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SHOULD CHRISTIANS BE ENVIRONMENTALISTS?

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Environmentalist: a person who is concerned with or advocates the protection of the environment (The New Oxford American Dictionary)

SYNOPSIS

Since the beginning of the modern environmental movement, secular environmentalists have claimed that historic Christianity is largely responsible for today's environmental problems. The issue, however, is not what Christians think or how they behave, it's what the Bible teaches with regard to environmental stewardship. There are two relevant teachings in Scripture that establish a foundation for developing a theology of nature and environmental stewardship.

Although God gave the family of man the authority to "rule over" creation, Scripture reveals that nature and wildlife are valuable to God independent of humanity. Numerous biblical passages reveal God's provision and care for wildlife and His concern for the treatment of domesticated animals. He preserved rather than recreated animal life to repopulate the Earth after the flood. God made covenants after the flood and for the eschatological future that included nature and wildlife. He instructed the Israelites to use ecologically sensitive practices in farming and waste removal.

If God loves, finds joy in, and cares for nature—and did not give people carte blanche to use it solely for human consumption and comfort—what does Genesis 1:28 mean when it instructs mankind to "subdue" the Earth and to "have dominion" over "every living thing" (KJV)? It means stewardship. A careful study of relevant passages reveals that God charged the entire human race with the responsibility to be His caretakers over creation.

Christian environmental activism can provide tremendous evangelistic opportunities. This is especially true among young people and college students, who are generally more sensitive to environmental problems than most Americans—and tend to be unchurched.

Since the early 1960s, secular environmentalists have claimed that historic Christianity, as a world and life view, is largely responsible for today's environmental problems.¹ In particular, they claim Genesis 1:28 grants the human race full authority to exploit and abuse nature with little regard for other life forms and natural objects. Unfortunately, many Christians have reinforced this perception by their apathy toward environmental issues and assumption that "environmentalism" is the agenda of political liberalism.

I've had several recent conversations with a Christian friend over various environmental issues that illustrate this. His response is always predictable: disdain. He is so programmed by the antienvironmental party line that any alleged environmental problem is merely a fabrication of the liberal imagination. To him all environmentalists are far-left, tree-hugging radicals who oppose any economic development that may even slightly damage nature or threaten wildlife. And that's all there is to it.

It is true that there *are* overzealous environmental advocates and laws that defy common sense—in fact some are patently absurd. A case in point was reported in a San Diego newspaper. Apparently, the city of Encinitas, north of San Diego, wanted to obtain a permit to transport sand from a construction project to one of the city's narrow beaches—not an unreasonable request. But the project required approval from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California State Lands Commission, California Coastal Commission, two other state departments, and the San Diego Association of Governments—a total of eight separate agencies!² It's no wonder practical-minded people sometimes get frustrated with governmental bureaucracies and vent their anger against environmentalists.

During one of our last discussions, I asked my friend this question: "What if God *told us* to take care of nature?" In other words, what if God instructed the human race to protect and manage wildlife, as well as forests, rivers, the land, and air? A simple and straightforward question—but one he refused to answer. The reason was obvious. If my friend admitted that God instructed mankind to care for and manage His creation, his attitude toward environmental activism would have to be reevaluated in light of biblical truth. That was something he was unwilling to do. If God instructed the human race to care for creation—who can argue against that? The task should become: how to do it.

There are two relevant teachings in Scripture that establish a foundation for developing a theology of nature and environmental stewardship:

1. GOD VALUES NATURE INDEPENDENT OF (BUT NEVER ABOVE) PEOPLE

God had the human race in mind when He created Earth (Ps. 115:16). People have an exalted position in creation (Matt. 6:26; 10:31; 12:11–12), and are of greater value to God than animals (Luke 12:7, 24). Moreover, nature is to provide for human needs (Gen. 1:29; 9:3), and the family of man has a right to use it and the authority to "rule" over it (Gen. 1:28).³

Nevertheless, throughout the Bible, from Genesis 1 (*all* creation is “very good” — v. 31) through Revelation (“The time has come...for destroying those who destroy the earth” — Rev. 11:18), Scripture reveals that nature and wildlife are valuable to God *independent* of (but not above) humanity. It does *not* teach that God created the Earth solely for human consumption and comfort. Nor does the Bible give people permission to exploit nature or abuse the creatures with which we share the planet. They don’t belong to us; they belong to God: “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Ps. 24:1).

