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## Eco-Myths

*Don't believe everything you hear about the church and the environmental crisis.*

"David N. Livingstone, Calvin B. DeWitt, and Loren Wilkinson" | posted 6/01/2001 12:00AM

You are at a neighborhood block party. Conversation is lagging-until somebody mentions "the environment." Suddenly your problem is not keeping talk going, but keeping tempers under control.

Fueled by misconceptions, misinformation, and even showmanship, the environmental debate rages in the popular media. One side likes to quote Rush Limbaugh, who paints Vice President Al Gore and friends as "tree huggers"; the other charges "rape of the Earth."

It is not very different in evangelical churches. When it comes to God's creation, evangelicals want to have ardent convictions, though misunderstandings and myths get in the way. Is concern for the earth *biblical*? Should our theology shoulder the blame for the crisis? Is there nothing we can do to make a difference?

CT decided to take such questions to key evangelical thinkers and leaders. When the Evangelical Environmental Network offered to cosponsor a symposium, CT signed on. A dozen people representing an array of disciplines spent the better part of two days late last year hitting the issues head-on. Many of the symposium participants stayed on to help shape "An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation." As expected, there was plenty of vigorous and interesting discussion.

The question arose, for example, concerning whether there really *is* a problem. Nobel laureate Henry Kendall, professor of physics at MIT (one of the few nonevangelicals present), set the stage by reviewing quantifiable evidence. Citing studies on water resources, oceans, soil, and atmosphere, he noted that the scientific community generally agrees that all is not well.

A public-policy shaper also joined the group, putting to rest the notion that all who work for environmental causes are neopagan New Agers. Susan Drake, a former UN representative for the Environmental Protection Agency and now senior conservation adviser for the U.S. State Department, told how Christian faith guided her work in high-level, international environmental forums.

Bunyan Bryant, from the School of Natural Resources and Environment at the University of Michigan, showed that African-Americans are particularly vulnerable to the effects of pollution. Studies show a disproportionate number of Blacks living close to hazardous waste-disposal sites.

Contributing editor Thomas Oden, concerned that "evangelicals not allow themselves to be co-opted by an agenda that is essentially politically motivated," urged symposium participants to think through a uniquely Christian approach to the issues.

The writers included in this CT Institute do just that. Their presentations at the symposium were particularly helpful in tackling "eco-myths." They offer insights that are sure to keep the church's discussion going.

### MYTH 1

#### The Church is to Blame

*David N. Livingstone*

In 1967, historian Lynn White, Jr., provoked a furious controversy by suggesting Christianity was largely to blame for the world's environmental problems. His article in *Science* magazine, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," argued that Christianity had to shoulder such responsibility because its theology was hostile toward the natural order. White's article has been quoted and vigorously debated ever since. Some found in White's analysis a justification for seeing the church as the planet's enemy.

But White's article must first be read in the light of his self-professed Christian faith. His father was a Presbyterian professor of Christian ethics, and White himself remained a lifelong Presbyterian and a frequent contributor to church publications.

Because his article is more often referenced than read, many have missed the subtleties of his argument. White argued that ecological problems grew directly out of the Western world's marriage between science and technology, a marriage that gave birth to power machinery, labor-saving devices, and automation. That is the first point. However, the intellectual origins of this transformation, he said, actually predate both the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century and the scientific revolution of the seventeenth.

It was the Middle Ages, he argued—and, specifically, the medieval view of "man and nature" that brought a decisive shift in attitude: people no longer thought of themselves *as part of* nature but as having dominion *over* nature. According to White, this ruthless attitude toward nature later joined forces with a new technology to wreak environmental havoc.

White ultimately traced this exploitative attitude to the triumph of Christianity over paganism—what he called "the greatest psychic revolution in the history of our culture." Christianity, he insisted, told people that humans had a *right* to dominate nature, and it was therefore "the most anthropocentric religion in the world." All this contrasted with earlier religious traditions in which every tree, spring, and stream had its own guardian spirit. By eliminating animism, he wrote, "Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference."

