

WHY SHOULD CHRISTIANS CARE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT?

“THE BIBLE PAINTS CREATION NOT AS A PASSIVE, LIFELESS COLLECTION OF ROCKS AND EARTH, BUT AS AN ENTITY THAT IS FULL OF LIFE, FULL OF PRAISE, AND FULL OF GOD’S GLORY.”

GOD CARES FOR HIS CREATION

Genesis tells us that when God created the world He didn’t make it instantly, with the snap of a finger or a single word, but that He crafted it bit by bit, declaring it “good” at every stage of its development. This good creation was abundant and diverse, with plants, trees, birds, fish, and animals “of every kind”.

But this initial careful work of God was not the end of his involvement. Throughout the Bible, He is depicted as intimately involved with sustaining his creation at every moment. He knows about every sparrow that falls to the ground¹; the rain, mist, lightening and wind appear at his word²; everything holds together in Him³. Psalm 65 says of God, “You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it... You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.”

The picture is of God lavishing his goodness on his creation; and the response from the earth is one of praise: “The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.”

Too often we think of the earth as a collection of inanimate objects, but this is far from much biblical imagery. The Psalms in particular are full of the language of creation praising God: it rejoices⁴ and sings for joy⁵. Psalm 19 says, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”

The Bible paints creation not as a passive, lifeless collection of rocks and earth, but as an entity that is full of life, full of praise, and full of God’s glory. It reveals His character and inspires us to worship Him.

To claim to love the Creator but to abuse the world in which we live is like claiming to be fans of Shakespeare whilst burning his plays. The created world is God’s masterpiece: He crafted it to reflect his character; He continually sustains it and works for its fruitfulness and abundance. God’s attitude to creation indicates that it is precious and wonderful independent of any utility it possesses for us. To love God and to be like Him is to care for the things that He cares for. This alone ought to be enough to motivate us to take responsibility for the world around us.

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¹ Matthew 10:29

² Jeremiah 10:12-13

³ Colossians 1:16-17

⁴ Psalm 97:1

⁵ Psalm 98:7-8

Our interconnection with the earth

In Genesis 2, there is no one to till the ground, so God forms man (adam) from the ground (adamah) and asks him to till and to keep it. This Hebrew wordplay (adam/adamah) expresses our solidarity with the earth; we are connected to it and utterly dependent upon it for life. For this reason Psalm 139:13-15 can parallel the "womb of the earth" with "a mother's womb". Humans are both physical and spiritual and the two ought not to be separated. To care for creation, then, is to care for a system that we are part of: in caring for the earth, we care for ourselves.

The original harmony between humans and the earth was ruptured by the fall. But even here, the interconnection between 'adam' and 'adamah' is reiterated. The earth becomes difficult to farm, cursed because of human disobedience⁶. We suffer when creation suffers, and it is our sin that causes creation's suffering⁷. Most dramatically, God announces that humanity will revert to the earth upon death, a tragic reversal of the original act of creation: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return."⁸

This interconnection can be seen throughout history - over and over again societies have undermined their own welfare by abusing the land that they depend on for life⁹ - and can be seen today, but with a difference. Habits of consumption and energy production in the West threaten to destroy not so much our own homes and livelihoods (at least not in the short term), but those of the world's poorest people.

Servant kingship

However, when God breathes life into Adam this sets Him apart from the earth. The contrast between God making plants and animals "according to their kinds"¹⁰ with the creation of humans "in our image, in our likeness"¹¹ implies a unique, intimate relationship between God and this part of his creation. Genesis 1:28 says that God blessed humankind and said: "be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion...over every living thing". Genesis 3 says that God created humans "to till [the earth] and to keep it"¹². But what does this mean in practice?

The language of being "in the image of God" is found in other societies around Israel at the time Genesis was written, usually used of kings, who were thought to be God's representatives on earth. In some cultures, the king would have to give an annual account of his rule, and would only be allowed to continue to represent God if He had ruled well. The language of the "image of God" in Genesis is unusual because it makes humanity as a whole God's representative on earth. Together, we have authority to rule the earth.

The language of "dominion" over the earth is sometimes (mis)taken as license to treat the earth however we want, but a careful reading of the Bible rules this out. First, this language of "dominion" is balanced by the language of Genesis 2:15, where humans are put on the earth to till ("to work, serve") and to keep ("to guard, protect") it.

Second, while the language of "dominion" does imply some degree of power or authority, it begs the question of how that power and authority should be exercised. Our rule, as his image bearers, is to be modelled after God's rule. Not only does He delight in his creation, but He takes care of the meek and does justice for the orphan and the oppressed¹³. He is the shepherd King who promises, "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak"¹⁴. Moreover, we ought not to read the command to have dominion without remembering Paul's exhortation to "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave"¹⁵. To rule over the earth in a way that reflects God's character, then, demands of us service and humility, not exploitation and selfishness.

"RULING OVER THE EARTH IN A WAY THAT REFLECTS GOD'S CHARACTER, THEN, DEMANDS OF US SERVICE AND HUMILITY, NOT EXPLOITATION AND SELFISHNESS."

⁶ Genesis 3:17-19

⁷ Romans 8:19-20

⁸ Genesis 3:19

⁹ See e.g. Jared Diamond's Collapse

¹⁰ Genesis 1:25

¹¹ Genesis 1:26

¹² Genesis 3:15

¹³ Psalm 10:16-18

¹⁴ Ezekiel 34:16

¹⁵ Philippians 2:5-7

“ARE WE MEETING OUR OBLIGATIONS TO THE POOR? OR DO WE NEED TO RE-EXAMINE OUR HABITS OF CONSUMPTION?”

God’s promises for the future

Our attitude to the earth is affected not only by the way we view God’s original intentions in creation, but also by our view of God’s promises for the future and for the ultimate redemption of the sin-ridden world in which we now live.

