

The Just Stewardship of Land and Creation

*A Report of the Reformed Ecumenical Council
Prepared for the Grand Rapids Assembly 1996*

Environmentalists are alarmed. They believe there is no time to waste. According to some scientists the ecosystem is on the road to extinction. Man has wasted things out of proportion to his needs or consumption, and accumulates rubbish with astonishing speed. A large part of Antarctica is already littered with rubbish. So are the slopes of Mount Everest. Tropical rain forests are severely damaged by indiscriminate logging. Man has changed from leaseholder of the earth to a consumer. He has created wants. Yet people who draw the public's attention to the modern devastation of God's creation are being called "prophets of doom and gloom."

Contemporary writers charge that the Christian view of the world is responsible for the present ecological crisis. As one writer put it:

On the subject of man-nature ... the Biblical creation story of the first chapter of Genesis ... not only fails to correspond to reality as we observe it, but in its insistence upon dominion and subjugation of nature, encourages the most exploitive and destructive instincts in man rather than those that are deferential and creative.

And some charge that evangelical Christians, who profess that the earth is the Lord's, have had very little to say about man's care for the land. I welcome, therefore, the environmental study from a Reformed perspective, *The Just Stewardship of Land and Creation*, which was commissioned by the Reformed Ecumenical Council. It offers a distinct contribution to the discussion on environmental concerns. Its editor, Dr. Calvin B. DeWitt, well qualified for the task, is professor of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and director of the Au Sable Institute, Mancelona, Michigan. Although others have contributed to the project, their roles in it is not so clear. The report seems to be mainly Dr. DeWitt's work.

It is not my intent to review the report in detail, but to use it as a basis for developing some further thoughts on the Reformed perspective on the environment. Political environmentalism.

The term ecology was originally used by the German biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel in 1873. In the course of time it has been adopted by political movements, which regard the preservation of the environment as their single and most important political goal: hence the various "ecology parties" which fight for representation in European national assemblies. These parties favour strict legal control over every activity that can in any way alter the balance of nature. In their *book Green Politics: the Global Promise*, Fritjof Capra and Charlen Spretnak defined Green politics as "an ecological, holistic, and feminist movement that transcends the old political framework of left versus right ... and it honours the inner growth that leads to wisdom and compassion."

In Germany, the so-called Green party has had a measure of success, but, although their ideas have spilt over into North America, the political wing of the ecology movement has not yet captured the imagination of many people here. The Green phenomenon is nevertheless worth mentioning because in Canada several citizens' groups, coalitions, and interchurch task forces are advocating ideas closely akin to those of the political Greens.

Green politics may appear modern, but in reality they aren't. The first ecological inspired mass movement in our century - the German Wandervogel movement of the twenties and thirties - was absorbed by Nazism. With its cult of nature the Nazi Party was perhaps the first political movement to place environmental considerations at the top of its agenda - along with animals. (One of the Nazi Party's first moves, once in power, was to ban hunting.)

During the Cold War many upheld the Soviet empire as a shining example of responsible environmental behaviour. But the collapse of the Soviet empire revealed that communism had wreaked environmental havoc due to the accumulation of centralized power and lack of accountability. The USSR ruined the entire Aral Sea and some of the largest river systems in the world. It also destroyed whole oilfields, forever, by incompetent and even criminal exploitation.

New Age environmentalism

In a world in which authority of every kind is on the wane and formal religions have lost credibility, people are still incurably religious. The New Age movement has become a substitute religion for many. One of its features is a leaning toward green politics and animal rights. New Agers believe that they are too modern and rationalist to believe in the God of the Bible. In their quest for God, New Agers substitute the environment for God.

Richard North, environment correspondent of the *Independent*, declared:

An awful lot of us just need to worship something. But in order to be able to worship, you have to be able to find something outside of yourself - and better than yourself. God is a construct for that. So is nature. We are falling in love with the environment as an extension to and in lieu of having fallen out of love with God.