The biblical fact is that God loves, provides for, and has great concern for the welfare of nature. He created a world designed to support animal life apart from humanity. Before the first creatures were spoken into existence, God created vegetation to produce “plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds” (Gen. 1:12). Thus, food and shelter were available when animal life began to inhabit the Earth (Gen. 1:30). After their creation, God charged the sea life, the birds of the air, and land-dwelling “livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals” to multiply and fill the seas and cover the Earth (Gen. 1:20–25). He gave rain “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” (Job 38:26–27).

Prior to the worldwide flood, God took great care to save both wild and domesticated animals by placing them in the ark with Noah and his family (Gen. 6:19–7:3). God didn’t recreate animal life after the flood—He preserved it. Later, when the floodwaters had receded and the animals were released to repopulate the Earth (Gen. 8:17–18), God made a covenant that included *all* animal life: “Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ‘I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that is with you—the birds, the livestock, and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth’” (Gen. 9:8–11).

The prophet Hosea spoke of another covenant that would occur in the distant, eschatological future, which will also include animals: “In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the creatures that move along the ground. Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land, so that all may lie down in safety” (Hos. 2:18).

Throughout the Bible, animals have more than incidental roles in the affairs of people. Part of King Solomon’s wisdom was that “he described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish” (1 Kings 4:33). Job tells his accusers that people can learn from animals (12:7). Sometimes God used animals for specific and unusual purposes. When God instructed the prophet Elijah to go into hiding, He used ravens to bring him food (1 Kings 17:1–5). God used a great fish to save Jonah’s life (Jon. 1:17) and a small

fish to provide the money for Jesus and Peter to pay the temple tax (Matt. 17:24–27). Animals even accompanied Jesus during His temptation in the wilderness (Mark 1:13). And, strangest of all, in the account of Balaam and his donkey, it was the donkey—not Balaam—that saw the angel sent to prevent Balaam from doing evil (Num. 22).

God further demonstrated His love and care for animals—alongside His love and care for people—in the Sabbath year instructions given to the Israelites: “For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it and the *wild animals* may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove” (Exod. 23:10–11, emphasis added; cf. Lev. 25:1–7).

Elsewhere Moses stated, “If you come across a bird’s nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young. You may take the young, but be sure to let the mother go” (Deut. 22:6). Here we see instructions to preserve breeding populations of animals harvested for human consumption. Had this injunction been followed throughout human history, there would be fewer endangered species today.

God is equally concerned that people treat domesticated animals humanely. This is expressed in Proverbs 12:10: “A righteous man cares for the need of his animals.” Similarly, Moses wrote, “Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest” (Exod. 23:12). Elsewhere Moses wrote, “If you see your brother’s donkey or his ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it. Help him get it to its feet” (Deut. 22:4); “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain” (i.e., allow it to eat some of the grain; Deut. 25:4). Even the Ten Commandments have a provision to care for domesticated animals: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, *nor your animals*” (Exod. 20:9–10, emphasis added).

A fascinating, but less familiar, example of God’s concern for domesticated animals is found in Jonah. After the prophet warned the Ninevites that they would be destroyed in forty days unless they repented, the king of Nineveh decreed that not only the people, but domestic animals fast and be covered with sackcloth (Jonah 3:7–8). Later, after the Ninevites repented, God conversed with Jonah (who was still angry because the hated Assyrians were spared) and revealed His compassion not only for the people, but for the animals: “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” (4:11)? God requires humane treatment for wild and domesticated animals.