White's assessment was more complex than this resume might suggest. He recognized that Western Christianity encompassed a variety of distinctive theological traditions, some of which—notably that of Saint Francis of Assisi—were quite reverential toward the created order. Nevertheless, he explicitly insisted that, insofar as Christianity undergirded both science and technology in the West, it bore "a huge burden of guilt" for a natural world now seeing increasing degradation.

Since the appearance of White's article, the idea of blaming Christians for the environmental crisis has attracted a wide range of committed defenders. Max Nicholson, for 14 years director-general of the Nature Conservancy in Great Britain, for instance, insisted that organized religion in general and Christianity in particular were ecologically culpable because they taught "man's unqualified right of dominance over nature."

Historian Arnold Toynbee found in biblical monotheism the mainsprings of "Man's improvidence" toward the natural order. To him, the only solution was to revert to pantheism. Similarly, educator and regional planner Ian McHarg claimed that Judeo-Christian theology produced "the tacit Western posture of man versus nature" by asserting "outrageously the separateness and dominance of man over nature."

### **The prosecution falters**

The arguments of White and his defenders have also been widely criticized, of course. There is much about their position that is questionable. In 1970, historian Lewis Moncrief expressed misgivings about looking for single causes for the environmental crisis. Instead of pinning blame for environmental recklessness on Judeo-Christian dogma, he argued for the significance of a range of cultural factors. Two were especially prominent: democratization in the wake of the French Revolution and, in the American context, the frontier experience. On the one hand, such developments led to affluence, changed production and consumption patterns, and problems of waste disposal. On the other hand, the absence of a public and private environmental morality, the inability of social institutions to adjust to the ecological crisis, and an abiding—if misplaced—faith in technology were the ultimate fruits of America's frontier experience.

The work of Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan throws doubts on White's thesis in a different way. Tuan scrutinized the environmental situation in Asia and discovered that, despite its different

religious traditions, *practices* there were every bit as destructive of the environment as in the West. Tuan clearly showed how the "official" pro-nature line in Chinese religions, for example, was actually vitiated by behavior. Deforestation and erosion, rice terracing and urbanization have all exacted an immense toll on the environment and effected a gigantic transformation of the Chinese landscape. Nor is Tuan's an isolated judgment. Erich Isaac speaks of the destruction wrought by Arab imperial expansionists on vast tracts of the Old World and of the devastation of central Burma by Buddhists. Such are ignored, if not suppressed, among critics of the Judeo-Christian West.

From a different perspective, the Oxford historian Keith Thomas insists that the coming of private property and a money economy led to environmental exploitation and the demise of what he termed the "deification of nature." The "disenchantment" of the world, as he put it, was less a theological achievement than an economic necessity. Alongside the Judeo-Christian emphasis on the human right to exploit nature's bounty, he pointed out, was a distinctive doctrine of human stewardship and responsibility toward creation. This is also the thrust of philosopher Robin Attfield. The idea that everything exists to serve humanity, he emphatically insists, is not the biblical position. This led Attfield to assert that there is "much more evidence than is usually acknowledged for. ... beneficent Christian attitudes to the environment and to nonhuman nature."

### **God, the wise conservationist**

As the rise of science and technology brought about profound environmental changes, Christian clergy and scientists alike outlined strategies to moderate damage to the natural habitat.

Concerned over wasteful land practices, John Evelyn (1620-1706), a founding member of the Royal Society and a Latitudinarian churchman, published in 1662 his famous *Silva, A Discourse of Forest Trees and the Propagation of Timber in His Majesty's Dominions*. Here Evelyn appealed for the institution of sound conservation practices, drew attention to agricultural encroachment on forest land, highlighted the ecological problems of unrestrained grazing, and warned of dangers from charcoal mining. His was a managerial approach to the environment, adapted to the rationalizing tendencies of the new mechanical world order. *Efficiency, production, management* were the watchwords of this pioneer conservationist. Precisely such arguments could also receive explicitly theological support. Thus, John Graunt presented his *Natural and Political Observations upon the Bills of Mortality* of 1662—a demographic analysis—within the context of natural theology. Graunt, using comparative population ratios, directed his readers' attention to the high incidence of pulmonary disorders from pollution in the metropolis.

