



EXTRACT FROM THE
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ON

THE BIBLICAL BASE FOR THE CARE OF CREATION

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Neither the Old nor New Testaments provide an integrated doctrine of ‘nature’. Indeed, the very word ‘nature’ is absent from the Hebrew language. To deal, therefore, with 21st Century environmental issues, such as climate change or over-population, requires careful analysis and application of Scriptural principles. The created order is intimately tied up with God’s purposes for the salvation of mankind and, therefore, follows the Biblical pattern of creation, fall and redemption. The principles we find relating to 21st Century environmental problems are laid down in Creation, applied in the Fall and reinforced in Redemption.¹

Creation

The Creation narratives (Genesis 1, 2) and poems (e.g. Psalm 104) form the timeless, yet ever relevant, principles surrounding a Christian attitude to the environment.

1. The Created Order is Good

Repeatedly, God proclaims that His creation is good (Gen. 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Its goodness is reflected in its biodiversity, sensory appeal and plenty. God so orders His creation so as to make it a place of shalom.

a. God is the Source – the Bible begins by asserting that ‘*God created the heavens and the earth*’. The origin of the created order is to be found neither in matter nor in nothing, but in God. That is not to say God is not transcendent, nor is it to say that God is not immanent, simply that God created. Furthermore, in God all things hold together (Col. 1:17), sustaining all things by his powerful word (Hebrews 1:3). Since the created order finds its source and sustenance in God, we must conclude that it is valuable to Him and has an intrinsic positive value in itself. The ‘natural’ world belongs to God by right of creation.

b. God is the Centre – humans possess one of three attitudes towards the created order. First, some are *biocentrists*. In general, Eastern religions and the spawning New Age consider all of the natural order to be One. As romantic as this may sound, biocentrism has not prevented the deforestation of large tracts of India and China; nor has it always treated humans with the dignity they deserve. As one writer comments, “*the quest for the humane treatment of beasts by lowering people to the level of animals leads only to the beastly treatment of humans.*”² Secondly, some are *anthropocentrists*. The great monotheistic religions believe that the natural order exists for mankind. There is no Scriptural doubt man is the zenith and peak of God’s creation, but this does not allow us to be arrogant about our ownership or self-importance. Rather, the first two chapters of Genesis, taken together with Psalm 104, force us to adopt a theocentric position. Cas Labuschagne explains, “*the creation is God’s and the ultimate purpose of creation is not just humanity, but rather the embodiment and expression of God’s greatness and majesty in the creation.*”³

¹ For the purpose of this paper, Creation is used to describe Genesis 1-2; Fall to describe Genesis 3 to Malachi 4; Redemption to describe Matthew 1 to Revelation 22. Strictly speaking these are not accurate delineations, since Redemption begins in Genesis 3:16.

² *A Biblical Perspective on Environmental Stewardship*
http://www.acton.org/ppolicy/environment/theology/m_protest.html

³ M. A. Jeeves and R. J. Berry, *Science, Life and Christian Belief*, Leicester: Apollos, 1998.

Professor Lynn White, an American historian, has argued that the exploitative attitude to nature adopted by much of Western technology is a direct result of the Judaeo-Christian belief that since people were created to have dominion over nature, they can treat the natural environment as they like. He wrote, “*Christianity ... insisted that it was God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends ... Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt.*”⁴ However, these views can be challenged on both historical and theological grounds. Historically, environmental abuse is not only found in Christendom – before the time of Jesus the Romans were notoriously liberal with their use of lead compounds. Today, one only has to visit the polluted Ganges or the smog-filled air of Tokyo to realise that the problem isn’t exclusively Christian. Likewise, from the Middle Ages onwards, Christians like Bacon and Descartes developed a positive concern for nature. Theologically, a proper understanding of biblical dominion is expressed in terms of a caring, responsible authority where human beings act as God’s stewards and obey divine moral limits.

c. God is the Reason – the Book of Job and Psalm 104 shed light on God’s pleasure in His created order, helping us understand that the natural world is not merely for human use. Job 38:26ff tells us that God waters lands and causes grass to grow where no-one lives. And why did God create the behemoth and leviathan (Job 40, 41)? According to Psalm 104:26, the leviathan is created to frolic in the sea – for pure enjoyment! Psalm 104 is the pleasure of God in His creation.

The created order belongs to God. As human beings we must not be so arrogant as to snatch ownership from its maker. Our relationship to the environment is therefore primarily a theological issue.

2. Man is a Part of Nature and Apart from Nature

The heading of this section was famously coined by the Christian geneticist Professor R. J. Berry. Mankind is part of the created order. He is created on the same day as the animals; he is created from the dust of the earth; he lives in the Garden. Mankind is literally the ‘earth creature’. We cannot therefore distance ourselves from the created order because we are part of that created order. Nor can we damage the created order without damaging ourselves. Psalm 104:23 presents the life of man within the scheme of the created order.

