

Titanic – should I let it go down or not?

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Christians and the environment

In March 2005, an article in the ‘Sydney Morning Herald’ proclaimed: ‘A bulwark of the economy, consumer spending, and the needs of the environment are on a collision course and Australians will have to cut back on what they consume or face a growing mountain of rubbish, a new study warns.’¹

There is a battle going on in Australia: my lifestyle of consumerism is having drastic and irreparable effects on the environment. I try not to be a consumer—well, in theory. But I’ve grown slack. It’s not that I don’t care, but I am becoming more and more of an eco-terrorist. I unconsciously waste water (whilst living in a drought); there’s litter everywhere on my way to work which once I would have picked up—now I don’t want to get my hands dirty; I like to drive everywhere. It’s clear that something needs to change.

It has been said that there are four core (overlapping) reasons that cause people to be worried about the environment:²

1. Population growth
2. Resource depletion and loss of biodiversity
3. Waste disposal
4. Atmospheric damage

Should we be worried about any of those reasons? Reasons number two and four concern me, but don’t keep me awake at night. Should they? There are many fingers pointed as to who is to be held responsible for these problems. It is fair to say that all are responsible and thus I have responsibilities to check my actions and their affects.

For many, including myself, it is hard to imagine Christianity being held responsible for environmental problems. Yet there are many who feel that Christian theology has influenced people to be blasé if not outright aggressive in its treatment of the environment. The American historian, Lynn White of the University of California, has written ‘Christianity ... not only established a

dualism of man and nature, but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for His proper ends ... Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt.³

Is this fair? Is it even, as Christians, our responsibility to act in care and love for the environment. One perspective is that the environment is like the Titanic. The environment is going down and there is nothing we can do to stop it, so we should just ignore it, let it go down and do whatever we can to help ourselves. Is this the right response?

As a Christian who believes that the ultimate authority for life and faith is the Bible, God's Word to people, it is from the Bible that I should seek my answer. What does the Bible say about the environment? There are four areas which I want to look into from the perspective of the Bible:

1. What is the purpose of the world?
2. How was/is man to treat the earth?
3. What is the current state of the environment?
4. What is the future of the earth?

First, what is the purpose of the world? Many people believe that there is no purpose, that the world is an accident, accidentally becoming what it is today without any set purpose or guidance. Others see that the purpose of the world is for human enjoyment and benefit. In this category the world is seen as important for its aesthetic beauty, its recreational value, its historical value, its cultural value, etc. As well, there are many other view points.

But what does the Bible say the world was made for? From what I can gather, the most complete answer can be found in Psalm 19:1-4. Here it says: *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.*

The biblical view of the world and its purpose is that the created universe exists as a matchless display of the glory of God. In summary, the earth was made to display the beauty of the One who created it—to show that there is a God who made a beautiful world. 1 Corinthians 10:26 gives the fullness of this purpose

by stating that *the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it*. We don't own the world—God does and He made it for His pleasure and for His purposes.

How do the above passages impact the way Christians should think about the environment? What was/is man's role in relation to the earth? In the Creation account (Gen. 1–2), we read: God blessed them and said to them, '*Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground*' (Gen. 1:28). Here we see that we are to rule this world and all in it.

Many people have noticed that the Hebrew word for 'rule' brings up images of lordship and domination. This is a key argument of many who think environmental degradation began with a God-given mandate to exploit the world (e.g. Lynn White).

One reason why many Christians of the past and present are seen as 'eco-terrorists' (that is, people who are happy to detrimentally impact the earth), is the fusion of Platonism and the Bible in some Christian circles. Platonist interpretations of the Bible have influenced Christian thinking, especially relevant in the Middle Ages. Medieval Theology borrowed much from Plato's teachings. Plato saw human beings as immortal souls trapped in a hostile body of flesh. Plato taught that all matter was by its nature tainted and temporary. The hope for humanity according to Plato was therefore one's soul escaping from the world of the material and into the realm of pure spirit.⁴

Although it is very possible that some Christians have read this word 'to rule' and then acted in a domineering way towards the environment, the context of the passage rules out lordship or domineering rule. In fact, the context of Genesis 1:28 set up a picture that could not be more opposite than a dominating, aggressive human lordship.

