

Introduction

In recent years the public awareness of environmental issues has increased dramatically. It is now possible for the average consumer to pay for all manner of services which claim to minimise the damage that their lifestyle causes to the planet. At a state level, the Australian government has recently ratified the Kyoto Protocol and is investing significant resources in studies of the environment and ways to protect it. At a popular level this is becoming a mainstream issue which begs the question, how should a Christian living in this culture respond?

Historically, the church has been seen to deal poorly with this issue and this has led some to suggest that the Christian worldview is largely to blame for the perceived environmental crisis.¹ To make matters worse, some within the church have perceived environmental ethics to be something associated only with liberal churches² and thus attached negative connotations to any suggestion that a strong environmental ethic has a place within Christianity. It is therefore important that time be spent investigating the basis a Christian could have for developing a strong environmental ethic. Consequently, the question that will be explored in this essay is:

What resources does the Christian faith have on offer for the development of a strong environmental ethic?

¹ Francis A Schaeffer, "Pollution and the Death of Man," in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*(Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 1970), 68.

² Holly Lebowitz Rossi, "God in the Garden," *Science & Spirit* 19, no. 4 (2008): 43.

In order to answer this several topics shall be examined. How the environment should be regarded, the place of humans with respect to it, how an understanding of God applies to this matter and finally the relevance of this issue to the life of the church.

A Christian Understanding...

... of the Environment

Firstly, it is important that the question of how a Christian should consider the environment, or more broadly, creation should be addressed. Before getting into this point it is also important to acknowledge that many consider it important that the discussion not centre on how we view “our world”, but that it be first and foremost remembered that creation belongs to God.³ In the creation account it is stated that God created from nothing (Genesis 1:1), and that it was “good” (Genesis 1:4). Given this doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, nature should be understood as having value in and of itself, by virtue of God deliberately choosing to create it, where there otherwise would have been nothing.⁴ So unlike a materialist, the Christian has a reason for highly valuing the environment on this basis alone, completely apart from any pragmatic reasoning concerning one’s own survival or quality of life. Given this, the passage “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Ps 24:1), combined with the simple existence of creation, this should thus form the basis of Christian discussion concerning environmental ethics.

³ E. Calvin Beisner, *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 11.

⁴ Schaeffer, “Pollution and the Death of Man,” 27.

In seeking to understand how God values the earth it is also important to consider how the work and person of Christ relates to this matter. Paul writes that God's plan for redemption through Christ applies to all creation, not just humans (Romans 8:19-23). The environment in which we live is part of God's redemptive plan and this should help emphasise its value to God.⁵ Within this understanding of nature it is important that creation not be considered as lowly. In the incarnation God chose to come and be a part of creation and at the resurrection we do not see the physical human body of Jesus despised and discarded but the same body redeemed and made new. This example highlights the value of the human body of Christ as part of creation.⁶ Also important to note is that God's covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:8-17) is not only concerning humans but extends to all life on earth and even the earth itself.⁷ From the points above it can be seen that the Christian has several lines of reasoning at their disposal that can provide a solid grounding in affirming the value of creation. Therefore this provides a foundation for a strong environmental ethic.

... of the human in relation to it

After establishing how creation, and by extension the environment should be viewed it is then important to consider the nature of the relationship between humanity and creation. Given that it had been established that the earth belongs to God, how then should passages like "The heavens are the Lord's

⁵ Robery L. Faricy, "Christ and Nature," in *Christians and the Good Earth*, ed. Alfred Stefferud (New York, NY: Friendship, 1969), 78.

⁶ Schaeffer, "Pollution and the Death of Man," 36.

⁷ Schaeffer, "Pollution and the Death of Man," 36.

heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings.” (Ps 115:16) be understood? For this the creation story is again important. It stated that humans were created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26) and should be thus viewed as a unique and distinct part of creation. It is stated in this passage that humanity is in a position to have dominion over creation, but further on Adam is tasked with tending the garden (Genesis 2:15). This emphasis on dominion however has led some within the church to develop the view that the right relationship of human and creation is that of human having dominion over creation, and thus treating it in destructive ways.⁸ Alternatively, some have interpreted this dominion in such a way as to argue that the role of stewardship, or looking after creation was the very first commandment given to humans,⁹ and thus should be our primary concern. However some have critiqued this view based on the distinction between “Earth” and “Garden” in the two verses.¹⁰ Bearing this in mind the theme of stewardship over earth that shall be further explored.

The question must also be asked about what it means for humans to be created in the image of God and how it is relevant to an environmental ethic. Some have interpreted this to not only be an indication of holding a special place within creation but also something which brings with it unique responsibilities concerning care of the created order.¹¹ This said, the question is then raised of what stewardship is considered to be. It has been suggested that this can be

⁸ Schaeffer, "Pollution and the Death of Man," 5.

