

Why Should Christians Care for Creation?

When I was a young boy I lived near an elementary school which stood adjacent to a community park. This park was something of a paradise for me, a personal Garden of Eden where I could play my favorite sports among my favorite friends. I was not a three sport star but I was definitely a three sport enthusiast. The summer time was the season of baseball, the fall was for football while the winter hosted basketball games in an old stone gymnasium that would have fit in well with the movie Hoosiers. The games were both scheduled with official teams as well as unscheduled with old-fashioned picking teams among those who voluntarily showed up to play. To this day I believe those pickup games did more to foster important people skills, conflict resolution and emotional resilience.

To get to this athletic paradise I had to walk through a small forest of human-created trails and a kaleidoscope of vegetation—soaring oak trees, colorful maples and southern pines standing straight like soldiers. There were many winding paths that would take me to different locations for different sports. Walking through those woods was sort of like walking through an extended enchanted gateway, taking me to this kingdom of youthful recreation. Parts of me would like to look back on that walk and reflect on the appreciation I had for God's natural world. How spiritual and Thoreau-like it would be to say I wandered in the woods for the sake of wandering and wondering. I was admittedly too young and eager to play a game to merely sit under a tree and meditate. Prayers of praise directed to the Creator or silent moments of mystical contemplation were absent in this journey toward paradise.

In retrospect those woods were a microcosm of the larger human posture towards God's creation. They were merely a means to an end and the end was my personal pleasure. Certainly there was some kind of unconscious sense of peace that walked with me through this gateway, but it was submerged in the greater desire to hit a ball or shoot a basket or make a tackle. I really didn't understand any call of stewardship of the forest or any kind of responsibility for its own future. I wasn't a tree hugger. I simply wanted to grab my Louisville slugger and feel the crack of the bat reverberating through my hands and up through my arms.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “*When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me*” (1 Cor. 13:11). Paul is confessing a universal aspect of childhood that need not be lamented or praised. To use the modern vernacular, “It is what it is.” It’s the nature of childhood to float along without reflecting what is underneath everyday existence. But now that I’m an adult and have access to the world’s scientific findings, a different responsibility resides with me. Now I understand those woods leading to the park are part of the larger call on humanity, and my life, to care for creation. It was a gift for me, regardless of my acknowledgement of it at the time. But it was (and is) also a responsibility that I have, just as raising my children was a responsibility when they were under my roof years ago.

The Apology

Why is that? What is the basis for this claim that I have a responsibility to care for creation? I want to give three compelling reasons why we are called to care for creation. I will call them three voices calling us to care for God’s creation:

The voice of creation itself

The voice of Holy Scripture

The voice of Jesus

For those more theologically minded human beings, we could call them

Natural theology

Biblical theology

Christology

I. The Voice of creation - Natural Theology

Let me begin with the voice of creation itself. The earth having a voice is a frequent teaching in the Psalms and Prophets. We are informed in Scripture the earth offers praise to God and gives laments to God. The earth celebrates and mourns. Listen to Psalm 19

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
2 Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
3 They have no speech, they use no words;*

*no sound is heard from them.
4 Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.*

The creation didn't start speaking when David picked up his pen or instructed his scribe to pen this psalm. Day after day the creation is speaking, without words as we know them, but still, they are speaking so that the whole world can understand them. Regardless of what language is spoken in a certain region, regardless of what religion is practiced, regardless of what the cultural context is, the creation is speaking. So the question arises, "Are we listening?" Are we listening to what God's creation is saying to us?

Later when Jeremiah was pronouncing the judgments of God on the people of Israel he declared: "*Therefore the earth will mourn and the heavens above grow dark*" (Jer 4:28). The people of God had been unfaithful and abandoned the teachings of God. The creation was witness to this unfaithfulness and mourned and grew dark in its depressed state.

And what about Job, the man God described as "blameless and upright." There was not another man on earth like him. Yet, when tragedy struck him his friends bombarded him with unhelpful and mostly untrue rebukes. He responded by saying, "*But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you.*" (Job 12:7-8). Were these the words of a man grasping for straws when losing a debate? Absolutely not. Job, the protagonist of the story is portrayed as filled with wisdom in the midst of his suffering. So perhaps we should spend a little more time listening to the animals that walk among us, the birds that fly above us, and the fish who swim around our feet in the sea. They can teach us something about God, his existence and his truth.