The orderliness of the world machine, he argued, attested to the sovereignty and beneficence of its Grand Architect. Humans must exercise stewardship over the natural world to ensure that they did not efface or erase the marks of its Designer. Moreover, God was seen as a wise conservationist, and people, made in his image, were to act as caretakers of his world.

The stewardship principle had already been firmly established in John Calvin's injunction: "Let him who possesses a field, so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence; but let him endeavor to hand it down to posterity as he received it. ... Let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses."

Now, in the midseventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a form of beneficent dominion surfaced in the writings of Matthew Hale and William Derham. Hale, England's lord chief justice, wrote in 1677 that the human race was created to be God's viceroy, and that its dominion and stewardship roles were intended to curb the fiercer animals, protect the other species, and preserve plant life. It was the task of humankind "to preserve the face of the Earth in beauty, usefulness and fruitfulness."

Derham, a clergyman and author, believed that the Creator's "Infinite Wisdom and Care condescends, even to the Service, and Wellbeing of the meanest, most weak, and helpless insensitive Parts of the Creation."

## **The beetle's "precious" life before God**

Cultural changes during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries drove people to think about their relationship to the environment even more. In response to worldwide geographical discovery, revelations about the size of the universe, and geological reports of an immensely old Earth, thinkers began more seriously to question the idea that the world existed solely for human benefit. Some argued that the human species was one more link in the chain of nature. The seeming secularism of such realizations should not blind us to the fact that it became increasingly acceptable *within* the Christian church to believe that all creatures were entitled to respect and civility.

Some theologians began to see that, in the Old Testament, animals were regarded as good in and of themselves-not just for their potential service to humanity. John Flavell, a late-seventeenth-century Presbyterian divine, described the horse as his "fellow creature"; Christopher Smart, the eighteenth-century religious poet, insisted that the beetle's life was "precious in the sight of God"; the Calvinist minister and hymnwriter Augustus Montague Toplady abhorred the digging up of anthills; and John Wesley instructed parents not to let their children cause needless harm to living things-snakes, worms, toads, even flies. So powerful, indeed, was this Christian impulse toward a new sensibility that Keith Thomas comments,

[T]he intellectual origins of the campaign against unnecessary cruelty to animals. ... grew out of the (minority) Christian tradition that man should take care of God's creation. ... Clerics were often ahead of lay opinion and an essential role was played by Puritans, Dissenters, Quakers, and Evangelicals.

One of the consequences of this changing sensibility was a growing sense of ecological interconnectedness. Consider the "arcadian" vision of English minister Gilbert White, whose famous *Natural History of Selborne*, published in 1789, recorded the natural order of the village from its bird life to seasonal change. White saw remarkable ways in which his region's ecological diversity actually constituted a complex unity. He conceived of all this in providential terms. God had so contrived and constituted this coherent natural order that everything fitted together "economically." Why? Because like its Creator, White insisted, "Nature is a great economist." He found a doxological aspect to this economy: the humble earthworm's indispensable activity in the soil bore witness to the "wisdom of God in the creation."

Similarly providentialist, though decidedly more rationalist, was the contribution of the Swedish botanist Linnaeus (1707-78), arguably the greatest natural historian of the Enlightenment. To Linnaeus, the classification of life was nothing less than a tool for uncovering the very order of God's creation. Linnaeus even saw himself as a second Adam, the namer extraordinaire. Divine design lay at the heart of the Linnaean project. And nowhere is this more clearly evident than in an essay he penned in 1749 on "The Oeconomy of Nature" in which he readily detected the hand of God in nature's order. Because God was the Supreme Economist and Divine Housekeeper, the study of nature's economy could, at once, confute atheism, justify the social order, and help humans see their creaturely position as continuous with, yet separate from, nature.

## **Where blame is due**

To the extent that the church has failed to take concern for the environment seriously, it must accept its share of the blame. We must not substitute irritation at Christianity's critics for serious self-criticism. But that need not keep us from reappropriating insights from Christian tradition that have been lost or suppressed. We need to cull our heritage for intellectual and spiritual resources to meet today's environmental problems.