The New Age Movement has also influenced churches. Some now talk about the need for an "earth-centred spirituality." Adherents of this philosophy believe that Christianity must be "weaned away" from its trust in the Bible and the personal God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Jesus Christ. It must come to maturity through the new light shed by the revelation of the Earth itself. DeWitt rightly points out that with this "weaning" comes the shelving of the Bible, equation of God with the Earth, and the degeneration of Jesus Christ to an earth spirit.

The Christian view

Many critics of the Christian faith make accusations without having carefully examined the Scripture. They go more by rumour and hearsay than by fact. To say that Biblical Christianity is at the root of the environmental crisis is outright slander. True, Christians have often neglected God's laws; they have not always been good caretakers of God's earth. And we may not confuse nominal cultural Christendom with the Biblical Christian faith.

How should Christians react to environmental concerns? The Bible clearly teaches that Christians, although pilgrims on earth, are responsible for the environment. It reminds them that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. God made the universe and man His tenant. Man, the image bearer of God, does not invest inanimate nature itself with rights that properly belong to God. Nor does he ignore the rights of man as God's steward. He recognizes that the trees, the flowers, all of nature, are created by God. Therefore, he utilizes nature without destroying its resources. He exercises dominion with great care.

The wonder of creation

Nothing is more basic and determinative in shaping our concept of the world and our place in it than the doctrine of creation. The Bible begins with the majestic words, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"(Genesis 1:1). And God looked upon this planet with its fertile fields, its herbs and trees, and saw that it was good. The natural world reflects the glory of God. The Psalmist wrote, "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." (Ps. 19:1) The most beloved of all the psalms, Psalm 23, paints a beautiful picture of domesticated animals, green pastures, and still waters - the earth. The apostle Paul declares that creation's testimony leaves no one with an excuse for not knowing God's divine and everlasting power (Romans 1:20; Acts 14:17). "The world is a looking glass," said the Puritan Thomas Watson, "in which we may see the power and the goodness of God shine forth" (see also Belgic Confession, Article 2).

The incarnation

The glory of the incarnation enriches and extends truths already implicit in creation - God's assumption of humanity and His entry into our world. The world was not only made by God, but also visited by Him. He thought it worthwhile living in it. Our Lord illustrates His sermons with examples from nature - the lilies of the fields and the birds in the air. Our Lord died to reconcile and to redeem the cosmos (John 3:16). And some day He will return the creation to its Creator (1 Corinthians 15:24)

The value of the land

God did not create the earth to be an empty place, but to be inhabited (Isaiah 45:18). The land which man inhabits is not his land but God's. He is always the owner. Therefore, man is responsible for the land. The Mosaic law had rather strict anti-pollution laws. Sanitation was stressed, including washing, separation, and other preventive measures. It contains the stern warning: "Do not defile the land where you

live and where I dwell, for I, the Lord, dwell among the Israelites" (Numbers 35:34) Isaiah mourns: "The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant" (Isaiah 24:5). To apply this truth to the Christian, his search for a "better country" in heaven does not justify the polluting or spoiling this earth - or allowing others to do so without protest.

Causes for defilement

a. Sin

The Heidelberg Catechism says that Adam's fall into sin "has so poisoned our nature that we are born sinners - corrupt from conception on." DeWitt correctly states that sin is not a popular topic, yet it must be recognized in the light of the degradation of creation and our stewardship of creation. As God's image bearer man can make choices. He is able to do things to nature that he should not do. In his brazenness and abuse of technology he does everything he can do without limit. Everything he can do he does. Everything that has ever been invented, both good and evil, has been or will be used. Man has an "infinite" capacity for fouling the earth.

