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**CHRISTIANS AND THE ENVIRONMENT:  
A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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## CHRISTIANS AND THE ENVIRONMENT: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

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*We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road – the one "less traveled by" – offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.*

Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring*, 1962

### **Introduction: Choosing Between Two Roads:**

When Rachel Carson penned these words so long ago, she could not have foreseen the twists and turns her less traveled road would take. As she recalled Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken," in which each way was equally desirable, she only knew this was not the case with her two roads. I wonder if she might have also recalled the two roads in Jesus' parable about the broad and narrow ways.<sup>1</sup> Like Carson's more traveled road, the broad way in Jesus' story also ends in destruction, while the narrow way likewise leads to life. Realistically, Jesus also saw that but few would choose the narrow way. Is this also true of Carson's less traveled road?

Is there a place for the church, the church in general and our church in particular, on these two twisting toilsome roads – that is, on both Jesus' narrow way as well as on Carson's difficult road?

Forty-four years have elapsed since Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, was released. It has been a controversial work from the day of its publication. It is no less so now. Recently, for example, a group of fifteen "conservative scholars" listed it among the most harmful books of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>2</sup> In the intervening years since its publication, the church has had a difficult time finding its place in tending and keeping creation. Even today in the church, there is considerable ambivalence about what has come to be called the "Environmental Movement."

Why has the church had such difficulty finding its place? Which of the two roads should we be on? What should we be doing? In this essay I will explore why the church has been so fitful, so uncertain of its niche, in so seemingly positive an endeavor, and specifically how we as Adventists should relate to the needs of creation, needs that are now made more acute by years of neglect and abuse. I wonder if greater involvement by the church in environmentalism would help or hinder the cause of the Gospel. Would it constitute a distraction from the real work of the church, or might it be part of what we're actually about?

### **Historical Perspective:**

The Bible is replete with creation affirming passages, starting with the original creation in Genesis and extending to the new creation in Revelation, in which there will be no

more curse. I will refer to a few such Bible passages, but there remain many others. Regenstein,<sup>3</sup> in his book, *Replenish the Earth*, chronicles organized religion's treatment of animals and nature, and notes biblical passages affirming kindness to animals while also noting God's concern for His creation. But sadly, even in biblical times, there was often a wide division between doctrine and application with the result that nature greatly suffered.

Jeremiah illustrated such failures when he wrote: "How long will the land mourn, and the herbs of the field wither? The beasts and birds are consumed, for the wickedness of those who dwell there..."<sup>4</sup> In the end, the yearly Sabbaths in which land was to have rested, and which Israel had failed to observe, were all kept at the same time during seventy years in exile.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, throughout history creation has often been a source of faith and inspiration. But then, tragically, attitudes changed.

Regenstein points out that while early Christians started well in relating to nature, the Middle Ages in Europe were characterized by great cruelty which extended into the nineteenth century and even to modern times, with significant exceptions when protective legislation was introduced.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, despite progress, wasting wilderness and natural resources has been widespread.

Perhaps it was with this dire history in mind, that in 1967 University of California science historian, Lynn White, published a pivotal paper in the journal *Science*<sup>7</sup> that challenged the church's equanimity and considerably focused attitudes on environmental issues. Sadly, this new focus has not always been positive, persistent or consistent. Entitled, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," White's paper placed major blame on Western society's Judeo-Christian roots. I well remember my own strong reaction and how I rejected White's accusation. Moreover, I was not alone; many believers reacted similarly.

The result was that the church's relative indifference, as revealed by a dearth of writings about nature and its preservation from a Christian perspective before *Silent Spring* and "Historical Roots," suddenly ended. Within three years of White's paper, according to Joseph Sheldon,<sup>8</sup> the average number of publications about nature coming from Christian sources, rose abruptly from a trickle to about forty-six or forty-seven each year, but with notable fluctuations. Some years realized significantly higher output.

What did White write that stimulated such a change in those who previously had been mostly silent? Key Bible passages for White were Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:7. White did not quote or even cite them, but referred to them this way: "And although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature; he is made in God's image." He continued with an observation he thought was a product of the "in God's image" relationship mankind was given at creation: "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen...(for) man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature."

