

The Bible and the Environment

1. Introduction

In 1970 the great Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer wrote a pioneering book – *Pollution and the Death of Man*. In it he told a story about a visit he made to an American Christian school in the 60s. Across a small ravine was a hippie colony, famous for its pagan rituals and rumoured to have Bacchanalian orgies. Schaeffer being Schaeffer he crossed the ravine and struck up a friendly conversation with their leader. They showed him around the commune in the woods, the fields, the crops, and even the secret place where they had their “grape stomps” and worshipped their ancient deities.

Then the Bohemian leader looked back across the ravine at the Christian school. “Look at that” he said “isn’t it ugly!”

Schaeffer comments:

“It was! I could not deny it. It was an ugly building without even trees around it.”

He goes on:

“It was then I realised what a poor situation this was. When I stood on Christian ground and looked at the Bohemian people’s place it was beautiful.... Then I stood on pagan ground and looked at the Christian community and saw ugliness. Here you have a Christianity that is failing to take into account man’s responsibility and proper relationship to nature.”

There are many reasons why I proposed to the elders some months ago that we should do a series on the bible and politics. There is a general election coming and we need to be informed. I have a wider and longer term concern that we need to think biblically about our responsibility and our role in the world.

But I want to impress upon you something very strongly today. I am not calling you to move away from Christian witness. I am not saying that our evangelism has to compete with our social responsibility. I am in fact saying the opposite.

I am saying that if our witness to Christ is not embodied, rooted – theologians would say incarnated – in lives and communities which are transformed at every level then Christ will not be glorified in this nation no matter what wonderful gospel presentations we may produce. Our world will just look across the ravine and see ugliness.

Let me put it in another way. Have you ever wondered why there is so little material in the New Testament letters about evangelism? There are bits and bobs, but by and large the New Testament letters are all about living day to day lives worthy of the name of Christ – as

husbands, wives, masters, slaves, rich and poor. And they are about building communities which reflect the glory of Christ – in gentleness, and forgiveness and humility and love.

Are the apostles not interested in evangelism? Or is Paul for instance saying that he will do the evangelism and their calling is to honour God in other ways.

No emphatically not!! Some are gifted as evangelists, but the whole thrust of the New Testament is that ordinary Christians, forming themselves into ordinary, but also extraordinary transformed communities are the hope of the world.

There is no tension, and there must be no disjunction between our verbal witness to Christ, and the way we embody that message in our individual lives and our life together. My aim for this series is that the peoples of East Oxford, and indeed the world, should look across the ravine and not see ugliness but beauty.

This morning, then I am going to say relatively briefly why I need to be concerned about the environment. I am then going to talk a little bit about some possible practical applications of this. Before we talk finally about why actually Christians ought to be uniquely equipped to be leaders in this.

2. Why Christians should be concerned

Not going to talk for long because I made the general case for involvement in managing people and resources in the first sermon.

The creation mandate

Genesis 2 – is the beginning of Christian reflection on almost every environmental issue:

Environmental aesthetics

The beauty of the environment – v9

“every tree that is pleasant to the sight”

Renewable resources

The productivity of the environment – v9

“the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is good for food.”

Biodiversity

V9 “the Lord God made EVERY tree”

V19 “The Lord God had formed EVERY beast of the field”

- The present rate of extinctions is somewhere between 100 and 1000 times the average historical extinction rate – EVERY plant and animal made by God.

Water rights

V10 “a river flowed out of Eden”

Water is the primeval gift of God.

Desertification is a moral issue

- Pumping water willy nilly out of subterranean aquifers in the Sahara – which will not be replenished – in order to give us early Egyptian new potatoes – IS A MORAL ISSUE.

Non-renewable resources

V12 “the gold of that land is good....”

Mineral resources are given to us by God to dig up and use

THEY STILL BELONG TO GOD

- Dig up the gold and make it into a golden calf – an idol – it is a sin.
- Dig up all the fossil fuel in the world, so that a future generation has none, and the world is now swimming in pollution and excess CO2 – it is a sin.

The creation mandate is to “work it and take care of it”

Work it – management of the environment is not only legitimate it is obligatory

Take care of it:

Keep it – cause a state or condition to remain

Guard it – “limit access and movement of persons or objects in and out”

e.g. of guarding the tabernacle from intruders

Revere it – “as an extension of carefully guarding or caring for an object”

- The world requires our care
- The world is holy ground!

The breadth of God’s concern

God cares for the environment ITSELF not just because it is our home.

Job (just before psalms)

Job 38:25-27 – “where no one lives”

Job 39:1-12

The compassion of God

His love of animals which are not domesticated!

Jonah 4:11

Jonah 4:11 (NIV - Anglicised)

¹¹ But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, **and many cattle as well**. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”

The glory of our hope

Revelation 21-22

New Jerusalem

New garden of Eden – Rev 22:1-2

3. Practical action

National and international

Resources in handout to consider

Global warming is a very significant issue

John Ray Initiative – John Houghton a member of the IPCC and
Christian – explain background to recent doubts

Local

Tidying up the nature reserve – excellent

What about our building? – Carbon neutral?

- Need a group who will work on this – volunteers please!!!

Personal

Recycling

Local produce – air miles

Carbon offset schemes

4. Why Christians should be uniquely equipped to make a difference

“Work it and take care of it” – Gen 2:15

Lynn White “The Historic Roots of our Ecologic Crisis” 1967

"christianity bears a huge burden of guilt."

"we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian
axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."

Historically overstated

However some have overplayed “dominion theology” –
environment there for us to use

Theologically wrong

Management and protection at the heart of our mandate

“Love your neighbour as yourself” Luke 10:27

The parable of the Good Samaritan

Shamed that others were more neighbour loving than them

- Copenhagen summit – failure of wealthy nations to “love their neighbour”
- It is possible to stand aside from that and – reduce our carbon footprint!

“Be on your guard against all kinds of greed” Luke 12:15

Western greed drives so much environmental destruction

- Live modestly
 - Would Jesus say it was greedy to demand mange tout peas from Kenya in winter – air fuel

“Thinking he was the gardener” John 20:15

The risen Jesus

Why “the gardener?”

John sophisticated writer – many suggest he wants to present the risen Jesus as a new Adam.

Our calling is to be conformed to the likeness of Christ

- What if we had the reputation of being like Jesus in every respect?
 - Hated as much as Jesus for our straight speaking about sin, repentance, the gospel, heaven and hell
 - Reviled as much as Jesus because we chose the humble path
 - Respected as much as Jesus because of the quality of our lives
 - Our relationships
 - Our integrity
 - Our simple lifestyle
 - Our sacrificial love for others
 - Our passionate commitment to “work the garden and guard it”
- Jesus sent a whole nation into turmoil
- The early disciples turned the whole world upside down
- What about us?