

Christians and the Environment

A while back I came across a website which ridiculed Christianity for being anti-nature and environmentally irresponsible.¹ It claims: *“Christianity must incorporate environmental concern. But it can only do so by jettisoning a significant part of its most holy scriptures, and looking for inspiration elsewhere.”* If this is right then I am now on a fool’s errand in trying to ground a Christian view of the environment in the Bible.

The website says Christianity is environmentally irresponsible for three reasons:

1. The book of Genesis teaches us to view nature as an object of conquest.
2. The Christian God is anti-nature because the Bible says he will destroy the earth.
3. The New Testament does not enjoin one environmental duty.

What does Genesis teach us about nature? Here’s what that website argues:

Modern scholars have made heroic efforts to reinterpret God’s messages to Adam in Genesis, to show that God meant us to have stewardship over the earth rather than unconditional mastery. But these efforts struggle against the evidence. *“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,”* says God in Genesis 1:26, *“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 the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”*

The website goes on to say that the Hebrew word for “dominion” means “tread down, subjugate, prevail against, rule over” and that when God commands *“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it”* that the word “subdue” means “tread down, conquer, subjugate, violate, bring into bondage”.

Next the website quotes God’s words to Noah in Genesis 9:1-4:

The fear of you and the dread [chath - terror] of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. [Genesis 9:1-4]

The website concludes:

These statements could not be clearer. God has made man complete master of all living things on earth. There is no question of stewardship, not a whisper that animals may have inherent value in themselves. Humans are cast in the role of conqueror and master, not of steward. There is no hint that they are expected to care for the earth and for animals as a condition of God’s favour.

Isn’t this fair criticism? This anti-Christian website is quite right. When God created people he did command them to conquer the earth. Maybe we just cop this criticism on the chin and admit these words in Genesis are most unfortunate. But we will do nothing of the sort. This criticism is not new. In 1967 Lynn White influentially claimed that before Christianity “man had been part of nature”, but under Christianity’s influence, particularly in Northern Europe, humanity became the ruthless “exploiter of nature”. The Industrial Revolution is often associated with such things as mining that leaves scarred, bleak landscapes and evil black smoke belching into a polluted sky.

Tom McMillan comments, *“For 200 years we’ve been conquering nature. Now we’re beating it to death.”* Paul Brooks says, *“In America today you can murder land for private profit. You can leave the corpse for all to see, and nobody calls the cops.”*

But all who claim Genesis shows Christianity countenances such environmental irresponsibility have utterly failed to understand the significance of God’s commands to

¹ <http://members.aol.com/pantheism0/ethicenv.htm>

conquer the earth.

See how the Bible begins:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form and void and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

Some wit has asked, "How can we know the ocean is friendly?" Answer: "Because it waves". But in the ancient world the open sea was viewed as anything but friendly. It was the symbol of uncontrolled chaos. You know what lies at the bottom of the ocean and twitches? A nervous wreck. The sea was a graveyard for fragile ancient vessels. When God created the earth along with the physical and spiritual heavens he deliberately created it in a state of chaos. God does this deliberately to reveal himself as the one who conquers chaos. That's what conquest means for God. It means bringing light out of darkness. It means filling that formlessness and emptiness with a wonderful variety of inanimate things and animate creatures. Conquest means bringing order out of chaos and beauty and abundance and life. Then God creates us in his image to be like him, to be conquerors in the same way as he himself is a conqueror. The command to conquer the earth is not license to exploit it and ravage it. It is a command to be Godlike, to bring order out of chaos, to bring beauty and abundance and life into the world.

Marshall McLuhan observes, "*There are no passengers on spaceship earth. We are all crew.*" Humans were created by God to work for the good of the environment. God placed man in a beautiful garden, not to strip it bare, but to work it and guard it so as to bring blessing to a world outside the garden which also needed to be made like the garden. Guarding the garden especially means preventing any moral evil from entering the garden. But it certainly includes the idea of being environmentally responsible. In this respect it is all hands on deck on spaceship earth.

