

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### *THINKING BIBLICALLY ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT*

Recently, Chuck Colson referred to a movie entitled “The Happening,” in which plants, threatened by a growing human population, release toxin into the air that causes people to kill themselves. Science fiction to be sure! But, the nation of Switzerland has passed laws and regulations that establish the principles of the “dignity” for plants. Actions and activities cannot “disturb the vital functions or lifestyles” of plants. In the 1990s, Switzerland amended its constitution to require that “account is to be taken of the dignity of creation when handling animals, plants and other organisms.” Last spring the Swiss parliament heard a report from a panel they had established to look into how this amended constitution impacts the making of law. The panel concluded that people do not have “absolute ownership” over plants and that “individual plants have an inherent worth.” Conclusion of the panel: “[W]e may not use them as we please, even if the plant community is not in danger.”

Although this is quite bizarre, such conclusions are the natural result of abandoning the unique value and worth of human beings created in God’s image. Plants now have rights! This is a worldview question and we obviously need clarity on how a biblical worldview would answer the claim that plants have rights, dignity and exist in a community.

A few years ago, I wrote a book on Ethics in which I included a chapter on our ethical obligations as Christians when it comes to the environment. I want to use that chapter to guide our thinking on this topic:

That there is immense confusion on the subject of the environment is an understatement; but this confusion extends even to theology. In 1993 Ron Sider reported that at a 1990 meeting of the World Council of Churches held in Seoul, South Korea, he could not persuade the delegates to add to a resolution on the environment a statement that read, “We accept the biblical teaching that people alone have been created in the image of God.” The debate centered on the term “alone.” The majority of attendees at this international conference were unwilling to affirm what historical, biblical theology has always affirmed: that human beings **alone** are created in the image of God. In today’s world there remains enormous confusion on how to think about the environment. Shirley MacLaine says we must declare that we are all gods. Disciplined but unchastened Catholic theologian Matthew Fox says we should turn from a theology centered on sin and redemption and develop a creation spirituality, with nature as our primary revelation and sin as a distant memory. In 1967 historian Lynn White, Jr. argued that it is precisely the Christian view of persons and nature that created the whole ecological mess. Meanwhile, many evangelicals come close to celebrating the demise of planet Earth, enthusiastically citing the decay as proof Christ’s return.

Complicating things further is the emergence, within Christianity, of the doctrine of Gaia, most famously represented in Rosemary Ruether's book *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: Harper, 1993). Ruether argues that male domination of women and male domination of nature are interconnected. She defines "sin" as wrong relationships among human beings and between them and the rest of nature that foster not just economic and political injustice and racism and sexism, but also the destruction of the entire created order. The Gaia hypothesis, so central to Ruether's argument, centers on the thesis that the earth is a living creature. The theory, in fact, imputes a kind of divine power to the Earth. "She" is alive and respect for her is at the center of restoring the right relationships destroyed by male dominion.

What are we to think about all of this? Is Christianity to blame for the environmental crisis? As Christians, how are we to treat the physical world? What is the value of non-human life? How much care do we as Christians need to take in relation to nature? How does God look at non-human creation? In 1970, Francis Schaeffer published one of his most important books, *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton: Tyndale). It remains a pioneering work and continues to influence my thinking on the environment and my responsibility to God in this area. Several key points:

- **Inadequate Views on Human Responsibility toward Creation**

Theology is the major issue in the current debate about how to view the physical environment. There are at least three inadequate theological perspectives in the culture today. First is the Christian view, often associated with St. Francis of Assisi, that all aspects of God's physical creation are equal, that there is no difference between the birds and humans. Legends about Francis have him preaching to the birds, and giving counsel to a wolf threatening a small town in Italy. But the particulars of God's creation are not equal. Genesis 1 and 2 make it clear that humans are the crown of God's creation. Humans are the only ones who bear His image. Jesus did not die for birds; He died for human beings. Second is pantheism, the view that all reality is one: All is God and God is all. The reason we do not want to cut down California Redwoods is because they are god. The reason we save the whales is because they are god. Such is the pantheistic position reflected in the views of Shirley MacClaine, the Gaia hypothesis and the entire New Age worldview. But the Bible will have none of this. The Bible does teach the presence of God everywhere (e.g., Psalm 139) but rejects that all is God. He created all things and is above and beyond His physical creation. Therefore, pantheism is simply an unacceptable position. Third is a commitment to a platonic dichotomy, i.e., that the spiritual world is all that is important; the material world has no value to God or to us as His disciples. The world is passing away so it does not matter whether we treat it well or abuse it. The Bible will have none of this either. Scripture details the goodness of God's creation (e.g., Genesis 1 and 2; 1 Timothy 4:4). It is simply wrong to reject God's physical creation as evil. Furthermore, the physical body is of such importance to God that He will one day resurrect it. Nothing speaks more powerfully about its goodness than that.

