, a heavy responsibility.

We have been talking about God providing for his people. Just as we should be proclaiming God's name in the world as he does, and as we must work to establish his kingdom in the world as he wants us to, so also we have to see that *people are provided for as God wants them to be provided for*. How do we do that?

We should be working toward a world in which every human being understands his *unique position*: That she has a unique hybrid nature, that he is an 'embodied self'. This means a world where each of us has opportunity to develop all of the dimensions of that nature. This means a world in which all of us live in a healthy environment where physical activity and the enjoyment of God's beautiful creation is a normal and natural part of life, not something reserved for a wealthy minority.

It means a world in which all of us understand and have opportunity to explore what it means to have the *special status* God created us with—the crown of being made in his image. We are speaking of a world where every child of whatever economic sta-



tus has the opportunity to grow up in a way that would develop all of her or his special, God-given gifts, talents and abilities whether those are spiritual, intellectual, artistic or physical. And it means a world in which every human being is able to take part meaningfully in the exercise of the *responsibility* that God has given all of us together of exercising dominion and authority over God's creation.

The question we started with now looks a bit simplistic, doesn't it? Plants or people? Souls or salamanders? Now, asking the deeper question, what does God want? We have gained a glimpse into what the world might look like if we were to take God's goals seriously.

We would have a world in which God's name is proclaimed loudly and clearly by his people—in preaching, in praise and in prayer, and in the proclamation of the message of redemption to those who have not yet heard it.

We would have a world in which God's name would be visible in a flourishing creation. God's creatures would live and multiply and praise him in their own ways in a healthy and beautiful environment (Is. 148:1-10).

We would have a world in which God's kingdom would be established and visible in the personal and righteous lives of his people, as well as in the structures of a society operating according to kingdom principles of love, justice and mercy.

And we would have a world in which human beings—*all* human beings—would not only have their basic needs (food, clothing, shelter) met but would also understand and experience the kind of full life that would come from a knowledge of each one's unique position, special status and responsibility toward the rest of God's creation.

Such a world may not be possible now—though that shouldn't stop us from aiming for it. But it is the kind of world that God had in mind in sending Jesus to be our Savior and Redeemer. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul declares:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 *and through him to reconcile to himself all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Col. 1:19-20).

And if this kind of world is the goal toward which redemption itself is pointing, aiming for that kind of world is a worthy task for any of us, whatever our particular area of service or ministry might be.

Let's do it!

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<sup>1</sup> Melba Maggay, "Hearing the Call of the Great Flood," *Our Father's World* (Dec. 9, 2009) <http://www.ourfathersworld.org/2009/10/09/the-greatflood-2009>.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Richard John Newhaus in "The Public Square," *First Things* (May 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Dickerson, *The Mind and The Machine: What It Means to Be Human and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011) p. 124.

## Chapter 3

# A CHRISTIAN'S CASE FOR EARTH CARE\*

*By Matthew Sleeth*

## Introduction

In 2002 the Reverend Jim Ball launched a campaign in favor of fuel-efficient, cleaner, and more modest personal transportation. He was one of the first eco-evangelist leaders to capture headlines with the “*What Would Jesus Drive*” campaign. Many Christians are unaware of or surprised to find that prominent church leaders from all denominations are calling the rank and file to support clean air, clean water, fuel efficiency and nontoxic manufacturing. The thirty-million strong National Association of Evangelicals published a theological document in November 2004 stating that our “government has an obligation to protect its citizens from the effects of environmental degradation.” Despite such straight forward statements, the issue of earth stewardship remains divisive among many believers. Why is this? Let’s look at some common arguments against personal stewardship of the earth, and then we’ll look at the biblically based reasoning that supports stewardship and environmental temperance. Following are some common arguments against stewardship.

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\* This chapter appeared in *Serve God, Save The Planet* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2007) pp. 34-50. It is published by permission of the author and Zondervan.

## **Objections to Environmental Stewardship**

*“God gave us dominion over everything.”* The beginning of Genesis describes the creation of the earth and the teeming creatures on land, sea and air. It tells of the creation of man and woman and of God’s willingness to give humankind responsibility for nature. Contrary to some popular beliefs, the first commandment in the Bible is not “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 9:7 NLT), but rather to “tend and watch over” the garden (Gen. 2:15 NLT). Yes, we were given permission to use the earth, but not to abuse it. As a sojourner on earth, we are entrusted to leave the earth in as good or better shape than when we arrived.

When we drop off children at kindergarten, we cede dominion over them to the teacher. Without this partial transfer of responsibility, chaos would reign in a classroom, and no child would learn to read or write. At the end of the day, when we pick up our children from school, we expect to find them in the same or better condition as when they arrived. We would not tolerate finding them battered or less intelligent at the end of the day. Similarly, dominion over nature does not translate to neglect, license or destruction.

“But a child is more significant than a tree, ocean, or forest,” you might say, and I would agree. So, let’s consider an automobile for a moment. A car is not alive and, despite advertising hype is not “made in heaven.” Yet I suspect that if we lent our car to a friend (i.e. gave him dominion over it), we would be very unhappy to get our car back dented, dirty, and with an empty tank. Being pro-stewardship is not a case of valuing forests more than people; rather, it means valuing human possessions less and God’s world more. Surely we must value the loan of God’s earth at least as much as we value the loan of an automobile, for God’s earth is only on loan to each generation.

God made the heavens and the earth, and his blessings are upon all living creatures.

