

The environment – Why should Christians care?

Psalm 148 is a praise to God for everything that God made. That, if anything, is enough reason for people of faith to care for the environment. But it goes a lot deeper than that, and that is what I want to look at in this article.

The last half of 2006 saw unprecedented coverage of the issue of climate change, as report after report was released warning us of the dangers of inaction. 2007 promises to be no different as we begin to learn to live with this reality. It will no doubt be an election issue as we most likely go to the polls later in the year. One of the reports released in 2006 was the 'Common Belief' report which contained a number of statements from different faith groups emphasizing the moral imperative to tackle climate change. So, as Christians, collectively and individually, why should we care for the environment? Why should we be concerned about being green?

While there are still people who disagree over the extent of climate change and whether or not it is happening as a result of human activity, more and more people are accepting that it is a current fact and that human actions since the beginning of the industrial revolution are playing a major part.

However we still have a lot of work to do. Did you know that there are Christians in the US today advising President Bush that policies that look after the environment are a waste of time, and their reason for that advice is that we're in the last days, Jesus is coming back soon to make it all better anyway, so let's make use of what we've got now? There are people actually advising the President of this at the moment. And so for a few years we've had the real possibility of drilling for oil in Alaska being contemplated by the Bush Administration. Although early in 2006 we did have the encouraging news that many evangelicals in the US signed a declaration urging that Christians have a moral obligation to care for the earth that God made. What I hope to show you in this article is a background of how much this God we believe in cares for the planet he made. Throughout the Bible there is a common thread of God's concern for the planet, and from this comes our responsibility and privilege to love what God loves.

Mark Brett from Whitley College in Melbourne has said that, to reduce the complexity of the many references in the Bible that call us to care for the planet, people have often narrowed creation theology down to the key point which serves human interests: God said 'subdue the earth', so let's get on with it. Brett goes on to say that both humans and animals are made from the earth, and in this sense we all belong to the same lineage system or 'earth community'. From the dust we were made. Genesis tells us that.

It's interesting to note that Genesis also tells us that God told all species to be fruitful and multiply, so one of our responsibilities is to allow the other species to do just that.

So let's have a brief look at what Genesis actually says. Ched Myers, a highly respected American author, has said that "The first creation account (Genesis 1:1-2:4a) is structured around the Creator's repeated pronouncements that each layer of the world is "fantastic." After day 1 he made the universe, and he said it was very good. Day 2 he made the sky and it was very good. Day 3.....and it was very good and so it goes on with everything that God makes. The Hebrew word "tov" signifies intense delight. God says this way before humans arrive on the scene, showing that God thought this planet was pretty amazing when we weren't even here yet. The environment is part of God's creation which He said was very good.

Then God goes on to make us, with the world as our habitat. As Ched Myers goes on to say, "humans have received the world as a gift from the Creator and must never mistake it for a possession (Leviticus 25:23)." After God makes us, He tells us what our vocation is. "The human vocation is summarized in Genesis 2:15: The human being is to "till and keep" ('abad and shamar). The Hebrew word for tend (Hebrew 'abad) means "to work or serve," and so, referring to the ground or a garden, it can be defined as "to till or cultivate." It implies adornment, embellishment, and improvement.

The Hebrew word for keep (Hebrew shamar) means "to exercise great care over." In the context of Genesis 2:15, it expresses God's wish that humankind, "take care of," "guard," or "watch over" the earth. What we're noticing is that "nothing in Genesis 1-2, the very first words of God that we have, are a sharp contrast from the once-prevalent and still persistent interpretation of "dominion" that many people, many Christians use to sanction environmental destruction in the name of progress." The exercise of dominion means that we are to exercise dominion with mercy, justice, and compassion -- as servants of creation, and as Jesus was the ultimate servant leader, we are to follow His example in living like this.