⁹ Laurel Kearns, "Saving the Creation: Christian Environmentalism in the United States " *Sociology of Religion* 57, no. 1 (1996).

¹⁰ Beisner, *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate*, 15.

¹¹ Joseph K Sheldon and David K Foster, "What Knowledge Is Required for Responsible Stewardship of Creation? ," *Christian Scholar's Review* 32, no. 4 (2003): 367.

captured in the statement: "If the steward knows the owner and is engaged in a loving, personal relationship with that owner, then the steward's behaviour will reflect the will and desire of the owner."¹² If this definition is accepted, this has serious implications for the Christian as a relationship with God is an important part of the Christian faith. Furthermore, as has already been established the Christian has a firm base on which to ground their understanding of how God views creation, so can have a good idea of God's desire for how it should be treated. At the core of this is God's plan of redemption for all of creation, not just humanity and through this the Christian can know of God's desire concerning creation.

So in order to be a faithful steward the Christian should be concerned with the welfare of all creation. It would seem that all humanity is given this role of steward and granted dominion over creation to be able to fulfil this role. An important distinction must be made that while humans were granted dominion over creation, this does not grant the right to simply do what we please. This is summarised well by McGrath: "The Creation is God's, and has been entrusted to humanity, which is to act as its steward, not its exploiter"¹³ Thus, it would seem that God has given humans responsibility of authority within the created order. In addition to sinning against ourselves and each other we have also sinned against creation and thus God in handling this responsibility poorly.¹⁴

¹² Sheldon and Foster, "What Knowledge Is Required for Responsible Stewardship of Creation?" 368.

¹³ Alister E. McGrath, *The Re-Enchantment of Nature : Science, Religion and the Human Sense of Wonder*(London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002), 29.

¹⁴ Stanley S Harakas, ""The Earth Is the Lord's" Orthodox Theology and the Environment " *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 44, no. 1-4 (1999): 159.

This is true especially of those within the Church who should be more aware of God's desire concerning creation. The role of the Christian as faithful steward of creation should help to form a powerful basis to any Christian environmental ethic.

Stewardship aside, attention will now be directed towards another part of creation, the rest of humanity. The effects of phenomena such as global warming will be felt by people all around the world, there is already concern around the quality of life for future generations,¹⁵ the very real threat of starvation from impending food and water shortages and large numbers of deaths due to extreme weather,¹⁶ just to name a few. Environmental ethics has become a question about how we treat and value the rest of humanity with whom we are sharing the planet.

Even now, the connection between areas of major environmental damage and poverty is being taken seriously.¹⁷ This then raises issues of oppression and injustice. In the absence of drastic action, if environmental damage continues as currently projected, it will cause significant hardship for many. First to feel the impact of these changes, and also the least equipped to respond to them, will be the world's poor, even though they contributed very little to the

¹⁵ *Rights of Future Generations : Proposal for Enlarging the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, ed. Lukas Vischer, Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches ; 19(Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1990), 57.

¹⁶ Noah J Toly, "Climate Change and Climate Change Policy as Human Sacrifice: Artifice, Idolatry, and Environment in a Technological Society " *Christian Scholar's Review* 35, no. 1 (2005): 63.

¹⁷ Anthony B Pinn, "Of God, Money, and Earth: The Black Church on Economics and Environmental Racism," *Journal of Religious Thought* 56/57, no. 2/1 (2001): 53.

environmental damage in the first place.¹⁸ This is significant for of building a strong environmental ethic as it means that a wealth of resources from liberation theologians becomes directly applicable to this situation as well resources concerning social justice from other traditions within the church. Simply put the scale and nature of consequences from environmental damage make it a justice issue.

This aside consideration must also be given to the Christian exhortations, found in the scriptures, to love your neighbour (Luke 10:27) to the extent that it is to be considered one of the visible marks of the Christian (John 13:35). Consequently it would seem to be an inescapable reality that environmental issues will negatively impact on the lives of those in the community around us, both locally and afar. Thus, love and concern towards our neighbour should make a significant contribution towards a strong environmental ethic. Furthermore this aspect of the Christian understanding is significant as it is important that love towards our neighbour not be excluded from Christian reflection on environmental ethics.