I have concentrated on voices within the modern Western Christian tradition. There are many earlier voices as well, such as Francis of Assisi. Committed to a life of poverty and a gospel of repentance, Francis treated all living and inanimate objects as brothers and sisters and thereby insisted on the importance of communion with nature. Some believe Francis came close to heresy in his tendency to

humanize the nonhuman world and have turned to other sources.

Sixth-century monastic leader Benedict is one of those. He emphasized stewardship, insisting on integrating scholarly work with manual labor. In this he represents an early wise-use approach to the natural order. Benedict drew on ethical resources embedded even earlier in the patristic period. The commentary on the six days of Creation in the hexaemeron of Basil the Great (c. 329-79), for instance, displays a profound interest in nature. His intent, like that of his contemporary Ambrose (c. 339-79), was to illustrate the wisdom of the Creator from the balance and harmony of nature, and to insist on the partnership between God and humankind in improving the earth. Similarly, in the fourth century, Chrysostom believed that animals should be shown "great kindness and gentleness for many reasons, but, above all, because they are of the same origin as ourselves."

All these need to be heard. It is the conceptual and practical testimony of figures like these that prompted Atfield to conclude, "Belief in man's stewardship is far more ancient and has been far more constant among Christians" than the assaults of critics would suggest.

Attending to these hidden riches within the Christian heritage can do more than clear our name. They might well provide the impetus for changing worldwide environmental behavior. The scholar and theologian can and should take a vital role in addressing the current situation-and leading the church forward.

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## MYTH 2

### It's Not Biblical to be Green

*Calvin B. DeWitt*

I am amazed to hear Christians sometimes say that biblical faith has little in common with the environmental cause. Even worse, some evangelicals fear that teaching people to enjoy and respect creation will turn them into pantheists.

My experience has been very different. For over 50 years I have been inspired and awed by God's creation. From keeping a painted turtle in a tank at age three to caring for a backyard zoo during my youth, I gained deep appreciation for God's creatures. Because I attended a Christian school, heard two sermons every Sunday, and had parents who not only tolerated the creatures under my care but brought me up in the way I should go, there was never any question where the natural abundance around me came from. All creatures were God's-his masterpieces. They were the ones about which we sang each Sunday, "Praise God, all creatures here below!"

As a youth I savored Article II of the Reformed tradition's Belgic Confession. In answering "By What Means Is God Made Known to Us?" the first part affirms, "by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God."

This theme of how creation tells of God's glory and love is echoed throughout Scripture: God lovingly provides the rains and cyclings of water, provides food for creatures, fills people's hearts with joy, and satisfies the earth (Ps. 104:10-18; Acts 14:17). It is through this manifest love and wisdom that creation declares God's glory and proclaims the work of the Creator's hands (Ps. 19:1). Creation gives clear evidence of God's eternal power and divinity, leaving everyone without excuse before God (Rom. 1:20). But today we often acknowledge God as Creator without grasping what it means to be part of creation. We have alienated ourselves from the natural processes. We abuse God's creation without realizing that we thereby grieve God.

Of God's magnificent provisions in creation, I want to identify seven. These provisions, many of which are celebrated in Psalm 104, point to the beauty and integrity of what God has made. Through the ages

they have led to wonder and respect for the Creator and creation. They also magnify the seriousness of our era's sometimes reckless disregard of our Father's world.

### **Seven provisions of creation**

1. *Earth's energy exchange with the Sun.* Our star, the Sun, pours out immense energy in all directions, heating anything in the path of its rays. A tiny part of the Sun's energy is intercepted by our planet. This energizes everything on Earth—all life, ocean currents, the winds, and storms.

The thin layer of gases that envelops this planet has a very important function here. This layer contains water vapor and carbon dioxide and other "greenhouse gases" that trap energy and delay some of its return to space. Earth becomes warm—but not too warm.

The provision of these greenhouse gases—in just the right amounts—makes Earth warm enough to support the wondrous fabric of life we call the biosphere. It works very much like the glass of a greenhouse that lets sunlight in, but makes it difficult for the heat to get out. We experience this "greenhouse effect" on the sunny side of our houses and in our cars when parked in sunlight.