Nowhere does the Bible communicate God’s love and joy for nature more beautifully, passionately, and poetically than Psalm 104. It recounts how God carefully prepared nature to support plant and animal life. It speaks of forest animals and sea life, of wild donkeys and wild goats, of birds, cattle, hyraxes, and lions. Psalm 104 reveals that all of these creatures depend on God for food and shelter—indeed, for the very breath of life:

He makes springs pour water into the ravines;
it flows between the mountains.
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....
The trees of the LORD are well watered,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
There the birds make their nests;
the stork has its home in the pine trees.
The high mountains belong to the wild goats;
the crags are a refuge for the coney [hyraxes]....
You bring darkness, it becomes night,
and all the beasts of the forest prowl.
The lions roar for their prey
and seek their food from God....
How many are your works, O LORD!
In wisdom you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
There is the sea, vast and spacious,
teeming with creatures beyond number—
living things both large and small....
These all look to you
to give their food at the proper time.
When you give it to them,
they gather it up;
when you open your hand,
they are satisfied with good things.
When you hide your face,
they are terrified;
when you take away their breath,
they die and return to the dust.
When you send your Spirit,
they are created,
and you renew the face of the earth.
(vv. 10–12; 16–18; 20–21; 24–25; 27–30)

Why does God express such heartfelt and earnest concern for nonhuman life? Because He values nature and the animals He created—and He derives immense joy from them: “For every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine” (Ps. 50:10–11).

2. GOD GAVE HUMANS STEWARDSHIP RESPONSIBILITIES OVER CREATION

If God loves, finds joy in, and cares for nature—and did not give people *carte blanche* to use it solely for human consumption and comfort—what does Genesis 1:28 mean when it instructs mankind to “subdue” the Earth and to “have dominion” over “every living thing” (KJV)? It means stewardship. Nature and nonhuman life belong to God (Ps. 24:1), but He gave the entire human race the responsibility to be His caretakers over creation.

In terms of purely *physical* creation, human beings are no different than other animals; we also depend on a healthy physical environment in order to survive. God said to Job, “Look at the Behemoth, which I made along with you” (Job 40:15). Likewise, Solomon wrote, “Man’s [his physical body] fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal....All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return” (Eccl. 3:19–20).

This is only half the biblical story, however. As we saw, the Bible also reveals that people have an exalted position in creation. We are the “crown” of God’s creation, the culmination of the creation week (Ps. 8:4–6). In order to understand the relationship that exists between people and the rest of created life, it must be understood that the human race has a dual position in nature. Although *Homo sapiens* are one of countless millions of created life forms, we are unique and special to God (Ps. 139:13–16). Only people were created in His image (Gen. 1:26–27).

Being created in the divine image is to be endowed with responsibilities. This truth is important to understand in terms of developing a theology of nature. God ordained mankind to be stewards over nature and nonhuman life; we are to have the same loving concern for nature that God does. We are to care for it, protect it, maintain it, nurture it, and even, in a sense, “save” it (e.g., from exploitation and abuse).

Before we explore biblical stewardship, we need to examine a controversial passage in Genesis. It *appears* to contradict my assertion that God has *not* given the human race *carte blanche* to use nature as they choose without any regard for other created life. Critics almost universally use this passage to support their claim that the Bible promotes an exploitive attitude toward nature. I’m referring to Genesis 1:27–28, especially as it’s worded in the *Authorized King James Version*: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

What, exactly, does the Bible mean when it exhorts the human race to “subdue” the Earth and to have “dominion” over nature? Does this passage allow—even encourage—people to misuse nature if it benefits humanity? No, it doesn’t.

The closest related passages to Genesis 1:27–28 are found in Genesis chapter 2. This chapter provides additional details about the creation of the first man and woman

and the physical environment in which they lived. We'll examine the passages in Genesis 2 that are related to Genesis 1:27–28.

The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed (2:7–8).

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (2:15).

So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man (2:21–22).

