

**HOW FAR DO YOU THINK THAT BIBLICAL TEACHING IS RELEVANT TO
MODERN ECOLOGICAL PROBLEMS AND CONCERNS?**

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Introduction

The world is facing a significant set of linked ecological challenges; these include pollution, leading to “global warming”, over-use of resources, deforestation and destruction of nature, and population growth outstripping ability to grow food (Stott 1999). Often Christians are accused of being “responsible” for these problems owing to the commands given in Genesis. We argue that this assertion relies on a misinterpretation of the overall message of Genesis, which combined with other Old Testament texts suggests God has care for nature, and mandates man to be a steward. Emulation of God or following his explicit commands imply a Christian duty to care for his creation. It was the fall that led to sinful destruction and deterioration of nature itself. The New Testament goes further, and suggests an active role for Christians in redemption of nature. Note that this is all the more surprising since many of the ecological challenges we face today were not significant issues in biblical times.

1 A mandate to destroy or to conserve?

It is repeated many times in Genesis 1 that what God has created “is good”. The argument that man was bidden by God to dominate the earth is often based on Genesis 1:26-28; “Then God said "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea.....God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it". Even in this passage the meaning of “rule” and “subdue” is open to discussion. If man is in God’s image, he will behave in the way God has modelled already in his benevolent creation, i.e. being trustworthy and responsible. Kingly rule in the Hebrew tradition was as a servant before God and not a tyrant (Atkinson 1994).

Genesis 2:15 is more explicit about man’s responsibilities “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” is quite explicit that mankind is to be a steward. Compare Psalm 24:1 “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it...”; God is creator and remains owner of the earth, and not man. And God sustains it as stated in Psalm 65:9 “You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain,” A steward would not overuse resources, pollute or destroy nature, but keep the planet available for future generations. He would not view nature as merely to serve man.

2 Effects of the fall

The fall has an effect on nature itself, see Genesis 3:17-18 "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field." It can be argued that a great deal of the errors of mankind spring from the fall and disobedience to God’s commands. Hosea links sin directly to ecological disaster in 4:2-3 “There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery....because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying.”

Sinners are warned against their ecological sins in Revelation 11:18; “The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants.... - and for destroying those who destroy the earth.” Another effect of the fall is idolatry, worshipping objects rather than the creator (see for example Isaiah 44:16-17 “Half of the wood he burns in the fire;...from the rest he makes a god, his idol”);. In this context, scripture warns explicitly against deifying nature itself rather than its creator, as in Romans 1:25 “Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal men, and birds and animals and reptiles...they exchanged the truth of God for a lie,

and worshipped and served the creation more than the Creator.” The passage also reminds us that perceived neglect of ecology by Christians is stimulating growth of “New Age” religion which worships nature.

3 Care for animals

Scripture gives no excuse for “destroying the earth” or nature. God’s care for His creation is evident well beyond the creation-event itself. If we are stewards in God’s image it implies a number of ecological lessons. One is care for animals. Psalm 104 is explicit that God provides for his creatures “He makes springs pour water into the ravines.....they give water to all the beasts of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. The birds of the air nest by the waters; they sing among the branches. . . . He makes grass to grow for the cattle, .”. And also Jesus himself points out in Luke 12:6 “ Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God”. The implication is that we must also care for wild creatures and their environment.

Mankind is explicitly bidden to be kind to animals in for example Proverbs 12:10 “A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel” and Exodus 20:10 “The seventh day is the Sabbath to the Lord your God: on it you shall not do any work . . . nor your animals”. One could construe these as cautioning against practices in intensive farming such as veal crates, long distance transport of live animals and battery hens, as well as extinction of species due to hunting or destruction of habitats. A wider conservation theme may be indicated by 1 Timothy 4:4-5 “For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it be received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer”. A corollary is in our view the risks posed by genetic engineering. Mankind oversteps the mark when acting as creator and not steward.

4 Care for the earth

God also cares for the earth itself as in Isaiah 40:12 “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?” In Job 38:26-27 it is God who makes the earth fertile “Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain and a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no man lives a desert with no one in it, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass?” Note that Job 38 and 39 are rhetorical questions, which aim to show Job his powerlessness before God. They do not assume that man would seek to “change nature” in the disastrous ways that he has, such as irrigation schemes and dams which often have unintended negative effects for the environment.

Meanwhile in Leviticus 25:3-4 the earth itself is to have a Sabbath rest “For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather your crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a Sabbath of rest, a Sabbath to the Lord.” This is clearly contrary to over farming and creation of dustbowls.