For Genesis 1:28 to be properly understood, it must be read in light of 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*. Here we see that God placed man in the Garden—the world when it was in its perfect state before any problems began. In the perfect world, it was man's role to work⁵ the land and to care⁶ for it. Any work that man did had to contain at its core the element of care. The conclusion to

the role of man in the Creation account is that man was never to rule the earth by exploitation, but instead by careful nurture and management. With the creation of the world completed, and man in their role to rule (to work it and take care of it), God saw that the world was ‘very good’ (Gen. 1:31)—good for God, good for man and good for the all aspects of the physical world.

The next question we have to ask is: so what happened? The current state of the environment is obvious—as stated previously there is degradation in all spheres of the environment. How did this happen? The Bible is clear how the problems in the environment began. At one single point in time, life changed from one of perfection—of God’s perfect rule over God’s world with God’s people fulfilling their role perfectly. The change from perfect to corrupt is illustrated in Genesis 3. But first we need to understand how and why the change occurred.

In Genesis 1 and 2, God gave man everything in the world to enjoy and look after—except one thing. People were allowed to do anything and enjoy everything—except for one small exception – they were not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16-17). The tree of knowledge of good and evil represented a differentiation in the attributes and status between God and man. God alone, as the One who for a very specific purpose designed and created the world, knows what is best for the perfect functioning of the world.

God is omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient and sovereign in all things. Man has none of the above. We are fallible and finite, and therefore can never claim to know in an absolute sense what is right and good—what is the true and right way of living, thinking and relating. Genesis 1 and 2 introduces us to God as the ultimate authority for our life. Man was not to usurp the authority of God and claim ownership and autonomy over the world. In the face of God’s good, life-giving power as seen in Genesis 1 and 2, and in the light of man’s profound role in the world (Gen. 1:31, 2:15)—man rejected the authority of God, rejected their role in the world, and begun a chain of events that would bring about the problems we see in the world today (Gen. 3:6).

The particular issue of the environment can be found in Genesis 3:17-18: To Adam he said, *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. When man rejected God and the role and purpose of man in the world, God judged man and part of this judgement was a world that was no longer perfect. It was no longer capable of being looked after. The earth is cursed due to man's rejection of God's rule. Put simply, man rejected the mandate of caring for the world and thus the problems that exist today were born.

After what is called the 'Fall of Man' in Genesis 3, it is important to move forward thousands of years to the place where God again speaks to people and gives man (men and women) commands on how to live. This time has been described as the time of the Law—a time that includes the giving of the Ten Commandments. As God is describing the ways people (to be specific, Israel) must live if they are to be His people, we find this understanding of attitude to the environment: Deuteronomy 22:6-7, *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, so that it may go well with you and you may have a long life.*

It was in one of my Old Testament classes where I was shown that an aspect of God's call⁷ on the life of the Israelites was to return to a humane treatment of animals. For a long time there had been widespread mistreatment of the environment. God called His people back to an attitude of guarding the ecological balance. Long term prudence and sustainability should set limits to short term greed.⁸ This was meant to be a principle that was applicable well beyond bird's nests.

Much of the environmental problems we can see in the world are efforts to get short-term financial (or other) gain. This puts long term gain in question, and leaves the environment greatly harmed in the process. It is clear that there is a purpose for the world, that man had a specific role to play, yet rejected this role and subsequently the world is in a great state of degradation. The Bible calls man to care for the environment.

