

The Gospel & Global Warming

Whether the world's climate is changing or not, the battle over global warming is heating up. How should the church respond to the environmental crisis?

A few years ago during a wedding reception at our church, I was cornered by a woman who obviously had been looking for me. "Are you the pastor of this church?" she asked in a tone that made me think maybe I didn't want to be the pastor at that moment. However, I confessed that I was and braced myself for whatever criticism she planned to hurl in my direction. "This wedding reception should be a crime," she stated matter-of-factly. "I've never seen so many items going to waste instead of going into recycling bins."

She was right!

I was embarrassed. Not only had I not inspired my congregation to start a churchwide recycling program, I also had not led our church in valuing the environment.

God had been at work in my heart about environmental stewardship, but the observation by the wedding guest began to push me toward action. The pressing question was, "How can I make caring for the environment a value in my church?" But the incident also raised a more troubling question for me personally, which was, "How did this once strong value in my life all but disappear?"

Does God Value Nature?

All of God's creation is important to Him, down to the last sparrow (see Matt. 10:29). The story of humanity in the Bible

begins in a garden and ends in a restored garden (see Gen. 2; Rev. 22).

God's first commission to His people, in the opening chapters of Genesis, exhorts them to be caretakers of the gift of creation. But why?

Romans 1 provides an answer. It tells us that all humanity knows there is a God because He has revealed Himself and His very nature through His creation. God directed this assurance, this undeniable proof, to people struggling with the most basic spiritual question: Does God exist?

As the Bible opens, the writer of Genesis chronicles God's magnificent creations—a man, a woman; the plants, trees and animals; the sun, moon, stars and sky. With the creation of Adam, the scene shifts to the new garden, where humanity falls into sin and the garden is defiled. But if we read ahead—to the end of Revelation, the last book in Scripture—we see the way that God brings us back to a restored garden.

Shouldn't this make us sit up and take note that there's something important about a garden—that God values the relation between His people and the rest of His creation? And doesn't it stand to reason that we should therefore share His high value of caring for the environment?

I believe many Christian leaders, myself included, have been fearful of what might happen if we advocated something that has been tagged as a cause held by those who oppose many of our Christian values. In our fear, though, we've avoided involvement. Evil always has a way of stealing out of God's camp the values that the church is called to champion.

For example, the Christians who experienced the environmental movement of the 1960s saw hypocrisy in the “Earth First” approach that made it seem meaningless, and they pulled back. “Mother Earth” theology led no one to God and instead had the effect of polarizing the church of that era from those who expressed any kind of ecological concern—blinding believers from theologically sound and balanced, practical approaches.

Today, however, it’s getting more and more difficult to ignore the signs that the earth is under siege by gross human mismanagement. That’s why our current apathy toward the environment really means we have decided its value is not worth fighting for. And this is where most Christians in the U.S. have gone awry.

Politics Aside

Many Americans perceive the church as conservative and, therefore, intimately allied with the Republican Party, which is more interested in capitalistic strength than environmental stewardship when it comes to managing our beautiful country. One environmentalist remarked in obvious irony: “It’s interesting that conservatives are the least likely to support conservation.”

In recent election years, this issue struck close to home when my wife and I had political discussions with our grown children. As a result of the way they were raised by us they have a strong love for nature.

Although I found choosing a political candidate relatively simple, they were conflicted. They sided with candidates who stood for human rights and the sanctity of life, but they also

agreed strongly with those who wished to protect the environment from destruction for economic gain.

As Christians, most of us make the value judgment that human life is more important than plant and animal life—and rightly so. However, God values both people and nature.

Knowing this caused a tension keenly felt by both our children. They'd ask: "Why do we have to choose? Why can't the body of Christ be for both? After all, God is for both."

The two dominant political parties in the U.S. stand at odds over this issue. For them it remains, simply, an "issue." Liberals are unable either through the court of public opinion or social action to actually make a difference. Conservatives and the evangelical church have for the most part avoided supporting the issue altogether.

In taking a strong leadership role in this debate, the church must grow thick skin and help provide a solution rather than be frozen in fear over people's perceptions from either side of the political aisle.

Since 1989 I have pastored and led a church in Boise, Idaho, a place where God's beautiful creation can be seen from every side of the city. Outdoor recreation is highly valued here. People hike, ski, mountain-bike, fish and hunt.

Yet for years I was afraid to use the word "environment" because I didn't want to be labeled a liberal. If you were a liberal, then you were also supposedly for many other things that I simply could not accept or attach myself to. Though I shared many of the ideals of conservatives, I viewed the

environment as one issue that I could let slide.

That began to change when I realized I couldn't let political affiliation deter my charge as a Christian to be a good steward of God's creation. Somehow I disconnected from this responsibility when I became a Christian.