White traced the development of science and technology in the West, which appears to have grown out of Western Christianity and its core belief that God is the Creator. Therefore, scholars thought the hand of God would be traceable in nature, and nature would be predictable, contrary to the petulant and capricious gods of the Greeks and others. By the eighteenth century, however, the "hypothesis" of God, as they came to think of God, had become unnecessary for many scientists. Notwithstanding, White thought that Western scientific thought was cast in a matrix of Christian theology, and that Christian attitudes about man's relationship with nature, as shaped by the "dominion" granted in Genesis, continued to prevail in Western society and culture, for Christians and post-Christians alike. Consequently, he felt that Christianity bears a "huge burden of guilt."

In 1994 I participated in a seminar at Newbold College in Britain, which was devoted

to the integration of faith and learning. In preparing for that event, I wrote an essay in which I reexamined the Christian's relationship with the environment and came to realize that, contrary to my earlier reaction, White had not been entirely wrong. Perhaps he overstated his case, but by then I had heard too many invoke "dominion" to excuse careless and greedy treatment of nature. It is not that western Christianity is solely to blame, as White seemed to suggest, for many non-Christians have also abused creation, but the problem I see is that so much abuse, enhanced by western technology, has come from the hands of people with a Christian tradition. Why?

Fundamentally, it must be our fallen natures that cause so much greedy exploitation at the expense of creation. Why have we been so indifferent? Shouldn't we have expected Christians to have at least slowed the destruction, if not made every effort to maintain a healthy environment? I do not wish to be unreasonably hard on past generations, but today with our scope and knowledge, should we not see things differently?

### **A Religious Solution:**

Finally, White made the observation: "Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not." This last observation is crucial, especially relative to how Christians face environmental issues. I believe it presents both challenges and opportunities.

Others, not noted for being religious, have similarly echoed the call for a religious solution, including Carl Sagan<sup>9</sup> who pleaded for a joint commitment by both science and religion to preserve earth. Sagan died true to his materialist beliefs, yet he was willing to use religion. Renowned Harvard entomologist, E. O. Wilson, made a similar appeal. Atmospheric scientist, James Lovelock agrees.<sup>10</sup> Wilson is described as an atheist and Lovelock agnostic. Their appeal for religion to help is, I believe, a frank admission that science cannot save the world, but that a spiritual force is needed to complete the job.

It is difficult to know what sort of religion Sagan, Wilson, and Lovelock had in mind, but can religion be expected to simply bend to a need whenever it appears? Bible based religion must first find answers in Scripture, not just blindly accommodate to someone's perceived problem. However and fortunately, there is abundant biblical support for preserving creation. Nevertheless, it appears that many believers either don't see their roles clearly, or they may be confused. Indeed, much is said to adherents of Christianity about environmentalism that may be confusing.

In a poll reported in *Christianity Today*, those interviewed were asked to evaluate the statement: "Because God created the world, it's wrong to abuse it."<sup>11</sup> Most agreed. Yet, the same article points out that environmentalism has no prominent place in the evangelical agenda, and that while individual adherents might agree with the above statement, most tend to hold their views in private. What then, is preventing action?

White, in saying that the solution to the environmental crisis would have to be religious, suggested that we should ponder the ways of Saint Francis of Assisi. I mention this specifically, for he clearly looks for the solution in a new Christianity. However, Saint Francis doesn't seem to have an answer. Maybe Francis Schaeffer saw things more clearly. He noted: "...that Christianity does not automatically have the answer, it has to be the right kind of Christianity."<sup>12</sup> I believe and will try to show that Adventist thinking about God, creation, life, and nature, has much to offer this discussion.

Calvin DeWitt,<sup>13</sup> a Christian environmentalist, compared creation to a large painting.

