

Session 8

ENVIRONMENTALISM

TERMINOLOGY

Environmentalism is a movement that centers on the preservation and protection of the natural world in light of the threats presented by a booming human population that engages in unconstrained consumption of natural resources, focuses on economic growth regardless of the cost to the environment, and engages in widespread and unsustainable development. Environmentalists posit that the fate of human civilization on earth is intimately tied to the fate of the natural world and that it is inherently wrong for one species to destroy the environment on which all species depend for survival.¹

PONDER THIS

Esther Baird: from a Paper on Environmentalism and Creation

So what did God intend for this creation? Genesis 1:26-28 provides an answer. In this passage God creates man—the only part of his creation to be created in God’s image. God then gives his human creation instructions on how he wishes the rest of his creation to be cared for. It is important to note that he does not give them creation, rather he gives them the instructions on how to interact with creation, namely to fill it, subdue it, and to rule over it. He does not hand the earth over to them and leave the scene, he simply, like an owner might to a landlord, endows them with the care and upkeep of the planet. The earth, universe, and all of creation still belong to God and that

is of utmost importance when considering our responsibility and attitude toward it today. . . .

Romans 8:19-22 tells us that not just humanity waits to be restored but all of creation does. Paul says creation “groans” to be released from its bondage to decay.² This reinforces that God has a redemptive plan not just to pluck saved Christians out of a burnt up, decayed planet and whisk them off to some ethereal heaven, but that God will redeem and restore the earth. Revelation 21:1-3 paints a picture of a new earth, a restored earth, one where God will come down and dwell with us.

In C. S. Lewis’, *The Last Battle*, the children enter a door after believing Narnia was destroyed. But the new land turned out to be Narnia after all or as Digory said, “more like the real thing.” The Narnia they had known was just a “shadow or a copy of the real Narnia which has always been here and always will be here.”³

The creation mandate does not then mean that we can wash our hands of this earth since God will eventually restore everything anyway. Rather, what the story of creation tells us is that God’s goal—a restored creation—ought to be our goal. The creation mandate means we must use the world God gave us with the same objective in mind that God has. Just as it is not acceptable to claim that we can abuse our bodies and minds since we are “saved anyway,” neither is it acceptable to treat the planet as if it doesn’t matter. It matters to God because it *is* God’s.⁴

QUOTE INTERLUDE

“I love the environment, but I’m cheap on the environment.”

NEWT GINGRICH

“God has given us a universe. It’s really an expensive toy with no instructions. We’re gonna break it sooner or later.”

KEVIN MAURER

“The way you can go to Paris or Beijing and everywhere there’s a McDonald’s hamburger, this is the ecological equivalent of franchised

life-forms. Every place is the same place. Kudzu. Zebra Mussels. Water Hyacinths. Starlings. Burger Kings.

The local natives, anything unique gets squeezed out.

The only biodiversity we're going to have left is Coke versus Pepsi. We're landscaping the whole world one stupid mistake at a time."

CHUCK PALAHNIUK

PONDER THIS

Carolyn Raffensperger: from "Women, Society, and Social Justice"

Word-oriented theologies which now exist in many of our churches are now being challenged by more Creation-oriented theologies. Is there hope for reconciliation of these theologies through Christ who was both called the Word of God and the Source of Creation, and who lived fully within our created world and shared our bread and wine?

There is much I do not understand. What I do know is how greatly our theology is enriched when we learn from the earth itself. This is because creation is the other Word of God, just as significant as the written Word. . . . I believe that what creation tells us about God and our own creatureliness is as important as Paul's letter to the Romans or the Sermon on the Mount.

But for now the creation groans in travail and pain because of our blatant disregard for its wellbeing and our attitude that we can use it up. Can we hear this cry of the earth?⁵

MY THOUGHTS

Christians have every reason to respect the earth as God's sacred creation that he declared "good." In fact, God liked it enough to take a day off just to enjoy it. Of course, the earth has gone through quite a bit since its creation. I wonder if God's report card on the current state of the planet would read something like this: "Progress unsatisfactory; see me after class."

I grew up with my mom in the home of my grandparents. While I wasn't a particularly messy child, my grandmother had a much higher standard when it came to clean. When Nana turned a room inside out for cleaning,

it looked like a brawl had broken out. She moved, turned over, shifted, and scattered everything as she vacuumed, dusted, wiped, sprayed, folded, and arranged. And then she put everything back. While no one said that I had to keep my room neat, I picked up on this household requirement by simple observation. Still, imagine if I decided that because Nana would eventually clean my room, I didn't need to take care of it in the meantime. So I chopped up my bureau for firewood, threw my TV out the window to watch it explode, tore up the carpet just for fun, and converted my closet into a secret hideout—something I would have needed if I had really done any of this!

You get the point. Anticipating future restoration doesn't give us a blank check to make a mess of things now. And perhaps our willingness to destroy something God created should also tell us something about the amount of respect we hold for him.

Esther Baird artfully communicates this same perspective on the care of creation—a biblical mandate for humanity to fulfill. She adopts a line of thinking that asks, if God's goal is moving the world toward healing and restoration, shouldn't that goal be ours as well? Certainly that's the first step that many Christians must take regarding the environment.

Carolyn Raffensperger then moves us toward the next steps. She teaches us that the environment has value on many levels and that our inability to care for creation reveals something dark and sinister about us. Not only do we abuse the creation of God, we also ignore the living book he has written all around us.

Raffensperger echoes the words of Psalm 19:1-3:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
 the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
 Day after day they pour forth speech;
 night after night they display knowledge.
 There is no speech or language
 where their voice is not heard.

Creation speaks to us, revealing God. But often we're not listening. Far from being a repository of natural resources we use to make ourselves wealthy, our environment serves as yet another way that God says, "Hey, it's not all about you (or the hokey-pokey, for that matter)."

If we take the issue of caring for our environment seriously, we must challenge our own consumer-oriented, high-pollution lifestyle by asking questions such as: Can I buy something used instead of picking up the latest version from the store? Can I increase my energy efficiency or even explore viable energy alternatives? Can I support organic farms that will improve the soil and the quality of food I consume?⁶

Of course, as we reconsider our relationship to the environment, we need to keep our priorities in focus. I heard an interview with an inner-city advocate who said something along the lines of, "It's very hard to make people care about a drowning polar bear if they're afraid to walk out their front door." Saving our world from catastrophic climate shifts certainly needs to be a priority. But our contributions might be limited by socioeconomic factors. The redemption of our environment is one way wealthier segments of the world can actively work to bless those who possess far less.

YOUR THOUGHTS

- How has your church responded to environmental issues? In what ways is that response adequate and how could it improve?
- Read Psalm 19. If the heavens "pour forth speech," what are they telling us about God?
- How does Raffensperger's characterization of the earth as a form of revelation change your views on the environment?
- The ways we can lighten our impact on the environment might surprise you. For example, plastics and many cleaning products are made from petroleum. So simply reusing canvas bags at the grocery store or buying an all-natural and non-toxic dish soap or bathroom

cleaner represent simple and low-cost ways to reduce pollution. Make a list of ways you can help protect the environment—do an online search if you want to make a big list—and choose three to put into practice.

- Read Romans 8. What exactly is creation here? What does it mean for creation to be “liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (verse 21)?
- Revelation 21:1 mentions a new heaven and a new earth arriving after the old heaven and old earth passed away. Explain whether or not this means we need not worry about the heavens and earth that we have today since they’ll just be replaced.
- Choose one of the Scripture verses mentioned above and dig deeper into the passage. Write a 200-word reflection on what you take away from it.