However, mankind is also unique. God deliberates over mankind’s creation and function (Gen. 1:26). God also makes man ‘in’, or more accurately ‘as’ His image (Gen. 1:28). Following on from a suzerain-vassal covenant, we are to regard ourselves as those whom God appoints to rule in His stead. We are His stewards, set apart from ‘nature’ on behalf of the God who declares its goodness and finds pleasure in it. By placing humans above non-humans, proper environmental stewardship will acknowledge that human needs are superior to non-human needs, when the two are in conflict.

3. Stewardship does not mean *status quo*

Man is created and given three commands – fill, subdue and rule. We are to understand the fulfilment of these commands in relation to our being the image of

⁴ L. White, *Science*, 155, 10th March 1967, pp 1204-1207.

God. As God's stewards, we are to fill the earth, subdue the earth and rule the creatures of the earth. God created the cosmos and pronounced it 'good' – our responsibility as His stewards is to keep it good by obeying His commands. The good of the created order is thus expressed in mankind filling, subduing and ruling. Over-population and its subsequent over-exploitation of natural resources may seem like obedience to the commands God gave, but God does not command mankind to treat the finite cosmos as if it was infinite, nor to damage it. Over-exploitation is therefore prohibited. It is a non-trivial fact that in discussing the trees of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:9a, "*the aesthetic is placed before the utilitarian. We are to enjoy creation just as God did when he proclaimed it to be 'very good'. Enjoyment in this way and destruction do not belong together.*"⁵

Stewardship however, does not mean stagnant preservation. In the New Testament parable of the talents, the manager who merely preserves his talent is condemned (Matt. 25:14-30). God calls us to conserve and manage, not merely to preserve. This implies the careful management of habitats, but taken in connection with the other commands God gave to mankind (fill, subdue, rule), it does not imply the cessation of technological advance nor the non-exploitation of natural resources. The function of the steward is to manage environmental change.

The parable of the talents reminds us also that the steward is accountable for his actions. The earth belongs to the Lord (Psalm 24:1) and He has placed us here as His managers. We are therefore accountable to Him for how we have managed (or mismanaged) His creation always remembering that 'nature' does not exist simply to meet our material needs, but also to provide us (and our Maker) with pleasure and enjoyment.

4. Dominion does not mean Domination

The anthropocentric view of many Christians has often substituted domination for dominion. God does not command us to act as tyrants or despots. Dominion implies responsible kingship (in the mould of King David and his greater Son Jesus – Psalm 72:8; Psalm 110:2). "*The Hebrew understanding was of a ruler totally responsible for his subject's welfare – caring, feeding, protecting (e.g. Psalm 72:1-2).*"⁶ Deuteronomy 17:14-20 shows what the Hebrews understood by rule. Likewise, in Genesis 1:29-30 mankind is commanded to share the earth's vegetation with other creatures – not to use up all the earth's resources for human needs alone. "*People, the land, and all of its creatures are not to be relentlessly pursued.*"⁷

One area in which dominion was exercised was in the serving and keeping of the land (Genesis 2:15). Mankind's dominion was exercised in active and responsible management of the land itself. The verb '*shamar*', to keep, carries the connotation of a loving, caring, sustaining keeping, such as we experience through the Aaronic blessing (the Lord bless you and keep you) – "*as God keeps his believing people, so should God's people keep creation.*"⁸

⁵ G. Prance, *Preserving Biodiversity: Is there a Biblical Reason*, <http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/cis/prance/index.html>

⁶ R. J. Berry, *God's Book of Works*, London, T & T Clark, 2003.

⁷ C. B. De Witt, <http://www.ausable.org/or.resources.online.1.cfm>

⁸ C. B. De Witt, <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1994/PSCF6-94DeWitt.html>

In summary therefore, we live in God's world. We are stewards of God's World. We will be held accountable for our management of the earth.

Fall

The Fall of mankind through sin devastated the earth. Never again, in this age, shall we live in Eden.

1. The Impact of the Fall

God's curse of the earth means that 'nature' does not work as it should. It is imperfect and according to Moss, "*cannot therefore ever be managed with complete success, however well understood, or however faithfully valid ethical principles are applied in decision-making.*"⁹ Similarly sinful human beings abuse the environment – mankind's lack of care for the created order is a symptom of his sinfulness. Berry writes, "*Abuse of the natural world is disobedience to God, not merely an error of judgement.*"¹⁰

2. Noahic Covenant

Six times throughout Genesis 9:8-17 does God reiterate that His covenant is not merely with Noah but with 'every living creature'. The rainbow is a sign of God's covenant with the earth. God is committed to the earth and all life on it.