This is a common metaphor. But DeWitt adds to it in interesting ways. On one side, a group of art critics is carefully examining and analyzing every aspect of the painting. Another group is busily destroying the painting to turn it into cheap merchandise. We have no difficulty identifying the second group, but who are the art critics? Could they represent scientists? Might scientists, while seeing details in nature, miss the big picture? Strangely, there is no group in DeWitt's metaphor simply admiring this marvelous work, trying to fathom its deeper meaning. Here again, I believe Adventists have much to offer. What about Sabbath, God's signature on His art? Creation gives us reasons to treasure and preserve this gift; Sabbath validates Creator and creation, and reminds us to care.

In researching "Christian environmentalism,"<sup>14</sup> I encountered several challenges that seem to impede positive action by conservative Christians. It is important to discuss these issues, I believe, because they are frequently voiced, are quite pervasive in the print and electronic media, and may unduly color opinions. Not every believer may be conscious of these roadblocks to action, but they may still be part of one's cultural background. In discussing these, I will try to incorporate ideas from Adventist thought.

In continuing this essay, I will discuss five problem areas that prevent positive Christian responses to environmental needs, particularly on the part of more conservative believers. Not everyone who opposes environmental action necessarily subscribes to all five impediments, although many appear to hold to more than one, and it seems that not a few subscribe to all five.

I should add that a sixth impediment is possible. When some believers develop the view that environmental action is both biblical and necessary, others, convinced that environmental protection is wrong for Christians, may oppose them and even apply coercive pressure to prevent action.<sup>15</sup> I will give an example of this later in the essay,<sup>16</sup> but I do not include it with the five listed below, as it is an outgrowth from them.

Succinctly, the five major challenges are:

- Misunderstanding the image of God, filling earth and having dominion, and tending and keeping the garden
- New Age and neo-pagan environmentalism
- Misunderstanding the nature of life, death, and future existence
- Suspicion of science
- Environmentalism and eschatology

### **Five Impediments**

#### **Challenge 1. Misunderstanding the Image of God, Filling Earth and Having Dominion, and Tending and Keeping the Garden:**

Joseph Sheldon<sup>17</sup> noted that Christian reactions to White were twofold. One approach was to reexamine the church's theology regarding nature, while a second reaction was to resoundingly deny that Scripture teaches a dominionistic, utilitarian attitude towards creation, rather than one based on loving and nurturing care. But, ignorant of White's charges perhaps, other believers continue to confirm exactly what he said. It is the view of this latter group, since it is not uncommon, that I wish to address.

An example of such a confirmation came to my attention several years ago. I had

received an e-mail containing an appealing account of a journey into the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), a region of considerable controversy in recent years. The austere and isolated beauty of that fragile, but relatively unspoiled, ecosystem drew me into the story. Large herds of caribou and flocks of water birds, along with large predators, such as wolves and polar bears, give the region the name, "Serengeti of the North." The article also contrasted the ANWR lands with an adjacent region where oil is extracted.

After reading this story, I did something I seldom do. I shared the account with several friends. One was a former pastor of our small congregation. His response surprised me, as he dismissed the account altogether, missing the entire drama of ANWR, but noting that he had seen oil company operations in Louisiana and knew oil companies would never despoil the land. That the arctic tundra is an extremely fragile ecosystem lacking resilience was not taken into account. Moreover, he went on, "Didn't God give us dominion over the creatures?" There it is! I think this was intended to end discussion. It did for me!

I believe this pastor, and many others like him have misunderstood the biblical concept of "dominion." Thus, it may be helpful to examine this problem more closely.

Consider Genesis 1:27 & 28 and 2:15 together:

So God created man in His own image; in the same image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply: fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend it and keep it.

These verses are sometimes read together to suggest that "subdue" and "have dominion" really mean, "tend and keep." Having dominion is thereby made to imply stewardship, and while we do not argue with the necessity for stewardship, "subdue" and "have dominion" in the original Hebrew are strong words that are more in harmony with conquest. We need to harmonize such words with "tend and keep"

Lockton<sup>18</sup> points out that these words *kabash* (subdue) and *radah* (have dominion) fundamentally mean "to place one's foot on the neck of the vanquished" and "trample" as in treading grapes in a wine press. However, Wieland and Sarfati<sup>19</sup> point out that in other biblical passages, such as in Micah 7:19, Leviticus 25:43, and 1 Kings 4:24, 25, these same words have a gentler demeanor. Therefore, brutality is not always or necessarily implied. Certainly, people were to be benign rulers, but I see even more. How should we understand "subdue" and "have dominion" in the context of "tend and keep?" The answer appears vital to a correct relationship with the environment.