- **Biblical Principles for a Proper View of the Environment**

- **A proper biblical view of the physical creation begins with a proper view of God.** The challenge is to keep in balance God's transcendence and His immanence. God's transcendence focuses on his radical separateness from creation; He is both above and beyond His physical world. God's immanence focuses on His presence in His physical world. To stress His immanence at the expense of His transcendence is to land in pantheism where everything is god. To stress His transcendence at the expense of his immanence is to see the physical world as insignificant and a tool for exploitation. Neither is satisfactory nor God-honoring. There needs to be a balance between both God's transcendence and His immanence, between His intimate involvement in all aspects of his physical creation (see Psalm 139) and His radical distinction from creation. Where it is finite, limited, dependent; He is infinite, unlimited and self-sufficient.
- **Second, is a proper view of humans.** Human beings are both interdependent with the rest of creation and unique within it, because we alone bear His image and have stewardship over the Earth. Christians frequently forget our interdependence with the rest of God's world. Our daily existence depends on water, sun and air. There is indeed a global ecosystem. It matters how we treat the water, the trees and the other animals. If they are harmed so are we. There is this vital, interdependent relationship that comes from the creative hand of God.

But the Bible also declares human uniqueness. This book has made much of humans as image-bearers of God. No other physical part of God's world can claim this. Humans also have dominion status. God declares in Genesis 1:26-30 that humans have the responsibility to rule (have dominion) over the nonhuman creation. Tragically, this dominion has frequently turned to exploitation. As argued in chapter ten of this book, Genesis 2:15 is the corrective to exploitation. Humans are to serve and watch lovingly, almost worshipfully, over God's creation. We are God's stewards over His creation. He has the sovereignty; we have the dominion. Francis Schaeffer also argues that humans have two relationships—one upward and one downward. The upward relationship accentuates the personal relationship humans might have with God, a relationship not enjoyed by the rest of the created order. The downward relationship accentuates the "creaturely" relationship that humans share with the rest of the created order (see Genesis 2:7 and Job 34:14,15). As in most issues, the struggle is to keep the two in balance. We tend to so highlight the upward relationship to the virtual exclusion of the downward. This leads to horrific neglect or ruthless exploitation of the physical world. Or we tend to highlight the downward to the virtual exclusion of the upward. This is the gross error of the evolutionary hypothesis, which sees humans as the product of the impersonal force of natural selection, not of God's purposeful design.

- **Third, the non-human creation is of great significance to God.** He created the physical world as a deliberate act. God also takes pleasure in His physical world. This is clear from the creation ordinance in Genesis 1 and 2 and from 1 Timothy 4:4: "For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude." See also Psalm 104:31 where we see God rejoicing in His works. The point is that if the physical world is of importance to God, then it must be to us—His creatures—as well (see also Job 39:1-2, Colossians 1:16 and Psalms 19:1-4).

As Ron Sider points out, it is likewise imperative that we note that God has a covenant, not only with humans but also with nonhuman creation. After the flood, God made a covenant with the physical creation: “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark (Genesis 9:9-10). The physical world has dignity, worth and value quite apart from its service to humanity. Incredibly, God’s plan for redemption has a cosmic quality to it. As Sider states, “This fact provides a crucial foundation for building a Christian theology for an environmental age. The biblical hope that the whole created order, including the material world of bodies and rivers and trees, will be part of the kingdom confirms that the created order is good and important. Romans 8:19-23 demonstrates that at Christ’s return the groaning of creation will cease, for the creation will be transformed: “The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (v. 21, NIV).