It is also not fair for this website to quote Genesis 9:1-4 in the same breath as the commands to conquer of Genesis 1. Remember Genesis 9:1-4 occurs after the Fall of man, after sin entered the world. When God says that from this time on all creatures will fear man he is describing what a world ravaged by sin will look like since, as the context stresses, God knows the Flood has not changed the human heart. Yes, there has been irreparable damage done to our world, but that tragic damage is the result of a fundamental moral disorder.

The website also argues that the God of Christians is anti-nature because he is presented as one who will destroy the earth. Yes, God will destroy this present heavens and earth. This is not because God hates nature. Remember he is the one who created nature in all its variety and he regarded it as very good. The problem with those who criticize Christians because of God's commitment to destroy the earth is that they have put the cart before the horse. Peter teaches: "*By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men*" (2 Pet 3:7).

Note that moral disorder is primary and determines the ultimate fate of the environment. It is God's utter opposition to moral disorder which explains why he will destroy this world, but only that he might create a new heavens and a new earth, the perfect environment. It should be added that the Bible is not crystal clear on exactly what is meant by "*reserved for fire*" and other Scriptures stress that there is an essential continuity between the present created order and the new created order that will be brought into being. For example, there is an essential continuity between the future resurrection bodies of God's people and our present bodies though the glory of

the former will be far, far greater than the puny, vulnerable bodies we now inhabit. But the fact that our present bodies are doomed to die and that the present creation is reserved for fire is due not to natural disorder but moral disorder, something that makes no sense to those who refuse to accept that a personal and morally perfect Creator rules the universe.

You may have heard what one mountain said to another mountain after an earthquake: "It's not my fault", Where does the fault for environmental disorder lie? Human evil lies behind the devastating hurricanes and tsunamis that have killed so many tens of thousands in recent years. I do not mean that Osama Bin Laden is generating these storms with a doomsday machine operated by a mad Islamic scientist in a nuclear submarine near the Gulf of Mexico. I do not mean that the evil of the drug trade in New Orleans and of oil barons in Texas has caused God to judge these areas with these terrifying storms. I simply mean that a right relationship between God and humanity is the key to environmental harmony and order.

In Hosea 4:3 we read: "*The land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.*" Why does the land and the animal world suffer? The previous verse provides the explanation: "*Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed.*" There is an inseparable link between moral disorder and environmental disorder. All of our environmental problems, including all natural disasters, are the consequence of humanity's rejection of God. Human sin leads us back to environmental chaos.

In Colossians 1 Jesus is presented as "*the image of the invisible God.*" This is Genesis 1 language. It means he is the Ideal Man, the beginning of the new humanity. We are told: "*He is before all things, and in him all things hold together*". The entire universe finds its order and stability in Christ. The relationship between God and Jesus, the New Man, holds the key to all environmental problems. Paul continues:

God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

The website says the New Testament does not enjoin a single environmental duty. It has failed to understand that the cross represents God's ultimate commitment to the environment. The cross is not just about our personal salvation from sin and hell. The cross is about reconciling the entire universe to God. God is profoundly committed to the environment. Rembrandt counseled, "*Choose only one master - Nature.*" But the way forward is not some mystical harmony with nature as in Taoism or mystical harmony with the Buddha mind as in Zen Buddhism. Rather, as we live in harmony with God's plan for his universe then we develop a profound sense of environmental responsibility.

How should we view such contemporary environmental issues as global warming? Australian of the Year, Dr. Tim Flannery recently stated that climate change is now at tipping point and the world could face "dangerous" climate change this decade if current levels of polluting continued. Apparently global temperatures have risen by 0.6 degrees in the past 140 years. Graham Farquhar from the Australian National University's Climate Centre believes that 'global dimming', caused by air pollution preventing the penetration of the sun's rays to the ground, is reducing evaporation. Less solar radiation with warming surface temperatures reduces precipitation, leading to a drier world and longer, harsher droughts in Australia. Certainly, most scientists are in agreement that the burning of fossil fuels and land-clearing do contribute to global warming. Our understanding of the inseparable link between the moral and natural orders means we are not surprised when we see damage done to the environment by

human greed and negligence.

