The Christian's Role in Environmental Stewardship

Don't Waste Water", "Think Before You Print", "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" and "Keep Our Oceans Blue" these are some of the popular environmental slogans that the average American has heard. Dappled in and around stories of civil and political unrest, not nearly a day goes by in the news without a revelation of an impending environmental calamity. The multitude of such a variety of stories can often be confusing and overwhelm the judgment of even the most learned individuals. Making matters worse, some events and research are based on impartial observations while others spin a yarn that is influenced by various political and social views. How is a Christian to navigate their way through these murky waters that threaten to scuttle their thinking? The authors of the Bible were never faced with the problems of hazardous waste disposal, greenhouse gas emissions, hydraulic fracturing, or asbestos related injuries. Is it possible that a God who is supposed to be omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent didn't fathom that when He cast man out of the garden such turmoil would eventually ensue? The answer of course is no! This is why it is so important for those who call themselves followers of Christ to plumb the depths of God's Word. A well-developed world view rooted solely in Biblical principles is the only way to keep a Christian's actions on an even keel amidst the vast array of environmental challenges facing the world today. According to the "Dominion Mandate" handed down by God to man, a Christian must practice environmental stewardship in all areas of their Christian walk thereby ultimately glorifying God and advancing the Gospel while demonstrating a Christ-likeness to their fellow man.

Environmental concerns are a hot button topic in the world garnering the attention of people everywhere from the leaders of the United Nations all the way to elementary school children in America. The fact that so many are concerned about the environment may be due in part to the World Bank's report that approximately 25% of the total wealth from poor countries is derived from natural resources as opposed to their more developed counterparts that only utilize 2%. It also may be due to 1:8 people in the world today still not having a way to obtain clean drinking water and over 90% of the 1.2 billion of the world's poorest populations relying on forest resources which are being depleted at "an equivalent of 18,100 soccer playing fields" every single day. These statistics might conjure up images of far flung locations populated by peculiar inhabitants with curious customs. However, many of the world’s poor do not just live in the remote regions of the world but rather in the surrounding areas of popular vacation destination spots such as the La Romana region of the Dominican Republic or Hyderabad, India. A Gallup 2016 poll discovered that 73% of Americans were concerned about the environment. Another Gallup poll from the previous year found that overall 75.2% of Americans identify as Christian. It is therefore reasonable to conclude based on polling figures that at least just over half of all Christians are presently concerned with environmental issues. This would seem to be supported by the Pew Research Center who conducted a 2004 survey entitled "Religion and the Environment: Polls Show Strong Backing for Environmental Protection Across Religious Groups" that ascertained roughly half of all Christians favor environmental regulations. Interestingly the same pollster from the Pew study found in a corresponding 2010 survey that, religion has far less influence on opinions about environmental policy than other factors do. Just 6% say that their religious beliefs have had the biggest influence on what they think about tougher environmental rules. Education and what people hear or read in the media are the strongest drivers of opinions about environmental regulations; roughly three-in-ten cite their education (29%), and 26% mention the media as having the most influence on their thinking about this issue*. (See figure 1 for graph on "Religion's Small Influence on Views of Environmental Laws and Regulations")

It is shocking that “Christians” cited a multitude of secular factors as having been the basis for their opinions on the environment as opposed to the Bible. In that same Pew Poll, just over half of all evangelicals and mainline Protestants reported ever having heard a sermon on the environment and only 10% of those reported hearing a sermon that included “specific religious language and themes promoting stewardship of the earth or care for God’s creation”. Therefore, based on available data, it would be a reasonable to estimate that only 2.5% of Christians have ever heard a sermon on the concept of ‘Biblical Stewardship’. It would seem that the bride of Christ has taken a wrong tack in the matter of the role of believers and the environment.

