

Caring for creation

Genesis 1:27-31; 2:8-9, 15

This world is an awesome place. It is huge, diverse, complex, fragile, unique. It is our home in the universe, and the only one we have.

Almost everyone would agree with that statement – whether they are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or atheist. But a serious commitment to Christian faith, to following Jesus, has important implications when it comes to what we believe about the Earth, and how we respond to it.

The most obvious biblical teaching about the Earth is that there was a Creator. The first sentence of the Bible declares that *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”* (Gen 1:1). Genesis 1 goes on to teach that humankind is a part of God’s creation, that everything God created was good, and that you and I have a God-given responsibility toward the rest of creation.

“The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it,” says Psalm 24:1. Have you ever wondered why God created the universe? I don’t think he created it just so he could one day meet you (or me)! I don’t think God created the universe purely for functional reasons. He was certainly under no obligation – to himself or any other being – to create anything material.

Part of the purpose of creation, I think, was the pleasure of God. Creativity and relationship to the other are essential to God’s nature. Observing the progress of creation, and moving among created things, relating to created things brings pleasure to God’s heart. And so we find God walking in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day, and seeking an active relationship with Adam and Eve. God still wants that kind of relationship with you and me.

“The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it,” says Psalm 24:1. And God appointed his human creation as stewards, or managers, of his world. We might feel separate from the rest of creation, and there are important and essential differences between me and a tree, or a monkey, or a star. But we are all part of the creation. Its beauty refreshes and inspires us. Its resources sustain us and bring us wealth and wellbeing.

At the same time, we have a sacred responsibility to steward what God has provided – to care for creation. Not only Christians, but every person has this calling. And here’s the problem: we have all, for the most part, fallen far short of what God expected of us. We have been bad stewards of the Earth – irresponsible, ignorant, idle, and in some cases wilfully destructive.

What we call climate change is just one aspect of the environmental crisis facing the world today. As long ago as 1984, German theologian Jürgen Moltmann gave a series of lectures titled *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, in which he said:

What we call the environmental crisis is not merely a crisis in the natural environment of human beings. It is nothing less than a crisis in human beings themselves. It is a crisis of life on this planet, a crisis so comprehensive and so irreversible that it can not unjustly be described as apocalyptic ... it is the beginning of a life and death struggle for life on this earth.¹

If God has indeed called people to be stewards of the Earth, and we have failed, then we have sinned against God. Walter Brueggemann, commenting on Psalm 104, said, “The world is a free gift from God, but with it comes an expectation and a cost . . . Every generation learns what the first humans in the garden learned (Gen 2-3).”²

¹ The Gifford Lectures, 1984-85. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM, 1985), p. xi.

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1984), p. 33.

When I give a detailed talk, or write a serious article, about ecology or climate change, there are typically three responses:

- (a) It's not human-induced, there's no scientific consensus, ecosystems are self-correcting, technology will save us, and there's no need for concern.
- (b) It sounds terribly interesting, but won't focusing attention on the environment draw attention and resources away from mission?
- (c) Why don't we hear this more often from our Christian leaders?

If you are not convinced of the seriousness of the environmental crisis, and the spiritual dimension to it, and urgency of taking appropriate action, I encourage you to take a second look at the issues, and hear from a range of scientists and theologians and ethicists who have made this their life.

What does responsible stewardship look like?

- 1. Careful allocation and use of scarce resources
- 2. Managing household/business/nation as an example to others
- 3. A witness to the reality of natural revelation (apologetic dimension)
- 4. Part of our God-given mission
- 5. A way to express our love and devotion to God

More and more Christians, including evangelicals and Baptists, are affirming that creation care is part of the Gospel imperative. For example, in 1990 the Anglican Consultative Council reaffirmed what it called "a consistent view of mission ... defined in a four-fold way ...

- (a) to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom;
- (b) to teach, baptize and nurture new believers;
- (c) to respond to human need by loving service;
- (d) to seek to transform the unjust structures of society.

It then added a fifth mark:

- (e) to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.³

What have we Baptists done in this area? There are many ongoing ecological projects led by individuals, small groups and churches. In 1989, the Baptist Union of NSW adopted the Zagreb Statement which committed our churches to:

- (a) recognise and accept our responsibility for stewardship of God's good earth, of which the pause for Sabbath rest is a sign and a reminder
- (b) learn of the environmental dangers facing our planet
- (c) share information and resources developed in our various conventions and unions,
- (d) pursue a responsible lifestyle, respecting the integrity of creation
- (e) exert our influence through industry, business, agriculture, government and as persons to protect and restore the delicate balance of nature which God has entrusted to us.
- (f) call upon Governments to lead their industry and people by example through their public utilities with special reference to greenhouse and other noxious emissions and effluents.

In 1999 our Social Issues Committee and BICM (now Hope Street) ran a successful seminar on "Christians and environmentalism."⁴

Most recently, I attended a meeting of the Baptist World Alliance in Prague in July, where I had the privilege of drafting a resolution on climate change, which was unanimously approved and can be used here in NSW as a guide to new initiatives in creation care:

³ Quoted in R.J. Berry (ed.), *The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), p. 30.

⁴ See http://www.baptistsocialissues.org.au/papers/christians_and_environmentalism_study_guide.pdf

- (a) Affirms the biblical teaching that God created all things and that God's creation is good (Genesis 1:1-2:2), and that God has entrusted the care of creation to humans (Genesis 1:28, 29; 2:15);
- (b) Confesses that humans have often denied or ignored our interdependence with creation and abrogated our stewardship of creation, resulting in misuse of the earth's resources, environmental degradation, and damage to ecosystems;
- (c) Recognizes our failure as Baptists to engage with these issues in an adequate and timely manner;
- (d) Calls upon the leaders of the Baptist World Alliance to strongly support and encourage government, corporate and community initiatives to address the causes of human-induced climate change, including but not limited to:
 - greater use of renewable energy technologies;
 - caps on "greenhouse gas" emissions;
 - carbon trading;
 - greater use of "green" architecture, town planning and transport;
 - encouragement to conserve, reuse and recycle goods;
- (e) Urges members and member bodies of the Baptist World Alliance to practice environmental stewardship, and promote education with the purpose of honoring God and enhancing the common good ...⁵

Finally, what can you do? Let creation care be an important factor in your purchasing and consuming, in your work life, and in your worship of God.

Psalm 104:27-31:

27 All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time.

*28 When you give it to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things.*

*29 When you hide your face, they are terrified;
when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.*

*30 When you send your Spirit, they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.*

*31 May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works...*

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⁵ See <http://www.bwanet.org/default.aspx?pid=863> (scroll down to Resolution 9).