

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The relevance of God in 2008: Christianity and the Environment

Among the wide assortment of treasures that clutter up my son's bedroom is a Victorian penny. It's an interesting piece of history. It is fun to look at it and imagine it being spent by a boy in an old fashioned sweet shop lit by a gas lamp. It carries you back to an age before cars, computers and DVD players. The penny may be historic, interesting and a collectors' item but it has no present value. My son could not spend it in a sweet shop today. Many people think of the Bible in similar terms. It is a valuable historic document, a beautiful piece of literature and was once highly prized; but it has no relevance or value today. This series of talks is intended to show that nothing could be further from the truth. If we think about the Bible as a book that God finished writing many centuries ago and then stopped speaking, we are making a great mistake. The Bible is not made up of words that God spoke long ago and have been going out of date ever since. It is best to think of it as a living Word. God spoke His word and made it "living and powerful", and it is still as much alive and vigorous now as the day it was first spoken. Since the Bible is a direct and living revelation from the eternal God it cannot go out of date and is always relevant to every situation.

So what does the Bible have to say about Christianity and the environment? It does not contain any references to carbon footprints, global warming or any other modern phrases, but God's word has plenty to say about the world that He made and our relationship to it. Before we look specifically at the issue of the environment, let's remind ourselves about the way that God, and His word, approach all the issues and problems of life. Most of us tend to approach life as a series of separate issues. There are personal things like our health, shelter and companionship. Then there are social issues like housing and crime, and there are 'big' issues like famine and the environment. We realise that many of them are connected at a certain level, but we tend to address them separately. We might call this the piecemeal approach. The last couple of decades have seen the rise of 'single issue groups' who concentrate on one issue, such as the environment, and focus all their energy on that. They see everything else only from the perspective of their one, chief issue. We might call this the selective approach. The Bible does not follow either of these approaches. It starts with God as the creator of everything and contends that nothing else fits together or makes sense without Him. It maintains that all our problems spring from separation from and opposition to God, and cannot be resolved until the separation and opposition are removed. Once these are dealt with, it declares that every other issue will be resolved at the same time. It declares that Christ is God's only solution to these two central problems. If we are going to see what the Bible says about the environment we need to get this perspective right from the start.

We will look first at three reasons why Christians should be passionately concerned about the world they live in. After that, we will consider three problems with the environmental movement from a Christian perspective. Finally, we will try and formulate a Christian view of the environment.

Reasons Christians care about the environment:

1. God made and owns the world
2. God made man a steward and manager of the world
3. People are affected by the environment and God cares deeply about people.

1. God made and owns the world

Sometimes we forget that the God who created the world, all those years ago, still regards Himself as its owner. The "god of this world" may be Satan, and human beings might be its chief inhabitants, but ownership still resides with the Maker. In the UK there are two main legal ways to possess a house or building: freehold and leasehold. If you have the rights of freehold to your house it is entirely yours. You may alter it, neglect it or even destroy it (within the constraints of other laws) and nobody else is able to restrain you. If you have the rights of leasehold things are different. You only have legal possession of the house for the duration of the lease, which is usually ninety nine years. When the lease expires you will have to pay to extend it, or the property will return to the person who owns the freehold. If you neglect or destroy the house, you will be legally responsible for any repairs necessary. Our position on earth is similar to that of a leaseholder. God holds us responsible for the world that He created for us to live on. In Psalm 50:10, God says to His people that "the cattle on a thousand hills" are mine. He could rightly have added that the hills the cattle grazed on are His as well! Just as God gave us a body to live in, and expects us to take reasonable care of it, and use it for His service; so He expects us to take reasonable care of the world He gave to us.

2. God made man a steward and manager of the world

Actually our responsibilities are more accurately portrayed in the Bible as those of a steward or manager. "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" Genesis 1:27-28. A steward is somebody who is given responsibility for another person's goods. He is never regarded as the owner of the things he administers. He manages another person's property for the benefit of that other person. His authority might be quite broad, but he must never forget that he is acting for somebody else. A steward who helps himself to his master's goods, or the profits from managing them, is not likely to keep his job for very long!

