

# Ethics

Unit 313 – Foundations 3

Week 6

**Environmental Ethics:  
A Christian Perspective**



## Introduction

The purpose of this lesson is to identify an appropriate Christian response to the environmental challenges of the twenty-first century on the grounds that:

1. These issues are of concern to God whose compassion and care extends to all of creation and not merely humankind.
2. These issues are reshaping the ethical landscape of contemporary society and redefining morality for the new millennium.

### 1. Caring for the Earth – why bother?

Those who object to Christians being involved in environmentalism usually offer one of four protests:

1. **It's Depressing** – who wants to spend time thinking and worrying about pollution, global warming, food shortage and desertification.
2. **It's Demeaning** – are we not reducing humanity to the same level as other living creatures by affording them rights reserved for human beings?
3. **It's Dangerous** – many Christians associate 'environmentalism' with left-wing politics, paganism and other expressions of New Age philosophy that are thought to be a threat to the faith.
4. **It's Distracting** – some argue that by allocating time and energy to caring for the earth we are diverting much needed

resource away from our primary task i.e. the proclamation of the gospel.

Many conservative evangelical Christians have developed what Brian McLaren called 'an eschatology of abandonment' - one in which Jesus returns to rapture His desperate Bride in a dramatic skyhook rescue as the world below spirals into a cataclysmic and fiery end. This type of eschatological perspective has perpetuated the idea that earth is not our ultimate home and that heaven is in fact our final destination, which, in turn, has led to a kind of spiritual indifference toward the earth and an unhealthy preoccupation with its instrumental value.

This in turn has resulted in a failure on our part to recognise that our mandate to care for the earth is not so that the world will be preserved for another 'age' beyond our own, but so that it may be preserved for the benefit of those who will live in the gap between our present and that inevitable Day when the 'end of the age' will come. That may be ten years from now or a thousand: no one knows for sure. What we do know is that between now and then people will need to live on very limited resources embedded in a fragile network of highly interdependent eco-systems. Our actions toward those systems and resources today will seriously affect the lives of those who live tomorrow and it's for this reason that those actions ought to demonstrate the love and consideration for others that Jesus encouraged through His life and teaching. At the end of the day, our God-given mandate to care for the earth is, amongst other things, an expression of our mandate to 'love our neighbours'. As McLaren rightly points out, we live not only downstream from those neighbours but 'downtime' as well and it's those who live in the years beyond our own who stand to benefit the most from our faithful and responsible stewardship of the earth and its resources.

## **2. Planet in Peril – the nature of the problem**

*"We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." - Romans 8:22*

The Old Testament prophets often spoke about the relationship between people and the earth and the consequences that would befall them if they neglected to care for the land appropriately.

*"There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. 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." - Hosea 4:1-3*

*"The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth; its inhabitants suffer for their guilt." - Isaiah 24:4-6*

*"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." - Revelation 11:18*

Today our planet faces the possibility of a devastating environmental crisis brought about by the growing demands of its ever-increasing and already enormous human population. Even though primeval history provides us with evidence that not all environmental anomalies have anthropogenic roots a large part of the current environmental concern is believed to be due to the size of the global population<sup>1</sup>. Although a scientific assessment of the exact causes and extent of the pending crisis will, of necessity, be ongoing, several fundamental issues have already been identified as representing the essence of the problem<sup>2</sup>:

- (a) Global Warming and Climate Change***
- (b) Critical Ecological Imbalances***
- (c) Pollution and Waste***
- (d) Resource Depletion***
- (e) Habitat Destruction***
- (f) Deforestation and Desertification***
- (g) Species Loss***

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<sup>1</sup> Other causes include solar variations, orbital variations, plate tectonics and volcanism – IPCC, 2007, *Climate change 2007: the physical science basis* (summary for policy makers), IPCC.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the debate and up-to-date perspectives from both sides of the divide see <http://climatedebatedaily.com/>

The environmental challenges of the twenty-first century are manifold and complex and mankind has a central role to play both in creating and solving of these ecological problems.

