

Keepers of the garden: Christians and the environment

by John T. Baldwin

How should we respond, as responsible stewards, to the ecological crisis we face today?

God created the earth "to be inhabited" (Isaiah 45:18, NIV). This means that our earthly habitat is not a fortuitous accidental phenomenon of little worth, but rather, it is one to be highly valued and preserved.¹

Unfortunately, because of wrongful interactions by human beings with the environment, an ecological crisis is underway. Some scientists suggest that "we are living on borrowed time, and tragically, we are borrowing the time from coming generations....The longer this current generation puts off coming to terms with the carrying capacity of the biosphere—living sustainable—the harder it will be for future generations to make it."²

How should we as Christians respond to the ecological crisis we face today? How should we be responsible stewards of our divinely designed home? An appropriate step would be to understand the biblical basis of ecology, the reality of the ecological crisis, and some positive measures we can adopt.

Biblical bases of ecology

The biblical doctrine of creation helps the Christian to understand the true significance of the world in order to deal with the environmental crisis. Because Christ is the Creator (John 1:1-3), He is the Lord of creation, rendering the environment of the Earth very precious, even in its fallen condition.

The first angel's message in Revelation 14:7 carries significant environmental implications. The angel calls all inhabitants of Earth to "worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters"(KJV).

The specific items mentioned here refer to realities created on the second and third days of creation.³ This means that the angel is focusing specifically on the creation of the original Earth habitats, namely, the atmosphere (Genesis 1:6-8), the sea basins, and the-land forms (Genesis 1:9, 10).

According to Genesis 1, after creating the land, God calls the Earth "good" (Genesis 1:10). In other words, the life-sustaining habitats are indeed good, and should be so considered by all Christians. God fills the habitats by calling into existence the great forests, plants, and fruit trees, and then calls this vegetation "good" (Genesis 1:12). It is necessary, therefore, for us today to consider our forests as "good" and valuable, and to care properly for them. Later the Genesis account describes God as filling the sea basin habitats with aquatic creatures of all kinds, and the atmospheric environment with birds, all pronounced "good" (Genesis 1:20-25). God completes the work of filling the land environment by creating animals and by His crowning work, the creation of human beings who display His image (Genesis 1:26). God declares all of these to be "very good" (Genesis 1:31).

The Genesis narrative provides an additional, environmentally significant insight with its instructions to the first human pair: "God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28, KJV). Human beings were to "rule" over

the subhuman world in the same loving, tender, faithful way as God ruled over human beings.

Moreover, God Himself planted a garden and gave it to Adam and Eve with the environmental instruction "to dress [or to maintain, cultivate] it and to keep it" (Genesis 2:25, KJV). Here is what we might call the very first Environmental Protection Act, stated by God Himself.⁴ This kind of care was appropriate not only for the garden, but also for the wider world. Because the first pair serves as the example in God's Word for all succeeding generations, all human beings are in some sense to be "keepers of the garden," i.e., good stewards of our planet home.

Later God told the Israelites that the Earth must be given opportunity to renew itself; hence the observance of an annual Sabbath every seventh year (Leviticus 25:2-8). In this way, each Israelite was responsible for helping to maintain the vitality of the soil.⁵ Charles Bradford summarizes the implications of this for Christian responsibility for Earth care as follows: "The stewardship of the earth, which God entrusted to Adam and Eve, still belongs to their descendants. We who inhabit the planet are responsible for its care. In the final judgment, the 'destroyers of the earth' are destroyed (Revelation 11:18)."⁶ Using the same Bible text, Miroslav Kiš refers to the "*principle of protection of the earth*" and observes that Christians will refrain from careless destruction of the environment.⁷ An end-time command recorded in Revelation affirms: "Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees . . ." (Revelation 7:3, KJV). These words indicate that God cares about the preservation of the Earth, water, and the forests of the planet, and that destroying them is regarded as harming them.

Kiš unpacks another biblical principle relevant to the stewardship of nature, which he calls the "*principle of simplicity*."⁸ This principle would curb the extravagant lifestyle of many inhabit-

ants of the affluent countries, which is a main culprit responsible for the bleak future of this planet. He also points out the benefits of a simple lifestyle as potential sources of feeding the hungry, saving money and resources, conserving gas, electricity, and water.⁹

The reality of the ecological crisis

According to Bernard Nebel and Richard Wright, four basic principles are essential for achieving a sustainable ecosystem, the goal of the environmental movement. They are: (1) recycling elements in order to dispose of wastes and replenish nutrients; (2) using solar energy; (3) maintaining the size of consumer populations to prevent overgrazing; and (4) maintaining biodiversity.¹⁰ An ecological crisis exists when any of these principles are compromised.

