



The Green Christian?

Greenpeace¹ campaigns on a range of environmental issues such as nuclear waste, deforestation, overfishing, genetically modified foodstuffs and oil drilling in the Arctic.

Should we also, as God's covenant people, care about the physical environment and resources of this earth? Has the Lord provided us with the earth merely as His means to supply our physical needs? This world is all going to burn anyway,² therefore is caring for the present earth's environment just like polishing the brass on a sinking ship? Is being 'green' a form of pantheistic pagan "tree-hugging" which is inconsistent with a true profession of faith in Christ?

If we are going to answer these questions rightly, we must see what our Lord teaches us in His Word about our relationship to this earth.

A glorious environment

In Psalm 8, David bursts forth in praise: "O LORD, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth, Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens!" The glory of the Lord is reflected and revealed in what He has made. He is the One who has set the moon and stars in place, positioning the celestial bodies with his 'fingers'. He is the One who fashioned the land creatures: "Sheep and oxen, And also the beasts of the field". Think of giraffes, ant-eaters, snow leopards, platypus(es) for example. He is the One who designed the swimming creatures: "Fish of the sea, whatever passes through the paths of the seas." Think of whales, jellyfish, marlin. He is the One who created the flying creatures: "The birds of the heavens". Think of albatrosses, hummingbirds, peacocks.

This creation shows the greatness, splendor, majesty and power of the Creator Himself. Have you ever looked up at the stars and thought about this earth spinning in space, suspended in the heavens at just the right distance from the sun to sustain life? The late Neil Armstrong said after the Apollo mission to the moon:

"It suddenly struck me that this tiny pea, pretty and blue, was the Earth. I put up my thumb and shut one eye, and my thumb blotted out the planet Earth. I didn't feel like a giant. I felt very, very small."

How puny is man, how insignificant in size, in power, in influence. We are truly tiny fragments in a giant universe. This humbling reality is expressed by the psalmist (Psalm 8:4-5). However, even though we are so small when compared to the vastness which God has made, even though we are so lacking in power and authority when compared to the majesty and might of our Creator, yet He has made us "a little lower" than Him. Only we, as human beings, amongst the myriads of life-forms, have been made in the image of our Creator. We are different and distinct from all other creatures and have been established by God at the apex of His created order on this planet.

In the beginning, God blessed man by giving the human race a responsible task. He said to our ancestors Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and **subdue** it; and **rule** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen 1:28) This glorious God-given task is often termed the "dominion mandate" or "cultural mandate". David puts it this way in Psalm 8 "You make him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet." God has delegated mastery of the earth to mankind.

A damaged environment

When Adam fell into sin, everything became very difficult, dominion became a struggle. God said:

“Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.”

Genesis 3:17b-19a

These words describe our presently groaning terrestrial environment. If you are in any doubt, just ask NZ kiwifruit growers whose vines are affected by the spreading bacterium *pseudomonas syringae pv. actinidiae* (psa). Alternatively talk to New Zealand beekeepers about the parasitic varroa mite which is destroying beehives across our land. Anyone who has a vegetable garden knows about the battle of keeping weeds and pests at bay.

When man ceased to honour and obey God, he also ceased to properly understand his relationship to this creation, despite the evident reality that the universe itself clearly displays the power and divinity of God.³ The darkened heart of man leads to foolish living where this creation is not viewed as being an instrument to glorify God. Instead, nature is seen merely as a tool or a toy to serve mankind. When natural resources are unwisely plundered to support unsustainable lifestyles the results include over-fishing, deforestation, species extinction, pollution, topsoil erosion and desertification. Productive farmland is turned into urban house sections and toxic waste dumps proliferate. Greedy over-consumption of resources fuels the idolatry of self-centred materialism. The dominion mandate is abused and the name of the Lord dishonoured.

This mandate has been used by some people to blame Christians for environmental degradation through excessive exploitation. The “Lynn White Thesis”⁴ linked the technological advances of medieval Christianity to the emergence of an aggressively exploitative attitude towards nature. White proposed that Christianity therefore bore “a great burden of guilt” for the current environmental crisis.

Celtic Christianity, together with the Benedictine and Cistercian monastic movements certainly developed technology which liberated time for spiritual pursuits. However, the ‘dark satanic mills’⁵ of the industrial revolution and the pollution of the environment are more a function of ungodly greed than faithful Christian living. It is true that some Christians see care for our physical environment as a low priority or even irrelevant to a life of faith. However, pollution and a lack of concern for the environment have been features of many cultures in history. Environmental damage through human activity is by no means restricted to the western industrialised world.

A Christian environment

Scripture provides us with principles for exercising God-glorifying dominion in a post-fall world. Here are some of the axioms for Christian environmentalism which are revealed in the Bible.