A Christian must not use their educational background, the media, or any other secular ideas when formulating an opinion and plan of action in regards to environmental stewardship. God commanded this very clearly in Proverbs 3:5 when He said, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding" (NET). Colossians 1:15-18 goes on to confirm that Christ is the head of the Church. He is above all and created all; that all things “in union with Him have their proper place.” (NLT) These two verses strongly rebuke any secular viewpoint regarding environmental stewardship. Believers should appreciate that God’s overarching purpose of creation is to testify about Himself and witness to man about the Gospel. (Romans 1:20) They must pour through the Scriptures and respond to the conviction of the Holy Spirit if they are to truly reflect Christ’s nature. Followers of Christ also ought to recognize that creation is suffering because of sin. Possibly two of the clearest sets of instructions about the dominion mandate can be found in the books of Genesis and Psalms. Both Moses and David write about all of creation being placed under man’s authority and that man’s only proper helper is woman. (Genesis 1:26; Genesis 2:18-25; Psalm 8:5-8) The Scriptures go on to explain the proper care of flora, planting of crops, and harvesting procedures, as well as express God’s elaborate design. (Matthew 26:8-30, Leviticus 22, 25; 1 Chronicles 16:33) God not only deeply cares for vegetation, but also for the animal kingdom. Followers of Christ are instructed in Proverbs and Deuteronomy about the proper care and treatment of animals and are again reminded that ultimately God oversees their care. (Proverbs 12:10; 27:23-27; Deuteronomy 22:6) The Bible is also specific in its testimony of God’s sovereignty in matters of all natural occurrences and disasters. (Job 38; Psalm 104) Christian stewardship does not only concern itself with the care of the Earth, it also involves caring for fellow humans. Jesus provided the Christian with two new commandments regarding their fellow man:

![Image](http://www.pewforum.org/2010/09/17/few-say-religion-shapes-immigration-environment-views/#2)
Before delving into the facets of the environmental movement itself, the Christian should understand its origins. The “founding father” of conservation is long credited to John Muir, born in 1838, to a Campbellite minister. Muir who had a promising start as an engineer and inventor, left that profession after an accident that caused a severe ocular injury to “study the inventions of God”, his desire led him to Yosemite National Park which would inspire Muir to author several books containing such quotes as, “every crystal, every flower a window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator” and “Here [in Yosemite] in this place of surpassing glory the Lord has written in capitals”. He credits these “divine lessons” from “God’s water and stone sermons” as inspiring him to found the “Sierra Club and helping to create and then expand the National Park Service to ensure that millions more would be able to see it for generations to come”. As according to Terrence O’Casey, Muir “wanted to ‘improve’ people in ‘mountainmania’ so they could encounter the love of God in Christ”. In general, the environmental world views of the 94% of Christians who identified with secular ideas can be grouped into three to main categories, “aesthetic and spiritual concerns for the integrity and beauty of nature… economic interests in conserving forest and other environments for future use…[and] the science of ecology… [which concerns itself with the] interdependence of humans, organisms, and their biophysical environment” Some Christians could make the claim that it does not matter what they are influenced by as long as they are taking action, however the Bible very clearly commands that a believer must examine and respond to situations through the lens of God. Colossians 2:8 says, “Don’t let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the spiritual powers of this world, rather than from Christ” (NLT). They might also argue that it does not matter which environmental group they support, except a follower of Christ is supposed to demonstrate Christ-likeness as a witness to God’s redemptive work. If a Christian aligns themselves with organizations that have uniblical philosophies, then their testimony is tainted and can actually bear false witness and cause harm to God’s people. Interwoven amongst the three categories are the more radical environmental viewpoints, referred to as the “deep greens”, frequently reported on in the news. Just as the general movement of environmental stewardship had a “father”, so too does this most radical branch of conservation. Through critical reading of the initial movements, a convincing case could be made for this “father” to be Lynn White, who by authoring her famous work, The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis in 1974, has provided a playbook for radical environmental organizations that blames Christianity for environmental problems and offers such suggestions as the need to develop a system of ideals to supplant those of Christianity and as creating a movement built on the constructs of religious zeal. While it is easy to blame Christians for the environmental crisis given that ¾ of Americans claim to identify as that faith, the argument is specious in nature because the planet is suffering from a “sin problem”, not a “Christian problem”. The founding father of the conservation movement was a Christian who followed the Biblical tenants of creation care. The “deep greens” are the opposite of anthropocentric in that they view the concerns of the non-human world to be more important than the concerns of the human world and are generally described as having a pantheistic worldview that favors “radical confrontation” such as in the cases of “Greenpeace” and “Earth First!”. David Foreman, founder of Earth First, stated, “A human life has no more intrinsic value than an animal grizzly bear [sic] life. If it came down to a confrontation between a grizzly and a friend, I’m not sure whose side I would be on. But I do know humans are a disease, a cancer on nature.”