In the Apostle Paul's magnum opus, his great letter to the Romans he wrote: "*We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*" (Rom 8:22) Paul was acknowledging that even the creation was groaning, like a woman in labor delivering her child. We don't need to dissect all that Paul was teaching final justice of God to hear what he is saying about creation. The creation is not an inanimate object with no feelings, no life, no capacity for rejoicing or crying out in anguish. The earth has a voice and

those who will listen can hear it rejoice when there is reason to rejoice and mourn when there is reason to mourn.

The great theologians of the church called this natural theology. Nature itself bears witness to God. We don't need a Bible to know something about the glory of God. Nature itself communicates truth about God. Even Jesus communicated this truth when he came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The crowds were praising God for his entrance and chanting, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." This declaration of Jesus as the King of Israel and the Son of David bothered the Pharisees, who were easily bothered by Jesus. They told Jesus to have the people stop this false praise. And Jesus said, *"Even if they are quiet, these stones will cry out."* Scholars have spilled gallons of ink to speculate what those stones would say, but this much is clear. Jesus declared the stones could speak and they would speak if necessary. Creation has a voice.

So if creation has a voice as many of us have experienced and "heard" on our walks in nature, what is creation saying? Of course there are those who can see and hear what creation is saying without the aid of science. St. Francis had an ear for the voices of nature. There are people who walk among us who have a similar sense of things. These people are hearing much of what the scientists are telling us with their special tools. Both are hearing the earth say:

1. I'm hot and getting hotter.

According to NASA, the earth has warmed up about 1.5 degrees Fahrenheit since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in 1880. Two-thirds of that warming has occurred since 1975. This may not seem like much if we were to confine it to our one little spot on earth. But if we spread this over the whole planet it's significant.

2. I'm wet and getting wetter.

According to the Royal Society the sea levels have risen about 8 inches since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Again, the rate of increase has accelerated over the past 30 years. This has happened as the sea ice in the Arctic zone has decreased by 40 percent since 1978 when it first began to be photographed from satellites. Eight inches may not

seem like that much, but over the course of the entire planet, it is one of the chief causes ocean storms like typhoons and hurricanes are increasingly severe.

3. I'm missing my trees

Forests cover about 31% of our planet, the Amazon rain forest alone is home to 100s of 1000s of species of plants and animals. Despite everything these forests do for the planet, they are being cut down at an alarming rate. Every year around 50 thousand square miles are lost due to deforestation, which is equal to losing 48 football fields a minute. Imagine losing all the football fields of the major football conferences in the NCAA in one minute. Do you think that would get someone's attention? I think about the loss of all these trees and the interconnectivity of trees, and I can hear an avalanche of mourning coming from the land.

I'm hot and getting hotter.

I'm wet and getting wetter.

I'm missing my trees.

That's part of what the creation is groaning about today. And we don't need to have a Bible to hear it. We only need to pay attention to what nature itself is saying.

II. The Voice of Holy Scripture : Biblical Theology

Natural theology calls us to care for creation, but so does the Bible. This call to care for creation happens from the very beginning of creation. In Genesis 1 we have the beautifully poetic creation scene in which God has made the entire world in six days. He imagines a universe and his voice thunders with a "Big Bang" to ignite it into a existence. He fashions a planet where the land is separate from the sky and the seas are poured into place. Vegetation is planted and spreads across the soils. Creature emerge in the sea, then on the land. In a final burst of creative energy God creates man and woman in his own image. In a conversation with his Trinitarian Self God said, *"Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all*

the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” (Gen 1:26)

Obviously, a key question here is “What is the meaning of dominion?” The

Word dominion comes from the Hebrew word *radah*, which means “to rule or have dominion over.” It must be a loaded powerful word because the next time the word is used in the Old Testament is in Leviticus in a passage about how Israelites are to treat their fellow Israelites who are so poor they must sell themselves into slavery. When a fellow Israelite becomes their slave the warning is given, “*Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear God*” (Lev. 25:43). The word, according to Strong’s Concordance, is used 27 times in the Old Testament, very often as a warning. In fact, the very last time the word is used in the Old Testament is in the prophecy of Ezekiel when God is indicting the pastoral leadership of Israel. “*Woe to your shepherds who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock.*” The diatribe continues on and then God says, “*You have ruled them harshly and brutally.*” (Ezek. 34:1-14).