For most non-Westerners, however, global warming is not viewed as the greatest environmental crisis. Do you know what Nepal's major export is? Dirt. Impoverished people live in Nepal's Himalayas who need wood for cooking. They chop down trees and the inevitable result is soil erosion, soil swept into Bangladesh by rains, raising the water table in Bangladesh and ever-increasing the severity of floods and loss of life because of them. Soil erosion and water management, not global warming, are the major environmental problems faced by most people in our world.

What can we say in helping us as Christians and as a church to become more environmentally responsible?

1. *We need to understand the root cause of environmental problems.* As we preach the message of the cross we need to help people to see that human evil damages not just personal lives but the entire workings of the universe, including earth's environment. Sometimes we see human greed doing direct damage to the environment as, for example, with the rapid deforestation of Brazilian forests. Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, "*[Forests are] the 'lungs' of our land, purifying the air and giving fresh strength to our people.*" To clear forests is akin to surgically removing the lungs of the world. Christians should be concerned about any threat to forests.
2. *We need to learn to treasure nature.* The knowledge that human evil lies behind all environmental problems and that this world is "reserved for fire" does not warrant fatalism nor justify environmental irresponsibility. As Andrew Cameron rightly observes, "*In the Bible 'eschatology' never overturns creation*". We know there will be no marriage in heaven. This doesn't mean we shouldn't enjoy rightful sex in the present. Paul teaches, "*For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving*" (1 Tim 4:4). "*The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it*" (Ps 24:1) so we must treasure it, not ravage it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, "*Many eyes go through the meadow, but few see the flowers in it.*" John Burroughs said, "*You must have the bird in your heart before you can find it in the bush.*" Preparing this sermon has highlighted my own lack of appreciation for the beauty and wonder of creation. Charles Lindbergh once asked, "*How long can men thrive between walls of brick, walking on asphalt pavements, breathing the fumes of coal and of oil, growing, working, dying, with hardly a thought of wind, and sky, and fields of grain, seeing only machine-made beauty, the mineral-like quality of life?*"

I find it hard to appreciate nature when I live in an urban jungle and spend most of my life indoors or driving a car. I need to take long walks that take me through fields and parkland. I need to address my ignorance about the wonders of nature.

We need to learn to treasure our experience of God's creation. Roger Miller observed, "*Some people walk in the rain, others just get wet.*" For me this recalls the time when rain would eventually fall in the dry, hot Punjab where we served as missionaries. I see our four children dancing in the rain with delight, their clothes saturated. What a blessing from God rain is! Oh, that Australians would see rain for what it is, not just subject to the vicissitudes of nature, but a wonderful gift of God, to be sought from God. Surely, we are being environmentally responsible when we help Australians to see their need to call on God for rain. This does not obviate the need to use God-given wisdom to consider and debate other possible solutions, for example, desalination plants, more dams, recycling programs, population ceilings or whatever else might need to be done to ensure good use of limited water supplies.

3. *Churches and Christians need to set an example that discourages wastefulness in use of resources.* How can we conserve them better?
 - a. Recycling is important. Some of this has been inefficient, but it has made us think more seriously about waste and has helped people to see that waste can be a useful resource, e.g. treated sewage as a soil conditioner.
 - b. Some of us should consider joining a local environmental group.
 - c. We need to decide what to do about plastic packaging. Ann Young says:

Yes, it is important - and it is even more important that plastic waste doesn't enter waterways. Using cloth shopping bags is the easiest first step. Avoiding fast foods packed in plastic containers is another - especially if you make your reasons clear to the company concerned. Many plastic bottles are recyclable, so favour products packed in bottles you know your council recycling will handle.
 - d. Andrew Cameron recommends making it a point to have a church clean-up to coincide with CleanUp Australia Day (a Sunday event) or even have a few churches in an area get together for this purpose. It may mean changing the times of services on that Sunday to make this possible. Cameron suggests providing a midday barbeque for the "CleanUp" people.