3. Moses and the Environment

Behind the creation narratives, the rest of the Pentateuch gives us the clearest teaching about God's concern for earth ethics.

a. The Sabbath Principle – Exodus 20:8-11 extends the Sabbath principle to livestock – farm animals are to be rested on the Sabbath. Leviticus 25:1-7, 18-22 describes a Sabbath year, where the land is allowed to rest and lie fallow for one year out of seven – the food growing in the land being eaten by the owners, their servants, aliens, livestock and wild animals. Following God's cycle will ensure successful yields.

b. The Jubilee Principle – In Leviticus 25:8-17, 23-24 the fiftieth year is the year of Jubilee where debts are cancelled and the land is allowed a further opportunity to rest and recuperate. The Sabbath and Jubilee principles allow good land management. They promote biodiversity and the restoration of the soil. Prance writes, "*This is different from much of modern agriculture that over-uses the soil drastically, kills biodiversity with chemicals and pollutes the river and water tables.*"¹¹ Modern examples of what happens when the Sabbath and Jubilee principle is ignored are the American Dustbowl and the degradation of Sicily's grain production.

c. 'Natural Justice' – the Pentateuch is full of 'odd' commands concerning the treatment of wildlife (e.g. Leviticus 22:27-29; Deuteronomy 22:6-7; 25:4; Exodus 23:19). Wenham points out that the reason for such commands "*could well be a combination of outrage at the apparent heartlessness of such a custom and the subversion of the natural order that it implies: milk should be used for sustaining the*

⁹ R. Moss, *The Earth in our Hands*, Leicester, IVP, 1982.

¹⁰ R. J. Berry, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Prance, *op. cit.*

kid's life not cooking it."¹² Killing a bird and its chicks could compromise the survival of the species. The Bible therefore advocates sustaining the life of man, animals and plants.

d. Fruitfulness – in Deuteronomy 20:19-20 the fruit trees of a besieged city may be plucked, but not destroyed. Their fruit is to be enjoyed, but their fruitfulness is not to be destroyed – “*We are permitted to use the fruit of creation, but we are not allowed to destroy the ability of creation to be fruitful.*”¹³ The destruction of ‘nature’s’ ability to be fruitful has caused and is causing rapid desertification and loss of habitat.

4. The Prophets and the Environment

The moral failures of God’s people are reflected in the fertility and fruitfulness of the land (Hosea 4:1-3). Loss of habitat and ecological disaster are functions of mankind’s sinfulness.

God is concerned for His creation – He is committed to it by covenant arrangement and has set down principles by which the fruit of the environment may be exploited whilst the fruitfulness of the environment may be maintained.

Redemption

Although the New Testament does not contain as many references to the natural order as the Old, it does reinforce and further creation teaching.

1. Jesus and ‘Nature’

The very fact we talk at all of the man ‘Jesus’ is testimony to God’s commitment to the created order. The Son of God took flesh; God chose to take a material body in order to save us. Thus, embedded within Christianity itself, is an inherent respect for matter. Matter is important to God. Added to that is Jesus’ own respect for, and interest in, the created order. He speaks of plants, seeds, birds and flowers. The Christian has no right to ruthlessly or thoughtlessly destroy that which God cares for (Matt. 10:29-30).

2. Salvation and ‘Nature’

Colossians 1:19-20 confirm that Christ’s death does not merely reconcile mankind to God, but the whole created order to God. He did not just die for us, but to reconcile to himself ‘all things’. God’s care for His cosmos extended to the reversal of the curse of the fall. One common objection to Christian environmentalism is that as Christians, since this world is doomed to destruction, we must focus on our spiritual lives and show no concern for the material. However, God showed enough concern for the material to become material Himself. Similarly, our salvation is holistic – we do not anticipate heaven being a place of disembodied spirits, but glorified people – perfected spirits re-united with glorified bodies. Since we care here for our bodies, even though they are doomed to destruction, should we not also care for the natural world? Christian pietism is no excuse for environmental sin.

¹² G. Wenham, *The Bible and the Environment*, <http://jri.org.uk/resource/bible-wenham.htm>

¹³ S. Bouma-Prediger, *Creation Care and Character: The Nature and Necessity of the Ecological Virtues*, <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1998/PSCF3-98Bouma.html>

3. Glory and 'Nature'

Romans 8:18-22 reinforces the function of the created order. At the present time, the whole creation is groaning. It groans because it was created to glorify God and yet, because of the sinfulness of mankind, it cannot fully fulfil its purpose. Cranfield writes, "*We may think of the whole magnificent theatre of the universe together with all its splendid properties and all the chorus of sub-human life, created to glorify God but unable to do so fully, so long as man the chief actor in the drama of God's praise fails to contribute his rational part.*"¹⁴ However, as Christians begin to glorify God for and through His creation, and as we anticipate the return of Christ and our attendant perfection, the created order will once again function as it was created.

¹⁴ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. I, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1980.