

IS GOD AN ENVIRONMENTALIST?

By Jonathan Clarke

Dr Jonathan Clarke is an exploration geologist and is a fellow of ISCAST (Institute for the Study of Christianity in an Age of Science and Technology).
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Introduction

Environmental issues are big news. They have been so since the environmental movement began in the late 1960's. Problems global (such as the ozone hole) and local (safety of chemical plants at Coode island), rival wars, scandals, and the economy for media attention. Various organisations compete with each other for the public's time and money, expressing their concerns in doomsday language with evangelistic fervour. Environmental values are taught from the start of schooling and "green" attitudes often colour the books and television that we read and view.

Awareness of environmental issues has spread from its beginnings to the extent that they are important components of policy. Governments, industry, and international organisations all must take environmental factors in account. Activist organisations have memberships of many thousands and budgets of many millions of dollars.

It is widely held that 20th century "western" industrial societies are uniquely destructive to the environment. In reality some of the greatest environmental changes came about through the activities of so-called primitive hunter-gatherer, pastoral, and rural societies. However it is true that modern societies have a major impact on the natural world through both the scale of resource use and the volume of wastes that they return to the environment. Hence the demand for changes in individual and community attitudes and practices is heard from many quarters.

Does it matter?

What should Christians think? Is there a biblical basis for environmental concerns? Should we bother? Some Christians think not. "Assembly Challenge", the Tasmanian equivalent of "Links", ran an article during the height of the Franklin River controversy in the early 1980's which said that Christians should not worry about the environment because the natural world was doomed to destruction. It seems to have escaped the writer that by the same logic Christians should not care for the sick because they will all die eventually, or for social justice because all societies are doomed to judgement.

Many secular writers have blamed Christianity for the so-called environmental crisis. The argument goes something like this. Genesis says that God created humanity alone in His image. An unnatural barrier is thus placed between people and the rest of the world, leading to arrogance. God also told humanity to fill the earth and subdue it. This provides divine sanction for whole scale use and abuse of the natural world. Furthermore, the Bible teaches that only God is holy, so that Christians (unlike nature worshippers) do not revere and respect nature. Finally, because the goal of Christianity is eternal, Christian's eyes are fixed on the future, and not on problems in the here and now.

These ideas are the root of the anti-Christian attitudes of some environmental philosophers. They are also partly the reasons why the same philosophers embrace buddhist and nature worshipping religions which are supposed to be more friendly to the environment. All too many environmental philosophers appear motivated by a romantic views of nature, by superstitious reverence for "Mother Earth" or, more dangerously, for the "Earth Goddess" or "Earth Spirits".

It is important for Christians to confront these things. Firstly, because they define the attitudes of many environmentally concerned non-christians to our faith. Secondly, a wrong perception of Christianity places obstacles in the path of some who might otherwise believe. Thirdly, action based on erroneous religious beliefs will inevitably effect the quality of the outcome. Finally, part of being salt and light in this sinful world requires us to deal with issues that confront us as individuals, churches, and societies. They are too important to allow the agenda to be set by people antagonistic to our faith. The history of human rights shows the danger of letting the initiative fall from Christians, the history of feminism shows the danger of never taking them up.

However, there is no point in leaping on our collective horse and galloping wildly in all directions at once. We need a basis for thinking and action. Hence, we must understand what Biblical base (if any) exists for our attitude to the natural world and how that attitude is worked out in Scripture. Only then can we begin to determine a Christian approach to environmental issues.

God and His world

The whole of creation exists for God and His pleasure and purpose (Rom 11: 36; Col 1: 16-17; Rev 4: 11). It does not exist for humanity at all. Humanity is made of the same stuff as the rest of creation (Gen 2: 7, 19, 3: 19), although possessing the unique gift of being in His image. Indeed, from some perspectives, we are but an insignificant part of it (Ps 8: 4). We, as a species, are not independent lords of creation (only God is), but stewards, caretakers, and managers (Ps 8: 6-9). The riches of creation are gifts of God, as He gave the "land rich in milk and honey" to the Israelites (Ex 3: 17).

