

CHRISTIAN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

People around the world are concerned about the environment and what man is doing to it. For many Christians, this issue has become very important.

Rather than responding emotionally to environmental issues, which can lead to poorly informed actions, we need to work from a Christian environmental ethic. The foundation of such an ethic must be the Word of God.

Logically, we must start in the Book of Genesis—the book of beginnings—to develop our thinking and create a truly Christian viewpoint and plan of action.

WHO MADE THE WORLD?

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

Genesis 1:1

The fact that God created the world means He owns it. Man can not really claim ownership of anything. Psalm 24:1 reminds us: “The earth is Jehovah’s, and its fullness; the world, and those who dwell in it.”

Everything we have comes from God who created it all. Because we don’t really own anything, we have no right to exploit God’s Creation—that is, to consume something exclusively for our own benefit, to the detriment of God’s Creation.

WHO HAS BEEN TOLD TO RULE OVER THE EARTH?

In Genesis 1:28, God says to Adam and Eve: “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; rule over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the

earth.”

Genesis 2:15 states, “Then Jehovah God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till and keep it.” God designed man to be different from all the other animals. He gave us a superior brain and the ability to communicate complex thoughts so we could share information and pass it on from one generation to the next. This, combined with our marvellous hands, made us able to subdue the earth and rule it, as He commanded us to do. But please notice the difference: We are to subdue the earth, meaning the ground and plants, but we are to rule over all the living animals, including aquatic, land and flying creatures. One can subdue with force, but a wise ruler leads rather than forces. As rulers we are to seek what is best for everyone under our care, animals as well as fellow humans. Man has a special responsibility and is expected to care for this planet and our fellow creatures that our Creator has entrusted to us.

IS GOD CONCERNED ABOUT HIS CREATION?

In Matthew 6:28 & 29, God tells us that He clothes the lilies of the field so well that “even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” Furthermore, not even a sparrow falls without God’s knowledge and permission. (Matthew 10:29) If God is that concerned about His creatures, surely man, acting as His steward, must be similarly concerned. We should thus want to eliminate or at least minimise harm to the world and its occupants.

WHY ARE THERE ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS?

When God first made the world, everything was “very good,” or perfect. (Genesis 1:32) All living things were functioning together in perfect harmony, with a sinless man tending to the perfect creation.

However, that has all changed. Romans 8:22 tells us “For we know that the entire creation groans and labours with birth pangs until now.” Genesis 3 records the event that led to our present world, in which all living things and all world systems decay and die. Romans 5:12 explains that man’s disobedience of God’s command not to eat of

the forbidden fruit began a relentless submission to sin. It resulted in God cursing the world with death. Genesis 3:17-19 describes some of the ways this sin affected the creation: “Cursed is the ground for your sake; in sorrow you shall eat of it all the days of your life; “Also thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you;. . . In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.” From this time on, the animal kingdom also changed. No longer did they all dwell together in peace, but some animals were transformed into carnivores and scavengers.

The whole of creation is running down and wearing out. “The earth shall grow old like a garment” (Isaiah 51:6), and man’s sinful nature has disrupted man’s relationship to the environment. Adam’s sin, which we all inherit, was rebellion against God’s rules, and man, ever since, has tried to make his own rules. This results in selfishness (and therefore exploitation), the refusal of man to practice love for his fellow man and other creatures, and the poor stewardship of His creation.

SHOULD MAN PROFIT FROM THE CREATION?

Deuteronomy 25:4 states: “You shall not muzzle the ox when he treads out the corn.”, which means that the ox should be allowed to have a reward for his efforts. In Isaiah 5 and John 15, God shows that even He expects fruit or “profit” from His work. In other words, some benefit should be gained from wise stewardship.

But man is not a perfect steward any more. Although the resources which God created are there for our use, man now often exploits these resources at the expense of his fellowman, and causes needless loss and destruction in other parts of God’s creation. Surely this is wrong!

Conversely, much of the emphasis of the modern conservation movement is strongly evolutionary and pantheistic, worshipping the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1). This contradicts the Biblical mandate for man to rule over the earth and subdue it. The development of energy sources (coal, natural gas, petroleum, etc.), the mining of mineral resources, the cutting of timber for building, and so

on is not wrong. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 states that there is “a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to keep and a time to throw away.” It is the abuse of these resources—the heedless exploitation, the waste, the greed, the corruption and the haste that is wrong.

Proverbs 12:10 says, “A righteous man considers the life of his beast: but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.” To rule means to administer, to work, to guide and take care of the creation—not lording over it in a dictatorial manner, or callously destroying it.

Intelligent stewardship of this planet requires knowledge and wisdom. We need to know the requirements of all the various plants and animals involved in any proposed project. We need to know how they all interact, and what effect our intervention will have on them and ourselves. We then need the wisdom to be able to balance all the conflicting issues and possibilities involved, and select the option that offers the greatest benefit and least damage to all the organisms concerned. It is obvious from the sophisticated balance achieved in undisturbed habitats that God has been scrupulous in these matters, and we would be very poor stewards if we did not do our utmost to follow in his footsteps. Unfortunately, we do not have the total knowledge required to make perfect decisions, nor the unbiased wisdom needed to best utilise our limited understanding of environmental constraints.

However, as servants of the One True God, we must pray for His guidance, strive to make the best choice we can and learn from our mistakes. Our focus must be to balance our needs as the ruling species with the needs of the many species that we have been charged with caring for.

A FINAL CAUTION

It is natural to want to see things in black and white terms. And there certainly are black and white issues.

However, because some things are so varied and complex, often involving sinful human behaviour and motives, black and white answers may be risky and hard to find. Sincere, Bible-believing Christians may

end up on opposing sides of such issues.

Discussions of uranium mining, logging, hydroelectricity dams, etc., usually give rise to far more questions than answers. Sometimes we do not even have enough information to ask the proper questions. We need to gather and carefully assess all the information possible in our attempt to resolve these issues. Sometimes the use of a resource might be right for one area, circumstance, or time, and wrong for another. Instead of blanket rules applied indiscriminately, we must fall back on principles.

We need to continue developing a Christian environmental ethic based on the Bible, and we need to practice it. The earth must be ruled sensitively, all the while understanding that our own sinful natures may blind us. Let us reject wanton and needless exploitation of the creation for selfish gain. We must not lose heart, for God promises that there will be perfect solutions to all the environmental problems when He makes a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (Revelation 21:1 to 22:5 & Isaiah 55:1 to 56:2).

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