3. People are affected by the environment and God cares deeply about people

No doubt God cares deeply about the world He made, but He is much more passionate about the people who inhabit it. We see the full extent and depth of God's love when we look at the death of the Lord Jesus at Calvary. However, in the books of the Old Testament prophets, we see some of the things that God cares deeply about. "Remove violence and plundering, execute justice and righteousness, and stop dispossessing My people", says the Lord GOD" Ezekiel 45:9. "But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream." Amos 5:24. God hates exploitation and greed. Much damage to the environment is done by people trying to make money as quickly and easily as possible. Not only are people often oppressed and exploited in the process, but they also suffer the consequences of a spoiled environment. We can be sure that God is displeased with such behaviour.

Since God cares about His world and its inhabitants, should we be getting involved in the environmental movement? Let's look at a few of the problems that a Christian has with environmentalism.

1. Man wants to be the saviour
2. God is excluded
3. Priorities are reversed

1. Man wants to be the saviour

We see how desperately keen people are to work for their salvation and earn their place with God in heaven. Apart from Christianity, all religions, and much of philosophy, provide ways for men and women to earn favour with God. You might say that everybody wants to be their own saviour. This is so ingrained in us that we find it very hard to accept God's free grace. The same attitude is seen in environmental matters. The emphasis is on what we can do to save the planet. It doesn't really matter whether the proposed solution is a grand piece of science to capture CO₂ by stimulating plankton growth, or the recycling of newspapers; the emphasis is on what we can do. Of course, on one level this is very sensible; we have to focus on the things we can do ourselves. The problem is that people are convinced that by science, social engineering or self-effort we can solve all our own problems. This is a dangerous attitude and one that Christians ought to avoid.

2. God is excluded

The central problem with the focus on human effort that we have just been discussing is that God is completely excluded. We could summarise the outlook like this: the world and its occupants evolved by chance; the world is a delicate ecosystem; man is in danger of damaging this delicate planet beyond repair; we have caused the problem, and we must provide the solution. There is no room for God in this world view at all. The Christian world view is: God made this world for His own purposes; the world was created by God in a robust way, and He will ensure that it operates as long as He chooses; the basic problem is sin, and nothing can be fully solved without addressing this basic problem; human beings cannot solve the problem apart from God. We will look in more detail at the elements of this world view a little later, but at the moment we are just noting that Christians see things from a very different perspective to most environmentalists. In excluding God from their schemes, they are rather like a man who tries to explain the solar system but does not believe in the sun! He invents more and more complicated theories to explain daylight, seasons, heat, night-time and the orbit of the planets, but stubbornly refuses to accept the one fact that explains all other things.

3. Priorities are reversed

Environmentalism tends to reverse two important priorities. It puts the environment before mankind, and the physical before the spiritual. Some exponents of environmentalism seem to regard mankind as a parasite on the planet, and dream of a world untouched by any human intervention. They do not realise that God made the world for man to live in, and that Eden was not a jungle but a garden. A garden is something ordered, created by a gardener for the enjoyment of himself and others. The Christian should desire a healthy, well cared for environment so that men and

women (and the rest of creation) can live safely in it. It is not an end in itself. Placing too much emphasis on the physical environment risks forgetting that the principal need of mankind is salvation. A green and healthy world full of lost souls is not what Christ died to achieve.

If there are problems with mainstream environmentalism let's consider what a Christian's view of the environment should be. We will do this under six headings:

1. God made the world
2. Sin spoiled it
3. Mankind retains responsibility
4. God remains in control
5. The world will be renewed
6. The world will be replaced.

1. God made the world

We have already covered this point, but it is worth briefly emphasising it again. The Christian sees the world as something special because it is part of God's creation. It was a gift from God to man and, if we have received a gift from somebody we love, we will take great care of it.

2. Sin spoiled it

The first thing that damaged the environment was Adam and Eve's sin. "Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field." said God to Adam in Genesis 3:17-18. Listen to this significant passage from Romans 8:19-23. It tells us some important truths about the world's past, present and future so I will read it all now and comment on it under several headings. "For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body." At the time of man's fall, God subjected the world to the corruption of sin. Not because the world had done anything wrong, but because it was inextricably connected to mankind, and has to suffer with him until the whole problem of sin is finally resolved.

