

# Toward a Biblical Theology of the Environment

by John A. Davies

## Part 2 of 2: Rebellion and Resurrection

### Rebellion

The second major theological point of reference, anticipated above, is the rebellion of the human race against its Creator God and the far-reaching effect this has had on our physical environment and our relationship with it.

This world as we presently experience it is an aberration. Illness and death are abnormal experiences. Pollution, famine, and cyclones are the consequences (direct and indirect) of our rebellion. Even the most pessimistic contemporary projections of environmental catastrophe cannot match the language of Jeremiah 4, or that of the author of the visions of Revelation 8 and 9. These biblical authors lay the blame for their cataclysmic scenarios at the feet of mankind.

We read in Genesis 3 of God's "curse" on the ground. The word "curse" is not, of course, to be thought of in terms of an uncontrolled outburst of temper. Rather it is the fixed and righteous response of a holy God to the subversion of the proper order of things. Curse is the opposite of blessing. Blessing has to do with people and the things around them functioning properly in relation to God's intentions. Blessing is often portrayed, for example, in terms of the coming of rain, the fertility of crops and vines and the well-being of flocks and herds. Cursing, then, is a deliberate pronouncement that all is not well, that the creation order of things has been violated. It is a judgment commensurate with the nature of the offence. Ecclesiastes portrays the effects of the curse thus: "What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted" (Ecclesiastes 1:15). It invites us to "consider what God has done," asking, "Who can straighten what he has made crooked?" (Ecclesiastes 7:13). The apostle Paul expressed the current relationship of the physical universe to the Creator in these words, "The creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it" (Romans 8:20).

Biblical realism demands that we take account of the fallen condition of our world. We realise that it will not be by our efforts that an environmental utopia will be ushered in. But this does not mean that we are not to strive to overcome the effects of sin. Though we fail to arrive at perfection in this present age, we press on towards the goal. We do this on the basis of God's promise to overcome the effects of the curse

(Genesis 3:15) and the outworking of this promise in the redemptive work of Christ (see below).

This is so in every area, including that of our environment. Thorns and weeds there will be, but we do not despair. Just as we rightly work at alleviating human sickness and suffering, so we expend our sweat in overcoming, at least in partial ways, the effects of the curse on the ground. In this, we must realise that our “cures” will have their side-effects, and it will often be a case of finding the least harmful of the alternatives.

The inbuilt frustrations to which the earth is now subject are compounded by our selfishness. In our greed, we display an insatiable appetite for more consumer goods, to the point where we deprive others of even the basic necessities for life. We will need to rethink our attitude toward economic growth and an ever increasing “standard of living.” The true cost of our consumer goods is to be calculated on the basis of a sustainable use of resources, costing in factors for recycling or safe waste disposal. If this is to be achieved, we must resist our ingrained approach to the “cost of living” which dictates that wages must rise by at least the same percentage as prices. Stewardship of the environment will be costly.

We also need to consider from a Christian framework the role of the state in regulating such matters. While many Christians would argue for a laissez-faire approach to market forces, a good case can be made for the position that the state’s role in promoting good and restraining evil (Romans 13) extends to fostering the protection of our human environment — the earth, water, and air, the plant and animal life on which our livelihood and well-being depend. Christians ought to be urging the state to exercise its responsibility to create the conditions (with appropriate incentives and disincentives) for long-term environmental care. The individual consumer ought not to have to pay a penalty for purchasing dolphin-safe tuna and unbleached paper products if the benefits of this choice are shared by the whole society. On a Christian understanding of our self-seeking nature, we have no reason to hope that every person will act in the best interests of society if it is not also made to be in his or her own best interest.

## **Resurrection**

At first glance, the Christian doctrine of the resurrection would seem to have little to do with ecological concerns. Ecology has to do with the here and now, while the resurrection would seem to be concerned with the hereafter.

