

The Whole Creation Groans: A Case For Biblical Environmentalism

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Tree-huggers. Animal-lovers. Green. Eco-friendly. Environmentalists. Hippies. Liberals. Unbiblical. Those labels are thrown around frequently — and often synonymously — in the discussion of care and stewardship of the environment. Evangelical Christians, who are commonly typified as white, middle-class Republicans, seem to have a greater concern for where the U.S. can find more oil, or how to justify various wars and military operations, than anything else. Among issues that are far too often ignored by us as evangelicals are poverty, AIDS, homelessness, hunger, and family dysfunctions. These are not the only issues, however, and it seems that the search for a Biblical environmentalism must be one that our generation must face.

Evangelicals have spent countless hours trying to disprove or dismiss things like global warming, over-pollution of freshwater bodies, the annihilation of large stretches of forest by large businesses and resource harvesting initiatives. They've actively protested the expansion of protected lands and been shown, time and time again, to be willing to lose the presence of one animal species for the material comfort of human beings (in the name of humans being able to live, of course). Christians, we've got more than a few things to reconsider on this issue, and using words like "stewardship" is not going to cut it.

Creation

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.
And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (Genesis 1:31 ESV)

In the first of two creation accounts that appear in Genesis 1 and 2, we are given a picture of seven days — seven days where God attentively, creatively, and powerfully brings the world to completion. What had begun with the creation of time, the heavens and the earth (1:1) was now shown as complete with the creation of men, in the image of God, as its keepers. Yet, this creation is not complete without the evaluation of His work by the Creator. In looking upon *all* that He had made, God concludes that it is very good. All of God's works were good, but now that Creation is complete and whole, it is very good and God is pleased with His work.

Gardening

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. [...] The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the

garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you will surely die.” (Genesis 2:8, 15-17 ESV)

As if the Creation itself were not glorious enough, God plants a garden in Eden. The Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, uses the word *paradeiso* to describe it. And it is here that God places man, according to Genesis 1:15, to “work it and keep it.” Two Hebrew verbs — *le-avdah* and *le-shamrah* — appear for these words and they have very specific applications in the context of this verse. Adam is placed in this garden and commanded to perform *avodah* or “service” in the garden, as well as to *shemor*, “guard it.” As to the translation, the English Standard Version has faithfully rendered the text by saying “work” and “keep” but there are nuances in the definitions that required bringing out to discuss this issue.

In this respect, God is laying out for Adam how he may carry out His prior command given in Genesis 1:28 (ESV): “And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion [...]” Three commands here define man’s relationship to God’s creation: *fill*, *subdue*, and *have dominion*. The Scriptures say that the earth is to be filled, that is, populated by humanity. The earth is to be subdued, that is, to be made subservient (the question of “To whom?” will be addressed later). And finally, the earth is to be ruled, that is, to be watched with the intent of keeping order (to be consistent with the use of the word throughout the Scriptures). Thus, if man is to fill, subdue, and rule the earth, the means that God gives him are service and guardianship, which is precisely what Adam and Eve began by doing.

Subjection

We all know the story. We know how Adam and Eve were deceived and, in their desire for more, sinned. Yet, we have only traditionally understood the consequences of the Fall on human lives, and haven’t given much thought to what effect sin had on the rest of Creation, for which we were responsible. The Apostle Paul, in Romans 8, however, gives us a glimpse of this:

For the creation waits with eager longing 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 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who are the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:20-23 ESV)

Paul, throughout his writing of Romans, hails back to the Creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2. To Paul’s theology, understanding the Creation was essential to having a complete picture of redemption, even the redemption of creation. But we cannot speak

of redemption unless we've discerned what creation was subjected to. Paul indicates for us here that it was subjected to futility. The creation was, in other words, put in a state of being incapable of producing any useful result. Now the next question. By whom? Paul tells us, seemingly with sarcasm, by "him who subjected it." Thanks, Paul. You've been so much help. What was obvious to Paul and to many readers — particularly those of Jewish upbringing, however — was that Paul was making a point about Adam. That word that is here translated "subjected" is the Greek equivalent of the command of God for Adam to "subdue" the earth. In other words, Adam messed up and brought down the whole creation with him in his fall.

So, the creation is stuck in its futility. Not only this, but it groans under the weight of "its bondage to decay." What a horrible condition! And we, as humans, in our own sinfulness, desire to exploit, rather than serve the earth, to use, rather than to guard the creation. We talk about "natural resources" a great deal, but don't take the moment to consider what perspective of creation we take by leaving it only at that: it's simply a "resource" to be "consumed" — economic terms for an economic view of the world. As Christians, we should be distancing ourselves from this view of creation, or else we continue the vicious work of futility, contributing to the groaning of creation. What hope can there be?

Reconciliation

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross. (Colossians 1:15-23 ESV)

Any Biblical hope or theology is, like creation's current state, subjected to futility apart from the cross of Christ. What Colossians 1 presents for us, then, is the Hope of Creation: Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. We are well aware that Jesus, in His sinless, Divine-human perfection, died for sin, to redeem for God a people for his own possession. We are aware that Christ's blood purchased for us healing in the name of the Lord. We are also aware that this same blood justified us freely by God's grace before the Throne. Yet, how little are we aware that Christ's blood is not only sufficient for this, but to also redeem all things in creation.

The same Lord who was the agent of the Creator's will. The same God who was the head of Creation. The same One who holds all creation together by His sovereign hand. The head of the church. The beginning. The risen One, preeminent above all things in

heaven and on earth. This very same Redeemer, Jesus Christ, reconciled all the creation to God in His blood. This is a re-evaluation of Creation. When the redemption comes in the day of Christ's return and all things are made new again, God's declaration will not be "very good" or "subjected to futility." No, in fact, God's decree shall be "Redeemed! Fit to be the dwelling of God! The abode of men, with God!"

Action

Christians, I encourage you to look at this creation with new eyes. It's not merely the third rock from the sun that humans happen to live on. It's not a mere resource for us to use for our own purposes. It is a creation that Christ's blood covers, and it, yes, should be worked and guarded and filled and subdued and ruled to the glory of God. What that will look like for each of us is a question I myself hope to explore and live out in my life. But I plead with you in this: be careful to discern what would please God as we seek to relate to the good creation that He has given us and, unlike Adam, to subject it to hope, to redemption, to the grace of God. Amen.