Consider, for example, some well-publicized compromises in the third and fourth principles. The deforestation of the rain forests is a good illustration of over-harvesting by human beings. More than 40 million acres of tropical rainforests are being lost annually to deforestation.¹¹ This reduction of valuable biomass generates serious environmental concern, in light of scientific consensus that the tropical rain forest belt is responsible for about 40 percent of the world's supply of oxygen.¹²

Overgrazing is also frequently practiced by poor people in many parts of the world as they pick the hillsides bare in their search for firewood. A Zimbabwe newspaper reported that "a lot of villagers in the area were cutting down trees randomly for burning their homemade bricks, usually near water sources like dams." The article commented: "We are concerned because a lot of people are now preferring to build their houses using bricks than mud and a lot of trees have been destroyed near dams and boreholes. We hope that a better way of burning the bricks should be looked into."¹³

Titus Matemavi writes concerning

biomass overgrazing on the African continent: "It is disheartening to note that abuse of nature in Zimbabwe is apparent in several ways. First, there is a lot of careless cutting down of trees and unnecessary burning of grass. Trees are used as poles to build wooden huts and storage places, in addition to being used as firewood. In rural areas or communal lands, firewood is the main source of energy for cooking and warming houses during winter. It is also the source of light during the night. As a result, many places in the rural areas which were once thick forests (the pride of Africa) have now been reduced to semi-desert areas."¹⁴

Compromises in maintaining eco-diversity balance illustrate the importance of the fourth principle of ecosystem sustainability. Acid rain, an atmospheric pollutant, is one of the serious environmental impacts of burning fossil fuel such as coal. Coal-burning power plants emit sulfur dioxide and nitrous oxide gases, which mix with water vapor in the atmosphere, hydroxyl radicals, and sunlight, resulting in a so-called "soup" of sulfuric and nitric acid compounds.¹⁵ These acids fall to the ground either in "dry fallout" or in precipitation known as "acid rain."¹⁶

Burning fossil fuels contributes to another environmental problem. When ignited, these fuels release carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, which contributes to the condition known as global warming, due to the greenhouse effect. This problem is noted in a recent Seventh-day Adventist statement on environmental issues: "Scientists warn that the gradual warming of the atmosphere as a result of human activity will have serious environmental consequences. The climate will change, resulting in more storms, more floods, and more droughts."¹⁷

As a final illustration of the ecological crisis, the debated ozone hole over Antarctica, while still under discussion, may present serious environmental con-

cern. The ozone shield surrounding our earth absorbs ultraviolet radiation which, if unfiltered, could destroy most life on Earth.¹⁸ Studies show that in humans, ozone depletion can cause suppression of the immune system, skin cancer, and cataracts.¹⁹

These few cases represent only a small percentage of the environmental

problems that we face, but they help to illustrate the need for positive action.

Positive environmental steps

The concerned Christian's imagination is the only limit in creating positive ways of nurturing the habitat divinely entrusted to our care. Perhaps first of all we can declare our strong personal sup-

port of Earth care as a sacred, central duty, and privilege of all Christians.

Second, church bodies can make statements affirming the need for environmental sensitivity. In 1992, the Annual Council of the Seventh-day Adventist Church voted a document entitled "Caring for Creation," which outlines the church's position on stewardship of the Earth. According to Seventh-day Adventist understanding, the preservation and nurture of the surrounding world is intimately related to the service of the Creator. (See sidebar.)

In addition to formal statements, individual Christian actions do make a difference. The key is, Will we by the grace of God reflect the true image of the Creator in dealing with this life-sustaining Earth habitat? Just as we can glorify God by the care we give to our bodies, so also we can glorify God by the care we give to our environment. Like any truly successful business, good management is crucial. As goes the management, so goes the enterprise. As go the human stewards, so goes our planet.

Changes in personal lifestyle practices can help. We can use compost for gardens. Recycling can become a part of our conscious effort. Alternate methods of transportation can be adopted where possible. In Tokyo most people do not own a car, but ride bicycles to train stations in order to utilize efficient means of getting to work. We can support quality environmental organizations such as the Nature Conservancy, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the World Wildlife Fund, the Audubon Society, the John Muir Society, and many others. Authors, professors, and preachers can utilize their pens and voices with lectures, articles, and sermons on eco-justice, a biblical theme showing that God is good both to humans and nonhuman earthly realities.²⁰

Learning to think environmentally can lead to a love of nature and thus to its preservation. Dennis Woodland, of

Caring for Creation

*A Seventh-day Adventist Statement on the Environment**

The world in which we live is a gift of love from the Creator God, from "Him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water" (Revelation 14:7; 11:17, 18). Within this creation He placed humans, set intentionally in relationship with Himself, other persons, and the surrounding world. Therefore, as Seventh-day Adventists, we hold its preservation and nurture to be intimately related to our service to Him.