Jesus also said that our lives do not consist in the abundance of our possessions. As a result, life works best when we

resist the allure of wastefulness and overconsumption by making personal lifestyle choices, which includes organisational choices, that express humility, patience, self restraint and frugality.

Put simply, care for the earth fulfills the Great Commandments to love God and love what God loves. Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Do unto others. As a group called Creation Care says, it's hardly showing love to a child with asthma when you're filling her lungs with pollution.

Another reason that God calls us to care for the planet is because environmental degradation hurts the poor the most. Care for the earth is an expression of our love for God and, as an extension of that, our love for the poor.

Despite our call for relationship with the environment as a biblical mandate, there is also the danger of doing what many environmentalists do and going to the other extreme of idolising the creation instead of the creator. We don't want to go to that extreme.

It's important for us to keep our focus on our reason for doing what we do. The apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, said that God's handiwork is seen in all of creation. Paul saw in creation the evidence of God at work, in the beauty and order of it all, and how it all fits together.

In recent decades scientists have been discovering that the laws of physics seem to be fine tuned for the existence of complex life. All the evidence suggests that our planet is not just a meaningless "lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark" as the famous astronomer Carl Sagan once said.

The fact that the Earth is situated in just the right location in our galaxy...that we're in a planetary system with giant planets that can shield the other planets from too many comet impacts...that we're orbiting the right kind of star that's not too cool or not too hot...that the earth has an atmosphere that has enough oxygen to allow for complex organisms to survive...that has enough water and enough continents that allow for the diversity of life and an active biodiversity that you need to support complex creatures such as ourselves...". All of these factors give the direct impression that something amazing has taken place, that this did not just happen by a series of chance events.

Scientists are also discovering that the universe itself seems to be fine-tuned for life. Currently there are about 20 known different physical laws and forces that hold the universe together and allow it to sustain life; and if just one of them was altered by a tiny fraction, the universe would not even exist. The universe, and this planet, are precious.

Scientists are also telling us about the interdependence of life on the planet. David Suzuki, the Canadian environmentalist, describes how, if all of humanity disappeared off the face of the earth, then the rest of life would benefit enormously. The forests would gradually grow back, and relative stability would return to the ecosystems that control global temperature and the atmosphere. The fish in the oceans would recover and most endangered species would slowly come back. On the other hand, for example, if all species of ants disappeared, the results would be close to catastrophic. There would be major extinctions of other species and probably partial collapse of some ecosystems. The functions of the creatures living in the air we breathe, and beneath our feet, all work together to keep us alive. Think about that next time you step on an ant! We need them.

Can you begin to see that, in the work we do with the poor, whether it be development work projects, or in marketing, if we do not consider the effects of environmental degradation, we are not working with the poor; we are actually working against the poor. Let me say that again: if we are not considering the effects of environmental degradation, we are working against the poor. Ross Langmead from Whitley College in Melbourne, has said that the transforming power of the gospel is not just spiritual, and not just social and economic, but also cosmic and environmental. The gospel is bigger than many of us thought!

As we have seen from the examples of David Suzuki, ecology is increasingly teaching us that everything is related. A theme running through the Old Testament is that a distortion of right relationships affects us, affects our societies and affects our environment. As Romans 8 tells us, the creation is groaning and awaiting the setting right of all relationships in the universe.

There are so many references to caring for the earth in the Bible. If you do want to find out more, I would encourage you to read more of Mark Brett. From a secular point of view, have a look at Tim Flannery's book, *The Weather Makers*. And, if you haven't already done so, go and see Al Gore's *'An Inconvenient Truth'*.

There is simply no question that relationship with the environment is our responsibility as Christians, just as much as caring for the poor, no more and no less. And as affluent Christians here in Australia, we have the resources to make a

real difference. Finally, listen to the words of Jesus when he says that from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required (Luke 12 v 48). We have been given much. So let's continue to do all we can to work with the poor by showing our love for what God loves.

by Nils von Kalm
6 June 2006