The Sun's energy also contains lethal ultraviolet radiation. This can break up chemical bonds that hold together molecules and thus disrupt and destroy living tissues. Of special concern is the breaking up of DNA, the genetic blueprint of living things. Doing so can kill microscopic creatures and induce cancer in larger ones.

But here we find another remarkable provision of the Creator. For in the gaseous envelope of Earth—high in the atmosphere—we find a gas that absorbs ultraviolet light: ozone. This forms the "ozone layer" or "ozone shield." Not much ozone is present; although it spans a layer several miles deep, if you collected it at 32 degrees Fahrenheit at sea level around the Earth, it would measure only about one-eighth inch thick. Yet that is enough to prevent most of the Sun's ultraviolet radiation from penetrating our atmosphere. If the biblical psalmist had known of this provision by the Creator, perhaps we would have had this verse in one of the Psalms:

The creatures that dwell in the shelter of God's providence rest in the shadow of the Almighty. God covers his earth with a protective shield; God guards the life he has made to inhabit Earth.

2. *Soil and land building.* Many of us know from gardening that soil can be made more productive through tilling and composting. This process also takes place unaided by human cultivation. Climate, rainfall, and soil organisms work together to make soils richer and more supportive of life. This entails a remarkable variety of cycles: the carbon cycle, water cycle, nitrogen cycle, and so on. This symphony of processes enables even bare rock eventually to support a rich fabric of living things. What a remarkable provision! It nurtures the fruitfulness of creation.

But this soil building teaches patience. It may take a century to produce an eighth-inch of topsoil. In this way the land is nurtured, refreshed, and renewed.

3. *Cycling, recycling, and ecosystems.* Recycling is not a recent invention. The whole creation uses and reuses substances contained in soil, water, and air. Carbon dioxide breathed out by us—and raccoons, lizards, and gnats—enters the atmosphere later to be taken up as the carbon-based raw material from which to make the carbon-based stuff of life. This is in turn transferred to the animals and microscopic life that depend upon it for food. And soon these consuming creatures return the carbon back to the atmosphere through breathing, or by their own death and decay.

Water, too, is recycled. Taken up by animals, it is released through breathing, sweating, and ridding of wastes—finding its way into the atmosphere, or through sewage-treatment plants back to rivers and streams. Taken up by the roots of plants, some is pumped up through the bundles of tubing in the roots, stems, and leaves of plants and back to the atmosphere. That moisture joins water evaporated from lakes, streams, and other surfaces and forms rain and snow that again water the face of Earth.

Thinking of such provision, the psalmist wrote,

He makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains. They give water to all

the beasts of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. ... He waters the mountains from his upper chambers; the earth is satisfied by the fruit of his work. (Ps. 104:10-13; all Scripture quotations from the NIV)

4. *Water purification.* Some water percolates through the soil to the ground water below and supplies the springs that feed wetlands, lakes, and ravines; we call this percolation. In many watertreatment plants in our cities, water is purified by having it percolate through beds of sand. In similar fashion, water that percolates through soil or rock is filtered, but usually over much greater distances. The result: by the time we pull up water to our homes by our wells, it usually is fit to drink.

This is more remarkable than it may at first seem. Water is often called "the universal solvent," meaning that it dissolves practically anything. How then could water ever be purified? Should it not always be contaminated with dissolved materials from everything through which it passes? Because of creation's natural distillers, filters, and extractors, the answer is no. There is remarkable provision in creation for the production of pure water.

5. *Fruitfulness and abundant life.* Of the known flowering plants alone, there are 250,000 species of orchids, grasses, daisies, maples, sedges. And each of these interrelates with water, soil, air, and other organisms, forming the interwoven threads of the household of life we call the biosphere. When I was in ninth grade, I recall learning that there were 1 million different species of living creatures. In graduate school, I learned that it was 5 million, and today we believe it is somewhere between 5 million and 40 million. This biodiversity is so great that we have just begun to name the creatures. This is just the kind of provision you would expect from a remarkably creative Genius. "The earth is full of your creatures," said the psalmist. "There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number" (Ps. 104:24-25).