At the end of the 1960s, during the height of the environmental movement, I was an ecology major but eventually began a career as a schoolteacher. My wife, Nancy, and I lived in an older home on our family ranch in Southern California. We spent the first 14 years of our marriage without electricity. We truly lived off the land—we grew some of our own food and always valued the natural balance of our surroundings.

Even though I had separated from these values and affections after going into the ministry, I never stopped loving nature. My affection for it was set aside because there was no real value for environmental stewardship in the church.

The evangelical church in the 1970s was rife with a theology known as Dispensationalism, which implied—if not explicitly stated at times—that “Jesus is returning and the earth is going to burn up anyway, so go ahead and use it up.”

During that time, a lot of Christians—people who had once seen the worth of cherishing and protecting the environment—lost their ideals and didn't see them as a value in the church. That included me.

I believe it's time that as Christians we begin to rediscover the values we have lost. It's time for us to be on the leading

edge of promoting environmental stewardship and providing practical instruction on how to implement these ideals in our daily lives.

Environmental Stewardship

To become good stewards of the environment, we have to start by understanding what environmental stewardship is. “Environmental stewardship” is the idea that we should care for, manage and nurture what we have been given by God.

Spiking trees, eco-terrorism or burning houses in unwanted developments is not true environmentalism. That is a destructive brand of activism. To have a biblical perspective on environmental stewardship, we should understand four major points about creation:

1. Provision. The first is that environmental stewardship views nature as a resource and provision. God has given us His creation to use, not to abuse. He has given it to us as a way of providing for people.

Plants and trees produce fruits, vegetables and herbs that are healthy sources of nourishment for people and animals. Properly managed land sustains these plants, which in turn sustain human existence. It’s a way that God shows His care for us through what He has created.

Our day-to-day choices—how we manage the land with our crops, how we treat animals, and how we take care of our natural resources such as water and air—are important because they are part of God’s great plan for resourcing and providing for His creation.

2. Accountability. There must be a balance between the use of and protection of Creation. God gave us the responsibility for life on all sides.

One thing that stands out to me while reading through the Old Testament, especially when Israel was in the wilderness, is that God called Moses to be a game warden of sorts to protect the balance of creation (see Deut. 22:6-7). God calls people to be responsible with the loss of game and with making sure animal harvesting is done responsibly.

An animal that becomes endangered because of human abuse is unacceptable. We must be accountable for the way we handle the delicate balance of nature.

3. Blessing. Environmental stewardship must look at God's creation as a blessing—something sacred. Haven't we all been awed by the beauty in a sunset or the creativity in a mountain range or the pure serenity surrounding a pond hidden away in the woods? It's in these moments that we realize how sacred these places are.

These snapshots of nature are sanctuaries for God's creation—a place where plants, animals and people should be able to live together in harmony. We should treat this with regard, showing reverence toward God who created it by making sure others have the opportunity to experience the unspoiled wonders as we have.

4. Heritage. Stewardship is a value to be passed from generation to generation while emphasizing the great importance of caring for God's creation. Most of the values we adopt from our parents are "caught," actions and behavior we observe and absorb. What our parents say to us is important,

but what they do leaves an indelible mark on who we are as we grow up and mature.

One way our church provided parents with the opportunity for passing down stewardship values to their kids was through organized camping trips. Many parents took their children into the woods with other families for wilderness cleanup and restoration projects.

Kids could see ecological values being lived out by their parents. When we model how to steward what God has given us, our children will catch the lifestyle, and it will become part of who they are.

The components of environmental stewardship seem simple enough and make good sense, but what doesn't make sense is why the Western church today refuses to embrace these simple values.

Our Future in Mind

As a member of the baby boomer generation, I have seen firsthand how people in my age range have made shifts from shortsighted thinking to serious reflection about the future. It mostly has come with each addition to their families.

Having their first child tends to initiate a sudden transformation in the way people view the world around them. New parents ask some challenging questions: Will the world be safe for my kids? Will my children have all the same opportunities I did? Will they have all the same freedoms I have? Will they be able to enjoy life the way I did?

The same questions are being asked about the environment, sometimes with much regret by the very people who unknowingly failed to think about the future of the earth. Failure to adopt this future-driven element in our thinking—and, subsequently, our actions—may result in a missed opportunity to experience a revolution in our own hearts as well as in the world around us.

One powerful example of a leader in the Bible who failed to think about the future was King Hezekiah. In 2 Kings 20 we find him confronted by the prophet Isaiah, who informs the king that some of his descendants are going to be exiled to Babylon.

What was Hezekiah's shortsighted answer to this? "'At least there will be peace and truth in my days'" (v. 19, NKJV). He was more concerned about his current popularity than his eventual legacy.

The moment is right for the church to reverse its wrongs in the area of environmental stewardship. By abandoning our shortsighted thinking and returning long-term vision to the church, Christians have an opportunity to change things.