Abuse of the environment is an offense to God because He is the One who ordained laws for the good of the people and the earth. Pollution is a public sin as it affects all of mankind and nature.

b. Greed

Most forms of pollution and destruction of our environment are directly traceable to man's insatiable greed. According to the Bible, "the love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). As one Christian put it, "Pollution is an inevitable consequence of an affluent society that values material prosperity above all else." Man wants much out of nature but he is not willing to put much back into it. Men cut down forests but often leave behind a wasteland. As a Christian community we must encourage men not to treat nature as a consumer object without value and rights and not to rape and ravish it, but to give it respect and consideration.

c. Poverty

DeWitt's report gives the impression that poverty is another main cause for environmental degradation. It says that actions on debts, trade, markets, aid, loans, and trading relationships are needed and that these actions need to be targeted to restoring the poor a capacity for them to become stewards of land and life. Our ultimate goal should be

To make tending the garden of Creation - in all its aspects, an unquestioned and all-pervasive aspect of the life of the poor and of their service to humanity and to God's world.

I find some of the REC's statements on the poor troublesome. What does the report mean when it states that "the church must act, but it must act only along with the poor?" Are the poor innocent when it comes to pollution?

In Third World countries hundreds millions of people, who like us have been created in the image of God, are living in appalling poverty. We have seen horrendous poverty first hand when we lived in the Philippines. The current most generally accepted cause for poverty in the Third World is the alleged exploitation by the First World. The Third World has legitimate grievances against the First World. However, we must not overlook racial discrimination, blatant corruption, extravagance and incompetence of oppressive governments, overspending on military hardware while teachers and children have no basic textbooks in their school, unfair taxation, and the lack of suitable investment opportunities in many Third World countries. Religion has also contributed to poverty and lack of environmental concerns. For example, Hinduism's rigid caste system, its faith in karma and reincarnation, has solidified injustice to those who are poor and lacking in privilege. The poverty and environmental crisis in the Third World have spiritual roots. Brian Griffith observes in his book *Morality and the Market Place*:

If we really wish to understand the origins of poverty in Third World countries, I believe we are driven back to an examination of the culture of different countries and to ask basic questions.... It is at this point that economic analysis needs a religious dimension.

Our Christian responsibility

a. Evangelism

Since the environmental crisis has spiritual roots, we must talk about missions. We cannot expect people to have a Christian view of God's world when they do not know Him. The role of missions is an answer to the problem of Third World poverty and the environmental crisis has been thoroughly understated. We seem reluctant to say that some cultural and religious practices have negative impact upon human life. But our Lord's Great Commission still stands. "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel." The goal of mission is that God may be glorified as King in the heart of men everywhere in all what they do. He is to be recognized as Lord in every sphere of life. Through the work of missions, the church announces and expands the rule of God. God is concerned with the salvation of the whole world and not with personal salvation only. The whole of creation is awaiting the day of redemption. Through its word and deed ministry the church brings the Gospel to the lost, speaks out against injustice, helps to establish more equitable structures, and seeks to alleviate the plight of the poor.

Conversion should lead to changed lives. In obedience to God, the new man sees exploitation as an injustice to His creation and pollution as an affront to God; despair, indifference and greed are replaced by hope, responsibility and stewardship.

b. Stewardship

Christians are bound by stewardship until they enter a better world. We have the unique calling and wonderful privileges to be earth keepers. DeWitt's report notes:

... we are expected to care for the ground and prevent it from damage, and we are expected to treat this marvellous world as an inheritance to passed down to Godly stewards yet to come, in even better condition than we received it.

The new earth

This is our Father's world. But the earth is still groaning and moaning because of sin. Some day we will inhabit a perfect new earth. This ruined creation will be restored. Paradise lost will be regained (Romans 8:18f). This new earth will not come through human efforts, but through God's intervention. This is according to the Word of the Lord, "Behold I will make all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

As we look forward to the new heaven and earth, we cannot escape our responsibility. Martin Luther once told his students that if he knew for certain that the world would end tomorrow, his duty would require him to plant his garden - and to collect the rent! Christians are to care for the environment, to work, to plant, to harvest, to pray and to bring the Gospel until the Lord returns in glory.

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