6. *Global circulations of water and air.* Because of its 23.5-degree tilt, our Earth gets unequally heated from season to season. Both seasonal and daily differences cause differentials in Earth's temperatures. This, in turn, produces temperature gradients that drive the flow of water and air from place to place. Atmospheric and oceanic circulations are vital provisions for maintaining life. Carbon dioxide produced by animal and plant respiration and oxygen produced by photosynthesis are released to air and water. Carbon dioxide is moved around so that it comes into contact with plants that reincorporate it. And oxygen, produced by photosynthesis of plants, is similarly circulated by air and water currents. Global circulations provide the "breath" of life on a planetary scale.

7. *Human ability to learn from creation.* Human beings are endowed by God with minds that integrate what creation teaches us. Through observation and experiment, we are able to revise our models of the world to represent reality better. Our mental models are further nurtured and refined by the cultures we grow up in. This capability is essential for meaningful human life.

### **Seven degradations**

Human beings can mute and diminish God's testimony in creation. We have the ability, in the words of Revelation 11:18, to "destroy the earth. Nearly every day now, we learn about new destructions of land and creatures. While some reports are dramatized and overstated, professional technical literature again and again describes new and increasing instances of environmental degradation. What I present here as "seven degradations" draws upon scholarly literature accepted by the scientific community. That means I have not gotten my information from government or university reports, newspapers, opinion polls, television, talk shows, or popular articles. Practically every one of these degradations is a destruction of one of God's provisions for creation.

1. *Land conversion and habitat destruction.* Since 1850, people have converted 2.2 billion acres of natural lands to human use. This compares with Earth's total of 16 billion acres that have some kind of vegetation and current world crop land of 3.6 billion acres. This conversion of land goes by different names: deforestation (forests), drainage or "reclamation" (wetlands), irrigation (arid and semiarid

ecosystems), and opening (grasslands and prairies). The greatest conversion under way is tropical deforestation, which removes about 25 million acres of primary forest each year—an area the size of Indiana. The immensity of this destruction illustrates our new power to alter the face of Earth. In the tropics, we do it to make cheap plywood, bathroom tissue, hamburger meat, and orange juice, among other things, but it destroys the long-term sustainability of soils, forest creatures, and resident people.

2. *Species extinction.* More than three species of plants and animals are extinguished daily. If there are indeed 40 million species, then the rate may be several times higher.

3. *Land degradation.* What once was tall-grass prairie we now call the Corn Belt; here we grow the corn that feeds hogs, cattle, and us. In much of this prairie, two bushels of topsoil are lost for every bushel of corn produced. Pesticides and herbicides made it possible to plant corn, or any crop, year after year on the same land. Crop rotation—from corn to soy beans to alfalfa hay to pastures—has been abandoned.

4. *Resource conversion and wastes and hazards production.* Some 70,000 chemicals have been created by our ingenuity. Unlike chemicals made by organisms and the earth, some cannot be absorbed back into the environment. Among them are many specifically designed to destroy life: biocides, pesticides, herbicides, avicides, and fungicides.

5. *Global toxification.* Of the thousands of chemical substances we have created, hundreds have been discharged or have leaked into the atmosphere, rivers, and ground water. This happens through "disposal" and from vehicles, chemical agriculture, homes, and industry. Some join global circulations; DDT has shown up in Antarctic penguins, and biocides appear in a remote lake on Lake Superior's Isle Royale. Cancer has become pervasive in some herring gull populations.

6. *Alteration of planetary exchange.* Earth's exchange of energy with the Sun and outer space is fundamental to the planet's circulations of air and water. But burning and exposing carbon-containing materials to oxygen brings rising concentrations of atmospheric carbon dioxide, allowing less heat to escape to outer space, thereby enhancing the greenhouse effect. This creates global warming.