And God said, let the waters bring forth abundantly moving creatures that have life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven. And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind; and God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas" (Gen. 1:20-22 KJV).

When the passenger pigeon became extinct, God took note. When we exterminate a species, we forever lose dominion over it. We cancel God's blessing on a species when we destroy it. Furthermore, God placed these creatures at the service of humans, which is to say they are meant to aid and sustain us. When we kill off a species we go against God's dual blessing: we cancel the life God gave to the species, and we forever lose the benefits of that species to humanity. When we ignore a blessing, we show a lack of respect for God. Disrespect is blasphemous. Let us keep in our hearts this thought: God created the earth, and if we do not respect the earth and all of its creatures, we disrespect God. Indeed, God retains ownership of the earth:

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him. For he laid the earth's foundation on the seas and built it on the ocean depths (Ps. 24:1-2 NLT).

Human ownership is an illusion. How can creatures that die own anything? No matter what you temporarily lay claim to or control, one thing is certain: In one hundred years, you will no longer own it. God introduces this concept to his people early on:

The land shall not be sold forever; for the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me (Lev. 25:23 KJV).

*“We don’t need to worry about nature; everything will be renewed after the rapture.”* The Bible promises that the earth will be renewed. However, this promise has little to do with us now. Why not? When asked, Jesus said that even he did not know when the end would come. Instead, he cautions us to conduct our lives in a way we would not be ashamed of it if the world ended today. We must always be ready for the end (Mark 13:32).

Because none of us knows the number of our days, we are to keep the commandments, and love God and all God loves, regardless of how much time is left. For example, suppose we heard that a fiery meteor was going to hit the earth in seven days. Would this news of disaster be an excuse for us to forgo following God’s commandments? Would imminent destruction of the earth be a green light to steal, hoard food, burn every forest, or ignore the poor?

Those who have no belief in God could rationalize selfish actions out of a “that’s all there is” reasoning. However, knowledge of an end time reminds believers to double their efforts to do the will of God. When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we ask for God’s kingdom to come to earth. Knowing that God promises to restore the earth is a reminder for us to do our part everyday to help. This is how we act out our faith.

*“Wealth is God’s reward to believers.”* God promises to reward his followers, but not with material wealth. He will provide for our needs if we dedicate our hearts and lives to him (Matt. 19: 27-30). The problem comes when we confuse our needs with our wants. Time and again Jesus warns of the dangers of having too many possessions. It is not our spiritual longings but our material desires that keep us from a right relationship with God (Rev. 18:13). We are explicitly urged to ask after nonmaterial eternal rewards.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But

store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt. 6:19-20 TNIV).

*“I bought my SUV because it is bigger, weighs more, sits up higher, and is safer in a crash. If I’m going to be in a wreck, I want my family to be safe.”* I’ve heard this line numerous times, which makes me wonder if it isn’t on a poster in the back room of SUV dealers. This philosophy is condemned, however, in the Bible. Proverbs 18:11-12 (NLT) says:

The rich think of their wealth as an impregnable defense; they imagine it is a high wall of safety. Haughtiness goes before destruction; humility precedes honor.

If we wish to experience life to the fullest, we have to do things that seem scary at first. The worldly hunger for permanence and safety “at any cost” is an illusion. It is not a path to God.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it. But whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? (Mark 8:35-36 TNIV).

Looking out for number one is not what comes to mind when we recall heroes of the Christian faith. One such hero was John Harper. Reverend Harper was a transatlantic passenger on the maiden voyage of the Titanic and a pastor at Moody Church in Chicago. When the Titanic was sinking, Harper gave up his seat on a lifeboat. Later, when he was in the water, he ministered to a young Scotsman. Harper gave his life preserver to save the soul and life of that man. Contrast this witness of love with modern end-zone dances, magazines called *Self*, and SUV’s that advertises “roadway domination.”

*"I don't have time to worry about the world's problems. Ignorance is bliss."* Jesus directs his followers to minister to the lowest and least of the kingdom. In the parable of the sheep and goats, he warns that he will deny salvation even to those who call him Lord if they have not cared for the least among society. The "least" includes the naked, the hungry, the sick, the homeless, and those in prison (Matt. 25:31-46).

My wife was teaching a high school class and brought up the subject of poverty. One student said that he doubted that anyone in the world today still went to bed hungry. He was wrong, of course, but not alone. A significant portion of our society is so wealthy that we have no exposure to the one billion people who are in a constant state of hunger. This lack of contact with the poor contributes to two problems: ignorance and a lack of perceived opportunity to help those in need. Environmental concerns are intimately tied to issues of poverty, health, and compassion. Ignorance is neither bliss nor an excuse. Ignorance is a route to damnation.

The discerning heart seeks knowledge, but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly (Prov. 15:14 TNIV).

Over and over, the Bible reminds us to educate ourselves about the world's problems and then act on that knowledge. We must actively help those least able to speak for themselves—including unborn generations.

*"My neighbors all do it. Why shouldn't I?"* When I was a kid, the "everybody else is doing it" excuse was the single worst reason we could offer when we tried to argue in favor of one of our childish wants. It was sure to be followed by "If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you jump too?"



The “I’m doing it because everybody else is” plea was lame when we used it as kids, and it doesn’t get any better as we age. Pouring chemicals on the lawn that are poisonous to small animals and children is go-along-with-the-crowd reasoning.

One of the dangers in keeping up with the neighbors is that we haven’t aimed high enough. In 2 Corinthians 10:12 NLT, Paul says:

They are only comparing themselves with each other, and measuring themselves by themselves. What foolishness!

