



**TOWARDS A
CHRISTIAN APPROACH
TO THE ENVIRONMENT**

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Introduction

One of the most spectacular cultural changes during the past half-century is the fact that the environment has moved from being an incidental issue to become a central political priority, particularly in the western world. We have almost universally come to accept that we are in the throes of a huge environmental crisis which ultimately threatens our welfare and possibly even the long term survival of the planet as a viable habitation for mankind. As a result, the little-known science of “Ecology” has moved from being an obscure branch of biology to being at the ideological and practical centre of scientific endeavour. Environmentalism is “in” and ecology is in the spotlight.

Part One: Setting the scene – overview of recent developments

Factors in the rise of environmentalism

It is worth asking what has brought about this remarkable change. Many factors have contributed. Firstly, industrial development has accelerated dramatically causing vast increases in the use of non-renewable natural resources and leading to major problems of pollution. The swift economic development of such countries as Brazil, India and China are outstanding examples of these realities in action. However, even in Britain we are faced with such factors as the enormous increase in landfill causing the production of methane; ever more destruction of the countryside to make way for urban sprawl leading to the ongoing diminution of the natural environment; and the polluted legacy of centuries of industrial activity, often conveniently buried in “brown field” sites. Secondly, spectacular and accelerating population growth continues and contributes massively to demand for water, food, energy, land, housing, services and consumer goods.¹ Thirdly, we have become much more aware of the finite nature of many natural resources. Oil is an obvious example – many believe that “peak oil”² has already been reached and that production will gradually diminish during the coming decades whilst demand continues to rise inexorably.³ The potential environmental cost of oil extraction was graphically illustrated in the recent (2010) disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. Water is another example. Water shortages abound throughout the world, international tension over use of water resources flares up regularly, and many millions still lack access to clean water, especially in Africa.⁴ Fourthly, the advent of nuclear energy has proved hugely controversial and has become highly politicized both in the context of military weaponry and in civil energy production. The catastrophic environmental impact of the use of nuclear weapons is well documented and no one has solved the enormous potential environmental problems created by the storage of nuclear waste. Fifthly, conservationists have made clear the accelerating rate of species extinction and the dangerously low numerical levels of many remaining species. Sixthly, the widespread acceptance of the reality of “global warming” has led to the advent of the “climate change” movement.

¹ Robert White & Nick Spencer *Christianity, Climate Change & Sustainable Living* (SPCK, 2007), p.42-43

² ie maximum practical oil production

³ White & Spencer, p.29

⁴ White & Spencer, pp.45-46

Scenes of wholesale deforestation, melting icecaps, drastic flooding and widespread drought have become iconic images of “global warming” which have significantly shaped the imagination of our whole society. Also, following on from this has come the recently conceived concept of the “carbon footprint.” This is having a significant impact on economics – generating whole new “green” businesses and shaping consumer markets. Finally, all these factors have been accompanied by the dramatic rise of “Green politics”. Jonathan Porritt⁵ and Friends of the Earth⁶ paved the way in the UK in the more sceptical 1980s. Writers such as EF Schumacher (“Small is Beautiful”)⁷ and James Lovelock (“Gaia – a new look at life on earth”)⁸ have played their part in politicizing environmentalism. The success of Al Gore’s “An Inconvenient Truth”⁹ lecture tours and film shows how far environmentalism has come in a couple of decades. Gore even won an Oscar for his performance! Green political movements have been spawned in many western countries and all major political parties now fall over themselves to demonstrate their “green” credentials.

The priority of climate change through global warming.

Of all the urgent issues raised by ecology, the most urgent is generally considered to be climate change. Tony Blair put it succinctly:

I believe climate change to be the world’s greatest environmental challenge, a challenge so far-reaching in its impact and irreversible in its destructive power, that it alters radically human existence.¹⁰

There is now general agreement within the scientific community that global warming is an extremely serious issue.¹¹ This was graphically stated by Sir John Houghton when Co-Chair of the Scientific Assessment Working Group of the IPCC:

The impacts of global warming are such that I have no hesitation in describing it as a ‘weapon of mass destruction’¹²

Robert White underlines the scientific consensus on this matter:

The overwhelming consensus of opinion among the thousands of climatologists, meteorologists, geologists, biologists, biogeochemists, oceanographers and others responsible for collating and analysing the data over the past 30 years leaves no serious room for doubt: warming of the climate system is unequivocal.¹³

Not only is it serious, but climate change is significantly affected by human actions – particularly the burning of fossil fuels and the process of deforestation.¹⁴ It is not hard to see why climate change has become the pre-eminent political issue of our current environmental crisis.

⁵ Jonathan Porritt, *Seeing Green*, (Blackwells, 1984)

⁶ See <http://www.foe.co.uk>

⁷ EF Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, (Penguin, 1973)

⁸ James Lovelock, *Gaia – a New Look at Life on Earth*, (OUP, 1979)

⁹ See <http://www.climatecrisis.net>

¹⁰ Quoted in White & Spencer, p.1

¹¹ Eg: John Houghton, *Global Warming - the Complete Briefing* (CUP, 2009), pp.172-238

¹² Quoted in White & Spencer, p.1

¹³ White & Spencer, p.2

¹⁴ White & Spencer, p.19-27

The politics of climate change – landmark events

The advance of environmental politics has been symbolized by a number of high profile international events and initiatives. Four are particularly worthy of mention in this context. First came the setting up of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) by the UN in 1988 as a comprehensive attempt to study, analyse and predict various aspects of climate change. It has issued four authoritative reports (1990, 1995, 2001 and 2007) and a whole series of technical briefings.¹⁵ Then in 1992 came the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio De Janeiro (the “Earth Summit”) which was attended by a staggering 25,000 people. It’s popularity made it the best attended conference of all time! Equally significantly, this was also the first worldwide conference of world leaders focused specifically on the environment and over 100 heads of State were present. The summit ratified the recently prepared UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The resultant “Rio Declaration”¹⁶ represented a symbolic change of outlook on the environment even if it lacked much power of bring about practical change. This was followed in 1997 by the “Kyoto Protocol”¹⁷ which was based on the UNFCCC and was the first attempt to reduce carbon emissions on a global scale by means of international agreement. This modest attempt to limit carbon emissions was seriously handicapped by the refusal of the USA and (initially) Australia to sign up and the failure to impose any emissions reductions upon developing countries. Most recently, the much anticipated United Nations Climate Change Convention in Copenhagen (2009) has been the focus of intense political activity as lobby groups have intensified their efforts to influence government policies and politicians have been forced to consider making significant commitments to policies related to climate change. The Copenhagen summit was inconclusive and the outstanding issues remain unresolved. At the same time, controversy over aspects of the science of climate change has intensified – as exemplified by the issue of the alleged suppression of information by climate change scientists at the University of East Anglia in 2009.

The Church and the Environment

Let us now turn our attention to the church. It is notable that environmental issues were of minimal concern before popular environmentalism took hold in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, the Catholic Church had little to say on environmental issues until recently. The deliberations of the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s decisively demonstrate this.¹⁸ At that time the Catholic Church did not see environmentalism as a central issue and devoted no specific attention to it. Yet within one generation of Vatican Two the Catholic Church is now firmly focused on environmental issues. Pope John Paul II led the way. In 1990 he stated:

There is a growing awareness that world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts, and continued injustice among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of due respect for nature.... Moreover, a new

¹⁵ See <http://www.ipcc.ch>

¹⁶ <http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?documentID=78&articleID=1163>

¹⁷ http://www.unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol/items/2830.php

¹⁸ See Austin Flannery (ed), *Vatican Council II: The Sixteen Basic Documents*, (Dominican Publications, 1996)

ecological awareness is beginning to emerge which, rather than being downplayed, ought to be encouraged to develop into concrete programs and initiatives.¹⁹

A similar new emphasis on environmentalism can be seen in most Protestant churches during the same period. For example, the Church of England has made a strong stand²⁰ and created a national environmental campaign – “Shrinking the Footprint.”²¹ Anglican leaders frequently identify themselves firmly with environmental issues. For example, the Archbishop of Canterbury was a key participant in the huge climate change campaign march in London in December 2009. Interestingly enough, evangelicals have been, historically, the most reluctant branch of the church to embrace environmentalism. As Alister McGrath has recently observed:

Evangelicalism is perhaps the form of Christianity that has had least interest in the environment in the recent past....yet all that has now changed.²²

Lynn White – the church as prime ecological culprit.