### 3. Environmental Ethics: Four Perspectives

There are essentially four fundamental ethical perspectives on the environment and they are best represented on a continuum:<sup>3</sup>

<b>Developmentalists</b>	<b>Conservationists</b>	<b>Preservationists</b>	<b>Critical Eco-Justice</b>
Anthropocentric -----			Bio-centric
Hierarchical -----			Egalitarian
Domination -----			Co-operation
Dualistic -----			Connected
Atomistic -----			Holistic
Instrumental value -----			Intrinsic value

**Developmentalists:** Developmentalists see the earth and its natural resources as available exclusively for the wellbeing of man and display little regard for the consequences of resource exploitation.

**Conservationists:** Conservationists share the anthropocentric values and ideals of the Developmentalists but believe that the use of resources must be governed by the best, science-based management practices for the benefit of future generations.

**Preservationists:** While recognising the utilitarian value of natural resources, preservationists believe in the value of protecting land, species, eco-systems and resources for their intrinsic value as well as their instrumental value.

**Critical Eco-Justice Movement:** This movement would include Deep ecologists, Spiritual / Religious ecologists, Social Ecologists, Animal Rights Activists and Eco-feminists. Broadly speaking the movement is bio-centric, holistic and egalitarian and focuses on the intrinsic value of natural resources.

### 4. Earth Matters: Environmental Theology

Our convictions about the environment are largely informed by our beliefs about God and what we perceive His thoughts to be toward the earth, in other words, our theology. A Christian expression of Environmentalism should arise from an informed, thoughtful and

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<sup>3</sup> J.B. Martin-Schram & R.L. Stivers, *Christian Environmental Ethics*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), p. 23-29

faithful consideration of environmental concerns from the perspective of Christian Faith and the revelation of Scripture<sup>4</sup>.

#### **4.1 Earth as Creation**

It is imperative that we understand that for the Christian, *nature* is in fact *creation*, i.e. the planned and purposely executed design of the Creator, whom we identify as Yahweh, the God of the Old and New Testaments.

***‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... God saw all that he had made, and it was very good’. - Genesis 1:1, 31***

***‘You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you’. - Nehemiah 9:6***

***‘He spreads out the northern skies over empty space; he suspends the earth over nothing. He wraps up the waters in his clouds, yet the clouds do not burst under their weight. He covers the face of the full moon, spreading his clouds over it’. - Job 26:7-9***

***‘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’. - Psalm 104:24-25***

***‘Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him’. - Colossians 1:15-16***

***‘In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe’. - Hebrews 1:2***

There is no concept of mere nature in the Bible. Nature, derived from a Greek worldview, is by scientific definition a self-sustaining system complete with its own internal laws. The notion of creation, however,

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<sup>4</sup> M. Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Era*, Peabody, MS. Hendrickson Publishing, 2006), p. 234

recognises that the universe is not self-sustaining, but is in fact continually dependent on the presence and power of God, the Creator, who is distinct from His creation, but intimately connected to its existence. Renowned Christian philosopher and author Francis Schaeffer evidently held the same conviction:

‘The beginning of the Christian view of nature is the concept of creation: that God was there before the beginning and God created everything out of nothing. From this, we understand that creation is not an extension of the essence of God. Created things have an existence in themselves’.

The notion of nature as creation and creation as separate from the creator is foundational to biblical creation theology and is the cornerstone of a Christian Environmental Ethic.

While there are multiple theories regarding how and when God created (theistic evolution, intelligent design, old earth / young earth theory, literal creationism, etc.) the underlying assumption of this lesson is that regardless of the means of creation, God is the source. It is not our intention to explore the various theories regarding the means of creation simply because from a stewardship perspective *why* God created the earth is infinitely more important than *when* or *how*.