Jesus is the one to aim for. Whenever we are uncertain about a particular behavior, all we need ask is “What would Jesus do?”

*“I’ll be dead before the oceans play out or the forests are all cut down.”* Selfishness, unlike wine, some cheeses, and Shaker furniture, does not age well. Yet there are people alive today who have lived long enough to see the loss of the American Chestnut and the American elm. They’ve seen the sky turn a purple-gray haze, stream become undrinkable (even unswimmable), wells poisoned, and the death of half the world’s birds. After describing these losses, I’ve heard many sadly say that they’re glad they won’t be around to see the outcome of another fifty years of business as usual. This group absolves itself of any responsibility for setting things on a better path. It is as if all the little children being born do not warrant an effort or sacrifice on the part of us who are older. Retirement from morality is not mentioned in the Bible; John the evangelist wrote the last book of the Bible at age ninety while on an island prison.

As Christians, we pray that God’s concerns become our concerns—no matter what our age. God is intensely concerned with the needs of the next generation. We who are older and have a greater understanding of the negative changes occurring in nature must be bold.

The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age; they will stay fresh and green (Ps. 92:12-14 TNIV).

*“Tree huggers worship nature. I don’t want to be involved with them.”* The problem today is not one of nature worship; instead, it is the worship of all things made by human beings. Ask yourself, “How much time have I spent admiring what God has wrought, and how much time am I spending admiring my possessions?” We have hundreds of magazines devoted to fashion, homes, self image and cars. We “live” in our cars commuting to and from work and activities. But have you spent an hour in the past week sitting in the woods or a field, enjoying God’s creation?

As Christians, we believe that God made the heavens and the earth. He made the teeming animals, birds and fish. He created the forest and fruit bearing plants. Heaven is God’s throne and the earth is his footstool (Is. 66:1). If a person is working to save the Lord’s footstool (earth), but doesn’t know the owner of the footstool (i.e. an atheist or agnostic), does that mean we should obstruct their labor (stewardship of the created world)?

The Bible repeatedly describes nonbelievers whom the Lord uses to accomplish his will. God instructed the prophet Elijah to be fed by (unclean, unkosher) ravens, and then by a pagan widow in Zaraphath. What if Elijah had refused help from these sources? What if he had told God he didn’t like the pedigree of his help?

When Jesus asked the pagan woman at the well for water, an opportunity for ministry presented itself. Because Jesus accepted help from a nonbeliever, many in the woman’s town came to know Christ. The same opportunities abound for working with nonbelievers in the environmental arena.

I know a southern family that is in full-time ministry. They describe themselves as living “right where the Bible belt buckles.”

They became ill while working in a poverty-stricken area and are now undergoing long-term drug therapy to remove lead poisoning from their bodies. Neither they, nor I, know whether a Christian or a sun-worshiper invented the medicine, but they gladly accept this lifesaving drug. Why then, would we question the validity of any environmentalist who labors to keep people from getting lead poisoning in the first place?

I am reminded of a well-known tale I first heard as a boy in church. There was a man of faith who lived in a floodplain. It rained hard for two days straight. When the river rose to the man's porch, a large truck drove up in the water. "Get in and we'll take you to high ground," the driver said.

"No thanks" said the man. "I believe in God. He will save me." The truck drove off. The waters continued to rise. A boat came along, and the boatman saw the man on the top floor of his house.

"Get in," said the boatman, "and I will take you to high ground." "No thanks" cried the man out his window. "I believe in God. He will save me." The boat motored away. Later, a passing helicopter saw the man clinging to the top of his chimney. The helicopter hovered and the pilot cried, "Grab on and I'll fly you to higher ground." "No thanks" yelled the man. "I believe in God. He will save me." After the helicopter left, the river rose and the man drowned.

In heaven, the man met God. Obviously the man was thrilled to have made it to heaven. He had only one question: "God, I had complete faith that you would save me from the flood, but you let me drown. Why?" "That's odd" said God. "I sent a truck, a boat, and a helicopter to save you."

What would happen if the thirteenth-century person for whom San Francisco and Santa Fe are named were in ministry today? Would the media dismiss Saint Francis, patron saint of animals and the environment, as a tree hugger? Would they try to

have him thrown out of church because he took seriously God's commandment to preach the gospel to all creatures? Would they insist he undergo psychiatric treatment because he wrote songs like *"All Creatures of our God and King"* and *"Brother Sun and Sister Moon"*? Would they condemn him for penning *"The Prayer of St. Francis"*?

*"Science will find a solution," and the related, "It's up to the government to protect us."* They might, but that hope should be tempered with the understanding that science brought us ethyl gasoline, which was supposed to stop engine knock but gave children brain damage. Science invented spray deodorants to keep teens from sweating; however, these aerosols ate a hole in the earth's protective ozone. Similarly, our government has a mixed record on protecting our health and the environment. To trust that government or science will fix everything is to abdicate our personal roles as stewards. One of the key features of Christianity is its emphasis on a personal God, personal redemption, and personal accountability. We cannot depend on the state, our church, or science to redeem us today or in the afterlife.

*"God lives in heaven. Why should we care so much about plants and animals?"* Solomon is known as the wisest person ever to have lived, but he wasn't born that way. After Solomon ascended to the throne, he received wisdom as a gift from God. Many know of his 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 poems, but few are aware that one of his greatest accomplishments was the ability to speak with authority about all forms of plants, animals, birds, reptiles, and fish (1King 4:31). The wisest human knew that to love God, we must know and love what he loves.