Contemporary theological reflection was decisively initiated by a seminal article written in 1967 by Professor Lynn White, a historian from the University of California, Los Angeles. The article was entitled “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis”²³ and it became the reference point for much subsequent thinking. It is important to pause and reflect briefly on Lynn White’s thesis. He places the principal blame for our ecological problems firmly on the western church. He argues that the church, on the basis of the Genesis 1 mandate of “dominion”²⁴ over the natural world, has provided the rationale for a wholesale exploitation of nature through the industrial revolution and beyond. He states that “Christianity is the most anthropomorphic religion the world has ever seen”²⁵ and that this has bred the attitude that “we are superior to nature, contemptuous of it and willing to use it for our slightest whim.”²⁶ For Lynn White, “what we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship”²⁷ and since the church has been ideologically influential throughout the industrialization of the West he believes that the church has directly paved the way for the developments that ultimately led to our current “ecological crisis”.²⁸ Lynn White’s surprising solution is to advocate Franciscan theology as the best alternative theological approach. According to White, “Francis tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and to set up a democracy of all God’s creatures.”²⁹ White therefore concludes his article with the provocative statement: “I propose Francis

¹⁹ Pope John Paul II, World Day of Peace Message, 1990. See <http://www.conservation.catholic.org/background.htm>

²⁰ Eg: See *Sharing God’s Planet*, (Church House, 2005)

²¹ http://www.shrinkingthefootprint.cofe.anglican.org/cofe_env.php

²² Alister McGrath, *The Re-Enchantment of Nature*, (Hodder & Stoughton: 2002), p.44

²³ Lynn White, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, Science, Vol 155 (Number 3767), March 10, 1967, pp 1203–1207

²⁴ Genesis 1:28-30

²⁵ Lynn White, quoted in RJ Berry (ed), *The Care of Creation* (IVP, 2000), p.38

²⁶ Lynn White, quoted in Berry, *Care of Creation*, p.40

²⁷ Lynn White, quoted in Berry, *Care of Creation*, p.40

²⁸ Lynn White, quoted in Berry, *Care of Creation*, p.42

²⁹ Lynn White, quoted in Berry, *Care of Creation*, p.41

as a patron saint for ecologists.”³⁰ Ever since its publication, Lynn White’s article has been central to the debate.

A variety of theological and practical responses to environmental issues took place in the years that followed Lynn White’s article. Formal church positions have changed sharply and have largely adopted a positive and sympathetic approach to environmentalism.

Some significant theological responses to environmentalism

A number of influential theologians have focused particularly on ecology in their thinking. Foremost amongst these has been Jurgen Moltmann whose use of the doctrines of creation, the trinity, redemption and eschatology served to underpin his conviction that ecology should be a central concern for theology.³¹ Moltmann took the current ecological crisis very seriously:

This crisis is deadly....unless there is a radical reversal in the fundamental orientation of our human societies, and unless we find an alternative way of living and dealing with other living things and with nature, this crisis is going to end in wholesale catastrophe.³²

He lamented the fact that the Enlightenment had allowed science to emancipate itself from theology with disastrous implications for both. Whilst secular science proceeded to create the conditions for a future environmental crisis, the scope of theology was diminished:

Theology’s domain became the soul’s assurance of salvation in the inner citadel of the heart. The earthly, bodily and cosmic dimensions of the salvation of the whole world were overlooked.³³

Moltmann sought to regain some of the lost ground in his influential book “God of Creation”. At the same time, one of Moltmann’s concerns was the popularity of “Process Theology” – to which we now turn.

Process Theologians, such as Paul Fiddes³⁴ and Norman Pittinger³⁵ set environmental issues in the context of the belief that the whole creation was in a continuous process of ongoing change and development in which God is not ‘omnipotent’ in the traditional understanding. Self-determination characterizes everything in the universe. Process Theologians drew from the ideas of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in his attempt to fuse theology with a wholesale commitment to the ideology of evolution.³⁶ In his scheme the whole of the cosmos is perceived as evolving spiritually and physically into an ultimate eschatological union with the cosmic Christ. Needless to say, many important aspects of traditional biblical theology are sacrificed in order to reach this conclusion. However, for

³⁰ Lynn White, quoted in Berry, *Care of Creation*, p.42

³¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, (SCM, 1985)

³² Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p.20

³³ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p.35

³⁴ Paul Fiddes, 'Process Theology', in A.E. McGrath, ed., *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 472–6

³⁵ See Norman Pittenger, *God in Process*, (SCM, 1967)

³⁶ Pierre Tielhard de Chardin, *Le Mileau Divin*, (Collins, 1957) and *The Phenomenon of Man* (Collins, 1959).

our purposes, the important thing to note is that this framework tends to minimize ecological issues because of an overarching belief that God's evolutionary plan for the cosmos is so powerful and all-embracing. The inexorable evolutionary development of the world will subsume the ecological damage caused by mankind in the relentless onward march of the whole cosmos towards eventual union with Christ. A more nuanced version of this type of approach is that taken by Arthur Peacocke.³⁷ He draws from evolutionary biology, Chaos Theory and Process Theology to suggest that God's input into physical reality does not come through specific divine acts or revelation, but through providing information which is absorbed into the earth's various systems to bring about the reality of change from "Process".

An important contrast is found in "Eco-feminist" theology. Theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether have approached ecology from an entirely different point of view. Ruether argued that the church's problem lay with the "western theological tradition of the hierarchical chain of being and command."³⁸ For Ruether, the starting point was to change all "hierarchical" relationships - especially the dominance of men over women. She anticipated that the result would be that the "instrumentalist" approach to nature within the church would give way and a better attitude to the environment would follow:

The restoration of just relations between peoples restores peace to society and, at the present time, heals nature's enmity. Just, peaceful societies, in which people are not exploited also create powerful, harmonious and beautiful natural environments.³⁹

Ruether does not state specifically how this hoped for change in human relationships would have such a beneficial impact on the environment. Nevertheless, feminist theology seeks to link the emancipation of women to the emancipation of the environment. This "Eco-feminist" outlook has had significant influence on the thinking of many churches in their response to environmental issues.

Another important force in the theological discourse over ecology is the growth of the contemporary Celtic movement in the church. Those of a Celtic persuasion emphasize the ancient Celtic traditional of engagement with, and respect for, the natural world in its own right. Alister McGrath describes the ancient Celtic outlook as that which ".....respected nature as a matter of fundamental religious principle, not in order to safeguard the future of the human race."⁴⁰ Celtic spirituality and theology has a number of important themes which make it a rich source of inspiration for environmentalism. Key themes include: a strong affirmation of the "goodness" of the physical reality of creation, a tradition of good stewardship in its communal life, a robust critique of materialism, a devotional life which emphasizes the wonder of creation and, most significantly, a specific focus on God as creator.⁴¹ Contemporary Celtic Christianity represents a challenge to both the Catholic

³⁷ Arthur Peacocke, *God and Science*, (SCM, 1996), especially pp.1-22

³⁸ Rosemary Ruether in Mary MacKinnon & Moni McIntyre (eds), *Readings in Ecology & Feminist Theology*, (Sheed & Ward, 1995), p.89

³⁹ Ruether in MacKinnon & McIntyre, *Readings in Ecology & Feminist Theology*, p.80

⁴⁰ McGrath, *The Re-Enchantment of Nature*, p.31

⁴¹ For a good summary see Ray Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1995).

and the Reformed traditions which it accuses of not cherishing the earth sufficiently in its theology and practice.⁴²

Francis Schaeffer – the genesis of an evangelical perspective

But what of evangelical theology? When and how did evangelicals begin to connect theology with ecology? It all began with Francis Schaeffer. He was the first popular evangelical writer to engage directly with Lynn White's thesis in his highly significant and prophetic book "Pollution and the Death of Man", published in 1971⁴³. Schaeffer laid the foundations for a developed evangelical response to environmentalism in general and to Lynn White in particular. Schaeffer started by accepting that some Christian thinking had allowed a negative attitude to the environment to develop. However, he denied that this was based on the biblical text itself. He argued that it had been caused by the intrusion of Platonism into Christian thought whereby the "spiritual" life was detached from the material world into an "upper storey".⁴⁴ This inevitably led to a devaluation of physical reality including the environment. Schaeffer was unimpressed by Lynn White's suggestion that Franciscan theology provided a way forward. For him, the Franciscan levelling of all aspects of nature has the effect of devaluing mankind. Schaeffer argued that this was a false and unbiblical approach to the environment,⁴⁵ He was concerned that it opened the door to pantheism rather than upholding biblical theism.