Genesis 2:7–8 relates that God created a garden in Eden and placed Adam, the first man, in it. Genesis 2:15 adds that Adam was instructed to “take care of” the garden. Only later, after these events occurred, did God create Eve, the first woman (21–22). In light of this chronology, it's important to understand that God's instructions to subdue” the Earth and to have “dominion” over nature was given *after* Eve was created and while the couple was living in the garden of Eden. How do we know this? The so-called dominion instructions were given to *both* Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:27–28). Thus, since Eve was created after Adam was placed in the garden—and before their banishment from Eden (chap. 3)—the “subdue” and “dominion” instructions had to have been given while the couple resided in the garden.

Why is this important? Because the harsh-sounding words “subdue” and “dominion” in Genesis 1:28 are softened and qualified due to the garden setting where the instructions were given. The natural environment in which Adam and Eve lived before the Fall was a paradise. It was free of thorns, thistles, and ferocious animals. It's preposterous to think that the injunction to subdue the Earth and to have dominion over nature had anything to do with battling and destroying nature. There was nothing to conquer in the garden of Eden! Fulfilling Adam and Eve's nutritional and other physical needs in the garden would not have necessitated toil and hardship. The couple could effortlessly select their food from the abundant plant life surrounding them (Gen. 2:9, 16). They didn't even have to water the garden (v. 10). Whatever “subdue” and “dominion” mean in Genesis 1:28, they do not carry a despotic connotation or suggest the freedom to exploit nature.

Dominion in the sense of absolute authority is only the prerogative of God—whether it concerns nature or anything else. The words “subdue” and “dominion” imply that people have a *stewardship* or caretaker's role over nature. People are custodians; they do not own the Earth.

The Bible illustrates the concept of biblical stewardship in several places. Perhaps the best illustration is found in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30). This parable speaks about a man who went on a long journey and entrusted his possessions to his slaves. He gave “talents” (large sums of money) to three of his slaves (vv. 14–15). When

the master returned, he confronted the slaves to see how well they invested his money. Two of the slaves doubled the amount entrusted to them and were rewarded for their faithfulness. But the third slave failed to use his talent wisely and was severely punished.

In like manner, nature belongs to God—but He appointed the human race to be His stewards. Our responsibility is to care for the owner's (God's) property (cf. Lev. 25:23). And like the slaves in the parable of the talents, people will be held accountable for how well they perform this task that the Master entrusted to them.

This model of stewardship comes to life in Genesis 2:15: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." The Hebrew word in this passage for "work" is *abad*, which is most often translated as "serve," though it may also be translated "cultivate." Likewise, the Hebrew word for "take care of it" is *shamar*, a word that implies watching over something, guarding and preserving it. The Hebrew meaning of these two words clearly instructs the first couple to watch over and tend the garden. Neither usage allows for plunder, exploitation, or abuse.

Adam's caretaker role in nature was further illustrated when God instructed him to name the animals in Genesis 2:19. By relegating this authority to Adam, God not only demonstrated His personal interest in, and concern for, the animals He created, but also His desire for Adam to take responsibility for them. (By analogy, when people name their pets, they demonstrate their affection and assume the responsibility to take care of them.)

A similar stewardship role was later given to Noah. God commanded Noah to preserve in the ark a genetic stock of two of *every* kind of living creature (Gen. 6:19). This command was not qualified, so it must have included so-called "vermin" and predators. Thus, Noah's stewardship responsibilities included all creatures, not just those that serve and are profitable to people.

God's stewardship charge continued with the rise of the Jewish nation. Thousands of years before modern environmental laws, God required the Hebrews to curb pollution by properly disposing waste products (Deut. 23:12–13) and to avoid sowing their fields every seventh year in order to restore the soil (Lev. 25:2–5). (This was also to allow poor people and *wild animals* to eat what was left—see Exodus 23:11.) God also taught the Hebrews not to eat the fruit of newly planted trees for five years until the trees had time to mature (Lev. 19:23–25). During the conquest of Canaan, God instructed the Israelites to use only nonfruit trees to construct their siege machines: "Are the trees of the field people, that you should besiege them?" (Deut. 20:19).