I travel to various churches and enjoy listening to songs of praise. In my lifetime, the method for singing together has changed. Many churches no longer use hymnals and instead proj-

ect slides with lyrics onto large overhead screens. Behind the song text, scenes of mountains, lakes, forests, streams, pastures, and flocks of birds are projected. But why use these images? Why not use an airplane in the background? Why not pictures of the things we work for, fight for and own? Would it be wrong to put up pictures of pools, cars, vacation homes, and stereos while singing “*This Is My Father’s World*” or “*Awesome God*”? In our hearts we know the answer.

God created the world, and he loves what he created. Read John 3:16 carefully. This beloved verse does not say that God loves people so much that he sent his only son to save them. What it says is: *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten son* (emphasis added).

## **Serve God, Save the Planet**

The original Greek text uses the word *cosmos*, and, like the word *world*, the word *cosmos* includes humans but encompasses far more. God loves the world, the whole world. As the song says, “This is my Father’s world, He shines in all that’s fair; In the rustling grass, I hear Him pass, He speaks to me everywhere.”

We live in a time when nature is viewed in a mechanistic way. We say that trees exist to make oxygen, or to give shade, or to be made into paper, and we assign them no further mystery. In other words, nature has purpose and value only in so far as it fulfills our material needs. Our worldview is so mechanistic that we ask questions like “If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it make any sound?”

The Bible answers this question: If a tree stands in the middle of the forest and is never seen by a human, it has meaning to God. The tree is there to glorify God and to give God pleasure. And yes, if the tree topples over one day, it does make a sound and God hears it. This biblical view is at odds with the industrial

worldview, but I find it comforting. Yes, it implies that we have some responsibility for God's earth, but it also means that our God is the kind of God who loves trees, and birds, and flowers. Our God is an awesome God.

The apostle Paul makes an intriguing argument in an appeal to nonbelievers in his letter to the Romans. "Don't believe in God?" Paul asks. "Then get out and take a hike in the woods," he reasons:

For the truth about God is known to them [nonbelievers] instinctively. God has put the knowledge in their hearts. From the time the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky and all that God made. They can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power, and divine nature. So they have no excuse whatsoever for not knowing God (Rom. 1:19-20 NLT).

The Twenty-third Psalm is among the most beloved. Only the Lord knows how many frightened children, people on their deathbed, and soldiers have found hope in its words. It has a power, truth, and beauty that resonates with us a thousand generations after it was written. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters." Many of us have had our most peaceful, happy, and godly moments while enjoying nature. There is nothing our twenty-first-century souls cry for like the peace and glory of God's presence.

*"A hundred million years from now, humans will all be gone and a new life form will have risen to replace us. The earth will eventually recover from us."* This is most often brought up when I talk with folks who do not believe in God. This reasoning rests on a notion that life is a zillion-to-one bingo game in which the

scorecard is cosmic dust and the caller is a series of lucky lightning bolts. Humans, they reason, are a doomed experiment in the game of chance, little more than a replacement for trilobites or dinosaurs. Humankind is no more planned than bad modern art—a hoax of paint randomly splashed on canvas. Because we are an accident, no one need shed a tear at our passing.

If one accepts a philosophy based on the reproducibility of scientific method, then we must state a fact: the earth is the only place in the universe known to have life. Others may have life but that is an assumption based purely on conjecture. The existence of life defies reason: life contradicts the second law of thermodynamics and the tendency of all systems to entropy. In our own solar system, the mass of matter that is “alive” (compared to all other matter) is so minute that it is, in a practical sense, immeasurable. Science must accept facts. If we are the only products of a four-billion-year-old game of chance, then what are the odds that luck would again come up with creatures that could write sonnets, ice skate, sing, fly and laugh?

I, for one, think the home planet is worth fighting for. I’ve regularly encountered these arguments against planetary stewardship in discussions with believers and nonbelievers. The list is neither exhaustive nor all-inclusive. Unspoken reasons for neglecting our role as stewards include greed, thoughtlessness, lust, exploitation, and short term profit. These factors negatively affect our environment as well as our individual walk with God.

*“We no longer need God to sustain us. We have science and technology.”* From the beginning of our history, humans have known God as both the giver and sustainer of life. Our ancestors planted seeds and prayed for rain. They thought the sunshine was a blessing, and they bowed their heads at harvest time. They gave thanks when livestock was born. Now, even those who believe in God no longer see him as the sustainer of life. Food comes from a

grocery store and clothing from the mall, and shelter is desired for curb appeal.

Our contemporary spiritual unplugging brings a great sense of control. If we are clever and lucky, we can take care of our needs. We all enjoy the fruits of technology. Psychologists and scientists declare us freed from superstitious shackles. It's foolish to depend on God to send the rain and protect us from the lightning. Yet despite having a record amount of control over our lives, something is amiss. Ten percent of the women and 3 percent of the men in our country need an antidepressant to get through a day, a day with no fear of starvation, invasion, or want. What's wrong? We find that we can buy a house, but not a home. We can travel the globe, but we feel utterly imprisoned. We have degrees, but little wisdom.

Perhaps more than any generation, we have rejected the concept of God the Sustainer. If God made nature to sustain us, and if we reject his sustaining gifts, will there be no consequences? I believe that we will have untold misery as we reject God as the source of our lives. As I write this, in our country and around the globe, the weather is becoming hostile. We are having record number of hurricanes, heat waves, floods and droughts in large part because we are abusing God's creation. God planned nature to sustain us. We should work with his plan, but this will require a new mindset.