God set aside the seventh-day Sabbath as a memorial and perpetual reminder of His creative act and establishment of the world. In resting on that day, Seventh-day Adventists reinforce the special sense of relationship with the Creator and his creation. Sabbath observance underscores the importance of our integration with the total environment.

The human decision to disobey God broke the original order of creation, resulting in a disharmony alien to His purposes. Thus our air and waters are polluted, forests and wildlife plundered, and natural resources exploited. Because we recognize humans as part of God's creation, our concern for the environment extends to personal health and lifestyle. We advocate a wholesome manner of living and reject the use of substances such as tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs that harm the body and consume earth's re-

sources; and we promote a simple vegetarian diet.

Seventh-day Adventists are committed to respectful, cooperative relationships among all persons, recognizing our common origin and realizing our human dignity as a gift from the Creator. Since human poverty and environmental degradation are interrelated, we pledge ourselves to improve the quality of life for all people. Our goal is a sustainable development of resources while meeting human needs.

Genuine progress toward caring for our natural environment rests upon both personal and cooperative effort. We accept the challenge to work toward restoring God's overall design. Moved by faith in God, we commit ourselves to promote the healing that rises at both personal and environmental levels from integrated lives dedicated to serve God and humanity.

In this commitment we confirm our stewardship of God's creation and believe that total restoration will be complete only when God makes all things new.

* This statement was adopted on October 1992 by the delegates attending the Annual Council of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. For other statements on the environment check the website www.adventist.org

Andrews University, gave the following advice to students: (1) Become energy-use conscious; (2) Become an eco-consumer when you shop; (3) Begin recycling domestic waste; (4) Encourage your institution to make its campus an arboretum; (5) Label campus trees to encourage care and appreciation of God's green earth; (7) Support local conservation groups; (8) Spend more time in nature; (9). "Think globally, act locally."²¹

Christians should no longer be captive to the assumption of much of modern culture, which severs God from the creation and subjects the creation to humanity's arrogant power. We need to embrace the cosmos as the creation of Jesus Christ. Taking this vision to heart permits us to praise God daily, as by faith we discern new instances of His superb workmanship and wonderful care in nature surrounding us. It enables us to wend our way with hope through the mixed signals we see in nature as it "groans and suffers...until now" (Romans 8:21), although, it "will be set free from its slavery to corruption" (Romans 8:20). God's redemptive work, through Christ, includes the natural world in the sense that it is honored by being re-created in the eschaton. In view of this, how important it is for Christians to honor and care for nature here and now—to be faithful keepers of the garden.

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Notes and references

1. An expanded version of this article was presented at the dialogue meeting between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, at Jongny, Switzerland, in April 2001.
2. Bernard J. Nebel and Richard T. Wright, *Environmental Science: The Way the World Works*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1993), p. 552.
3. William Shea, "The Controversy Over the Commandments," in *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11 (2000)1-2: 227.
4. For more on environmental legislation see Gregg Easterbrook, *A Moment on the Earth: The Coming Age of Environmental Optimism* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1995), p. xv.
5. Charles E. Bradford, "Stewardship," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. by Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 2000), p. 662.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Miroslav Kiš, "Christian Lifestyle and Behavior," in *Handbook*, p. 704.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Nebel and Wright, p. 85.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 430.
12. Personal interview with Dennis Woodland, June 10, 1997.
13. "Villagers Accused of Environmental Damage," *The Herald* (June 24, 1996), pp. 9,10.
14. Letter to the author, June 10, 1997.
15. Nebel and Wright, p. 361.
16. Payson R. Stevens and Kevin W. Kelley, *Embracing Earth: New Views of Our Changing Planet* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992), p. 125.
17. "GC Votes Statement on Dangers of Climate Change," *Adventist Review* (March 28, 1996), p. 7.
18. Nebel and Wright, p. 377.
19. Stevens and Kelley, p. 118.
20. See Dieter T. Hessel, *For Creation's Sake: Preaching, Ecology, and Justice* (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1985), p. 15.
21. See Dennis W. Woodland, "Christian Environmental Stewardship," *Lake Union Herald* (December 1996), pp. 12, 13.