The nature of stewardship

There is a rich lode of material for us to mine in Scripture on the stewardship of God's gifts. The Bible talks about stewardship by individuals, societies, governments, and church leaders. Biblical stewardship consists of three things: firstly, preservation of what has been entrusted to us (such as sound doctrine, 1 Cor 11:2); secondly, wise use of what we have been given (Matt 25: 14-27), which means using them to the glory of God and the betterment of other people; and thirdly it is also important to teach and show others to do the same (1 Tim 4: 10). Material selfishness is condemned, as shown by the parables such as the rich fool (Lk 12: 16-21) and the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16: 19-31). Simply preserving what we have been given may not be sufficient, as the fate of the servant who buried his master's money shows (Matt 25: 28-30). Joseph and Daniel are prime examples of what the Lord expects of good stewards.

Biblical environmental stewardship

Much of the broader picture of Biblical stewardship is also applicable to our responsibilities towards the world that God has created. Humanity was instructed in the beginning to fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion over it (Gen 1: 27-29). This is clearly in the context of God's Lordship and the giftness of creation, with the implication being that gifts must be used wisely. This is illustrated in

Gen 2: 15-16, where Adam is placed in Eden to till and care for it, a task which included naming the animals (Gen 2: 19).

It might be argued that this state of affairs applied only before the fall. However, the law of Moses also required wise land use, illustrated by the commands to leave fields fallow every seven years (Lev 25: 1-7). In this way the land would continue to provide food, not only for the people and their livestock, but also for the wild animals. Continued disobedience of this law was one of the sins that led to the Babylonian exile. The length of the exile was determined by the time needed for the land to recover from its abuse (2 Ch 36: 21). The goal of the law was holiness (Lev 11: 45) in every aspect of life. This even covered the way in which troops in the field were to dispose of body wastes (Deut 23: 12-14). God is interested in how His people get rid of their sewerage. Even during times of war, fruit trees were to be protected (Deut 20: 19). A good man is one who is kind to his animals (Pr 12: 10). It is in this context that David (Ps 8: 6-9) is able to say in humble awe that physically insignificant humanity has been gifted by God with the stewardship of His world.

The New Testament says little about environmental responsibilities, although it has much to say about stewardship generally (such as the parable of the three servants, Matt 25: 14-30). This is in line with the superficially reduced emphasis of broader issues of social justice and conduct in the New Testament. However, as Christ came to fulfil the law, not abolish it (Matt 5: 17), and because all creation (Rom 8: 19-20, Eph 1: 10, Rev 5: 13), not just humanity, is involved in the redemption, we can conclude that God is still interested in how people use His creation. This is confirmed by Christ's use of good stewardship of the natural world as models for both spiritual stewardship and His own ministry. Examples include the parables of the lost sheep (Matt 18: 12-14), the fig tree (Matt 24: 32-35), and the good shepherd (Jn 10: 1-6).

A Christian approach to environmental issues

The Bible is very clear that the natural world suffers because of human sin (Lv 26: 34-35, Joel 1: 10, Rom 8:22). Human sin lies at the root of all environmental problems (Mi 7: 13). We cannot expect to escape environmental problems in this age of the world. This no more reduces the Christian's responsibility to care for the world than the human sin and imperfection reduces our responsibility to live in right relationships with each other.

I suggest that Christian attitudes to the natural environment should show the following characteristics: firstly, recognition that the world is God's, not ours; secondly, we are the part of creation to whom God has given the "duty of care" in regard to the rest of creation, we are stewards of creation, not its rulers, and are thus accountable; and finally, stewardship involves both preservation and wise use of what we have been entrusted. Thirdly, the use we make of creation must be good, in a way that primarily glorifies God and secondarily is of benefit to our neighbour.

Applying these principles in our daily lives is a challenge that we all face. It should affect what we use and the way we use them, and how we dispose of them. It should play a role in our voting intentions, our career choices, and our family size. Wise use of God's world should be as much part of our decision making as wise use of our time, money, and abilities. For those in positions of responsibility (in whatever field), it should have an impact in what we do and say. We have a responsibility to encourage others to live wisely also. For those who join activist organisations, it means understanding the Biblical basis for practice and maintaining high standards of honesty, integrity, and truth, something not always present in these groups. Furthermore, issues of individual morality and social justice must not be subordinate to environmental issues, rather they need to be

considered alongside each other.

Finally we must always remember that we live in an imperfect, fallen world. This means that we must also admit our own fallibility. We often must make decisions and act on limited information. Inevitably this means that we will sometimes make mistakes. This calls for humility on our part before God and other people, and forgiveness and understanding towards others, especially those whose choices and decisions in this area may be different than our own. Only in this way can we begin to be good stewards of God's creation.

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