In October 2004, the Indian subcontinent was flooded by a deadly tidal wave. Such events happen and will continue to happen, but one of the reasons for the record number of fatalities in this case was not the wave, but the fact that all mangrove trees along the shoreline, which normally holds back the waves, had been cut down to make way for the white sandy beaches so loved by tourists.

As we manipulate nature without regard or concern for its underlying design, we will increasingly have to deal with unnatural



problems. Diseases that were once confined to the latitude of the Nile River, or the Amazon, are appearing for the first time in temperate zones because of our prodigal behavior. We may find some answers in science and technology, but there is a vast wealth of knowledge and wisdom that can be obtained simply by observing the Creator's methods.

## Chapter 4

# PLANTING TREES FOR JESUS

*By Scott Sabin*

### Introduction

An accident of geography made me into a Christian environmentalist. Of course, I believe that nothing is truly accidental, but it was not something I set out to be.

In 1991, to fulfill the language requirement for an MA in International Relations, I spent the summer in a Spanish immersion program in Guatemala. It turned out that language learning, as important as it was, was not the real reason I was there. God used that time for a very different purpose—to open my eyes to issues of poverty and injustice. Also, and perhaps most importantly, I was introduced to people living out their faith with a kind of courage I had never experienced growing up in the church in Southern California. I met not just one, but dozens of people putting their lives on the line for the kingdom and giving everything they had to care for the poor, the sick and the oppressed. That experience was stirring and life-changing.

With a new sense of calling, I returned home to finish graduate school. I had an intense desire to work alongside people like those whom I had met in Guatemala and to emulate them in my own dedication to God's call. That led me to volunteer at Plant With Purpose, a small Christian nonprofit helping poor farmers in the Dominican Republic, based in San Diego, where I was attending school. Plant With Purpose, then called Floresta, had a

unique program, using reforestation as a vehicle to help the poor.

At first the environmental aspect of the mission struck me as odd and perhaps superfluous, but I was excited by the organization's other efforts to combat poverty in Christ's name, including its microfinance and discipleship programs. I saw the organization as a temporary stop, a place to gain experience before moving to a more mainstream Christian relief and development agency. My father in particular wanted to make sure that I didn't get stuck there, admonishing, "Planting trees for Jesus is about as marginal a way to spend your life as I can imagine." I was not entirely sure he was wrong. I was certainly not a tree hugger, and a little bit uncomfortable with being seen as one.

## **The People Need The Trees**

Over time, however, I began to learn what the founders of Plant With Purpose had previously discovered: there is a direct connection between poverty and environmental degradation, and it is often hard to address one without the other.

Our founders hadn't been primarily motivated out of environmental concern either. Working in the Dominican Republic in the aftermath of Hurricane David, they were dismayed that food aid and other relief interventions were doing nothing to actually improve the situation or change the lives of the people who were dependent on it. Instead it was merely keeping people on life support.

Seeking a way to address the root causes of this dependency, they began to follow the problem upstream— both literally and figuratively. They realized that many of the people living in the shantytowns around Santo Domingo were relatively recent arrivals from the countryside, often settling in the most flood prone areas of the city, next to a river that had become the sewer for the entire valley.

Further upstream in the mountains, farmers were abandoning their land, leaving hillsides dry and stripped of trees and topsoil. Ironically, desperation and lack of opportunity was driving them to take whatever they could from the land, making them the primary cause of the deforestation that was taking place. We learned that there was a vicious cycle between deforestation and poverty.

## **Deforestation Contributes to Poverty**

A poor farmer, living at or near the subsistence level has basically two assets: the soil that he farms, and the rain that falls on it. Surprisingly, deforestation has a huge impact on both.

Everybody understands the importance of access to clean water. Water is essential for drinking, for washing and for growing crops. Soil is probably less understood in the United States, where we are further removed from the farm, and where we often treat soil as dirt with chemical fertilizers. Soil, however, is one of the most important and most overlooked natural resources on the planet. It is the life of the land, and the key to the farmer's life.

Trees and forest cover are a huge protection against soil erosion. Roots hold the soil in place, and the forest canopy and leaf litter break the fall of the rain, reducing its impact on the soil. Studies have shown that loss of forest cover can increase soil erosion rates by up to 75 times<sup>1</sup> “now that life is flowing away from the mountains,” quoting a village elder from his childhood in India.<sup>2</sup> Sadly, we have seen life flowing out of the mountains in far too many countries.

In addition, through their deeper root systems, trees can help bring nutrients to the surface from deep in the soil, depositing them in their leaf litter, fallen branches and decaying roots and trunks, where they will be of more use to crops with shallower roots.

Less obvious are the impacts that the loss of forest has on

water resources, but these are vast. Even after working in this field for nearly twenty years, I consistently underestimate their importance.

First, tree roots increase soil porosity and allow rainfall to infiltrate the soil, replenishing aquifers. The gentler strike of the raindrops, due to tree canopies and litterfall, allow the rain time to penetrate the soil. Forests provide a higher rate of infiltration than most other types of vegetation, making them the birthplaces of springs and rivers.

Perhaps the most helpful way of visualizing this is to think of the forest as a sponge, keeping the ground and surrounding microclimate moist. Falling rain soaks in, rather than running off quickly. Thus, long-term studies have shown that streams flowing from forested areas are more likely to flow year around. The forests mitigate flood and drought cycles, whereas streams flowing from deforested watersheds are more likely to have water only when it rains. Then they flood, often becoming deadly.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally the trees act as a natural filter, removing bacteria and keeping water pure. Finally, forests also have an important impact on the microclimate and even global climate,<sup>4</sup> contributing to regular rainfall, as water that would have rapidly run off is recycled into the air by the trees, through evapotranspiration.