When we read "subdue" and "have dominion" along with "tend and keep," which could just as well be translated, "serve and protect," it almost appears as if the two ideas are in opposition. But that can't be. Try as we might, however, it still seems difficult to harmonize the two ideas. But, would God instruct Adam and Eve to tend and keep while also telling them to tear apart what He had just called good, and even very good? Hardly! Our task will be to harmonize the two ideas that almost appear irreconcilable.

It has been suggested that the commands, "subdue" and "have dominion," given their original meaning, although spoken by God to newly created man, should be understood as

applying to an as yet future time after the fall. Thus, they would have been instructions for dealing with future less than perfect conditions. But would it not be strange and discouraging to address newly created man in the understanding that he would fail? Given that God called creation good and even very good, instituted the Sabbath creation celebration, and even instructed man to tend and keep creation, permission for mindless exploitation appears out of character, unsatisfactory and, in fact, out of context.

As presented, “subdue” and “have dominion” actually appear, in part at least, to qualify the expression, “Image of God,” and as such, must be in harmony with that powerful and positive quality in newly created man. Moreover, “subdue,” within the larger “Image of God” context, appears to be qualified by the command, “fill the earth.” We should note that other creatures were also told to multiply and fill.<sup>20</sup>

Genesis 2 suggests that earth was not full before, or even after God created Eden and placed man in it. Eden was described as being in the east, implying that it occupied an exact location. And when Adam and Eve sinned, they were ousted from the garden, further suggesting that Eden was indeed a real, but restricted place.

What was it like outside the garden? We have little information on this, but evidently there was room for expansion. This has caused me to wonder if Eden had not only been created as the home of our first parents, but also as a pattern and resource for expansion to other parts of earth. In order to develop new gardens, man was also given authority or dominion to accomplish the task.

Ellen White, in *My Life Today*,<sup>21</sup> hints about the idea of enlarging the garden to fill earth. She pictures life in the restored earth and “the garden of delight, a sample of the perfect work of God’s creation, untouched by the curse of sin – a sample of what the whole earth would have become had man but fulfilled the Creator’s glorious plan.”<sup>22</sup> Again in *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets*,<sup>23</sup> Ellen White writes: “the home of our first parents was to be a pattern for other homes as their children should go forth to occupy the earth.” She adds: “That home, beautified by the hand of God Himself, was not a gorgeous palace. Men, in their pride, delight in magnificent and costly edifices and glory in the works of their own hands; but God placed Adam in a garden.”

What was the dominion relationship like? Isaiah 11:6 contains a description of man’s association and bond with animals in the future restored earth: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.”<sup>24</sup> In this description of the new earth, even a little child leads large animals, which would not be possible without their willing cooperation. This picture suggests that in the beginning, dominion was likewise more a response to man by nature, rather than one exacted by man.

The instructions, “subdue” and “have dominion” are not the same as “tend and keep.” That is clear enough, but neither is the instruction to “tend and keep” in opposition to “subdue” and “have dominion.” They are, as we have seen, in harmony with each other when correctly understood and followed.

Conditions are no longer ideal, as we well know, although a possible vestige of the original relationship may still be seen in responses of domestic animals and pets today. After the Great Flood, animals became fearful of people. Genesis 9:2 records that the “fear of you and the terror of you shall be on every beast of the earth...” Man has lost his dominion, and to a considerable degree the image of God as well. However, and happily too, all is not lost, for in 2 Corinthians 3:18 we find the image being restored by the Holy Spirit. Moreover, Romans 8:21, tells how creation will be delivered from bondage when the sons of God are revealed.

While this will be most true in an ultimate sense when earth is made over new, and the “sons of God” fully revealed, can it not also happen, in some degree now?