#### ***4.2 Creation as Revelation***

In addition to being a conscious and deliberate act of God, the creation also serves as a revelation of God. Both the Old and New Testament Scriptures attest to the fact that creation contains a general revelation of the Creator and therefore has something to communicate regarding His essential self. The Psalmist, David, celebrates the universality of that revelation:

***‘The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handiwork. Day to day utters speech and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their sound has gone out throughout the earth and their words to the end of the world’.***

**- Psalm 19:1-4**

For the apostle Paul, writing in the New Testament, the revelation of God within the creation goes beyond merely indicating the existence of a Creator. He points out that the very character or ‘divine attributes’ of that Creator are also made known through the things created:

***'For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and deity, so that they are without excuse'. - Romans 1:20***

Here Paul indicates that it is not only possible to know that a Creator exists through the revelation contained in the creation, but that it is also possible for us to know what kind of a Creator He is. If you consider for a moment the intricate detail of the microcosm, the awesome grandeur of the macrocosm, the infinite diversity, the inexhaustible creativity, the perfect balance and finely tuned symmetry contained in creation, you can easily see why it is possible to deduce a great deal about the nature and character of God from it.

It is also apparent from Paul's writings that creation contains a disclosure of Divine pattern and principle. As Christ-followers (and as human beings) we have a responsibility to bring our lives into alignment with these patterns and principles, some of which are intrinsically embedded in the natural order of things. The apostle Paul uses this 'natural order', or more specifically the violation thereof, as the basis for his scathing reprimand of those guilty of idolatry and suppressing the knowledge of God and Truth, claiming that they gave themselves to what is 'against nature'.

***'... (those) who exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator... For this reason, God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise the men also, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned 'in their lust for one another, men with men, committing what is shameful and received in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.' - Romans 1:25-27***

Clearly for Paul the violation of the natural order constitutes a violation of the original pattern and intent of God and therefore a violation of His will. Paul again appeals to 'nature' as a guide when it comes to the matter of personal appearance and demeanour:

***'Does not even nature itself teach us that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonour to him?' - Corinthians 11:14***

While a thorough historical-grammatical analysis of Paul's statements within their immediate context may produce varying interpretations of both his theology and intent in making the statements, it is sufficiently evident that Paul appealed to the natural created order as revelation of

divine pattern and principle, as well as a guide for appropriate Christian conduct<sup>5</sup>. Christian geneticist and naturalist Robert Berry concluded:

‘God has written two books: a book of words, which we call the Bible; and a book of works, which is creation. He is the author of both. They are written in very different languages, but we have no excuse if we fail to read them both because of difficulty or (worse) laziness in interpretation. Those who read only one of Gods books will necessarily discover only a part of God’s nature and purposes’.

#### ***4.3 Earth as God’s Possession (ownership)***

God claims the earth (and everything in it) as His possession.

***‘To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it’. - Deuteronomy 10:14***

***‘Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and earth is yours’. - 1 Chronicles 29:11***

***‘The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters’. - Psalm 24:1-2; cf. Psalm 89:11; 1 Corinthians 10:26***

***‘For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land’. - Psalm 95:3-5***

As ‘creator’, ‘owner’ and ‘possessor’ of the earth God loves, sustains and redeems it

***‘He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD. By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth’. - Psalm 33:5-6***

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<sup>5</sup> The purpose of a reference to these scriptural statements is neither to endorse or excuse any particular theological position on the matters of sexual orientation and personal demeanour but simply to highlight the Apostle Paul’s readiness to look to the natural created order as a revelation of divine pattern and principle.