It is useful to note that Schaeffer's book was written before the issue of climate change came to prominence. His focus, therefore, was on the many aspects of the degradation of nature that were already very evident at the time. The recent dominance of the climate change agenda has tended to obscure the fact that even if climate change was not an issue or was overcome, the environment would still remain a massively important priority for Christians. On the basis of Schaeffer's approach Christians should be actively involved such key issues as conservation, ecological education, critiquing wasteful economic practices and reducing pollution.

Schaeffer's most helpful contribution was to seek to outline a biblical framework from which to address the environment. He focused on the significance of key doctrines such as creation, the fall of man, the incarnation and eschatological restoration.⁴⁶ Other evangelical theologians have subsequently developed the implications of these doctrines as applied to the environment. Schaeffer's conclusion was highly significant – he argued for active Christian involvement in environmental issues with the hope that the church can make a significant positive impact. He has a specific expectation: "But we should be looking now, on the basis of the work of Christ, for substantial healing in every place affected by the Fall."⁴⁷

⁴² Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, pp.83-85

⁴³ Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution & the Death of Man*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1971).

⁴⁴ Schaeffer, *Pollution & the Death of Man*, p.30-31

⁴⁵ Schaeffer, *Pollution & the Death of Man*, p.32

⁴⁶ Schaeffer, *Pollution & the Death of Man*, pp.34-57

⁴⁷ Schaeffer, *Pollution & the Death of Man*, p.48

Evangelical thinking gathers momentum

Since Schaeffer's time there has been a remarkable development of evangelical writing which seeks to engage with environmentalism. Some are biblical theologians such as Alister McGrath,⁴⁸ Michael Northcott⁴⁹ and Christopher Wright⁵⁰ who have sought to dig deeper into the ecological implications of the biblical text. Others like RJ Berry,⁵¹ Robert White⁵² and John Houghton⁵³ are professional scientists seeking to integrate scripture with the implications of their scientific expertise. Still others seek to speak primarily as church leaders. Notable amongst them are John Stott⁵⁴ and NT Wright⁵⁵ who, from strong biblical foundations, are particularly concerned to mobilize their church constituencies into practical action over environmental issues.

We will examine some examples of this developed evangelical thinking in order to get a feel for the important themes that have emerged.

RJ Berry and the "Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation"

RJ Berry is an eminent geneticist⁵⁶ who has championed environmentalism for many years through a series of important and provocative books and articles. He has been particularly concerned to rehabilitate a strong theology of nature after its apparent demise in the wake of secular Darwinian evolution.⁵⁷ However, one of his most important contributions has been to formulate the "Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation"⁵⁸ (EDCC) and to gather together an impressive group of evangelical leaders to support this declaration in his seminal book - "The Care of Creation". Berry was provoked into initiating a more systematic and developed evangelical response to environmentalism by the statements of the World Council of Churches at Seoul in 1990. At Seoul the WCC, spurred on particularly by Moltmann, sought to provide a vigorous theological and practical environmental statement. However, its theology was weak in that it declined to affirm the significance of mankind as uniquely in the image of God.⁵⁹ Berry was deeply uneasy at the WCC's decision to dethrone mankind from his God-given status as God's image bearer. This proved to be the provocation that led to an alternative

⁴⁸ McGrath, *The Re-Enchantment of Nature*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 2002)

⁴⁹ Michael Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, (CUP, 1995).

⁵⁰ Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, (IVP, 2004), *The Mission of God*, (IVP, 2007).

⁵¹ RJ Berry, *God's Book of Works*, (T & T Clark, 2003), *Environmental Stewardship (ed)*, (T & T Clark, 2006), *The Care of Creation (ed)*, (IVP, 2000)

⁵² Robert White & Nick Spencer, *Christianity, Climate Change & Sustainable Living* (SPCK, 2007) and Robert White (ed) *Creation in Crisis*, (SPCK, 2009).

⁵³ John Houghton *Global Warming – the Complete Briefing*, (CUP, 2009). See also in RJ Berry (ed), *Environmental Stewardship*, pp.315-317, and in Robert White (ed), *Creation in Crisis*, pp.11-33.

⁵⁴ John Stott, *Issues facing Christians Today*, (IVP, 1999).

⁵⁵ Eg NT Wright *Surprised by Hope*, (SPCK, 2007)

⁵⁶ Professor Emeritus, University College, London.

⁵⁷ See RJ Berry, *God's Book of Works* (T&T Clark, 2003).

⁵⁸ Berry, *Care of Creation*, pp.17-22

⁵⁹ WCC World Convocation on Justice, Peace & the Integrity of Creation, Seoul, 1990, Affirmation 7, in Michael Kinnamon, & Brian Cope (eds), *The Ecumenical Movement*, (Eerdmans, 1997), p.322

approach - and the EDCC was the result. The EDCC has gained much support since its publication in 1994.

Due to the importance and prominence of the EDCC, its central affirmations merit our brief attention as we work our way towards a biblical approach to the environment. The first affirmation states:

As followers of Jesus Christ, committed to the full authority of the Scriptures, and aware of the ways we have degraded creation, we believe that biblical faith is essential to the solution of our ecological problems.⁶⁰

This represents an attempt to provide a secure biblical foundation for any environmental initiatives within the church and it also argues for the inadequacy of basing any proposed solutions on other worldviews. The second affirmation states:

We and our children face a growing crisis in the health of the creation in which we are embedded, and through which, by God's grace, we are sustained. Yet we continue to degrade that creation.⁶¹

Seven degradations are listed: land degradation, deforestation, species extinction, water degradation, global toxification, alteration of atmosphere, and human & cultural degradation. The EDCC wisely seeks to state the ecological issues very widely and not reduce them merely to one aspect (eg climate change). The third affirmation calls for mental and spiritual reorientation amongst Christians:

Many concerned people, convinced that environmental problems are more spiritual than technological, are exploring the world's ideologies and religions in search of non-Christian spiritual resources for the healing of the earth. As followers of Jesus Christ, we believe that the Bible calls us to respond in four ways.⁶²

The four proposed responses are: repentance from past attitudes, a determination to be biblical, searching the Scriptures for insight on the environment, and reflecting on what the natural world itself teaches us about God and his plans for that world. The fourth affirmation seeks to elicit practical responses through identifying key biblical principles with a particular focus on stewardship:

Thus we call on all those who are committed to the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to affirm the following principles of biblical truth, and to seek ways of living out these principles in our lives, our churches, and society.⁶³

The concluding affirmation brings in the note of future hope:

We believe that in Christ there is hope, not only for men, women and children, but also for the rest of creation which is suffering from the consequences of human sin.⁶⁴

On the basis of these affirmations the EDCC encourages individuals and churches to be "centres of creation's care and renewal," and to "resist the allure of wastefulness and overconsumption."⁶⁵ In the political arena Christians are called to

.....work for godly, just, and sustainable economies (and) responsible

⁶⁰ Berry, *Care of Creation*, p.18

⁶¹ Berry, *Care of Creation*, p.18

⁶² Berry, *Care of Creation*, p.19

⁶³ Berry, *Care of Creation*, p.19

⁶⁴ Berry, *Care of Creation*, p.21

⁶⁵ Berry, *Care of Creation*, p.21

public policies which embody the principles of biblical stewardship of creation.⁶⁶

Since its publication in 1994 the EDCC has become a frequent reference point in the evangelical world as many are seeking to find a way of addressing environmental issues.

