

DISTINCTIVE CHRISTIAN BELIEFS ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

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By

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Introduction-

Thank you for inviting me. It is an honor to speak to the faculty at Colorado's flagship university and a special pleasure to be with Christian faculty at another university. Let me explain at the outset what I am not going to do today. I will not harangue you with a recitation from some little golden book on the environment revered by a mainline secular environmental organization. Nor will this be a quickie course on how to be environmentally correct. Nor will it be secular environmentalism warmed over under the guise of Christian "greenness". I also promise not to bug you about recycling, composting, or the evils of granola abuse. In Boulder, you hear enough about that from other sources.

What I intend to do in the next 30 minutes is present what I think are seven distinctive Biblical beliefs that comprise a Christian view of the environment. I happen to think that Christian theologians have so exclusively focused on the relationship of God and man (which is certainly eternally important) that they have unfortunately ignored an important Biblical responsibility of mankind to God's creation. Today, I want to depart from the traditional God and man discussion and focus on God, man, and God's creation. I'm supplying a handout with an outline for you to use in following along and some Biblical references attached it for your further study.

Because of our time factor this is going to be a very brief discussion, but I hope it will serve as an overview of distinctive Christian beliefs about the environment and a starting point for further discussion. Let's start with the most significant first.

Worship of the Creator God -

The Ten Commandments put it quite clearly; "You shall have no other God before Me". God is above man, his things, and the creation. We are to worship Him, not our things or the creation. God is not "in" nature, as pantheists suggest, but as its creator, is fully in control and above it. We are to put our focus first on Him. In this sense, the traditional theological approach has been correct. However, it is unfortunate that it typically stops there, because, God speaks to us out of His creation as He did to Job. Out of the whirlwind and the storm He evokes our sense of humility and worship. The psalmists praise the Creator and call for the whole creation to praise Him. John reminds us that, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God" and that "all things came into being through Him". God is first, and pre-eminent, His creation follows. From Paul in Romans 1, "the eternal power and divine nature of God" is reflected in the creation, but in sin "they worshiped and served the creature rather than the

Creator”. Jesus displayed His Godliness through His power over the creation as the disciples marveled “even the wind and waves obey Him”. Finally, from Revelation 4, “Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou did create all things and because of thy will they existed and were created”.

Therefore, it is a distinctive Christian belief that we do not worship the creation, but the Creator God. It is important to put Him first and insist on this, or the environment (nature) will become just another thing we become preoccupied with and use to keep God out of our lives. Just as society uses possessions, drugs, alcohol, etc. to try to fill up an empty life. The environment (and its “preservation”) can become our god, but it is poor substitute for the real thing. To paraphrase a bumper sticker, “Hug God and you will never go back to trees.”

God's View of His Creation

How does God view what he has created? If Christians understand His view of it, we have a basis for true environmentalism. In Genesis 1 He said, “behold it was very good”. However, as man interacted with God and the creation, we disobeyed God and sinned against Him and His creation. I think it is important to point out that the original sin was not only disobedience of God; it was an environmental sin as well. Man used something that he was told to preserve.

Later in the giving of the Law, (Exodus and Leviticus) God instituted a Sabbath rest for the land every seventh year. (Faculty are especially glad that this concept was carried over into the academy in the form of our sabbatical, even though most are quick to discredit other Biblical teachings.) When the people dishonored the law and failed to keep the Sabbath rest of the land for 490 years, they were carried away into captivity for 70 years (II Chronicles) so the “land will have its rest”. The math here should not be lost on us, for this is a very strong statement about Gods concern for His creation. The 70 years of captivity works out to the loss of one sabbatical year in seven that had been ignored for 490 years.

In Psalm 104 we have a beautiful picture of God's moment by moment care for all of His works. All of this is a moving affirmation of God's care and concern about His creation and we should not be less serious. Therefore, God's view of His creation should form the basis for our distinctively Christian view of our relationship with the environment.

The Stewardship Role of Man

God placed man in His garden. As a forester, it was exciting for me to find that the garden consisted of “trees that were good to eat and pleasing to the eye”. And, that man's role was to “cultivate and keep it”. Suggesting an active role of management of the garden environment as well as a passive role of protecting things that were to be preserved. I've often commented on this to students by saying that I thought that Adam and Eve were the first silviculturists (one who cares for and nurtures a forest) or at least the first agro-foresters (one who incorporates trees in agriculture). Another role given to man before the

original sin was “to subdue it”. I take this to mean they were to keep the characteristics and processes within the garden in proper balance. Failure to subdue the serpent, for example, led to The Fall. I think it is clear that God intended man would, under His personal mentoring, become an ideal steward of His creation. Actively involved in management and preservation, using as well as protecting and fully aware of the balance of structure and processes God had created.

Solomon discusses his stewardship of parks and forests in Ecclesiastes but finds disillusionment with these efforts under the sun (apart from God). In the parable of the faithful steward, a person is put in charge until the master returns. The parable speaks to responsibility of stewardship, dangers of excess, and the results of abusing the trust placed in a steward.