But it is the doctrine of the resurrection, beginning with the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the “firstfruits” (1 Corinthians 15), which brings hope not only for us as individuals, but for the world we share. The choice of “resurrection” here rather than the more customary “redemption” is deliberate. First, it draws our attention to a much neglected aspect of the work of Christ. We focus in too restricted a manner on his death as the saving event, and fail to see that the Resurrection has redemptive significance (resurrection, that is, as the culmination and vindication of the saving event, not in isolation from the Cross, as Romans 4:25).<sup>1</sup> Secondly, it serves to bring into sharper focus the goal in view for the creation rather than the means by which this end is achieved.

The quotation from Romans 8 above was incomplete, for the context (particularly vv. 18 to 25) is about the reconciliation of the physical universe. This is closely linked with the future bodily redemption of believers. Then the creation will be “liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.” The present period of agonising anticipation is like that of a woman groaning in the labour ward.

The reconciliation of all things — “things on earth” and “things in heaven” — is dependent on the work of Christ, the “image of the invisible God” in whom the fullness of God is to be seen, and who, following his peace-making work on the cross, became “the firstborn from among the dead” (Colossians 1:15-20).

The resurrection of Christ, the guarantee of our resurrection, gives significance to the whole of our physical world. So, too, does his incarnation. But it is the Resurrection which, following the judgment of God on sin, preeminently demonstrates God’s commitment not to walk away from his creation, but to be fully, personally and permanently identified with it.

The stress in the Bible is consistently on the earth as the sphere of God’s saving activity. It is to this world that he sent his Son. It is our flesh which he has taken on, and which, now transformed and glorified, he shares with us for eternity. It is to this earth that he is to return to reign forever. It is to this earth that the heavenly Jerusalem is pictured as coming down. The hope of Christians is not a future disembodied state in some ethereal realm, but a resurrection body, like that of Jesus. This renewed body has its home on a renewed earth from which every form of pollution has been removed. God has not allowed the effects of our rebellion (destruction and death) to frustrate his good purposes. All things will be made new.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *The Centrality of the Resurrection: a Study in Paul’s Soteriology*, Baker (Grand Rapids, 1978).

This goes beyond a mere restoration of things as they were in the beginning. It is a glorious fulfillment and transformation of all of the potential that was there in the garden. Consider the symbolism of the gold and the precious stones, which are no longer buried under the ground, but which now adorn the city (Revelation 21).

The whole of God's saving plan has been moving towards the restoration and the perfection of our relationship with the physical environment, just as much as it has been concerned with the restoration of our relationship with God and with other people.

This is not a prescription for complacency, as though we can sit back and wait passively for the resurrection. Rather it is the encouragement we need to spur us on in our present struggle. We live with the knowledge that the battle has been won through the victory of Christ. The resurrection is the vindication of all of God's creative and recreative purposes. Each seemingly small act of conservation or reclamation finds its significance in the light of the ultimate cosmic restoration which began with the victory over sin and death in the person of Christ.

The humanist ultimately has no solutions. We may learn much from non-Christians concerning the nature and scope of the problems we face. We may commend and work with those who demonstrate a concern for the environment in many ways. But humanism has ultimately nothing to offer beyond a pronouncement of doom upon this planet, and (paradoxically) some cheap romantic notions and quick technological fixes.

The Christian community is well placed to set a lead, both at the neighbourhood and global levels. The Christian church has a revealed truth, and it has the structures which make it feasible to refine and communicate approaches to conservation. Our role as "salt" is as a preservative, restraining the tendencies around us to environmental degradation as much as those towards moral corruption, for both are a perversion of God's purposes. This will involve us in supporting government and private initiatives to this end, as well as in making personal adjustments in lifestyle.

There is much that can be done, and it is to be hoped that Christians with more technical expertise will exercise their minds within a Christian framework and help us all in implementing practical approaches to a more obedient and responsible fulfillment of the mandate to be stewards of the earth.