Alister McGrath and the “Re-Enchantment of Nature”

Alister McGrath has made a decisive contribution to this discussion in his book “The Re-Enchantment of Nature,” published in 2002. McGrath takes up the battle against Lynn White by seeking to turn his thesis on its head. Whereas White alleged that Christianity provided the ideological basis for modern western exploitation of nature, McGrath argues that it was in fact the rejection of the biblical worldview by Enlightenment thinking during the eighteenth century that was the root problem:

....the grounds of our ecological crisis lie in the emergence of a worldview that proclaimed human autonomy and viewed nature as a mechanism subordinated to humanity.⁶⁷

McGrath goes on to analyse the implications of a secular, modernist, Enlightenment outlook:

The Enlightenment is marked by the ‘disenchantment’ of nature, its transformation from something sacred into mere matter available for human manipulation.⁶⁸

McGrath contrasts the wonder and respect associated with nature in the biblical tradition with the wholesale “disenchantment” of the Enlightenment outlook. Nature has become something to use for the service of mankind and this has had disastrous results at a time the western world is largely in the grip of Enlightenment thinking:

“The most self-centred religion in history is the secular creed of twentieth-century Western culture.”⁶⁹ McGrath has equally little faith in the current trend towards Postmodern thinking, which, although an important reaction to the limits of Modernism “....does not offer any firm basis for insisting that nature is to be respected and regarded as something special.”⁷⁰ McGrath pleads with the church to seek to regain a sense of the wonder and enchantment of nature. We need to engage with the natural world at a deeper level in appreciation and reflection. This leads to the important biblical intuition:

Nature is not complete in itself. It points to something, intimating the presence or promise of something even more wonderful.⁷¹

McGrath ends with an important plea to the church:

The basic theme of this book is simple. It suggests that we reclaim the idea of nature as God’s creation and act accordingly, bringing attitudes and actions into line with beliefs. We have been entrusted, corporately and individually, with the jewel of God’s creation and given the responsibility of tending and nurturing it, before passing it on to others.⁷²

⁶⁶ Berry, *Care of Creation*, p.21

⁶⁷ McGrath, *The Re-Enchantment of Nature*, p. xviii

⁶⁸ McGrath, *The Re-Enchantment of Nature*, p.54

⁶⁹ McGrath, *The Re-Enchantment of Nature*, p.51

⁷⁰ McGrath, *The Re-Enchantment of Nature*, p.75

⁷¹ McGrath, *The Re-Enchantment of Nature*, p.141

⁷² McGrath, *The Re-Enchantment of Nature*, p.187

Robert White and Nick Spencer – “Climate Change and Sustainability.”

On the crucial question of climate change there has been no more important attempt to provide an evangelical response than that of Robert White and Nick Spencer in “Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living” (2007).⁷³ Robert White wrote as Professor of Geophysics at Cambridge University and Spencer had just completed a stint working at the Jubilee Centre⁷⁴ which researches the societal application of biblical principles. The result was a book which sought to integrate science, theology and practical application.

This is a seminal book with a number of important contributions to a Christian response to climate change which are worth outlining. Firstly, White and Spencer provide a helpful summary of the scientific evidence relating to climate change in a form which is accessible to non-specialists. The book is worth reading simply to study this section and to gain an overview written from an authoritative Christian perspective.⁷⁵ Their outlook is clear – that global warming is real, that it is very dangerous and that its cause is largely caused by human activity. They believe that it can be halted, but only by a comprehensive response on many fronts: “Climate change is not one big, intractable problem, but billions of tiny, tractable ones.”⁷⁶ Secondly, White and Spencer provide a stimulating contribution to biblical reflection by focusing on Isaiah 40-66. Their reason is that this part of Isaiah “...contains some of the most inspiring images we have within Scripture of ‘the right order of things’.”⁷⁷

They contend that Isaiah 40-66 articulates the prophetic vision of the redemption of the whole creation alongside the salvation of humanity.⁷⁸ The prophetic vision of the ‘right order of things’ involves both obedience to God by mankind, and mankind working in harmony with the natural world, thus bringing divine blessing upon nature as a foretaste of the ultimate redemption of the cosmos.⁷⁹ In this way White and Spencer resist two common ideas: the secular hope of merely finding a “techno-fix” for climate change or the “deep ecology” movement’s claim that mankind is a mere sideshow in the overarching task of saving “nature”. White and Spencer insist that solutions to climate change problems require a moral framework in which mankind’s ethical choices are paramount. Thirdly, White and Spencer develop the idea of “sustainability”.⁸⁰ Secular notions of sustainability derive from the authoritative statement made in the UN “Brundtland Report” (1987). Brundtland defined sustainability as:

Development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.⁸¹

White and Spencer support this definition but point out that sustainability is not a new idea – in fact it is rooted in the Bible. They particularly emphasize provisions in the Mosaic Law which were intended to ensure that the vitality of the agricultural economy

⁷³ White & Spencer *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, (SPCK, 2007).

⁷⁴ The Jubilee Centre, 3 Hooper Street, Cambridge, CB1 2NZ. <http://www.jubilee.centre.clara.net>

⁷⁵ White & Spencer, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, pp.13-48

⁷⁶ White & Spencer, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, p.62

⁷⁷ White & Spencer, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, p.103

⁷⁸ eg Isaiah 41:17-20, 43:19-21

⁷⁹ eg: Isaiah 58:6-11

⁸⁰ White & Spencer, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, pp.49-72

⁸¹ White & Spencer, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, p.50

was sustained. The concepts of the year of Jubilee and Sabbath year were central to this. The year of Jubilee (every 50 years) not only relieved debt and reduced inequality, it also allowed just and widespread access to land and agriculture.⁸² The Sabbatical year (every 7 years) was perhaps the most direct environmental provision in the Law in that it allowed for the land to “rest” and be renewed so that its fruitfulness could be sustained.⁸³ White and Spencer also point out that the theme of sustainability is present in Isaiah 40-66.⁸⁴ Fourthly and finally, White and Spencer discuss the implications of working for climate change at a very practical level for individuals, churches, communities and nations.⁸⁵ In this way science and theology are used as the basis for widespread practical changes amongst the Christian community. Their suggestions are radical and deserve careful consideration.

Part Two: Biblical Reflections towards a Christian approach to the environment.