It won't be easy. Many people from both liberal and conservative camps are likely to cast a suspicious eye on a reversal of position. But if the statistics are true and Christians do comprise one-third of the world's population, then what would happen if more than 2 billion people became serious about upholding the value of environmental stewardship?

It would make a difference. It would change the world.

Tri Robinson is the founding pastor of the Vineyard Boise Church in Boise, Idaho. For more, visit [vineyardboise.org](#).

Stewards of the Earth

A growing number of Christians believe it is the church's responsibility to care for creation.

At Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Boise, Idaho, environmental protection starts with on-site recycling bins and distribution of cloth grocery bags. The church prints materials on recycled paper and sponsors seminars, such as the Let's Tend the Garden conference, named for its nearly 3-year-old environmental initiative.

Volunteers have also tackled reforestation projects, cleared hiking trails and cleaned up streams.

"I think we've developed a good name among people who normally wouldn't go to church," says pastor Tri Robinson, who is part of a budding environmental movement that encompasses charismatics. "I am finding even Christians are looking for a church that is doing relevant stuff."

"It is the conversation of the day," says Richard Cizik, vice president of government relations for the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) and keynote speaker at the Let's Tend the Garden conference. "Churches by the thousands are engaging environmentalism."

Some churches have indeed become more environmentally

proactive than others when you consider that:

»The Vineyard Church of Fort Collins in Colorado has installed recycling bins and reviewed energy use. It recycles paper and donates used printer cartridges to charity.

»Last spring, Lutherans in northern Michigan collected more than a ton of disposable medicine and personal care products to prevent toxic materials from leeching into drinking water.

»After a sermon series last winter, the Ann Arbor, Michigan, Vineyard formed an environmental task force to promote such measures as recycling, using compact fluorescent lights and better communication with scientists.

»The new sanctuary of a charismatic church in Florida features automatic utility shutdown systems, heavy insulation, tinted glass and landscaping with native plants to reduce water consumption.

The Rev. Jim Ball, executive director of Evangelical Environmental Network, believes the level of active involvement by churches is “on the verge of exploding.”

Activism has also carried over into the pews. One layperson “convert” is Raymond Randall, director of the Creation Care Task Force at Northland church in suburban Orlando, Florida.

Randall and other volunteers donned hazard suits last spring to sift through Northland’s garbage to determine methods of reducing waste and recycling at the church. The task force envisions taking such steps as installing recycling bins, eliminating disposable trash such as plastic foam coffee cups and reducing bottled water usage.

Another is Dominic Nilo, an electronic technician and the former co-director of Let’s Tend the Garden. He still clears trails on weekends, doing so because he believes caring for

creation is biblical.

“It’s a gift to us and we need to use it responsibly,” Nilo says, noting that one participant’s son accepted Christ in July while taking part in a trail-clearing expedition.

Lending credence to the current groundswell, 28 members of the evangelical and scientific communities last January signed and issued a statement, “An Urgent Call to Action,” which was sent to the president and speaker of the House. It stated, in part, that “every sector of our nation’s leadership ... must act now” to correct “worsening problems” in the world’s natural environments.

The 3-year-old Evangelical Climate Initiative advocates similar action. Among the signers are such national Christian figures as Foursquare President Jack Hayford and Church of God in Christ Presiding Bishop Charles E. Blake.

For other Christian leaders, however, environmentalism is seen as a hot-button topic that runs contrary to conservative politics or one that needs a more unified level of Christian support.

The Rev. Lou Sheldon, founder of the Washington, lobby Traditional Values Coalition, harshly criticizes a movement that he believes has been hijacked by the radical left. He says science doesn’t support the theories of former Vice President Al Gore.

“Yes, the earth is warming, but the cause of that warming is the issue,” Sheldon says. “It’s the sun’s rays. Carbon in the air isn’t causing it to get warmer.”

Sheldon is one of several national Christian leaders who also challenge Cizik's stance on the issue. Another is Bishop Harry Jackson Jr., a signer of a March 1 letter to the NAE's board that asked the organization to stop Cizik from speaking out about global warming.

Although Jackson, pastor of Hope Christian Church in Washington, D.C., believes Christians should be involved, he thinks the church should proceed slowly on making public statements until it has a unified voice.

"It's not a danger to the gospel," Jackson says of environmental activities. "But because we don't have clear goals we can lose a lot of resources without coming to an answer and, therefore, be a distraction."

He is also concerned that governmental involvement could result in expensive changes to U.S. environmental policies before other polluting nations agree to take similar action. Those involved in environmental initiatives, however, see a major difference between "creation care" and a legislative agenda.

"I think it's become way too political on both sides of the issue," says Rick Knable, the associate pastor who oversees the Fort Collins Vineyard's efforts. "The debate shouldn't be whether we are or aren't the cause of climate change. It's, are we having [a negative] effect on the environment and how can we decrease it?"

Cizik's point is similar. "It's not a red-blue state issue," he says. "It's a spiritual and moral issue."

Ken Walker