A fellow denomination in the “deep ecology” movement is the “animal rights” movement. It’s most famous congregation is perhaps the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). PETA subscribes to “speciesism”, which it defines as a preference for one’s own species above all others. “[PETA claims] humans are the only creatures who can be guilty of speciesism, which makes it the radical environmentalist’s corollary to racism and sexism”. These “deep greens” are the most politically active of all the groups and include members such as former Vice President Al Gore under the Clinton administration, who encouraged Americans to utilize every policy and program, every law and institution, every treaty and alliance, every tactic and strategy, every plan and course of action—to use, in short, every means to halt the destruction of the environment and to preserve and nurture our ecological system.

Lastly in this group are the political ecology assemblies that concern themselves with how humans interact with the environment in relation to economic and political issues. Examples of this can be noted in the United Nations use of the term “ecocide” in sections of their recommendations. This strategy has been employed in New Zealand where the Whanganui river has been granted the “full rights of personhood”, as an “integrated, living whole” and in the United States where Secretary of the Interior under the Obama administration, Sally Jewell, declined an emergency access road for the residents of the remote fishing town of King Cove because she has “listened[ed] to the animals”. The promotion of the environment and it species over humans might seem a correct way of thinking to the secular world, however it disrespects God’s omnipotence by demoting the creation that He formed in His image. The anthropomorphism of the planet, its non-human species, and geographical formations is a form of idolatry and runs counter to the first commandment of God. God does not lay out a plan of salvation for anything other than man in the Bible and His ultimate goal is a restoration of relationship with His people.

Christians are not just influenced by the secular organizations. They are also guided by religious viewpoints. DeWitt, who writes for the Christian Research Institute describes five main Christian stances towards environmental stewardship. The first is the “Utilitarian Earth View” popularized by former U.S. Secretary of State under the Reagan administration, James Watt, who put forth in his article, “Ours is the Earth” that “[the earth is] merely a temporary way station on the road to eternal life…The earth was put here by the Lord for His people to subdue and to use for profitable purposes on their way to the hereafter”. The idea that the earth is only here for human domination runs contrary to God’s stated purpose of creation which is to testify about His glory and to spread the Gospel. There is also the “Gnostic World View” that utilizes claims of dualism to support their viewpoint that the world is comprised of two segments: matter and spirit and the physical world is evil and therefore unimportant. For a Christian to practice this viewpoint they would have to ignore God’s declaration in Genesis that it was “very good” as well as His continued nurturing of creation. The third described by DeWitt is the “Conflation of Earthkeeping with Environmentalism” which is a movement that believes if a follower of Christ cares about the environment they have become part of the new age pantheistic movement which ascribes to worshipping creation. This idea likewise, is not Scriptural as Christians who practice the dominion mandate are honoring and worshipping God. Another viewpoint listed is one in which there is a tendency to shun people groups based on their new age beliefs thereby denying them the ability to hear the Gospel message. This has been aptly name the “Fear of the Samaritans Syndrome”. This “shunning” of people groups is counter to the Scriptural commands of the Great Commission. Lastly, the fifth main Christian viewpoint towards the environment has been the “No Crisis/No Stewardship Philosophy” which does not believe that there are any environmental problems and therefore a Christian does not need to be an environmental steward. A Christian has but to look outside of themselves to see that sin is prevalent in every area of life. It is not surprising that Lynn White was able to successfully cement the term “Anthropocentrism” which is the habit of viewing the world exclusively in terms of human needs, wants, and aspirations to Christians.
As Christians seek to become involved they need to wisely consider who they are supporting as many of the movements conceal political agendas that run counter to Christianity. They must be secure in the knowledge that man is not in control of the earth and ensure they do not fall prey to the "ecological hysteria" caused by constant news stories about environmental calamities. Godly environmental stewardship should start in the home with the training up of children to have a strong Biblical worldview. This can be accomplished not just by reading through Scripture but also by modeling common daily stewardship with in their households. Christians should consider simply actions of obedience such as recycling, composting, use of eco-cleaners, energy and water conservation, and using sustainable products. Moreover, Christ followers ought to contemplate founding or joining local Christian organizations that are involved with cleaning up area communities such as the "Ray of Hope" organization in Philadelphia. They can also become involved nationally and internationally by joining groups such as the Evangelical Environmental Network that "educates, inspires, and mobilizes Christians in their effort to care for God's creation, to be faithful stewards of God's provision". Enigmatically, many Christians with missionary hearts already practice the Lord's command to "...to visit orphans and widows in their affliction..." (James 1:27, NIV) but they do not associate it with being an environmental steward. It would be unusual to be part of any international missionary group today that does not help to provide clean water and sanitation, restore the course of lakes or rivers, plant crops, stop soil erosion, provide medical care for zoonotic diseases, or deliver more efficient and cleaner resources for cooking and transportation. It is by addressing these issues that missionaries are able to gain access to countries and are welcomed by local populations, paving the way to share the Gospel. The group, Creation Care, has a maxim, "environmental problems are sin problems". What we mean is that the root causes of every environmental issue in some way gets back to flawed human beings and sinful hearts: Materialism, greed, selfishness, fear. All of these lie at the root of the things that we do as individuals and as a society that have produced the crisis we now find ourselves in. So a real solution to the crisis in creation is to find a way to heal human hearts. Additionally, a Christian should be aware of environmental legislation. Both Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 specifically speak about God's authority, His design for the government, and the Christian's call to participate and be subjected to its processes. (See figure 5 for the "Hold BP Accountable") Most importantly, it is imperative to recognize that God cares most for his children, that He desires to re-