Genesis – laying the foundations for biblical environmentalism

The account of creation and the early eras of human existence are essential to all aspects of biblical theology – not least in our quest to find a biblical perspective on the environment. God’s creation “ex nihilo” demonstrates that the cosmos is finite and contingent.⁸⁶ We cannot accord it divine status.⁸⁷ However, we must recognize that it is suffused with wonder and beauty. Nature is indeed “enchanted” and points us firmly to our creator God.⁸⁸ Also, God saw that everything he had made was “good”.⁸⁹ This means that its goodness and value is not defined by its relationship with mankind. As Christopher Wright states:

We need to be careful to locate an ecological dimension of mission not primarily in the need-supplying value of the earth to us, but in the glory-giving value of the earth to God.⁹⁰

Mankind, however, has a unique place in the creation. Men and women are made “in the image of God”.⁹¹ We must get our thinking clear about mankind before we can properly understand the natural world and our relationship with it. Lynn White’s interpretation of Genesis 1:26-28 has shaped much of the critique of the church. However, he and many others are mistaken to allege that man’s “dominion” over nature gives him a mandate to selfishly exploit it. Gordon Wenham comments on Genesis 1:28 as follows:

Mankind is here commissioned to rule nature as a benevolent king, acting as God’s representative over them and therefore treating them in the same way as God who created them.⁹²

⁸² Leviticus 25:9-55

⁸³ Leviticus 25:1-7

⁸⁴ Eg: Isaiah 65:17-25

⁸⁵ White & Spencer, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*, pp.165-213

⁸⁶ Genesis 1:1-2

⁸⁷ Romans 1:25

⁸⁸ Psalm 19:1-4

⁸⁹ Genesis 1:31

⁹⁰ Wright, *The Mission of God*, p.399

⁹¹ Genesis 1:26-27

⁹² Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, (Word, 1987), p.33

God has indeed made man responsible to be his representative in his dealings with the natural world. Man's "dominion" was intended to involve bringing order, shaping and developing the natural world. Man's "power" is certainly involved in this process, but we must remember that this creative process has been subsequently corrupted by the advent of sin. The type of relationship God intended between man and nature is specifically indicated in the divine command given to Adam concerning the Garden of Eden. Adam was to "work" (literally "to serve") and to "take care of" (literally "to keep, guard, protect") the Garden. The literal meanings are highly indicative. These two verbs clearly indicate a responsible care, not unthinking exploitation. McGrath summarizes the implications of Genesis 1 and 2 with regard to the environment:

There is thus no theological ground for asserting that humanity has the 'right' to do what it pleases with the natural order.....A closer reading of the Genesis text indicates that it endorses such themes as 'humanity as the steward of creation' and 'humanity as the partner of God' rather than 'humanity as the lord of creation.'⁹³

Here McGrath is seeking to balance the reality of mankind's authority over creation with his responsibility for it. He argues for the concept of stewardship to express the implication of these truths.

So what of the "fall" of man in Genesis 3? The advent of human sin brought about a severe disruption to the pattern of inter-relationships envisaged by God in his original creation. Primarily and fundamentally, sin caused a rupture in the relationship between God and mankind. Amongst humanity conflict arose between the sexes,⁹⁴ between relatives,⁹⁵ between tribes⁹⁶ and between emerging people groups.⁹⁷ However, for our purposes we need to note the degradation of nature involved in this process. The natural world no longer functioned exactly as God had intended. Man would henceforth no longer have an unbroken harmonious relationship with nature.⁹⁸ (We shall see how Paul developed this theme later). Henceforth the natural world would both point to its creator and also give living demonstration of the impairment to nature brought about by sin. The Genesis Flood gives eloquent testimony to this.⁹⁹ The rampant advance of sin in mankind led God to initiate a drastic act of judgment in which almost all humanity perished. What is not so commonly noticed is the spectacular destruction wrought upon the natural world by this act of judgement.¹⁰⁰ Man's sin indirectly caused the natural world to be engulfed in suffering and destruction.

One other vital aspect of the Genesis account should be noted carefully – God's covenant with Noah in Genesis 9:1-17. This came in the direct aftermath of the flood and is a much neglected but crucial aspect of God's dealing with the natural world. God promised to Noah that he would never destroy the world again in a universal flood and he gave a sign of his commitment – the rainbow. However, we should note that this was also a covenant

⁹³ McGrath, *The Re-Enchantment of Nature*, pp.29-30

⁹⁴ Genesis 3:16

⁹⁵ Genesis 4:1-16

⁹⁶ Gen 9:18-27

⁹⁷ Genesis 14:1-18

⁹⁸ Genesis 3:17-19

⁹⁹ Genesis 6-8

¹⁰⁰ Genesis 6:17

with the natural world itself – specifically with animate life.¹⁰¹ God entered covenant relationship with “the environment” and promised that it would be sustained until the end of all things:

And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth’. So God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.’¹⁰²

The Noahic covenant should give inspiration to Christian environmentalism, for if God loves the environment enough to make a covenant with it, then we can be confident of God’s blessing in our efforts to protect that same environment. Also, we can be sure that the essential stability of the earth and its eco-systems will not be totally destroyed by man.¹⁰³

Israel – an example for ecology and sustainability.

The outstanding OT scholarship of Christopher Wright has helped to rehabilitate some important themes of OT biblical studies. Wright has argued against the tendency to ignore or downplay the significance of the Mosaic Law and the society that it brought about in ancient Israel. He argues that ancient Israel should be seen as a “paradigm,” by which we can assess contemporary society and from which we can attempt to apply biblical social principles today.¹⁰⁴ Dr Michael Schluter and the Jubilee Centre have been putting a similar case. This perspective has helped us to engage more seriously with the ecological and social implications of the Mosaic Law and what this implies about God’s concern for the environment. We have already noted how White and Spencer have brought out these themes. Wright emphasizes that Israel’s society was intended by God to be an example of how mankind could live in sustainable harmony with the natural world. This was both a “sign” to contemporary nations and also an example whose principles could inform the church in its attempts to engage with ecological issues. Wright emphasises that the OT scriptures were given to teach the church through its examples.¹⁰⁵ This does not mean merely to give moral tales about personal relationships! No, the scope is broad and ecology is an aspect of the Law of Moses. None of this suggests that the church is to seek to re-apply the Law on Moses, but it does imply that there are lessons to be learnt from the way in which God’s care for the environment is woven into the Law of Moses.

¹⁰¹ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, pp.194-195

¹⁰² Genesis 9:12-17

¹⁰³ Genesis 8:22

¹⁰⁴ Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics & the People of God*, (IVP, 2004), pp.62-75

¹⁰⁵ Eg: 2 Timothy 3:16, 1 Corinthians 10:6, 10:11

The Law envisaged a society founded upon worship of God,¹⁰⁶ in which society was governed by important ethical principles.¹⁰⁷ However, societal ethics are closely intertwined with ecological ethics. There are a number of very specific commands which have ecological implications.¹⁰⁸ However, more significant were the specific provisions to maintain a sustainable and just agrarian economy. The year of Jubilee is immensely significant for its land redistribution. This not only limited social inequality, but kept the land in local ownership and kept all the people in touch with the land and all aspects of agriculture.¹⁰⁹ The Sabbath day provided rest for animals, not just for humans.¹¹⁰ However, the Sabbath year provided rest for the land.¹¹¹ Here is an archetypal provision for sustainability in which individual gain and personal decision is overruled by a societal command which forces people to take consideration of long-term sustainability rather than short-term gain. There is a strikingly contemporary ring about this! The Mosaic Law had a concluding prophetic warning - the potential danger of Israel coming under the “curse” of God if it became disobedient to the Law.¹¹² It is notable that some of the “curses” were ecological in their outworking – crops and animals will be cursed, plague and disease will affect agriculture.¹¹³ The nation may even be uprooted from the land which had been given them by divine promise in the Abrahamic covenant.¹¹⁴ The ecological dimension of the Mosaic Law is remarkable. In fact, a study of the Law reveals a close inter-relationship not only between God and the people, but also between God, the people and the land.¹¹⁵

The Psalms – Creation praises God.

The Psalms are full of rapturous affirmations of God as the creator of both the world and the whole cosmos: “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it...”¹¹⁶ However, there is more to this theme than the mere affirmation. In the Psalms we enter into the mystery that creation has its own form of worship and praise to God:

The heavens declare the Glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hand. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.¹¹⁷

And on the earth, the hills “are clothed with gladness”, whilst the meadows and valleys “shout for joy and sing.”¹¹⁸ The Psalmist exhorts all creation to praise in the startling and vivid language of Psalm 148.¹¹⁹ Creation “praises” God just by its very existence - the beauty, wonder, fecundity, variety and sheer scale of creation is intended to “speak” of its

¹⁰⁶ Eg: Exodus 20:3-11, 24:1 – 30:38

¹⁰⁷ Eg: Exodus 20:12-17

¹⁰⁸ Eg: Leviticus 22:28, Deuteronomy 20:19, 22:6, 25:4.

