

"CONCERN FOR THE ENVIRONMENT"

(Romans 8:18-25)

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Concern for the health and future of the world of nature is one of the most powerful forces in our culture. In twenty years [*This book was published in 2000*], the environmental movement has moved from the fringe to the mainstream of contemporary life. It affects our lives in countless ways, influencing everything from the way we take out our garbage to the way we vote. Yet evangelical Christians in general have been slow to reckon with the movement, and what little many evangelicals know about the movement tends to be negative. Many believers, I find, view the environmental movement with suspicion, if not downright hostility.

I would argue, however, that passages such as Romans 8:19-22 should lead believers to be environmentalists. These verses make clear that God intends to liberate, or redeem, the created world along with his own children. Creation now is not what intended it to be, it has been "subjected to frustration" (v. 20). But God will free the created world from this bondage one day, bringing it into the glorious freedom of his own children (v. 21). To be sure, human beings continue even in this passage to be the focus of 's plan. But Paul reveals that God is also concerned about the entire world he has made. Simply understood, this leads to environmentalism, that is, concern for the environment in which we live.

Of course, everything depends on what we mean by environmentalism. Reason for Christian hostility is easy to understand if we brand environmentalism by some of its more extreme advocates. Indeed, an anti-Christian bias is evident in some early environmental thinking. Some theorists in the movement argued that the Christian worldview enshrined an anthropocentric view of the universe that justified unconcern for and, indeed, the exploitation of, the natural world.¹ In its place, some environmentalists advocate a biocentric view that values all life equally. Edward

Abbey, the most famous of the "eco-warriors," said that he would rather kill a man than a snake. Believers who read such statements and hear about the worship of "Mother Earth" in pagan and New Age religions naturally conclude that Christianity and environmentalism are incompatible.

But such a conclusion is short-sighted and unfortunate. Properly understood, concern for the environment is a natural product of the Christian worldview, as some scholars have been pointing out for many years.² God created the world, pronounced it good, and entrusted its care to human beings. True, God gave human beings the right to use its resources



¹ See, e.g., Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (3d ed.; New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1982).

² See, on this text, Fred van Dyke, et al., *Redeeming Creation: The Biblical Basis for Environmental Stewardship* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), 85-88.

for our good. But in making us "rulers" (Gen. 1:26) of the created world, he does not give us the right to do anything we want with it. Rather, we are appointed as stewards of creation. We are to manage it not only for ourselves but for itself, for, as passages like Romans 8:19-21 make clear, it has value in itself, apart from what human beings may gain from it.

Indeed, I find that some Christian reaction against environmentalism is profoundly un-Christian, compounded of equal mixtures of selfishness and materialism. Catering to our pleasure and maintaining our present, often luxurious standard of living become more important than tending the world God has made and ensuring that its wonderful resources will be available for generations yet to come. Believers will naturally continue to debate what actions may be needed in order to fulfill the stewardship mandate God has given us. But we owe it to that mandate to become informed, from the best and most neutral sources we can find, about what the problems really are, and to be willing to make sacrifices to maintain the world he has entrusted to us.³

³ For an excellent taxonomy of Christian views on the environment, see Raymond E. Grizzle, Paul E. Rothrock, and Christopher B. Barrett, "Evangelicals and Environmentalism: Past, Present, and Future," *TrinJ* 19 (1998): 3-27. See also other articles on environmentalism in that volume and also in *TrinJ* 18 (1997).