*'The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.... The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made'. - Psalm 145:9, 13; cf. Psalm 145:17*

*'In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind'. - Job 12:10*

*'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, for so you have ordained it. You drench its furrows and level its ridges; you soften it with showers and bless its crops. You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with abundance. The grasslands of the desert overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness. The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing'. - Psalm 65:9-13*

*'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. He waters the mountains from his upper chambers; the earth is satisfied by the fruit of his work. He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate-bringing forth food from the earth.' - Psalm 104:10-14*

*'The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word'. - Hebrews 1:3*

*'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'. - Psalm 104:29-30*

*'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 the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God'. - Romans 8:19-21*

*'Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace*

***through the blood of his cross'. - Colossians 1:20; cf. Ephesians 1:10***

#### ***4.4 Earth as our Habitation (Stewardship)***

Earth is the place of our habitation, the place where we live and the context on which we depend for our very existence. As such, we have a relationship with it and a responsibility to it.

***'The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it'. - Genesis 2:15***

***'You must keep my decrees and my laws.... And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you'. - Leviticus 18:26, 28***

***'The land itself must observe a sabbath to the Lord. For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and garner their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the Lord.... The land is to have a year of rest'. - Leviticus 25:2-5; cf. Exodus 23:10-11***

***'If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit'. - Leviticus 26:3-4***

***'You shall not pollute the land in which you live.... You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell; for I the LORD dwell among the Israelites'. - Numbers 35:33-34***

***'If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you?' - Deuteronomy 20:19***

**In summary, the Christian Perspective would suggest that:**

- All creation is good because it is the work and possession of God (Genesis 1 & 2; Ps. 24:1)
- All creation is sacred because it contains a revelation of God

(Ps. 19:1-4; Rom. 1:20-21)

- All creation is home to and sustains both human and non-human life forms. It is therefore essential to our survival.
- All creation should matter to us because all creation matters to God

In highlighting the unique challenges of preaching to a post-modern audience, author Graham Johnston suggests that for the twenty-first century listener, a disregard for the environment will be viewed as ‘callous indifference to all people, both present and future’<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in our proclamation of the ‘good news’ concerning the coming Kingdom of God, we should endeavour to communicate the truth that the ‘good news’ is in fact good for *all* creation and not merely humankind.

## 5. A Practical Response

On a more practical level, Christian author Michael Frost offers the following as a guideline for Christians who want to make an immediate, practical and personal response to the environmental challenges of our time, both at home and at work:<sup>7</sup>

- Recycle plastics, glass and paper products
- Replace ordinary light bulbs with compact fluorescent light bulbs. This will both save energy and save money.
- Buy household appliances (fridges, washing machines, dishwashers, etc.) with the ENERGY STAR<sup>8</sup> Label or equivalent.
- Schedule a home energy audit – many utility companies offer them for free.
- Choose renewable energy (wind or solar) to power your home or business.
- Buy a fuel-efficient and ecologically friendly hybrid car (eg: the Toyota Prius).
- Avoid plastic. Use ceramic crockery, cutlery and real plants
- Consume Less

<sup>6</sup> G. Johnston, *Preaching to a Post-modern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-first Century Listeners* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001) p. 133

<sup>7</sup> Frost, M, *Exiles*, ...2006, p. 248-249

<sup>8</sup> ENERGY STAR is a joint program of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy aimed at protecting the environment through energy efficient products and practices. For more on ENERGY STAR see Online: <http://www.energystar.gov/> [cited 17 April 2008]

## 6. Conclusion

A Government White Paper compiled in 1990 which laid out official policy for the environment and served as the formal statement of the UK's position to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (1992), provides a thought-provoking conclusion:

*'Ever since the Age of the Enlightenment, we have had an almost boundless faith in our own intelligence and in the benign consequences of our actions. Whatever the discoveries of science, whatever the rates at which we destroyed other species, whatever the changes we made to our seas and landscapes, we have believed that the world would remain much the same as in all its fundamentals. We now know that this is no longer true ... Increasingly we understand that the ways we produce energy, use natural resources and produce waste threaten to change fundamentally the balance of our natural environment. We may not be seeing the end of Nature, but Nature is certainly under threat ... The starting point [for action] ... is the ethical imperative of stewardship which must underlie all environmental policies. Mankind has always been capable of great good and great evil. That is certainly true of our role as custodians of the planet.'*