Earth with its creatures was a gift from the Creator, but creation has now been greatly damaged, the gift disdained. Imagine what the Creator must feel about how mankind has taken the dominion relationship he originally enjoyed and turned it into the “dominion mandate,” suggesting that we not only may, but, in fact, must exploit creation. In the original Hebrew, having dominion is an imperative, but not the imperative to destroy. Naturally, life requires giving and taking, but it was to be with all due consideration and care.

Contrary to the “dominion mandate,” as it is commonly understood, I believe that “Dominion” does not in anyway imply or condone abuse, or covetous exploitation. A correct understanding of the original relationship man had with nature will be seen as anything but transcendent, indifferent, or coercive. Although God is transcendent, He is also personally involved in the affairs of this world. And so should we.

Paul, addressing Athenians, said: “... in Him we live and move and have our being...” Every day is a miracle, if we will but see it. We have no permission to destroy earth and damage and unbalance ecosystems; they’re our God-given life support systems. It is important to see this and put “subdue” and “have dominion” in their proper settings.

## **Challenge 2. New Age and Neo-Pagan Environmentalism:**

About the time that White published his “Historical Roots” paper, atmospheric scientist James Lovelock was designing instruments for NASA to detect whether or not life existed on Mars.<sup>25</sup> In the process of looking at Mars’ atmosphere, Lovelock realized that it was very different from ours. He interpreted this to mean there was no life on Mars, that the Martian atmosphere was in a state of static equilibrium and unable to support life. But then he thought about earth’s dynamic atmosphere, which is so vital for sustaining life, and decided that our atmosphere is actually maintained by the very life it supports. In many ways, this understanding is intuitive and confirmed by the oxygen, carbon, water, and nitrogen cycles, and other biological and ecological processes. Lovelock began to metaphorically think of earth as like a living cell with its creatures serving as organelles.

One morning when on his regular walk, Lovelock fell in step with a neighbor, Nobel Prize-winning novelist William Golding, and told him about his idea. Golding said the idea needed a name and suggested “Gaia” after the Greek goddess of earth. Lovelock liked and adopted the name, and ever since nothing has been the same.

Lovelock’s “Gaia Hypothesis” has been very controversial, largely because it was enthusiastically adopted and promoted by neo-pagan New Agers. They took Gaia to higher imaginary levels, believing her far more than a mere metaphor. The idea of earth being a super-organism had great appeal and, in the hands New Agers, earth became “Mother-Earth.” In their eyes, we are all part of a whole, and all are part of God. They hold a pantheistic view of life. Thus they protect earth. This is how environmentalism became associated with neo-paganism and what many saw as a left-leaning liberal agenda. Conservative Christians wanted nothing to do with either one.

In response, many Bible believing Christians pulled away from any positive beginning in response to White’s paper. Incidentally, White himself, has been described as evangelical; in his paper he claims to be a “churchman.” The evangelical church was first alerted to the New Age movement, along with its environmentalist connection, in 1983<sup>26</sup> by the writings of Dave Hunt and Constance Cumbey.<sup>27</sup> The unfortunate association of environmentalism with



the New Age Movement as a result of Lovelock's adoption of "Gaia," opened a wide divide between conservative Christians and environmentalism.

The New Age Movement is undoubtedly satanic, but to condemn all Christians with environmental concerns as heretics, as Cumbey and Hunt did, is quite another thing. Sheldon wrote: "The New Age movement is a real threat to the church and must be addressed. But Cumbey is incorrect to suggest that the Lord is not interested in His Creation and has not placed us in a position of authority for its care."

The outcome of the New Age connection with environmentalism was that many Christians were persuaded that environmentalism was not a Christian's concern. This has been particularly true for more conservative believers. Even so, there is no unanimity, even in their ranks. Some mainline churches have been more receptive to environmentalism,<sup>28</sup> but recently the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) almost backed a pro-environment statement. Its task then would have been to persuade its 30 million members, who are notoriously suspicious of science, to care about the environment.<sup>29</sup> Later reports, however, indicated that under pressure from other evangelical leaders, the NAE backed down on its statement about global warming.<sup>30</sup> This illustrates the sixth impediment. Still a group of 86 Christian leaders is bravely pressing on.