God's divine command for Adam to tend and care for the garden of Eden; Noah to preserve and care for the animals God would use to repopulate the Earth; and the Israelites to be careful stewards of the land God provided them can be extrapolated to include the entire human race and *today's* natural world. Nowhere does the Bible teach that God's edict to care for nature was limited to just Adam in the garden or to Noah and the Israelites. The entire human race receives the stewardship mandate.

The doctrine of stewardship—applied to nature and harmonized with the correct biblical meaning of subdue and dominion—acknowledges that nature is God's property

and that He delegated a caretaker's role to humanity. A steward does not own what he or she protects. With this responsibility comes accountability. As the parable of the talents illustrates, we will be rewarded if we perform our stewardship role well—and can expect punishment if we don't. Church historian and theologian Geoffrey Bromiley put it like this: God "will have words of commendation for those who work for the integrity of creation and words of rebuke for those who abuse his handiwork to selfish or wicked ends."⁴

Unfortunately, the human race has failed to take its stewardship responsibilities over nature seriously—and we see the consequences of this everywhere across the globe: the extinction of thousands of plant and animal species; huge tracts of the Earth spoiled and contaminated; air and water pollution; loss of scenic rivers, forests, wetlands, and other irreplaceable wild habitats. The Bible teaches that God will hold mankind accountable for this disastrous irresponsibility. Revelation gives a grim warning of the fate of rebellious humanity that includes punishing people who "destroy the earth":

"The nations were angry;
and your wrath has come.
The time has come for judging the dead,
and for rewarding your servants the
prophets
and your saints and those who reverence
your name,
both small and great—
*and for destroying those who destroy the
earth.*" (Rev. 11:18, emphasis added)

Commenting on this passage, Bible expositor Warren Wiersbe explained:

Sinful man has polluted and destroyed God's wonderful creation; and he is going to pay for it....Creation is for God's praise and pleasure, and man has no right to usurp that which rightfully belongs to God....

"[Those who] destroy the earth" refers to the rebellious earth-dwellers who will not submit to God. How ironic that these people live for the earth and its pleasures, yet at the same time are destroying the very earth that they worship! When man forgets that God is the Creator and he is the creature, he begins to exploit his God-given resources, and this brings destruction. Man is a steward of creation, not the owner.⁵

The mindset that all environmentalists are liberal radicals not only hinders real progress in identifying and formulating strategies to combat potentially serious environmental problems, but it gives Christianity an ecological black eye—and compromises what could be tremendous evangelistic opportunities. Christian environmental activism can have great appeal to secular and New Age unbelievers who

think Christians are apathetic to environmental issues and who think non-Christian religions are better suited to formulate environmental ethics and stewardship guidelines. This is particularly true among young people and college students—who are generally more sensitive to environmental problems than most Americans and, at the same time, tend to be unchurched.

If we love God, we should make every effort to honor and protect what He considers important and valuable. So go outdoors and give tribute to God by being a good steward over His creation. This can be a special delight to Christians because we know personally the Author of all things wild and beautiful.

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NOTES

- 1 One of the first and most well-known and widely quoted advocates of this theory was the late historian, Lynn White, Jr. In an address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1966, White presented his thesis that the historical source of the present “ecological crisis” was Western culture’s Judeo-Christian traditions, in particular its doctrine of creation. His influential lecture was later published: Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science*, March 10, 1967. This article has since been reprinted and anthologized numerous times in scholarly journals and popular publications.
- 2 “Sand Gift Will Help Replenish Beaches,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 9, 2009, B-1.
- 3 All Bible quotations are from the New International Version, except where otherwise noted.
- 4 Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “Eschatology: The Meaning of the End,” in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 82.
- 5 Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: An Exposition of the New Testament Comprising the Entire “BE” Series*, vol. 2 (Colorado Springs: Victor Books, 1989), 584, 601.