¹⁰⁹ Leviticus 25:8-55

¹¹⁰ Exodus 20:8-11

¹¹¹ Leviticus 25:1-7

¹¹² Leviticus 26:1-46, Deuteronomy 28:1-68

¹¹³ Eg: Deuteronomy 28:15-24

¹¹⁴ Deuteronomy 28:64-68

¹¹⁵ Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics & the People of God*, pp.17-20

¹¹⁶ Psalm 24:1, cf: Psalm 104:24, Psalm 65:5-8

¹¹⁷ Psalm 19:13

¹¹⁸ Psalm 65:12-13

¹¹⁹ Psalm 148:3, 7, 9-10

creator God. Human sin diminishes this capacity; ultimate redemption will greatly enhance it.

Psalm 104 is highly instructive for our purpose. It could be described as “the ecological Psalm.” Here the wonders of creation are again laid out, but with particular emphasis on the power of creation, through God’s blessing, to provide for the needs of all its numerous life forms. Mankind is very particularly the recipient of this remarkable combination of God’s ongoing blessing and the earth’s built-in fecundity:

He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate – bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart.¹²⁰

When God’s blessing is withdrawn then this wonderful provision falls away,¹²¹ but when his Spirit is manifested he comes to “renew the face of the earth.”¹²² The Psalm ends with an invitation to “meditate” on these truths about God, and his creation. There is no more positive affirmation of the goodness of creation and its close dependency on God in all the OT.

The Prophets – ethical and eschatological insights about the natural world

The range of OT prophecy is vast and much of it beyond the scope of our discussion. However, two points are worthy of note here. Firstly, it is important to keep firmly in mind that the prophets were “covenant enforcement mediators.”¹²³ Their ministry arose directly out of the Mosaic Law. They were those who reminded the nation of their obligations and warned of the disasters which would attend their long-term disobedience. The prophets were clear that some of these disasters would be ecological.¹²⁴ Secondly, the prophets consistently anticipated a restoration of Israel to her land and to obedience to her God. Some of this prophecy has a distinctly eschatological tone to it – a ‘Messianic Age’ was to be expected.¹²⁵ Christian interpreters disagree as to whether such prophecies refer to a literal, physical “Messianic Age” after the return of Christ, or whether they refer to aspects of the life of the church or whether they anticipate the “new heaven and the new earth” of Revelation 21-22 – or indeed a mixture of these! Even allowing for a diversity of possible interpretations we can confidently affirm that the prophets anticipated an ecological dimension to the advance of the Kingdom of God. Nature is to be restored and blessed as the Kingdom rule is extended and in the eschatological age. Although it is hard to pin down the exact implications of this prophetic emphasis, it should serve as an indicator to the Church that there must be current ecological implications to the process of the advance of the Kingdom in the Church age.

¹²⁰ Psalm 104:14-15

¹²¹ Psalm 104:29

¹²² Psalm 104:30

¹²³ Gordon Fee & Stewart, Douglas, *How to read the Bible for all its Worth*, (SU, 1998). P.167

¹²⁴ Eg: Micah 6:13-15, Amos 4:6-10, Isaiah 24:1-13

¹²⁵ Eg: Isaiah 11:1-9, Isaiah 35:1-10, Micah 4:1-8, Zechariah 14:10-11, 16-21

The Gospels – God’s identification with the natural world.

In Christ, God became flesh and dwelt amongst us.¹²⁶ The mystery and reality of the incarnation is central to all theology and of vital importance in our discussion of the environment. God’s wholehearted identification with the creation through the incarnation should profoundly influence our understanding of mankind’s relationship with nature. Jesus came and lived amongst us, but he also came and lived alongside the fields and the animals. He walked the hills, he sailed on Lake Galilee. He rubbed shoulders with farmers and fishermen. He told stories about agricultural life and the weather. He turned water into wine. Jesus emphasized God’s providential care for creation¹²⁷ and pointed towards its eschatological redemption.¹²⁸ Here is a solid foundation for ecological concern.

Jesus came to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom and the Kingdom involves “the renewal of creation.”¹²⁹ The nature miracles provide suggestive insights into the ecological implications of the Kingdom. These events are more than symbolic – they strongly indicate the authority of Christ over nature and the possibility of a reordering of nature. For example, when Jesus calms the storm on the Sea of Galilee¹³⁰ his actions can be seen as “presaging God’s final elimination of chaos from the natural world.”¹³¹

It is notable that Jesus’ challenge to his disciples to be non-materialistic is rooted, in part, in insights from the natural world. God’s care for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field¹³² encourage Christians to turn away from acquisitiveness, refuse anxiety and exercise trust in God. However, there is something more. Jesus was also teaching that God’s provision of resources in the natural world is sufficient to meet the needs of all the creatures he has made. However, this sufficiency is based on all creatures only using the resources they really need (like birds and lilies do). This ecological insight is an implicit challenge to modern materialistic societies in which ever-increasing acquisition, overconsumption and ever higher standards of living result in the depletion of natural resources needed by other creatures.

Christ’s work of salvation through his death and resurrection provided the gateway for salvation for humanity. But what about the natural world in which mankind lived? Jesus predicted much suffering in the natural world as his second coming approached,¹³³ but this suffering was merely the “birthpangs”¹³⁴ of a new age in which there would take place “the renewal of all things.”¹³⁵ He referred in passing to specific physical aspects of

¹²⁶ John 1:14 etc

¹²⁷ Eg: Matthew 6:26-30

¹²⁸ Eg: Matthew 17:11

¹²⁹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus, God & Nature in the Gospels*, in Robert White (ed), *Creation in Crisis*, (SPCK, 2009), p.211.

¹³⁰ Mark 4:35-41

¹³¹ Bauckham, in White (ed), *Creation in Crisis*, p.217

¹³² Matthew 6:25-34

¹³³ Luke 21:11

¹³⁴ Matthew 24:8

¹³⁵ Matthew 19:28

this renewal of creation.¹³⁶ However, the resurrection of Jesus was the clearest indicator of the eschatological future of redeemed humanity and also the natural world itself. If Jesus had been raised, then mankind could be raised too - and somehow the earth must be renewed as well. The Gospels do not spell out the implications of this idea, but the resurrection narratives provide powerful hints. It was left of Paul and other NT writers to develop the concept.

Paul – hope for the redemption of the earth and cosmos

Paul gives us a few decisive insights into the scope of God’s plans for redemption. A vital passage is Romans 8:19-22:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.¹³⁷

As Douglas Moo states: “It is the clearest expression of future hope for the physical world in the NT.”¹³⁸ Here Paul makes clear that “creation” (ie all the natural world apart from humanity) was “subjected to frustration” by God himself as its fate was inextricably linked to humanity and the disastrous decision of mankind to sin against God. This sin, according to Paul, meant that the natural world would be unable to fulfil its full potential and would, to some extent, malfunction. Moo describes it thus: “Human sin led to some kind of a change in the nature of the cosmos itself.”¹³⁹ Paul then states that “creation” can only be set free from this limitation at the second coming of Christ when “the sons of God” will “be revealed”. This will enable the creation to “be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.” Here Paul amplifies the implications of the Genesis statements about the fall of man and its negative results within nature.¹⁴⁰ He also gives us one of the most powerful affirmations in the Bible about the scope of the future redemption. The whole world, indeed the cosmos, will be transformed and renewed.¹⁴¹ This idea is echoed in Colossians 1:15-20 where we are told that God intends to reconcile “all things” to himself through Christ. The process began with the cross and will be eschatologically completed. A similar theme underlies 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 in which the various stages of resurrection and Christ’s Kingdom rule are discussed. Again the implication is that the natural world will ultimately follow believers in being cleansed from sin and renewed. As NT Wright says:

The whole creation.... is on tiptoe with expectation, longing for the day when God’s children are revealed, when their resurrection will herald its own new

¹³⁶ Eg: Luke 22:14-18, 22:29-30, Acts 1:6-7

¹³⁷ Romans 8:19-22

¹³⁸ Douglas Moo, *Nature in the New Creation – NT Eschatology & the Environment*, (Journal of Evangelical Theological society, 49, 2006), p.4

¹³⁹ Moo, *Nature in the New Creation*, p.4

¹⁴⁰ Genesis 3:17-19

¹⁴¹ See also 1 Corinthians 15 where a similar concept is taught from the starting point of the resurrection of humanity

life.¹⁴²

Peter – the old earth and the new earth.