Clearly this idea of dominion is powerful. Those who have dominion have the capacity to rule, to dominate, to subjugate and to tread on ruthlessly. So we can see that God has given humankind a very potent capacity that can be used for good or ill. It is a force to be reckoned with. The Ezekiel prophecy sent a chill down my spine because it speaks to how we too often treat the earth. We take for ourselves without thought of serving and giving back to the earth. The shepherds of Israel had gotten the dominion thing backwards - they were seeking to be served by the people rather than serving the people. They were taking the best of the milk, the best of the wool, the best of the animals without a thought of those they ruled over. They had moved from ruling to exploiting for their own gain and pleasure.

What did God have in mind when he created humankind with the power to rule over every living thing? Perhaps the best way to get at the meaning of the word is to see how the story of Genesis unfolds as Adam and Eve are given further instruction on caring for the earth. After God had taken formed man from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, the story tells us, “*The Lord God took the man and put*

him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” (Gen 2:15) Adam is given a job and it is related to the earth, the stuff from which he was made. He is to work this Garden and take care of it. The phrase “take care of it” translates the Hebrew word *shamar* which means “to keep watch over or maintain.” It’s like the night watchman protecting the property when the others have gone to bed. It’s a prolific word in the Old Testament, used more than 450 times. One of the most well-known usages is by Cain when the Lord asked where his brother is, after Cain had murdered him. Cain asks rhetorically, “I don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain was asking if he was responsible for the well-being of his brother, and assuming the answer was no. But he was wrong. There was a posture of care he was to take into relation with his brother. He had done the opposite, and consequently he would walk around marked by his violent abusive behavior for the rest of his life.

The creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2 combine to teach us we have been put in dominion over the earth to take care of it. We are like the soldier standing guard in front of the military compound in enemy territory. We are to keep our eyes open to any possible threat and respond with disciplined urgency. We recognize what we are guarding is precious and essential to life. For if the soldier standing guard doesn’t do his job, and the enemy sneaks by him, the entire future of the operation is at risk.

Or consider the metaphor of the gardener who tills the ground, plants seeds, keeps the weeds out so the harvest can be plentiful. The good gardener is not going to do anything to harm the soil or neglect the vegetables growing in their lines. He knows that exploitation of the soil for short-term gain is a recipe for long-term desolation. He knows what he can and cannot do, what he should and should not do to nurture the land for ongoing productivity.

What does all this mean? It means the Bible, from the outset, portrays humanity as caretakers of the earth. We have been given dominion over the earth at the dawn of creation for her benefit and ours, not just ours. We have a responsibility that the earth is protected from predators, profiteers and plunderers. The earth is our brother, not our enemy. The earth is our mother, not our mistress. The earth is our sister, not our stepchild. As we consider how we exercise our stewardship it is incumbent upon us not to ask, “How can I make money and avoid

exploiting the earth?” but rather, “How can I care for creation and still make a living?” It’s a very different question, but the times we live in call for us to ask questions the way Adam and Eve asked questions in the beginning.

III. The Voice of Jesus: Christology

As we consider how we, as Christians, are going to live on God’s earth we are challenged to listen to the voice of creation itself, the voice of Holy Scripture and finally, the voice of Jesus. In listening to his voice, I would ask that we listen not simply to admonitions he might make about WHAT we do to the earth, but WHY we ought to care for the earth. I’m asking that we connect the dots that are so prominently cast across the planet.

