

**Position Paper on Ecology and the Environment**  
**By Michael R. Jones**

Since the 1970's there has been more and more focus on the environment and more calls to exercise caution in order to conserve natural resources. From the oil crisis of the 70's to the blackout of 2003, there has been growing concern and discussion over America's failure to conserve natural resources and the potential ramifications of not exercising proper stewardship over the earth and its resources. Christians, who should be most concerned over these issues are instead one of the groups constantly singled out as being the least concerned.

Many evangelicals tend to equate a concern for the environment with liberal politics. This is because people who fall under the definition of liberal tend to be the ones most vocal about environmental concerns and the ones most actively involved in environmental causes. Add to this that some in this category are not always on their best behavior with regard to their activism and one ends up with a position with which few Christians desire to be associated. A friend once explained to this writer his justification for purposefully refusing to recycle. His reason: the "hype in the liberal media."

Closely aligned with this concern is the close connection between many conservation efforts and the naturalistic tendencies of modern science. Many Christians correctly associate such naturalism with the theory of evolution. Many conservation efforts have this in common with science: the only reality they believe in is the natural world. Thus they are concerned about the environment because they see it as humanity's only resource for sustaining life. Many Christians, then, are reluctant to engage in conservation efforts or even to espouse conservationist views either through fear of being unduly influenced by evolutionary theories or of being associated with evolutionary theories.

Other Christians are simply unconcerned about the environment because of a misunderstanding regarding end-time theology. The same person mentioned above who refused to recycle added further support to his position, or so he thought, by reminding anyone who would listen, that this world would come to an end soon anyway. Many Christians share that view and assume that the next item on the agenda is apocalyptic destruction followed by renewal so that there is little reason to be concerned about the environment since "this world is not our home" and "is passing away" anyway.

This view may be influenced by a further misunderstanding regarding the nature of the world. Many Christian leaders in the centuries following the apostles incorporated Greek thought into Christian theology. The Greeks, who believed that matter constrained the soul so that it could not know wisdom or truth perfectly and thus could not truly be one with god, ultimately came to regard matter as evil. These schools of thought influenced many of the ancient Christian preachers and this view remains influential in Christianity today, although many are unaware of the source. This is unfortunate since the Scriptures teach that the world was created good and that the evil present in nature and in the world is the result of human sin and its corrupting influence on the created order. Many Christians do not consider that the hope of the believer is not simply that they go to heaven when they die and exist as disembodied spirits; their hope is to be resurrected as Jesus was and dwell for eternity in the new heavens and the new earth. This should influence the way believers think about the world even in its present state.

Christianity is often blamed, sometimes rightfully so, as a culprit in the destruction of natural resources. This is not because of any particular organized plan or agenda that makes the

environment and natural resources disposable without forward thinking about conservation, preservation, or restoration, such as in the case of big business. In addition to the attitudes already stated, the view known as subjectionism, which has been prevalent in conservative Christian circles, is a further factor in conservative Christianity's apathy and failure with regard to the environment. Subjectionism is the view that the command in Genesis 1 to "subdue" the earth means that the earth and its resources exist solely for human consumption and so may be used to further human progress and expansion with little regard for conservation and restoration.<sup>1</sup>

These misconceptions are dangerous to fulfilling the Christian's responsibility toward the earth and its resources. Indeed, the Scriptures teach that at creation humanity was given responsibility toward the earth and its resources. Thus, all humanity must seek to preserve the environment and conserve its resources, but Christians especially, who claim not only to have but to understand God's special revelation, must actively seek to exercise good stewardship over the environment through conservation and cultivation.

Despite the actions, politics, and theology of many environmental groups, there is reason to be concerned, in some respects even alarmed, about the current state of the environment and its further degradation. Although some sources inflate the numbers, there are many species that have become extinct and many more that will become extinct in the coming years due to the destruction of their habitats through deforestation, mining, the conversion of land from one type of habitat to another, over-harvesting and other activities. What farmland is not being bought up and used for things other than farming, such as subdivisions and other development, is losing its topsoil through over-planting and failure to rotate crops. Chemicals are created, either intentionally or as by-products, whose impact on the environment is unclear and many chemicals and by-products known to be harmful to the environment are spewed into the air, drained into rivers, lakes, and other water sources, and buried in landfills or other places.<sup>2</sup> All of these add up to an environmental crisis that will not be rectified quickly or without much cost and labor.