Stewardship is such a distinctively Biblical concept that even in secular society it can seldom be adequately explained apart from its Biblical roots.

Limitations on Use

Leviticus describes dietary restrictions associated with “clean and unclean” animals that have specific hygienic importance. However, those restrictions also have ecological significance, such as the maintenance of predator-prey relationships and the important role of decomposers. In the Law, fruit trees were not to be used for three years, with the direct result of insuring plant maturity but also the implied result of providing a food source for wild birds and mammals. Jeremiah cries out over the effect of the impact of sin on the creation, “why is the land ruined and no one cares?”

Paul recognizes in Romans that the “creation groans and suffers” under the weight of man’s sin. Sin against God, against man, and against God’s creation. Realizing that creation must await Christ’s return before it will be completely cleansed and renewed. Colossians states that Jesus holds the creation together providing further reason to limit our selfish exploitation of it.

God’s creation is not ours to abuse. It is not for our unrestricted use or pleasure. It is ours to use within limits and the defining of those limits requires study, knowledge, and wisdom before God. For example, I am realizing from my current research just how tremendously important wood is to us in virtually every aspect of our life in Colorado. I am not opposed to logging, therefore, because the removal of trees is an important part of the management of forests and the way that we get wood and paper products to use. In fact, in Colorado, we face some very critical forest health problems because we have failed to remove trees and properly manage fire regimes. However, the application of logging in our forests requires specialized knowledge about forests and careful planning to insure we properly use the forest and avoid its abuse. This also recognizes that there are areas that are so fragile that man made disturbances must be avoided.

The Role of Wilderness

It is interesting to note that the major ministries recorded in the Bible were launched from the wilderness. Consider Moses, John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul who all had a wilderness experience prior to beginning their work. The

wilderness was also a continual refuge to which Jesus retreated to pray. The Biblical concept of wilderness was an uninhabited place, often close enough to access, but remote enough to provide solitude for meditation and prayer. In many cases it was a place where one's life might be at risk. In all cases, it was a place one could be alone with God. That does not appear to coincide with the popular concept of wilderness today. We seem to emphasize recreational activities and group experiences.

Leviticus forbids the sale of the priest's pastureland within cities, thus insuring perpetual open space in urban areas. One can only speculate about God's intention to insure community quality of life through what appears to be simple protection of temple property.

Christians need wilderness. We need a place to be alone with God, to fast and to pray, to find solitude in chaotic world and refocus our lives on our Creator and the mission He has for us.

The Perils of Materialism

The Bible is clear on this point, "You cannot serve God and riches". I've observed that University faculty think they are aloof from this conflict, because the administration insures that riches are kept apart from us.

Christians, however, are constantly called upon in Scripture to trust God for His provision and care. We are to consider the birds, flowers, and grass of the field, not to be anxious about our lives, and to be content with what we have. Paul counsels Timothy about the perils of materialism by noting that "the love of money is the root of all sorts of evil".

Since we live in a society and, increasingly, a world of materialists it is easy to be swept along in the tidal wave of over-consumption. God is fully capable of meeting our needs and the creation is amazingly resilient to reasonable use, but the satisfaction of selfish wants (the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the boastful pride of life) sorely test the sustainability of the creation in many places. If there is one individual action Christians can take from an environmental standpoint it is to limit our consumption to a responsible level before God. This leads me to my final point.

The Coming Evaluation

A key Christian belief is that there will be a final day of judgement. "Behold I am coming quickly...to render to every man according to what he has done." Everyone, the great and the small alike, will be held responsible for their actions toward God, toward men and women, and toward God's world. What will we do with a question from God like this, "How have you cared for my creation"? For the pagans, there are plenty of other scary questions before God gets to this one, but for the Christian it is another reason to return humbly to the cross of Christ.

Fortunately, we can be reconciled to God and his creation through our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. Colossians expresses it this way, "For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him (Jesus Christ) and to reconcile all things to Himself." I suggest that includes our reconciliation as sinful

people not only to God and our fellow man, but also to God's creation. I believe it is possible for us to live our lives in harmony with God's creation as His stewards, but we need to know what our distinctive beliefs about the environment are and seek God's strength in following them.

Conclusion

Obviously this presentation has been brief and hurried. I have not talked about practical applications that should spring from these beliefs, but I would like to. Perhaps at another time. Some of the supposed applications I see in the Christian "green" press are, frankly, silly and lack credibility.

For the moment, however, let me say that I believe we should be focusing on use of the creation with wisdom and discretion as responsible stewards. That requires more than environmental slogans and simplistic rhetoric. It requires thought, study, and self control. It is more than mimicking secular environmental agendas with their concealed political objectives in order to appear "green" to the world.

We have a lot of work to do in reconciling men and women to God and His creation, I hope that the seven distinctive beliefs I suggested today will help you as you walk with God in His garden. As a forestry professor, I leave you with this concluding thought. It was through the misuse of a tree that mankind sinned; it was on a tree that Christ paid the penalty for our sin, and it will be through the tree of life that we will enjoy eternity with God.