Many believers consider issues in isolation; reactions to environmentalism's pantheistic pagan association may not be balanced by understanding the Creator's charge to tend and keep. Ray Bohlin<sup>31</sup> warns that because environmentalism was co-opted by New Agers, many Christians became confused and retreated. He goes on: "But we cannot allow the enemy to take over leadership in an area that is rightfully ours. As the redeemed of the earth, our motivation to care for the land is even higher than that of the New Ager."

### **Challenge 3. Misunderstanding the Nature of Life, Death, and Future Existence:**

In an earlier section, we noted that Lynn White wrote that the solution for the environmental crisis would have to be religious. Francis Schaeffer<sup>32</sup> added, that for Christianity to do the job, it would have to be the right kind of Christianity. He continued:

"Any Christianity that rests upon a dichotomy – some sort of platonic concept simply does not have an answer to nature, and we must say with tears that much orthodoxy, much evangelical Christianity, is rooted in a platonic concept, wherein the only interest is in the "upper story," in the heavenly things – only in 'saving the soul' and getting it to heaven."

Jews understood that the Creator was interested and involved in creation. Similarly, first-century Jewish Christians' and Gentiles' understanding of nature was based on a transcendent God who reconciled the world through Jesus, who as a personal Being who entered into creation, was demonstrably interested in, and intimately involved with His creatures. He, the incarnate Creator, used creative power to heal and even defeat death.

As the church developed, however, especially after the second century, opposing Greek philosophies slanted and shaped Christian beliefs. The Greek dualistic view of life was assimilated into Christian theology. Gnostics, for example, believed that earth was created by a lesser God and, as a consequence, earth was correspondingly lesser and imperfect too. Nevertheless, they believed man was endowed with a divine spark that could be reintegrated with the divine source. It was this spirit alone that produced humanity, and it only was

capable of, or worth saving. According to this view, man had a dual nature, body and spirit. As time passed Gnostic ideas began to be mirrored in Christian beliefs.

The ongoing Greek influence in Christian doctrine is illustrated by the words of Pope John Paul II who said, "Even if the human body originates from preexistent living matter, the spiritual soul is spontaneously created by God."<sup>33</sup>

Fred Van Dyke<sup>34</sup> wrote of the universe: "Its material substance is neither an imperfection, as Aristotle thought, a necessary evil, as Plato thought, nor an illusion, as Buddha thought." We are God's creation. Van Dyke further and more explicitly noted that, "We can begin to deal honestly with the things in creation as *creatures*, not as imperfect, evil, or unreal. And we can begin to see ourselves, not as souls trapped in physical bodies (which even some Christians mistakenly believe), but as creatures with a composite nature: body, soul, and spirit."

To the list of ideas about life and nature, we may add the challenge of naturalism. Interestingly, as Rasi<sup>35</sup> points out, Christians had to fight on two fronts: naturalism and neo-panteism. The former does away with God, the latter places him in everything. They appear quite different, but end up placing man at center stage.

I see a great irony here: Darwinian naturalists teach that the fittest reproduce more successfully. Unfit don't! New Age neo-panteists likewise see Gaia as a product of evolution. Yet it is often true that Darwinian naturalists and New Age panteists are at the forefront in protecting the environment, in which they seemingly should have less philosophical interest, given that extinction is an integral part of evolutionary theory, while Christians, who should have a huge stake in guarding God's creation, you would think, are often the most indifferent to its plight

Greek philosophies that permeated Christian beliefs ended up demeaning nature, and the concept of creation and even the Creator Himself. It is not difficult to see how these could lead to a number of theological aberrations that are still prevalent today: the immortal soul, the ascent of a conscious spirit at death, an eternally burning hell, the inherently evil nature of flesh leading to celibacy and monasticism (although some monastic orders were service oriented), and a reduced value placed on honoring the Creator through Sabbath keeping. Christians have lost much.