... of the environment in relation to divine revelation

Having briefly looked at how creation should be considered by the Christian as well as the place of humanity within it, attention shall now be given to creation as it relates to divine revelation. Early Christians acknowledge that the person of Jesus was the supreme revelation of God; but that creation itself was also

¹⁸ Toly, "Climate Change and Climate Change Policy as Human Sacrifice: Artifice, Idolatry, and Environment in a Technological Society ": 70.

viewed as an important source of revelation.¹⁹ The importance of nature as a source of revelation can be seen in many places in the Bible, both Old Testament and New, for example: “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse” (Rom 1:20). The significance of this should not be understated. If the church is seeking to reveal God to the world then ignoring the environment to the point of its destruction, or creating situations which allow it to be scarred beyond recognition should be unthinkable.²⁰ An understanding of nature as a medium through which God is revealed should thus be significant motivation for a strong environmental ethic.

Finally, one extremely important function of creation is to glorify God. Throughout the passages such as: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 19:1) which emphasise this point. In addition God being glorified through the beauty of creation, but for many, being in contact with nature serves as an important part of their spirituality and encounter with God. For those who find nature to have great spiritual significance, the notion of, a world without any beautiful forested places with birds, lizards, ants and the whole spectrum of God’s creation all around is quite disturbing. Living in a world where the majority of the environment could not be referred to as beautiful would surely impoverish the spiritual experience of many in the church today. Given this, in a world where extinction rates are at

¹⁹ Tim Cooper, *Green Christianity: Caring for the Whole Creation*(London: Spire, 1990), 145.

²⁰ Rossi, "God in the Garden," 43.

record levels and many regions are experiencing significant biodiversity issues²¹ there are many reasons for a Christian to be concerned. Seeking to preserve creation as a source of divine revelation, a means to glorify God and an aid to worship should further provide a basis for a Christian to develop a strong environmental ethic.

... of the importance of living this out

It can be seen that there are many theological reasons why the Christian is justified in having a strong environmental ethic. This forms the basis of the question for this essay. It is important to meditate the impact that the realisation of strong Christian can have on the mission of the church. Studies in the United States have found a worrying negative correlation between church attendance and environmental concern.²² This is an important issue that must be addressed. Part of this task should be to help Christians gain an awareness of both the theological and pragmatic realities of how we relate to our environment. Again this should be viewed as no less than a critical part of our witness to those outside the church, a realisation which was well captured by Francis Schaeffer "When I stood on the Christian ground and looked at the Bohemian people's place, it was beautiful... Then I stood on pagan ground and looked at the Christian community and saw ugliness. Here you have a Christianity that is failing to take into account man's responsibility and proper

²¹ Sheldon and Foster, "What Knowledge Is Required for Responsible Stewardship of Creation?" 375.

²² Sheldon and Foster, "What Knowledge Is Required for Responsible Stewardship of Creation?" 366.

relationship to nature."²³ It is realisations like these that should force us to seriously consider the impact, both positive and negative, that the practical outworking of a Christian environmental ethic can have, not only on creation but on the churches ability to reflect God in the community.

Given these factors it is important that when matters of environmental ethics are discussed in the church that the Christian be open and honest about the fact that there are valid reasons for the criticisms against the church in this area. This should not be taken as an admission that the church has never had answers that would lead to a strong environmental ethic, but what the church appears to have failed to do is to act upon those answers.²⁴ Given this, it is likely that through the process of raising awareness about the relevance of this matter, a Christian will be forced to confront an ugly view of the church, from both the outside, but also the inside when viewed through a new theological lens. Given this, honesty, humility and repentance in this matter should be important in discussions on environmental ethics within a Christian worldview.

Importantly though, a Christian environmental ethic needs to ensure that it does not end up grounding itself in pragmatic concerns. While some will argue for strong environmental ethics on the basis of a utilitarian argument, it is important that the church ensures that this is not the basis of its reasoning in this matter. While the outworking of a strong environmental ethic in the church should lead to pragmatic results, the motivation behind doing these things should come from

²³ Schaeffer, "Pollution and the Death of Man," 24.

²⁴ Schaeffer, "Pollution and the Death of Man," 34.

a realisation of what is right based on knowledge and understanding of creation and God as creator.²⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are many resources available within the Christian tradition which can lead one to develop a strong environmental ethic. It should also be remembered that the resources covered here are by no means exhaustive and there exists many others from different traditions within the church. One of the important factors that the Christian should consider is what the impact of developing such environmental ethic would be. It would seem that the church has dealt with this issue poorly in the past, to the detriment of our public witness and our environment. More importantly if creation is understood to not only glorify God but aid in revealing God to those living within creation, any degradation to the environment could be viewed as potentially degrading our sources of learning about God. A strong and theologically grounded environmental ethic should thus be viewed as an important part of the Christian faith in not only reinforcing a strong doctrine of God, humans and their relation to creation but also in aiding our worship and also our witness to God to those both in and outside the church.

²⁵ Schaeffer, "Pollution and the Death of Man," 54.

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