One popular view of Christianity is that this means escape from the world into a purely spiritual Heaven, but this is far from the biblical picture of “the end.” As in the creation narratives we saw that care for creation is also care for ourselves as inescapably physical creatures, so in the promise of redemption we see that some form of ongoing bodily existence is integral to what we will be. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul discusses at length the importance of physical resurrection, and we see a picture of the similarity and difference that will mark our resurrection bodies¹⁶.

Similarly the promises of the Bible point to a “new heavens and new earth”¹⁷ – a renewal and transformation of this creation. Romans 8 says that creation waits “with eager longing” for the time when it will be “set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” At that time the desert and the wilderness will blossom and praise God¹⁸, rivers and streams will flow in the desert¹⁹; all creation will rejoice²⁰.

In Jesus’ ministry we see God’s promised future breaking into the present as Jesus heals and feeds people as well as forgiving their sins²¹. The good news that Jesus proclaims is for all creation, and his promise is of the redemption of all things. And although we live now in the time in between the first and second comings of Jesus when all is not yet as it will be, the New Testament makes it clear that our role in this “now and not yet” time is not simply to wait passively, but to work to bring God’s kingdom to earth whilst recognising that it won’t fully arrive until Christ returns. Like Jesus, our role is to proclaim and demonstrate the gospel; to model a new humanity; to bear witness now to the total redemption that God will one day bring about.

Right relationships

What does this redemption look like? Jesus summarises God’s will like this: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” and “love your neighbour as yourself”²². In other words, the sum of the will of God for us is that we would have perfect relationships with God and with others. A concern for getting our relationships right is the essence of Christianity.

As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, having right relationships with our “neighbours” means we must take care of their bodies as well as their souls, and in order to do this we must take care of the earth, with which we are all interconnected and upon which our well-being depends. Environmental destruction has consequences for people both around the world – as noted above, the poorest and most vulnerable are most at risk from environmental devastation – and down the generations – the call to love our neighbour extends to our children and grandchildren, and on into the future.

This focus upon the concerns of others is also captured in the biblical concept of justice (Hebrew: mishpat). Far from being some abstract concept of fairness, mishpat is all about the way we conduct each and every relationship. It is about meeting the obligations of our relationships.²³ It highlights our duties and responsibilities towards others, and is particularly invoked in the Bible in the context of oppression of the poor and vulnerable. Are we meeting our obligations to the poor? Or do we need to re-examine our habits of consumption?

Failure to care for creation is a failure to conduct our relationships in the way God wants us to; it is a failure of justice; it is a failure of love.

¹⁶ John 20

¹⁷ Revelation 21:1

¹⁸ Isaiah 35:1-7

¹⁹ Isaiah 41:17-20

²⁰ Isaiah 55:12

²¹ Mark 5:21-43; Luke 6:18-19; 17:11-19; Matthew 14:13-21; 15:32-39

²² Mark 12:30

²³ Ashcroft, John in Jubilee Manifesto: a framework, agenda and strategy for Christian social reform edited by Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft (IVP 2005), pp.109-110.

Implications for Climate Change

What does a concern for right relationships mean for the way we take care of our world? The reality is that many of the things we do as a society which damage the earth have their roots in broken relationships or a failure to prioritise relationships over things. Take transport, household energy use and our habits of consumption as examples.

We travel further to work than ever before, and do so increasingly alone in our own cars. This affects not only the climate, but also our relationships with those around us. American sociologist Robert Putnam estimates that for every 10 minutes of additional commuting time, there is a corresponding 10% decrease in our social interactions. A concern for relationships challenges the hyper-mobility of our society.

Carbon emissions from home energy use have risen most significantly because of the increase in single-occupancy homes²⁴. For a wide variety of reasons, for which we all as a society are responsible, people increasingly live alone. What does this tell us about the quality of our relationships as a society? What could be done to strengthen relationships in families and communities?

The most significant proportion of our household carbon emissions in the West comes from consumption, which in many areas (e.g. communication, recreation, clothing and footwear) has tripled over the past few decades. Jesus says that "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil", and we see this too in our society. Our lives become more about owning "stuff", as we buy into the belief that more things will make us happier, that we can forge our identity by the things we buy; and our desire to acquire not only distracts us from the most important thing – investing in our relationships – it also all too often overrides our desire for justice for the poor, or any consideration of the effect of our lifestyles on the environment.

All of these relational and environmental problems are challenged by the holistic message of the gospel. For example, the biblical images of the Sabbath and Jubilee proclaim the equal value of all people, the importance of limitations upon the accumulation of wealth and spirals of debt, the importance of rootedness in place, the importance of family and community relationships, as well as the importance of rest for all people and for the earth. The gospel paints a vision of society that that is relationally and environmentally sustainable.

If we are to take the gospel seriously, we must recognise its demands over every area of life and over every relationship. It requires of us an integrated understanding of mission that neither neglects evangelism and the need for repentance and faith in Christ, nor the need for radical action to address the problem of climate change, nor the need for social reform to address the underlying structural factors that make it more difficult for us to live the life God intends for us.

But the message of the gospel is, above all, good news. Contemporary accounts of climate change often offer serious cause for concern and little hope. Christian hope for the future is not an excuse for apathy, but ought instead to provide us with the motivation to engage positively with our communities, in the expectation that God will be faithful to his promise to one day "reconcile all things to himself" (Colossians 1:15-23) and that, in the meantime, He delights to use his people as the agents of his redemptive activity.

"THE GOSPEL PAINTS A VISION OF SOCIETY THAT THAT IS RELATIONALLY AND ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE."

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²⁴ Nick Spencer and Robert White, *Christianity, climate change and sustainable living* (SPCK 2007), pp.53-54