Adding to the effects of increasing carbon dioxide are other greenhouse gases, such as chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) refrigerants in our air conditioners and refrigerators. Melting snow caps, receding glaciers, and a slowly rising sea level demonstrate that Earth's temperature has been rising very slowly over the centuries. There has been some debate on the degree to which this is happening, but that it is happening seems clear. And this rise likely will accelerate, with consequences not only for Earth's temperature but also for the distribution of temperature across the planet, with consequent changes in patterns of rainfall and drought, and even—ironically—lower temperatures in some places in the world. CFCs operate not only as greenhouse gases. They also destroy ozone in Earth's protective ozone layer.

7. *Human and cultural degradation.* One of the most severe reductions of creation's richness concerns cultures that have lived peaceably on the land for centuries. In the tropics, cultures living cooperatively with the forest are being wiped off the land by coercion, killing, and legal procedures that deprive them of traditional lands. Their rich heritage of unwritten knowledge is being lost. Names of otherwise undescribed forest creatures are forgotten; so are uses of the wide array of tropical species for human food, fiber, and medicine.

### **A place for evangelicals?**

Six centuries before Christ, Jeremiah described the undoing of creation: "I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty; and at the heavens, and their light was gone ... I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert; all its towns lay in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger" (Jer. 4:23-26). Neglecting to do God's will in the world is not new, and its environmental consequences have been known for more than two thousand years (Jer. 5:22-23, 31; 8:7).

The evangelical community has been slow to get involved in environmental issues. But it is not too late. In the early 1970s there were few evangelicals involved in world hunger. Today some of the best relief

operations are done by these deliberative evangelicals. They did not just start handing out food. They got the best minds together, collected the scriptural material, and carefully planned.

That needs to happen again. Our environmental situation presents a significant opportunity. To be *evangelical* means to proclaim the good news. Part of our proclamation is that the environment is God's *creation*. If we do not make God the Creator part of the good news, we are crippling our faith and witness. We will lose sight of what the Belgic Confession called "a most elegant book" wherein all creatures help us-and othersto see the invisible God.

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## MYTH 3

### There is Nothing Christians Can Do

Loren Wilkinson

Headlines trumpet news of environmental crises, with some experts claiming apocalyptic scenarios where we will either burn or freeze within a generation. Another vociferous group claims just the opposite: there is no real ecological problem, only hysterical environmentalists. Despite their divergent messages, both groups offer Christians the same temptation: to think there is nothing we can do to help the situation.

But this is simply not true. There are many strategies Christians can and should pursue to help care for creation.

One of the earliest evangelical books on the environment-Francis Schaeffer's *Pollution and the Death of Man*-made one of the wisest observations: Christian households and churches need to be "pilot plants" of the new creation. There the world can see, acted out in individual lives and in communities, the healing of creation that only comes from being in fellowship with God in Christ. Eugene Peterson's rendering of Philippians 2:15 suggests the difference we can make: "Go into the world uncorrupted, a breath of fresh air in this squalid and polluted society. Provide people with a glimpse of good living and of the living God."

What does "good living and the living God" mean when it comes to creation? What can we do? Here are some suggestions, organized in everwidening spheres of influence:

#### **Individual action**

First, we become *aware*. We learn how God cares and provides for us through creation. That means, for example, knowing where our food, water, and energy come from and where our waste products go. (There is no "away" in God's creation.) What farms produced the food in our last meal? How were the plants grown? How far was it transported to get to our table? To what former wetland is our garbage hauled? Into what bay or river are our toilets flushed (and after what degree of processing)? What forests were pulped to produce our paper? These questions are not intended to reduce us to guilty inaction, but to make us know that it is through God's creation that we live.

We also need to practice the principles of "reduce, reuse, recycle"-not out of environmentalist legalism but in conscious delight of being God's free, redeemed, and responsible stewards:

We *reduce*, for example, because, though creation is for our use, it has worth far beyond the use we make of it. The more we learn the impact of our choices on creation, the more likely we are to learn to be content with less.

We *reuse* because God did not make a throwaway world. So repair the shoes or toaster to give them new or longer life. If we must bring things home in packaging, we ought to consider the second life the packages might have. And we ought to be willing to pay more for things that have a longer life.