Access to clean water is an important issue, but as much effort is often spent on digging wells and installing purification systems, the source of the problem is rarely considered. At Plant With Purpose we believe that one of the most effective ways of offering a cup of cold water in Jesus name is to restore the watershed that it flows from.

Deforestation robs poor subsistence farmers of their two most important tools for survival, their soil and water resources, and no amount of food aid or distributed seeds can make up for land that has been badly degraded.

There are still additional health impacts of deforestation to

consider. It has been linked to increased incidences of malaria, leishmaniasis and hookworm. And as forests get scarcer and firewood more expensive, families stop boiling drinking water, even as the contamination increases.

The impact doesn't stop with the poor farmer either. Further downstream, the topsoil, now mud, silts up hydroelectric plants or upon reaching the ocean, destroys fisheries and kills coral reefs. Rain that does not infiltrate the soil kills people in flash floods. A large portion of the Dominican town of Jimani was wiped out in 2004 when a fifteen-foot wall of mud and rocks swept down from the mountains of Haiti, killing thousands on both sides of the border. Similar floods have twice devastated the city of Gonaïves in Haiti.

## **Poverty Contributes To Deforestation**

But, as our founders studied the situation, an interesting dynamic became apparent. The rural poor were often responsible for the very deforestation that was increasing their desperation. Land that was forested, and often marginal or inappropriate for agriculture, was being cleared because there was little or no other land available to the poor. In other places, making charcoal to sell as fuel was a last resort for those whose land would no longer produce anything else.

In most cases the problem was not one of ignorance, but of desperation. Over the years, I have had illiterate farmers give me more eloquent explanations of the functioning of a healthy watershed than I have heard from most American biology teachers. However, in Haiti, I was told that there is a proverb that says, "either this tree must die or I will die in its place." I have heard similar sentiments expressed all over the world.

Although we first became aware of this dynamic in the Dominican Republic, we have learned that the situation is not

unique. Throughout much of the tropics the vicious cycle is the same. Nearly a billion people live as subsistence farmers around the world, growing most of their own food. The rural poor make up 80% of the chronically hungry people globally<sup>5</sup> and rank lower on the scale of human development in almost every indicator.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, small-scale agriculture is the single largest cause of deforestation worldwide.

Of course there are many causes of deforestation and it is important not to lay the blame solely at the foot of the poor and disempowered. They have little or no choice as to how they relate to the forest, as the Haitian proverb so eloquently expresses. On the other hand, consumption choices of the wealthy also have a massive impact, as corporations work to serve our appetite for beef, soy, timber, paper, palm oil, and countless other items.

However, Plant With Purpose realized that this vicious cycle represented an opportunity to create a virtuous cycle. By addressing both economic and environmental issues simultaneously, and remembering that these are at their heart spiritual issues, we have been working towards turning this vicious cycle into a virtuous cycle. Increasing prosperity gives people the opportunity to better and more sustainably care for and farm their land, in turn giving them more prosperity and more ability to care for their land. With God's help, we believe it can become a victorious cycle where relationships between God and people, people and their neighbors and even between people and creation can begin to be healed. Furthermore, in what seems to be to be a real illustration of the kingdom, the poor, often villainized for their role in deforestation, are becoming the heroes of the story, and planting millions of trees and restoring both creation and their own communities.

We have learned that God's creation is often more resilient and certainly more diverse than we had imagined. We have seen that the more closely you mimic creation in your agriculture the

more sustainable it becomes and it is possible to work with the environment instead of working against it. Over the years we have been blessed to see watersheds that were once barren begin to come alive again and rivers and streams that had dried up or become seasonal start to flow year around once more.

As I have spoke on this relationship between environmental degradation and poverty over the last fifteen years, I find that many Americans have a hard time relating to it. Our lives are remarkably insulated from our environment and our affluence often allows us to keep the consequences of our environmental problems at bay. When water comes from bottles and food from the supermarket, it is can be hard to relate to the impact of drought, or waterborne illness. Environmental concern can be seen as a luxury, since the perception is that it is about things that don't directly impact people, such as endangered species or wilderness protection. These are a subset of the environmental issues confronting the planet, but in much of the world, environmental issues are human issues. Creation care is a justice issue. And we *are* ultimately just as dependent on the life support system that this planet provides. We too must take care of our home.

My skepticism began to evaporate after seeing the desperation of families struggling to eke out a living on unimaginably steep, rocky hillsides where forests once stood. As I spoke with the director of a foundation years ago, he rolled his eyes and said, "I hope you are not going to tell me God cares as much about trees as he does about people." I thought about it for a moment, and replied, "No, what I will tell you is that the people need the trees." God tells us to love our neighbor, and our neighbor needs the trees.

## **God Takes Delight In The Trees**

As much as my attitude had changed, my approach to creation was still pretty utilitarian. But Scripture tells a different



story. I would never go so far as to say that God cares as much about trees as people. Jesus clearly says that we are far more valuable in God's sight than a sparrow (Matt. 6:26-27). However what is clear is that God does care deeply about his creation. That comes through loud and clear from Genesis to Revelation.