3. Mankind retains responsibility

Saying that sin spoiled the world does not excuse men and women from the damage they have done subsequently. We are all responsible for the sins that we do. When Cain murdered Abel, God held him responsible and declared His judgement. When somebody pollutes a river and that pollution then causes sickness or death, God observes and judges. We thought earlier about the stewardship of man. This means mankind has a special responsibility for creation, having been made its manager by God.

4. God remains in control

This is a very important fact to grasp. Yes, man is responsible, and sins have consequences, but God has not abandoned His world. No Christian should fear that life on earth will be destroyed by nuclear accident, global warming or any other disaster. God remains in total control. Whether we think of God as making the world robust enough to survive mankind's damage, or His preventing the worst excesses, does not matter too much. The point is that God is sovereign. God restrains the worst effects of sin in this world. According to 2 Thessalonians 2:7, He does this by His Spirit. Please note, I am not suggesting we should be reckless or uncaring; just that doomsday scenarios should not panic Christians because we know what the final outcome will be.

5. The world will be renewed

The Christian knows that the environment will only be restored when Christ comes to reign and sets up His millennial kingdom. Only then will the effects of sin be removed. Remember those verses from Romans. Just as we often groan at the effects of sin, so the earth itself waits for its renewal. The environment cannot be restored until Christ comes and we ourselves receive the final instalment of our salvation; that is the redemption of our physical bodies. Human bodies, as well as human souls, were damaged by sin. So was the planet. The death and resurrection of Christ dealt with **all** the results of sin. At the moment only the soul and spirit feel the benefits of salvation. In the future, our bodies will be redeemed and the planet will be as well. Listen to Isaiah 11:6-9, "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall

lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." This describes what the natural world will be like after its deliverance from bondage. Let's not forget the extremely wide scale of the work done by the Lord Jesus on the cross. Just as sin caused damage far beyond Adam and Eve, so the work of the cross is effective beyond the direct forgiveness of our sins. The whole of creation, including heaven itself, will be changed by His great work.

6. The world will be replaced

We might have thought that a world delivered from the bondage of sin was a suitable conclusion to the story; but God's plans go further. "Of old You laid the foundation of the earth and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will endure; yes, they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will change them, and they will be changed." said the psalmist in Psalm 102:25-26. If we are tempted to think he was just using picture language, we hear John confirm the fact in Revelation 21:1. "Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away." In eternity, God will remove the last traces of sin by replacing heaven and earth with new creations that never have been, and never will be touched by sin at all.

Practical Implications

As Christians, we have God given insights into the future of this world. We are also recreated as children of God and given a new home in heaven. Our principal tasks are to represent the Lord who has bought us, and to tell other people about His great salvation. The Christian should support attempts to prevent the worst effects of sin in this world. For example all believers would support proper enforcement of laws to prevent crime, and the providing of social care to the vulnerable. We do not do these things because we think that such efforts will create a heaven on earth. We know that only faith in the Lord Jesus really provides what people need. The main task of the church is to preach Christ. Social care is an important, but strictly secondary goal. The same is true of the environment. We have the privilege of pointing people to a loving creator who became a re-creator by His own death and resurrection. We can support our words by actions that show respect and care for the world that He made, but we must get the priorities right.

Having looked at all these points, what can we conclude that the Bible says about the Christian and the environment? Let me put it in five sentences:

1. Our first priorities as believers are spiritual and heavenly.
2. We can trust God and not be terrified by threats of catastrophe.
3. God has His own plans for the future of the planet.
4. God still cares deeply about the world but even more deeply about its inhabitants.
5. We should not knowingly spoil God's creation, but care for it as a gift from Him.

Only God's children can fully appreciate the world that He made. We can look forward to our own bodily redemption and the redeeming of the earth itself. We can live today as first-fruits of a new work of creation that will one day culminate in a new heaven and a new earth.

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