And we *recycle* because God does. "To the place the streams come from, there they return again," says Psalm 104. Increasingly, however, we have built a civilization whose residues—plastics, tires, Styrofoam—do not fit into the created cycles. So when we must discard what we have used, we need to recycle.

To these three R's, Christians have good reason to add two more:

We *resist*. Our culture often defines our value in terms of how much we consume. We need to resist this consumerism that is fed by advertising and television. Perhaps a television set is one thing we should not repair when it breaks. In few other areas can we better demonstrate "good living" and our allegiance to "the living God" than by refusing to be shaped by our consumerist culture.

But that negative choice opens up a glorious, positive one: We *rejoice*. The more we learn about God's provisions for the earth, the more wonderful it seems. Isaiah's words should describe our experience of creation: "You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands" (Isa. 55:12; all Scripture quotations from the NIV).

### **Community efforts**

We should get in the habit of using the theological term *creation* instead of the more secular *environment* or *nature*. The bedrock of our action is that we are *creatures*, responsible to God our Creator for our use of his gifts in creation. A congregation that speaks only of "the environment" may well come to feel that its wastebaskets full of plasticfoam cups on Sunday morning offend only some politically correct fad.

We also need to broaden our understanding of the word *stewardship*. Inside the church, the term is restricted almost entirely to matters of money. But increasingly, it is being used outside the church to speak of our care of creation. The word opens a door to witness, for it invites the question, "To *whom* is the steward responsible?"

If the church is to be a model of "good living and the living God," we also need to be aware of what our buildings and practices convey about God and the genuinely good life. All the principles of caring for creation that we practice as individuals—reducing, reusing, recycling, resisting, and rejoicing—should be evident in our corporate life as well. To recycle (or avoid) the Sunday flood of paper, to make our church buildings and parking lots available to wider use—these make for good stewardship. Ultimately, to a pagan world beginning to glimpse something of God through creation, these acts function as pre-evangelism.

Church members should also consider reducing their impact on creation through sharing. Many things that we own—from lawn mowers to vacation homes—could well be shared.

Finally, churches should resist an increasing tendency to leave God's creative acts out of worship. Much new worship music exalts God in his majesty, but speaks very little of what he has done and made. New music in the church would be enriched if it were to follow the pattern of an old carol: "Joy to the world! the Lord is come; / let earth receive her King; / Let every heart prepare him room, / And heaven and nature sing." That's good theology, and good worship.

### **Public witness**

Christians have recently begun to be more aware of their need to be politically active. We need to extend that activity to policies that influence our care of creation. It is important to shape the way our governments and economies work. We need to bring the full meaning of words like *creation* and *stewardship* into the public arena. Here are four principles for wider involvement.

- Many of the most important political decisions related to the care of creation are influenced greatly by opinions of local people. Zoning hearings to increase the density of an area, or to allow roads, industry, or power plants, invite public participation. It is important to use such forums in order to save our communities, and to do so publicly in the name of God the Creator.

- Just as we have (rightly) evaluated candidates for office on their records on such issues as abortion and attitude toward the family, we need to evaluate also their attitudes toward creation.
  - A major problem in our civilization is the barrier between cities and the agriculture that supports them. (The average food item in North America is transported more than 800 miles.) This leads to ever-larger farms and ever-fewer opportunities for stewardship and contact with the creation that supports us. To remind people of their vital connection to the land, we therefore need to encourage urban gardens, farmers' markets, and local, small-scale agriculture-and to point out (as Paul did to the pagans in Acts 14:17) that it is God who "has shown kindness by giving you rain from heavens, and crops in their seasons, and provides you with plenty of food, and fills your hearts with joy."
  - Some of the most eloquent and effective voices for the care of creation come from environmental groups in which there is no Christian presence (and often an implicitly anti-Christian bias). Christians should consider participating in such groups, both because their agenda-caring for creation-should be a Christian's agenda, and because these organizations desperately need a Christian witness. The environmental movement is an ethic looking for a religion, and it is no surprise that many people in it have turned to native and pagan religions when no Christian voice speaks with and to them.
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