Throughout the creation story, God pronounces what he has made to be good. In the Books of the Law we learn how to take care of it, giving the land itself a sabbath (Ex. 23:10-11; Lev. 25), and we are told that if we fail to do so, the land will take its own sabbath (Lev. 26:35). Around the world today we can see many examples of the land taking its own sabbath, as land degraded beyond its ability to produce, lies fallow.

We are also told that the earth is the Lord's together with everything that is in it (Ps. 24:1). Although we are asked to be stewards of the earth, and even to exercise dominion, nowhere is creation given to us to do with as we please.

It is also clear that, while the main thread of the Scriptures tells the story of God's relationship with human beings, he has a relationship with creation independent of us. We get glimpses of this in Psalm 104, which gives a very tender portrait of God nurturing and caring for his nonhuman creation. However, Job contains one of the most powerful passages demonstrating this relationship. When Job and his friends challenge God over the justice of Job's situation, God's response is essentially to say "Look at all I have going on which you have no idea about." God asks, "Who is this who darkens counsel without knowledge?" and then goes on for three chapters to describe relationships he has with his creatures and with the systems and processes of the earth (Job 38-41). It is a call to humility, which we tend to forget. These are creatures and systems that today we feel quite free to tinker with, despite the fact that the earth is still the Lord's.

Traditionally, creation was seen as God's general revelation and Paul tells us that God's eternal qualities and divine nature are

evident in creation (Rom. 1:20). Some worry that an emphasis on creation care will lead us to worship nature, but throughout church history many thought that studying creation would in fact produce the opposite result, leading people to God. That has certainly been the case for me. One of the tremendous blessings of the past twenty years has been a reawakening to God's creation.

Perhaps you remember the film, *March of the Penguins*, which told the amazing story of how penguins struggle to feed and nurture their chicks in the stark environment of the Antarctic. On the surface this may not seem like it would be that interesting, but that shows how little we know of creation. In fact, it is an incredible story— intricate, full of plot twists that challenge credulity and containing of both pathos and triumph. The more we learn about creation, the more fascinating it is. But on reflection, perhaps the most amazing thing is the fact that we know the author of this story.

Another story I recently became aware of is that of the Clark's Nutcracker. This large jay-like bird lives in the pine forests of the high mountains. If you have picnicked in the forest you may have seen it and not given it much thought other than noticing its raucous call. But the Clark's Nutcracker collects pine nuts out of the cones in the trees and buries them in little caches of 3-4 seeds. Over the course of a season it may make twenty thousand or more of these little seed stashes. Later, when food is scarce, it is able to accurately locate these storage spots even though they may be under several feet of snow. Yet the bird is apparently able to remember where it has hidden its food supplies with stunning accuracy. Because they store more than they need, they are also planting new pine trees and are important to the maintenance of their own habitat.

There are literally millions more stories in creation that are equally fascinating. Science is only beginning to uncover many of these and the layperson might know very few. We may visit a

spectacular overlook in a park like Yosemite, and stand in wonder for a few moments looking at a waterfall, but that is a very superficial view of all that God has authored.

For me this awakening has been a little like getting to know another facet of someone whom you know in a very limited context, perhaps a co-worker. Accepting an invitation to their home you discover a whole new aspect of their personality. Perhaps their home is full of amazing oil paintings that they have done themselves, or of handcrafted furniture that they have built. Suddenly you realize you don't know them as well as you thought. In fact they are far more complex and talented than you imagined.

"Wow, I didn't know you painted!" Or in this case, I have thought, "Wow, God, I didn't know you created!" Like Job, I have been humbled by how little I knew or understood of God's relationship with his creation and all that he is doing in the world.

## **Creation Groans**

It is no secret that the Lord's amazing earth is in deep trouble today. Deforestation, loss of biodiversity, declining resources, dying oceans, loss of soil and water, climate change, pollution—the list of problems is long and daunting. Many of those who study the intricacies of creation have become deeply discouraged. It is easy to be driven to despair. But we have a hope—a hope the world desperately needs to know about.

Furthermore, as we learn of God's plan of redemption in the New Testament, there are indications that creation has not been forgotten or abandoned.

The most familiar verse in the Bible, John 3:16, tells us that God so loved what he had created, (the Greek word is *cosmos*) that he sent Jesus. While many interpreters have reduced *cosmos* in this instance to something narrower than "all the created order," the broader interpretation is consistent with Colossians 1:20,

which speaks of Christ reconciling *all things* to God, whether things on heaven or things on earth. The Bible ends with a vision of a renewed earth.

In popular eschatology the earth is burned up. Yet as Steven Bouma-Prediger has pointed out, 2 Peter 3:10, from which that belief is derived, are often mistranslated. Properly translated, it states that the earth will be found or judged, and speaks of the redemption and purification of heaven and earth, rather than a starting over. Earth will be renewed and restored, not burned up and thrown away.

Whether the existing earth will be purified and renewed, just as we ourselves are purified and thus made a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), or whether this earth will indeed pass away, as many believe, we have cause for hope that creation will be restored, and that is something we can share with the rest of the world.

## **Let's Plant Trees**

Where does that leave human beings? To listen to secular environmentalists you would believe that humans were the problem and the best thing to do for creation would be to eliminate people. To be sure we have chosen to do many things in a very unsustainable way. We have forsaken our stewardship task, forgetting that the steward acts as the agent for another – in this case God. But humans are not inherently the problem. Indeed God invites us to be a part of his plan for redemption in the world. We have a hope and we have a role to play.