In conclusion, Christians can have a positive influence on society by embracing the Dominion Mandate: "(1) Creation is the launching pad for the Gospel, (2) Creation care strengthens our Gospel witness, (3) Living out the Gospel includes caring for creation, and (4) ignoring environmental problems heaps shame on the Gospel". Perhaps many Christians find it difficult to fully associate with the environmental movement due to their proclivity to worship the creation rather than the Creator; however, that is not a valid excuse for disobeying God. Just as Satan caused the "curse" and "fall" of man corrupting the good plan of God, he also corrupted the original founding of the environmental movement so that it no longer points to God. Exacerbating the situation, political parties hunger for power and control and attach themselves to particular movements further marginalizing people. Nevertheless, this is not a reason to disengage from the political process but rather should spur the believer into action. A Christian must keep the issue of the environment in perspective remembering that God is in control and will return one day to cleanse the earth from sin and regenerate it as referenced in 2 Peter 3:7-12 and in Revelation chapters 21 and 22. This does not mean they should not worry about environmental concerns as Beisner wisely points out that, "Dominion is no license for abuse, but neither is stewardship a barrier to lawful use—lawful being defined, ...not by environmentalists' whims but by God's moral revelation in the Ten Commandments and their amplification throughout Scripture". To be clear, environmental stewardship is not a salvific issue, although it is a command that was clearly laid out by God as a means to benefit man and ultimately to bring Him glory. Brown, Driver, and Briggs note that when Genesis 1:26-28 speaks of the "Dominion Mandate", it uses the word "Râdâhâl" that means "dominion, reign, to prevail against, and rule" yet, as with many Hebrew words, it also means "subjugation, to tread down upon, and even crumble off". This provides the child of God with a profound word picture of the tremendous amount of harm that can ensue from the misinterpretation of Scriptural directives. Similarly, Christ followers must consider how much of the poor rely on natural resources to survive. It is human nature to assume that another will rise up and fulfill the mandate in economically depressed areas or foreign lands however, Solomon warns that "the one who oppresses the poor insults his Creator, but whoever shows favor to the needy honors Him" (Proverbs 14:31, NET). A Christian does not have to make radical changes to their lives to start modeling environmental stewardship. Meditating on God's intricate design for lift should reveal His deep devotion to His creation thereby making it also important to His children. As Christians follow God's command to fulfill the "Great Commission" they allow for more of mankind to obey the "Dominion Mandate". While believers should take joy in the abundance God has blessed them with, they need to balance that with stewardship. The two new commandments given by Christ serve to remind His followers that obedience to God is always demonstrated through action as was displayed for mankind by His ultimate sacrifice. Maybe Christians ought to reconsider just how much the "know" God. Those who have God's truth within them will manifest God's character.

Whatever you are doing, work at it with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not for people, because you know that you will receive your inheritance from the Lord as the reward. Serve the Lord Christ. For the one who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there are no exceptions (Colossians 3:23, NET).

References


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Jesus replied to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'" An Understandable Version. Jesus replied, (Deut. 6:5) "'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and the greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Life can be a beautiful journey, if you have the right perspective.