5 Sustainable development?

The Bible does not teach that mankind is forbidden to use nature. The use of animals and plants for food is explicit, although it is notable that in the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve appear to be vegetarians 1:29 "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth, and every tree that has fruit with seed in it, they will be yours for food." Abraham eats

meat and serves a choice calf to the Lord himself (Genesis 18:1,7-8), while Jesus eats the Passover lamb (Luke 22:1).

Animals were also used, with God's approval, for transportation (Jesus rode into Jerusalem on an ass's colt, for example), to serve as beasts of burden, and as sacrifices for sin. Trees were felled for construction (such as cedars of Lebanon for the temple, 1 Kings 5:10) and for firewood. Designated areas (e.g., the valley of Hinnom) were used for refuse disposal. Jesus himself proclaimed that "Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be thrown into the fire (Matthew 7:19). These passages imply that stewardship permits sustainable and circumscribed activity of man in nature.

6 Redemption of nature now or in the future?

The implication of the teachings and resurrection of Jesus are that the creation as well as man will be redeemed, as set out in Romans 8:19-21 "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God". To some extent this is looking ahead to the new creation as foreshadowed also in 2 Peter 3:13 "In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" but it can be argued that it is also a mandate for Christians today to nurture God's creation.

Jesus is himself the creator, which puts an additional emphasis on these lessons for Christians (Colossians 1:15-17) "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, for by Him all things were created....and in Him all things hold together". It is his creation that we can mar or nurture.

Indeed, with this as background one can link the message of several of Jesus' parables which focused on "the master's return" that he would punish not only exploitation of mankind but also of nature. See Matthew 24:45-50 "'Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time?...suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards..... He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'" This passage is of particular importance since it highlights that it is man's thoughtlessness amid growing wealth which is the main cause of environmental ills such as global warming, where rich people produce many times more carbon dioxide than do poor ones.

7 Population growth

Indeed, it can be argued that the above discussion deals with the majority of the issues identified in the introduction, namely "global warming", over-use of resources, deforestation and destruction of nature. We consider the to be the main ecological problems and concerns of t today. It remains to assess briefly a Christian view of population growth, which is also at the root of some of the other challenges.

As Genesis states, mankind was mandated to "fill the earth and subdue it". However, "fill" need not imply overpopulation but a sustainable situation; the mandate to be stewards of the earth and serve God in marriage (1 Cor 7) would encourage restraint in having children so that they may have nurture, attention and appropriate resources. Equally, if overpopulation is

partly the reason for the other environmental difficulties we need to resolve, there will be a need to concern ourselves with it.

One explanation for the surge in population last century is that medical advances took place while people remained in the mind-set that few children would survive, and equally that children were vital to care for individuals in their old age. The dramatic falls in birth rates as countries become wealthier show an adjustment to the change in circumstances where infant mortality is much lower and pension schemes can help to provide for people in their old age separately from their children. The falls also tend to coincide with emancipation and better education of women. In this sense, a hopeful view is to see God's purposes being worked through these changes, implying populations will level off, with mankind filling the world without destroying it. In Europe and Japan population is even set to fall.

There remain important issues as to whether artificial means of birth control are permitted for Christians, also for population control. The Catholic Church remains of the view that all means of birth control are unacceptable. According to Atkinson et al (1995) this is largely due to the teaching of Augustine, that even within marriage contraception introduces elements of corruption and prostitution. One passage that could justify this point of view is God's concern with those not yet conceived as in Jeremiah 1:5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

Meanwhile Protestants consider at least that "barrier" means of contraception could be permitted, while agreeing that abortion remains anathema, except when the woman's life is threatened. The consciousness of John the Baptist that Jesus was close in Luke 1:41 could be cited as against abortion of the foetus. We agree with the Protestant view, noting also that self-restraint, use of barriers and adoption by the childless are all feasible alternatives to abortion.

Conclusion

Scripture provides a sound basis for conservation, sustainable development and action against pollution. This is true both of the Old Testament and, particularly, the New, where the advent of Christ the creator foreshadows the new earth, where creation will be remade, but also mandates us to nurture creation, thus working towards it on this earth. Views that Christians have duties to despoil the planet are based on a misunderstanding and partial view of certain texts in Genesis. We note that for the most part the environmental ills are due to wealth and greed rather than overpopulation. Nevertheless, the latter cannot be entirely disregarded, and important debates which rage in this area. Besides being of benefit to the environment per se, a better focus of Christians on ecology would also help to counter the false religions of the New Age (featuring worship of nature) that have become so pervasive.

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