- **The Motivation for Good Stewardship**

Since we are God’s stewards over His creation, what should be our motivation? Are we good stewards for **pragmatic** reasons or for **moral** reasons? The pragmatic view posits that we should be good stewards over God’s world because our very survival depends on it. For example, if we farm the hills irresponsibly, we will lose topsoil and harm our ability to produce food. If we wantonly kill snakes, eventually we will be overrun by rodents. If we mine copper irresponsibly, we will cause horrendous erosion that harms the waters. If we burn the rainforests, we pollute the air and destroy oxygen-producing trees, which in turn threaten our supply of oxygen. But the Bible rejects this as the motivating force for good stewardship.

Instead, Scripture implores humans to exercise good stewardship over the physical world because to do so demonstrates honor and respect for God’s created order. The physical creation should not be exploited, because it is morally wrong to misuse God’s created order. Having God’s perspective, we responsibly farm, we shun wanton destruction of animal life, we responsibly mine copper and we cease burning the rainforests because we respect and honor that which God has honored and respected. We show honor to the physical world with which God has a covenant relationship. Christians should, therefore, be the leaders in responsible environmentalism. As God’s theocratic stewards, we represent Him when we honor His physical world.

- **The Environmental Solution**

Schaefter argues that the church needs to be a “pilot plant” where the proper relationships between human beings and the physical world is modeled. The church, he states, must be a place “where men can see in our congregations and missions a substantial healing of all divisions, the alienations, man’s rebellion has produced.” This macro-plan for reconciliation must begin with the church. It involves five dimensions:

**Humans properly related to God.** For any type of reconciliation to occur, humans must trust Jesus Christ for salvation. This is what the Apostle Paul meant when he referred to his ministry as one of “reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18)—reconciling God and humanity through the finished work of Jesus Christ. Humans will never exercise proper God-honoring stewardship without first being reconciled to Him through Christ.

**The human properly related to self.** Humans must see themselves as God sees them—of infinite value as creatures and, in Christ, as redeemed. Because we have God’s view of self, there is proper respect for the body as eternally significant. A mark of the redeemed Christian is a commitment to care for and respect one’s body. It belongs to God and to allow it to be an instrument of sin or to treat it with disrespect is to say something about God, for He created and redeemed it. The Christian is no longer independent but forever dependent on the Lord who purchased him (see Romans 12:1-2, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

**Humans properly related to other humans.** Because we now have Christ’s mind, Christians view other humans through God’s eyes. Christians treat all humans with respect, realizing shared creatureliness and shared value as image-bearers of God. This is at the heart of Jesus’ command to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbors as ourselves. The Good Samaritan story powerfully illustrates **how** one loves one’s neighbor (Luke 10:30-37). All humans, redeemed and unredeemed, are of value and worth to God.

**Humans properly related to nature.** Humans are to treat all aspects of God’s physical creation with respect and honor. If all of God’s creation is “good,” then His disciples must have the same regard He has. It is ethically wrong to destroy wantonly what God has created. The non-human creation serves humans and that is the point of having dominion status. But humans serve God’s creation with respect and honor; we are God’s stewards representing Him. Stewardship also implies accountability—to Him.

**Nature properly related to nature.** Romans 8:20-23 makes clear the present “groaning” of creation; it awaits the return of Jesus when it will be restored. Then nature will be properly related to nature and the horrific consequences of human sin that so wreak havoc on the physical creation (see Genesis 3) will end.

In 1988, Mother Teresa and James Lovelock, advocate of the Gaia hypothesis, got into an argument at Oxford University’s Global Forum for Survival. Mother Teresa argued that if we take care of people on the planet, the Earth will survive. Lovelock countered that if we take care of the Earth, humanity’s problems will be solved (Tod Connor, “Is the Earth Alive?,” *Christianity Today* [11 January 1993], 25). In light of God’s Word, both are needed. God makes it clear that if there is repentance and cleansing, he will cleanse the earth as well (see 2 Chronicles 7:14 for example). There is the crying need for balance focusing on humans and focusing on the earth. Both are important to God. Christians must be at the forefront of the ecology movement so that God’s glory is not preempted by a narrow humanistic agenda nor an “antihuman” value system endemic to modern pantheism. We must not conclude that the Earth is good and humanity evil. Also, we must not conclude that being concerned about the environment makes one an advocate of some form of pantheism or the Gaia hypothesis. The beauty and complexity of the Earth are God’s good gifts. We must cultivate respect and honor for God’s physical creation. We are his stewards and He is watching!

See Chuck Colson, “Breakpoint” (4 August 2009) and James P. Eckman, *Biblical Ethics*, pp. 89-95.