Genesis 2:15 says that God placed Adam in the garden to tend it and keep it. A lot has been written by others about those two words: tend and keep (*abad* and *shamar*) in Hebrew. They are also translated as “work” and “take care of,” or even “serve” and “protect.” But another aspect of this verse that I find compelling is what God does with Adam. Creation has just been completed.

If ever there was a moment when the earth was pristine, this was it. Yet God invites Adam into what he is doing. He could as easily have told Adam to keep his hands off, but instead he makes Adam a partner.

Similarly we are given a role in God's plan of redemption. In 2 Corinthians 5:18, we learn that we too have been given the same ministry of reconciliation that was given to Christ, the reconciliation of all things. Romans 8:19-22 leads us to the conclusion that creation has a stake in redemption and we have a part in that. It is a heady thought. We as children of God, bring good news to all of creation.

Exactly how this happens is unclear, but one thing that is clear is that as we go forth into the world, proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom, and modeling the reconciliation that it implies, our interactions with the earth and nonhuman creation can either be life-giving or death dealing. It is up to us to decide which provides a better witness to the love of God. How can we live out the gospel so that it is in fact good news for creation?

We can honor God by fulfilling our stewardship role on his earth, which he considers good. We can get to know our creator better by learning about his creativity. And at Plant With Purpose we have decided that in addition to feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, we can work to restore the creation that they depend on for sustenance. Long-dried streams that flow anew and once dead watersheds that again pulse with life are powerful metaphors for the redemption that Jesus offers. Isaiah 41:17-20 tells a similar story:

The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the LORD will answer them. I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. . . . I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set pines in the

wasteland, the fir and the cypress together, so that people may see and know . . . that the hand of the LORD has done this.

As trees are planted and the thirst of the poor is quenched, God is glorified. Planting trees for Jesus, while by no means the whole gospel, is kingdom work. Of course God does a lot more than plant trees and we do too. Our stewardship of creation can take many forms and with the right attitude, even something as simple as recycling can be an act of worship.

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- <sup>1</sup> David Pimentel, "Soil Erosion: A Food and Environmental Threat," *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, vol. 8 (2006): 119–187
  - <sup>2</sup> Paul W. Brand, "A Handful of Mud: A Personal History of My Love for the Soil," in *Tending the Garden: Essays on the Gospel and the Earth*, ed. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 136–150.
  - <sup>3</sup> William G. Deutsh, et al., "Community-Based Water Quality Monitoring," in *Seeking Sustainability: Challenges of Agricultural Development and Environmental Management in a Philippine Watershed*, Ian Coxhead and Gladys Buenavista, eds. (Los Baños, Laguna: Philippine Council for Agriculture, Forestry and Natural Resources Research and Development, 2001), 138–154.
  - <sup>4</sup> Bettwy, Mike. "Tropical Deforestation Affects Rainfall in the U.S. and Around the Globe," [www.nasa.gov/centers/goddard/news/topstory/2005/deforest\\_rainfall.html](http://www.nasa.gov/centers/goddard/news/topstory/2005/deforest_rainfall.html) (accessed May 27, 2009).
  - <sup>5</sup> "The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2005," *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*, (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2005) 24. This publication is also available online at [ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/008/a0200e/a0200e.pdf](http://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/008/a0200e/a0200e.pdf)
  - <sup>6</sup> "Rural Poverty Report 2001: The Challenge of Ending Rural Poverty," *International Fund for Agricultural Development*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 36. This is publication is also available online at <http://www.ifad.org/poverty/>
  - <sup>7</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 76–77.

# INTRODUCTION TO THE VERNON GROUNDS INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC ETHICS

In every age, God raises persons who not only have a keener sense of his ideals for life in community than their contemporaries, but who also have the courage and foresight to pursue these ideals for themselves and the ability to lead others to do the same. For more than a generation Vernon Grounds has played such a prophetic and catalytic role in the arena of social ethics within the evangelical community. In doing so, he has established a legacy of Christian witness in the social domain that has been hailed by many as epoch making and pace-setting.

It is to perpetuate Vernon's legacy of a vigorous Christian engagement in the public domain that the Vernon Grounds Institute of Public Ethics was established at Denver Seminary, where he has given a lifetime of dedicated service.

In embracing this task, and keenly aware of Dr. Grounds' lifelong stance, the Institute makes several bedrock commitments. First, it is committed to always anchoring its teaching and position in the Word of God. Second, it will endeavor to remain true to the Christian world view and the evangelical understanding of Christian faith. And, driven by the passion to see these resources brought to bear on social reality with a view to transforming it for the better, it further commits itself to pursuing an ethical agenda that will seek to be as all-embracing as its means allows.

From what has been said so far, it should be clear that VGI's arena of endeavor is social ethics. But it needs to be said that, in laboring in that realm, its mission is mainly educational. More

precisely, what it aims to do is provide an environment, resources and tools with a view to sensitizing, educating and training Christians in a broad array of ethical issues so that they may be empowered and equipped to fulfill the biblical mandate to be “salt” and “light” in a morally decadent world (Matt 5:13-14, Phil. 2:15-16). As used here, the term ‘Christian’ is meant to embrace several groupings: students in training, Christian leaders, lay persons and the broader Christian community.

In the pursuit of this educational mission, VGI intends to imply a variety of delivery modes, including lectures, workshops, seminars, informal discussion, and of its own limitations, VGI welcomes partnership with others who are also interested in a comprehensive and a robust Christian witness in the public square for the Glory of God.

*Dieumème Noelliste*  
*Director of the Vernon Grounds*  
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*Professor Theological Ethics*  
*Denver Seminary*