All scientific models reveal that climate change is going to impact the poor sooner and more severely than anyone else. In 2011 The National Association of Evangelicals endorsed a 29 page document entitled “Loving the Least of These: Addressing a Changing Environment.” It is based a judgment scene told by Jesus, *“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me”* (Mat. 25:40) The evangelical document highlighted four ways the poor are more affected by a climate change than the rest of the world. They are:

1. Impact of Disasters

The poor are more impacted by disasters than the rich because they don’t have buffers to deal with crop failures nor do they have insurance to recover from these disasters. Hurricane Dorian which devastated the Bahamas in 2019 is case in point. Many people think of the Bahamas as a tropical paradise where newlyweds take their honeymoons. It is the wealthy who can come and go from areas of devastation that look like war zones, whereas the poor have little choice but stay and scrounge for food or find new shelter. Most everyone had a fair warning the hurricane was coming, but only the wealthy had a means to leave.

2. Cost of Adaptation

The poor are trying to adapt to severe weather that is more erratic than ever. For example, the poor farmers in small villages in Nigeria feel compelled to plant seeds after strong rains, because they don’t know when rains will come again. Droughts have become more prevalent so

they plant when the ground is moist enough to germinate seeds. Inevitably, they plant more seeds that dry up or are washed away. They are trying to adapt and take greater risks in hopes of growing a crop. The rest of us only have to deal with higher and lower costs at the grocery stores. We are financially pinched because of paying more for vegetables. It's different for the poor. They aren't pinched. They are pummeled.

3. Displacement

I remember years ago traveling to Alburen, Honduras after Hurricane Mitch devastated this second most impoverished nation in the Western Hemisphere. In a four day period Honduras and Nicaragua were pummeled with 75 inches of rain which led to 11,000 fatalities. As I walked through the village, which lie in a valley surrounded by steep hillsides, it was gut-wrenching to see what happened. Small shanties made of sticks and man-made ropes had been built on the hillsides. They didn't build in the valley because this was the decent farmland which provided for their livelihood. You could see how the torrential rains had created massive mudslides on these mini-mountains. People's homes and lives were swept away like bugs down a drain. Some government aid and international benevolent organizations responded with aid, but they couldn't rebuild everyone's lives and couldn't bring back the dead. They were displaced and wouldn't readily or easily find homes again.

4. Diminished Resources

Another way the poor are more affected by severe weather is related to diminished resources. If you reflect on how wealthy nations respond to a threat to the international flow of oil and gas, you know this often leads to wars and rumors of wars. Oil is one thing, food and water another. On small Pacific islands or tiny sub-saharan farmlands in Africa, severe weather can wipe out resources essential for daily living. When those resources are gone, human nature and the instinct for survival kicks in. Local conflicts escalate, harmony exits and lives are lost. Even the U.S government has identified climate change as a national security threat as resources become more scarce around the world. The poor will be affected most and first, and thus Jesus' call to care for the "least of these."

In Jesus' judgment saying in Matthew 25 he names basic human needs which becomes a precursor for Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Jesus names food, water, hospitality, clothing, and health as elements we all need. We can't live the human experience without these basic needs being met. He goes on to declare if we see those needs in others and don't respond, we are denying him those same basic elements. When we don't give water to the thirsty it's like not giving water to Jesus. They couldn't claim to love Jesus and follow Jesus if they weren't willing to come to his aid. And the way they could come to his aid was to meet these basic needs in the people most desperately lacking them.

Jesus was asking his followers, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say "demanding" his followers connect the dots from human need to eternal reward and punishment. They needed to see their thirsty and hungry neighbor was really thirsty and hungry Jesus. Those who came to his aid would receive an eternal reward and those who ignored these desperate neighbors would receive eternal punishment. It's a big deal to Jesus how we treat the least of our neighbors.

Conclusion

We are living in an era of human history where we once again need to connect the dots. We've got to connect the dots from Jesus' love of the poor to our love of the poor. And one of the best ways to love the poor is to love the home God has given them. God's home for the poor is planet earth. They have no other place to go. So when we care for their home (which is our home too by the way), we are caring for them. And when we care for them we are caring for Jesus. You see the love of Jesus and the love of the poor and the love of creation all go together. It's a trinitarian community of love. So when anyone asks us why we are so committed to caring for creation we can say simply, "It's how I love Jesus and all the people he loves."

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