It is human sinfulness that has led to the current state of the environment. Greed encourages businesses and individuals to use the cheapest and easiest means of extracting out of the environment whatever is desired with little regard for the future use of those resources or the land from which they are obtained. Big business, as a means of increasing their bottom line, lobbies Congress to allow or expedite activities that further the degradation of the environment and give little or nothing in return. Self-centeredness (some might say laziness) encourages people not to recycle and to contribute to the environment's degradation through illegal dumping of trash, used motor oil, batteries, and other waste. While these are generalizations, they do convey accurately the attitudes of humanity, Christian and non-Christian, toward the environment and the lack of concern for a proper use of and conservation of the resources the planet has to sustain life.

The reversal of these crises must begin with the reversal of the attitudes and beliefs that lead to and encourage them. Christians, as people of the Bible, must begin by looking to what has been revealed by God regarding humanity's relationship and responsibility to the world and its resources. This will yield a biblical understanding regarding the responsibility that humanity has toward the environment and the stewardship that has been given them from God and for which God demands an accounting.

---

<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Grizzle, Paul E. Rothrock, and Christopher B. Barrett, "Evangelicals and Environmentalism: Past, Present, and Future," *Trinity Journal* 19:1 (Spring 1998): 6.

<sup>2</sup> J. Kerby Anderson, *Moral Dilemmas* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 188-191.

The creation accounts of Genesis indicate that humanity was given “dominion” over the earth which, while it certainly involves some form of authority over the created world, also involves a responsibility to make sure that everything continues to function in the order and for the purpose for which God created it. This means that humanity cannot exercise its authority in such a manner that either goes contrary to or thwarts God’s intentions. Thus humanity rules over creation not for humanity’s own purposes and end, but for God’s.<sup>3</sup>

Humanity stands as God’s representative and regent in creation and as such must avoid the temptation to make humanity the center of the universe, a position that belongs only to God. Humanity is has an accountability to God for the use of the world and its resource and so must begin looking at the world not as something that belongs to him, but to God, and which we use simply as those who are stewards over creation. In Genesis 1 man is told to replenish the earth and in Genesis 2, Adam is told to guard the Garden, both expressions which speak of responsibility and stewardship.<sup>4</sup>

Christians must respond to the environmental crisis with well-informed and reasoned responses that do not end in mere statements or expressions of belief, but that translate into actions of various kinds that contribute either to conservation efforts or preservation and restoration efforts. What, then, can the average Christian do to exercise proper stewardship of the environment?

First, Christians must understand the Scripture’s teachings regarding humanity’s responsibility toward the environment and its resources. Without a correct and Scripturally-informed understanding of humanity’s responsibility, there will be little motivation to change the status quo and become involved in proper stewardship even to the slightest degree. This must not end with mere understanding, but must involve proper preaching and teaching regarding humanity’s responsibility and guidance in how to live as good stewards of God’s creation.

Second, Christians must take seriously their responsibility and make a commitment to further conservation. They can begin by following guidelines given by the government and social organizations regarding activities such as recycling, conserving energy, and other things that do not place an undue strain on the environment or that reduce waste so that natural resources may be conserved.

Third, Christians must begin a legacy of responsibility by teaching their children and new converts the proper theology and actions so that they in turn will pass it on to others. In this manner a legacy of meaningful and useful environmental stewardship will become a way of life for individual Christians and for churches in the coming generations.

Only with both understanding and action will humanity be prepared to give an account of its stewardship regarding the world and its resources. Such understanding and action will also enable Christianity to remove the reproach on the church’s name for her previous apathy and inaction.

---

<sup>3</sup> Michael A. Bullmore, “The Four Most Important Passages for a Christian Environmentalism,” *Trinity Journal* 19:2 (Fall 1998): 153-155.

<sup>4</sup> John A. Jelinek, “Animal and Plant Rights: Informing a Biblical Perspective,” *Journal for the Study of Christian Ethics* (Fall 2005): 21-23.

## WORKS CITED

Anderson, J. Kerby. *Moral Dilemmas*. Nashville: Word, 1998.

Bullmore, Michael A. "The Four Most Important Passages for a Christian Environmentalism," *Trinity Journal* 19:2 (Fall 1998). 139-162.

Grizzle, Raymond E., Paul E. Rothrock, and Christopher B. Barrett. "Evangelicals and Environmentalism: Past, Present, and Future." *Trinity Journal* 19:1 (Spring 1998), 3-27.

Jelinek, John A. "Animal and Plant Rights: Informing a Biblical Perspective." *Journal for the Study of Christian Ethics* (Fall 2005): 15-36.

### **For Further Reading**

Campolo, Tony. *How to Rescue the Earth Without Worshipping Nature: A Christian's Call to Save Creation*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992.

DeWitt, Calvin E. *Earth-Wise: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues*. Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1994.

Van Dyke, Fred. *Redeeming Creation: The Biblical Basis for Environmental Stewardship*. Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996.