Firstly, this world does not belong to us; God is the owner.⁶ We are stewards of everything we have been given dominion over.⁷ God therefore expects us to use the resources which he has entrusted to us wisely. Francis Schaeffer said “*If I love the Lover, I love what the Lover has made.*”⁸ Farming, mining, drilling for oil, fishing, hunting for food, or pest control are all permissible activities for mankind. However the reaping of earth resources must be performed in such a way that due care is taken of the creation.⁹ Greed, which is idolatry,¹⁰ has often led to exploitation and abuse of the creation.

Secondly, God highly values all the flora and fauna with which He has populated His world. God cares for all the creatures He has made. He knows when even a single sparrow falls to the ground.¹¹ Think, for example, of the compassion of the Lord for the cattle in Nineveh.¹² All plants and animals receive their food and drink from God.¹³ He clothes the grass of the field.¹⁴ The diversity of species on the planet gives glory to God, as well as providing essential ecosystems for

the ongoing survival of His many varied creatures. Biodiversity should be preserved if at all possible.¹⁵

Thirdly, our dominion over animals is never to be ruthless and uncaring, but should reflect the concern which God has for what He has made.¹⁶ We are to rule Creation in such a way that God is glorified in, and through, our faithful dominion.¹⁷

Fourthly, we are not to worship the creation.¹⁸ The New Age movement and much of 'green politics' has elevated the creation to be a pantheistic god. Mankind is seen by some as being equal in status to all other creatures. John Davis, editor of Earth First Journal, has said "*Human beings, as a species, have no more value than slugs.*" Some people even elevate animals above men and women, who have been created in the image of God.

The purpose of creation is neither to be man's servant, nor man's equal, nor man's superior but primarily to give glory to God. Therefore Christians should be involved in environmental concerns. Christians should speak out against cruelty to animals. Christians should use precious resources wisely until the Lord returns. Christians should lead the way in showing the right relationship between man and his environment. Christians should be known as those who care for God's creation, not as those who abuse what God has made.

However, no matter how well we care for this terrestrial globe, all our faithful efforts for the care of the environment will not save the planet. This world is not our permanent home, but a temporary dwelling place for all mankind.

A Future Environment

The phrase "*Son of man*" in Psalm 8 points to the ultimate environmental fix, even though when the psalmist wrote these words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he did not personally know the Man who would bring that solution. That God-man is Christ Jesus, who when he took on human flesh, became part of the physical universe which had been created through Him and for Him.¹⁹ Jesus Christ has abolished the last enemy death. All things are in subjection under his feet.²⁰ At the time when Christ returns, this present earth will be burned.²¹ This first earth will pass away²² and a new earth will be formed. The new physical environment will no longer be cursed,²³ but will be a home which we, the children of God by grace, can joyfully care for as we fulfill the original purpose of our dominion mandate in the very presence of our Saviour.

Does the Bible then teach that we are to be "Green Christians"? The answer really depends upon what "green" means. Here is a brief definition. A 'Green Christian' does not worship this creation, does not elevate creatures to God-given status of man and does not view this world merely as a servant for man's needs. The 'Green Christian' remembers the temporary nature of this world, and knows that we do have a God-given mandate to care for this world during our sojourn here.²⁴ The Green Christian trusts that Christ will enable him/her to glorify God as we rule this world together in his name, as good stewards. Are you this type of 'Green Christian'?

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Notes

¹ greenpeace.org

² 2 Peter 3:10

³ Romans 1:20-21

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- ⁴ White, Lynn, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155, whole no. 3767 (March 10, 1967), 1203-12.
- ⁵ A line from a short poem by William Blake epitomising the environmental effects of the English industrial revolution, later incorporated into the anthem "Jerusalem" with music by Hubert Parry (1916)
- ⁶ Psalm 24:1
- ⁷ Matthew 25:14-30
- ⁸ Francis Schaeffer *Pollution and the Death of Man*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1970.
- ⁹ An example of this principle would be the sabbatical year provision for the land to remain fallow every seven years (Lev 25:3-4)
- ¹⁰ Colossians 3:5
- ¹¹ Matthew 10:29
- ¹² Jonah 4:11
- ¹³ Psalm 104:14
- ¹⁴ Matthew 6:30
- ¹⁵ Genesis 6:19
- ¹⁶ e.g. Exodus 23:5; Proverbs 12:10
- ¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 10:31
- ¹⁸ Exodus 20.3
- ¹⁹ Colossians 1:16
- ²⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:27a
- ²¹ 2 Peter 3:7
- ²² Revelation 21:1
- ²³ Revelation 22:3
- ²⁴ Genesis 1:28; Psalm 8:6