It is worth noting here that many Christians believe that the earth is going to be utterly annihilated at the Second coming – based mainly on 2 Peter 3. This view has been a fundamental stumbling block for many who cannot see any point in seeking to preserve a world which is running down and is facing annihilation by the fire of God’s judgement upon Christ’s return!

However, closer examination of 2 Peter 3 suggests strongly another interpretation. It is very probable that Peter’s language in this passage is describing the complete purging of the earth rather than its annihilation. The metaphor of “fire” best fits judgment not annihilation. This is borne out also by Peter’s use of the example of the Genesis Flood as an analogy: the waters of the flood are said to have “destroyed” the earth, but this was a purification by judgement rather than an annihilation of the earth’s physical reality (2 Peter 3:6). The NIV translation of 2 Peter 3:10 says that the earth “will be laid bare” by this divine judgement. This makes good sense of the metaphor and the context. The exegetical case for this view has been developed by Douglas Moo¹⁴³, Wayne Grudem,¹⁴⁴ and others. In the same passage Peter speaks of his anticipation of a “new earth” (2 Peter 3:13). This gives us hope that out of the purged earth will arise a new physical environment on earth which is free from the taint of sin as a habitation for redeemed humanity. So whilst our efforts to preserve the environment are not, in the absolute sense, going to “save the planet,” they have great benefits for mankind now and are important prophetic signs of God’s good and redeeming intentions towards the earth itself –as made clear in the book of Revelation.

Revelation – the eschatological renewal of the universe.

Despite the notorious complexity attending the interpretation of the book of Revelation, we must reflect (very selectively!) on some of its themes. Most commentators would agree that whatever era or timescale is intended to be understood in chapters 6 to 19 this narrative describes a titanic battle: Satanic forces and their human allies on the one hand, and God and the Church on the other. The account in Revelation has special reference to the eschatological climax of this battle and the return of Christ. It is often overlooked that there is a heavy price of ecological destruction and degradation paid by the earth (and indeed the cosmos) during this process. It is noteworthy that Revelation states that an aspect of God’s eschatological judgement relates specifically to ecological issues:

The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both great and small – *and for destroying those who destroy the earth.*¹⁴⁵ (italics mine).

One aspect of the rule of evil men and the influence of Satanic forces is destruction within the natural world. God will ultimately intervene to bring this process to an end.

¹⁴² NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, (SPCK, 2007), p.115

¹⁴³ Douglas Moo, *Nature in the New Creation*

¹⁴⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pp.1160-1161

¹⁴⁵ Revelation 11:18

After Christ returns the eternal age will be inaugurated in which the long-anticipated biblical hope for cosmic renewal will be fulfilled in the advent of the “new heaven and the new earth.”¹⁴⁶ Some believe this will come in two stages – a “millennium”¹⁴⁷ and then the eternal age,¹⁴⁸ others believe that the transition will be immediate upon the coming of Christ¹⁴⁹ and the final judgement.¹⁵⁰ However, whichever way we look at it, the ultimate conclusion is clear – the earth and the cosmos are going to be dramatically renewed. God’s ultimate intention is not to redeem mankind from the physical world, but to redeem the physical world alongside man’s redemption!

Concluding reflections.

The whole scope of biblical material needs to be taken into consideration in developing an appropriate response to the question of the environment. One or two ‘proof texts’ will not do the job. As we have seen, there are many aspects of the biblical story which give strong indications that engagement with environmental issues is important for the Church. When one considers, for example, the significance of the creation/fall account in Genesis; the ongoing concern for ecological issues in the story of ancient Israel; the deep appreciation for nature in the Psalms; the suggestive teaching of Jesus and the eschatological emphases of the NT - then a strong cumulative case for environmental concern can be made. Throughout the bible we see a strong emphasis on the physical dimension of both God’s original creation and also his ongoing and ultimate re-creation. Neo-Platonic versions of Christianity which downplay physical reality in place of the ‘spiritual’ do not accurately represent the biblical description of creation and redemption. The ultimate destination of the redeemed is a strongly physical ‘new heaven and new earth’. An overview of the biblical material strongly indicates God’s love and provision for all his creation and the responsibility of the Church to adopt a prophetic and practical approach to the issues raised by the question of the environment. From a biblical perspective there is no place for detachment or lack of interest in this vital issue.

Part Three: Practical outworking of Christian environmentalism.

The ethical imperative – love for God and for our neighbours.

NT ethics is ultimately based on the twofold imperative of loving God with our whole beings and loving our neighbours as we love ourselves. Jesus made these two priorities clear.¹⁵¹ The other NT writers particularly affirmed the second.¹⁵² There are a few important implications for our subject. Firstly, if we love God with wholehearted devotion, then surely we will respect and treasure His creation? How is it possible to love God and yet to knowingly participate in the insidious degradation and destruction of parts

¹⁴⁶ Revelation 21:1ff

¹⁴⁷ Revelation 20:1-10

¹⁴⁸ Revelation 21 & 22

¹⁴⁹ Revelation 19:11-21

¹⁵⁰ Revelation 20:11-15

¹⁵¹ Matthew 22:34-40

¹⁵² Eg: Romans 13:9, James 2:8

of His creation? Secondly, common sense and scientific knowledge combine to tell us that to love our neighbour means, where possible, to protect the environment in which they live, both for the present generation and on behalf of those yet to be born. The common link between environmental degradation and poverty is now well accepted.¹⁵³

An ecological perspective on the ethical imperative of neighbour love has not yet become clearly established as an important outworking of the principle. However, it is increasingly becoming clear that the overconsumption of some people can spell poverty for others; the overuse of resources by some can deny them to others; the destruction of the environment for short term gain by some can destroy the livelihood and future of many others. A strong environmental perspective in Christian ethics will serve to redefine the scope of loving our neighbours.

Preliminary reflections.

Ultimately, every Christian needs to make a personal judgement about the seriousness of the ecological problems faced by the world today. As noted earlier, there are a vast range of issues at stake. So many, in fact, that Robert White has entitled his recent book “Creation in Crisis” (2009). Robert White identifies energy production, population control, food production and water provision amongst the most critical.¹⁵⁴ However, alongside these issues we also have to come to a view about the central question of climate change. There are some who seriously doubt the majority scientific view, and climate change sceptics have become more prominent recently. Christians will have a variety of views on this subject which must be respected. It is our contention here that the majority scientific view is generally sound. James McCarthy has provided an excellent overview of the issues and offers a robust challenge to extreme climate change scepticism.¹⁵⁵ There is also a widespread nervousness amongst Christians about the way climate change discourse has often become sensationalized, over-dogmatic, politicized or even portrayed as a single-issue choice between “salvation” or “catastrophe”. Such concerns are understandable, but surely cannot be sufficient reason not to get involved in the issue! John Houghton’s “Global Warming – the Complete Briefing” (2009) is recommended for an up to date and authoritative scientific assessment.¹⁵⁶ The approach proposed here is based on a general acceptance of the scientific consensus about the urgency of our numerous environmental problems including climate change. Our engagement with these issues should be based on a sober factual assessment of their importance and rooted in a biblical perspective on the environment.

Western Christians face another major problem in engaging effectively with environmentalism – we are simply too detached from the key problems to take them seriously enough. We are too comfortable. We can still consume more or less what we want without facing any immediate consequences. We are largely protected from the impact of environmental problems at present. Pollution, though real, is largely out of

¹⁵³ Rene Padilla in White (ed), *Creation in Crisis*, pp.175-191 for an extended discussion.