Yet is there any hope for the environment? There are things I can do in the short term, but is there long term hope for the environment to return to its

original state of perfection? The biblical answer is yes there is hope—and this is a certain hope. This hope for a restored world can be found in Romans 8:19-22: *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 the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*

The earth is awaiting its salvation from the state it is in. There will be a time when God reverses the damage which we have done and renews the world to its previous perfection. This ‘salvation’ of the earth is parallel to the salvation of man. David Seccombe pertinently explains that ‘when the last of God’s chosen ones finds his or her way to Christ, the restoration of all things will be at hand. The creation itself in its own way longs for this day, for it too, is to share in a resurrection like that of the believer’.⁹

The guarantee of this certain hope is the same for both man and creation—the all necessary and all-sufficient work of Jesus, who reconciled *all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross* (Col. 1:20). As man is restored and freed from the judgements of God, so too will the earth. For man cannot be separated from the earth and the earth cannot be separated from man—this intimate connection was the design of God in the very beginning. When will this happen?

The Bible states that this will all happen after the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. This is the time of the New Creation. Here in the New Creation, the world will be made anew. This is seen in Revelation 22:3: *No longer will there be any curse.* The curses placed on this world will be absent from the New Creation. It will be a time when God and man will be restored in relationship, and the restored, perfected earth will be the setting of this relationship.

John Stott summarises the Christian position on the environment when he says that we ‘believe that God created the earth, entrusting its care to us, and that one day He will re-create it, in the “new heavens and the new earth”’.¹⁰ As a Christian, there is a number of actions that this biblical understanding of the environment should bring forth in our lives.

The first is to realise the reason why God made this world and respond appropriately. This means we must make an effort to see the glory of God in the world around us (Ps 8:1, 9; 19:1). One of Clyde Kilby's ten resolution summarises this for me: 'I shall live with my eyes and ears open because God's glory is all around us and He wants us to see it. Once everyday I shall simply stare at a tree, a flower, a cloud or a person. I shall not then be concerned at all to ask what they are, but simply be glad that they are. I shall sometimes look with the freshness of vision of one who looks for and sees everywhere the glories of our God. I shall hold fast to the truth that this world is not idiotic, neither run by an absent minded landlord, but that today, this very day, something is being done that I shall understand with joy as a stroke by the Architect who calls Himself the Alpha and Omega'.¹¹

It is also a good thing to sit down and Psalm read 104. As Moses once prayed: *Father, please show me your glory.* Please show us your glory in the world around us. Let us see you infinite power, wisdom, knowledge, goodness, faithfulness and grace in and through your world. Help us as we seek to fulfil our role in looking after your world, whilst looking forward to your new heavens and new earth, and a 'curseless' time seeing your glory face to face.

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ENDNOTES

1. Accessed on June 19, 2008 at <http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/Danger-of-excess-in-our-throwaway-culture/2005/03/18/1111086016565.html>
2. Accessed on June 19, 2008 at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/7078857.stm>
3. Accessed on June 19, 2008 at http://www2.una.edu/dburton/lynn_white_Thesis.htm
4. Plato's views are helpfully summarised in D. Seccombe, *Dust to Destiny—Reading Romans Today* (Sydney; Aquila Press, 1996), pp. 140-41.
5. V. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis—Chapters 1-17* NICOT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990) states the Hebrew word that the NIV translates 'work' is literally 'to serve'. So again he note is sounded that man's role in the garden (world) is as a servant—he is there not to be served but to serve.
6. Hamilton also states that the Hebrew word that the NIV translates 'care' mean's to

‘exercise great care over’ to the point, if necessary, of guarding. *The Book of Genesis*, p. 171.

7. It must be noted that the call to be ‘environmentally friendly’ is not a major part of the Law, but is part of the teaching of the Law nonetheless.
8. J. G. Miller, *Now Choose Life* (Leicester; Apollos, 1998), p. 135.
9. Seccombe, *Dust to Destiny*, pp. 140-41.
10. J. Stott, *New Issues facing Christians today* (rev. edn.), (London: Marshall Pickering, 1999), p. 140.
11. Taken from Clyde Kilby’s ten resolutions as quoted in J. Piper, *Pleasures of God* (Oregon: Multnomah Press, 2000), p. 95, fn. 11.