¹⁵⁴ Robert White (ed), *Creation in Crisis*, specially chapters 2,6,8,9,10

¹⁵⁵ James McCarthy in White (ed), *Creation in Crisis*, pp.34-52

¹⁵⁶ John Houghton, *Global Warming – the Complete Briefing*, (CUP, 2009).

sight. Soil erosion takes place elsewhere. We cannot see the smoke of the forests burning. We are never seriously short of water or food. Climate change is not yet having any significant impact on our lifestyles. Political pressures have not forced any radical changes of lifestyle upon us. We are mostly urbanized and have lost “connection” with the land, with agriculture, indeed with nature itself – except as a playground. Most of what we think about environmental issues is based on what we see in the media, not what we see in our streets, fields, rivers, homes and workplaces. It would all seem so different if we lived in Bangladesh with its catastrophic flooding or Kenya with desperate droughts, or Brazil as the rainforests continue to burn. These days of comfort and complacency in the West surely cannot last as the sobering realities of environmental degradation creep up upon us. However, in the meantime, it takes an effort of the imagination and the will to decide to be actively engaged with environmentalism.

Personal responses.

If we wish to be environmentally active the only place to start is with our own personal lifestyles although this has to be done with care and sensitivity in the context of local churches – we must ensure that judgmentalism does not creep in as each person and family unit responds individually to the issues involved.¹⁵⁷ The two central questions are simple: do we believe in the biblical imperative towards environmental concern? and, are we willing to make anything more than cosmetic changes in our lifestyles as an aspect of our Christian discipleship? Many fairly low-cost changes can quite easily be made: recycling, reducing consumer waste, switching to low energy lighting, installing home insulation, using public transport and cutting unnecessary car travel, etc. More challenging are possible changes that involve major choices such as considering switching to forms of ethical investment/insurance/banking, changing our cars, reconsidering where we live on environmental grounds, questioning our use of air travel, investing in solar panels, or modifying shopping choices to reflect ethical and environmental factors (such as the transport costs of the food we buy). These challenging options all require thought and planning. There are no cut and dried answers. Every issue needs to be considered on its merits – then choices have to be made. Can we be bothered? Does it matter enough? We can even take this a step further and ask whether environmental considerations alone argue for western Christians to move towards adopting a simpler lifestyle all round. Materialism and environmental degradation tend to go together. Is it time to look again at the materialistic assumptions of our lifestyles?

Churches as centres of “the care of creation”

An Environment Agency report in 2007 listed the 50 things that mankind could do to help preserve the environment on a worldwide scale. The report placed the role of faith communities as the second most important factor out of 50! Their opinion was unequivocal:

It’s time that the world’s faith groups reminded us we have a duty to restore and maintain the ecological balance of the planet.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ See Romans 14

¹⁵⁸ Hilary Marlow, *The Environment*, in Rose Lynas (ed), *Votewise Now*, p.57

It is time indeed and no one is better placed to do this than the church of Jesus Christ armed with a biblical perspective on the environment.

There are a number of foundations which first need to be set into place. National Christian leaders can play a vital part in raising the profile of environmentalism. Clearly, local church leaders also need to reflect upon the relative importance of the environment in our contemporary Christian discipleship. Then teaching, worship and prayer can begin to reflect this priority. From this basis, corporate activism can easily develop in which those whose work involves environmental issues are encouraged, environmental activists are empowered and practical steps can be taken at a communal level to reflect the church's environmental priorities (eg energy saving, micro-generation of renewable energy on church premises, car-pooling, sharing of goods to reduce waste, promotion of specific environmental issues etc). One very practical approach for local churches is to get involved with the 'Eco-Congregation' movement which provides a framework for local churches to think through and enact an environmentally positive agenda.¹⁵⁹ An obvious benefit of this type of approach is the opportunity it provides to reach out to those sections of local communities which (broadly) share our environmental concerns.

RJ Berry pleads for the emergence of churches as centres of "creation care." White and Spencer want the church to "showcase how sustainable living is not only possible but is also beneficial and joyful."¹⁶⁰ Maybe this is an aspect of being "salt and light" in our communities?

Preserving and creating beauty – the aesthetic dimension of environmentalism.

The natural world is beautiful and its beauty is a constant preoccupation of mankind. 'Art' in its widest sense should thus be linked to environmentalism in its attempts to capture the beauty and variety of the natural world. Environmentalism is not merely about seeking to reverse environmentally destructive patterns of human behaviour – it is also about the aesthetic dimension of life. Some Christians are in a position to exercise a direct and specific influence in these areas through their work. Architecture, planning and conservation are three obvious examples. Those working in such fields should rightly see their work as linked to the broader agenda of environmentalism and they deserve the full support of their local churches.

Political engagement.

Ultimately, positive environmental change will only be brought about by political will rather than by individual action. There are many important environmental pressure groups around.¹⁶¹ Each issue is complex and there is room for differences of opinion (eg over nuclear energy). None of this should negate the fact that if there was a mass involvement in environmentalism by Christians it would have a profound impact upon politicians and policy-makers. Letter-writing, petitions, supporting pressure groups, campaign marches,

¹⁵⁹ <http://www.ecocongregation.org>

¹⁶⁰ White and Spencer, *Christianity, Climate Change & Sustainable Living*, p.175

¹⁶¹ Eg: Friends of the Earth: <http://www.foe.co.uk>, Stop Climate change: <http://www.stopclimatechange.net>. Green Party: <http://www.greenparty.org.uk>

meetings with politicians – all these are important aspects of a commitment to direct involvement in the political process. There are a number of Christian pressure groups in existence which can assist the church to formulate its response to different environmental issues.¹⁶²

Conclusion - environmentalism as part of the life and mission of the Church.

This paper has argued for three things. Firstly, we must engage closely with the reality of environmental degradation and danger in our world today. Without a genuine attempt to get to grips with what is evidently happening to our planet we cannot hope to make a meaningful response. Secondly, we must look seriously at the Bible to enable us to understand its perspectives on this issue. Not enough emphasis and attention has been given to this in evangelical theology and church life. This needs to change. Thirdly, we must be willing to make a direct and multi-faceted response to environmental issues. This could prove to be costly and demanding – but is well worth the effort.

At the end of the day, environmental issues will only form part of the church's life and mission. There are many other important priorities to be attended to and we should not fall into the "one issue" culture which surrounds so much secular environmentalism. God has called us into partnership with Him in his saving mission. The gospel must go to the ends of the earth. However, this gospel has a very "earthly" feel to it. God loves both the whole man and the whole earth. Christians should be prophetic and powerful in being in the forefront of those who say that the environment really matters and man's greedy exploitation of it must change – and soon.

¹⁶² Eg: Tear Fund: <http://www.tearfund.org> Christian Aid: <http://www.christianaid.org.uk>
Evangelical Environmental Network: <http://creationcare.org>, Christian Ecology Link: <http://www.christian-ecology.org.uk>, European Christian Environmental Network: <http://www.ecen.org>

Appendix – some ideas for local church environmental initiatives:

A good place to start is to identify likely environmental enthusiasts in the church and to seek out those with relevant skills. Initiatives may well flow out of discussions with existing enthusiasts. Another helpful thing to do is to make contact with Christian environmental organizations such as 'A Rocha'. 'A Rocha' runs the 'Eco-Congregation' initiative (in England and Wales), which enables churches to go through a stage by stage environmental audit over time. Another possibility is to identify a possible environmental project in your community and to take a leading role in seeking to bring it into reality. Possibilities include – turning derelict land into park land, sponsoring and delivering environmental education projects, forming an environmental pressure group, supporting other agencies in wildlife audits etc., and working with landowners to create wildlife areas on unused land etc. See the 'A Rocha' website for some great examples. Many churches find it profitable to work with other churches in their area to develop environmental initiatives.

Environmentalism is a good way to make friends and build partnerships in your community. The opportunities for Christian witness in this context are likely to be extensive and exciting.

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