One could properly end discussion of the third challenge here, but it seems appropriate to not only discuss what Scripture does not teach regarding life and death, but also what it does teach. Adventist understanding of creation, life and death wholeheartedly agrees with the indivisible composite nature of man. This concept has much to say regarding life now, creation care, and our future existence. And as we shall see, the nature of future existence has much influence on how we should treat creation now.

But what of life now, in which we find ourselves subject to inherited tendencies to evil? How do we reconcile the "good creation" with New Testament uses of words like "flesh" and "world?"

Often, in the New Testament, the word "flesh" implies our fallen nature. Yet, Romans 8:3 points out that "...what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh." It was through Jesus' life and death in the flesh, that we look forward to the flesh being renewed by the Holy Spirit, together with a renewed material world. In this way, Jesus gave enhanced value to flesh. The future life, consequently, will be a bodily life, albeit without the baggage of evil. It will be a real world with real people and real nature.

The word, “world,” is similarly used to convey earth in rebellion with all its attractions and liabilities. But made over earth, like renewed man, will be real, and “good” and even “very good” again.

Paul, writing of the resurrected body, calls it a spiritual body. How should we understand this? At the same time, the inward man is renewed day by day<sup>36</sup> by the Holy Spirit<sup>37</sup> after the image of the Creator.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, spiritually renewed man still retains a bodily existence. The resurrected person is likewise spiritual and embodied. The pre-death renewal by the Holy Spirit is, perhaps, an even greater miracle than the resurrection itself, for this is no generic person who rises, but a specific individual who, having lived and been spiritually renewed before death, returns to life with identity and memories intact. God, in retaining the spirit of that person,<sup>39</sup> is able to give back the very individuality, the “spirit” of that person that was given up along with consciousness at death. The new person who rises will be the same person who died, but now in a perfect body. However, this “spiritual body,” it is important to emphasize, is no phantom body.<sup>40</sup>

Paul also speaks of Jesus’ resurrection: “But now Christ is risen from the dead and has become the *first fruits* of those who have fallen asleep.”<sup>41</sup> Jesus is the representative risen man. Luke, the physician also wrote of the resurrected Jesus and quoted Him: “Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, in the resurrected Jesus, we have a type of our own future resurrected natures.

Our world is degenerate, but this was never the Creator’s plan. Corrupted as it is, this world is still God’s gift to us, a gift He will restore. Earth is our home, and we must see it that way, not as a lesser place to leave behind. Moreover, what we do with it now, even though badly damaged, says much about our understanding of who God is, creation, and our future life.

#### **Challenge 4. Suspicion of Science:**

Many conservative Christians have great difficulty relating to science. Why is this? Evolution, tending to atheism and under-girded by naturalism and materialism, is a prime reason for this caution about science. Victoria Schlesinger<sup>43</sup> writing about Christian attitudes toward science puts it this way: “Science remains the principal foe of the belief that God created the world, and without this precept the entire belief system of fundamental evangelicals begins to unravel. As a result, many conservative evangelicals dismiss science as part of the liberal agenda.” Just as many conservative Christians appear unable to separate environmentalism from New Age pantheism, so they likewise seem unable to distinguish between science and atheism.

Consequently, and in general, there is a fundamental suspicion of science among conservative Christians. Thus, when scientific evidence appears not to align with biblical teachings, they generally reject scientific evidence. Care must be taken, however, to be certain that *both* Scripture and science are correctly understood.

Global warming, a favorite “whipping boy” for those who oppose creation care, is a case in point. When measures are proposed to curb greenhouse gas emissions, protests may invoke the “dominion mandate.” Regulating emissions may be seen as restricting development, which would be understood as contrary to biblical instruction. Science underlying proposed legislation would likewise be rejected.

Other examples of science based environmental concerns, which many Christian

believers look at askance, are: the ban on DDT use, widespread species loss, and human overpopulation. Overarching all of this is what appears to be the ultimate concern: economic costs.<sup>44</sup>

DDT use may initially effectively combat malaria-carrying mosquitoes, but it is too simplistic to suggest that its widespread and long-term use would ultimately have been successful in preventing malaria. Evidence suggests that mosquito resistance to DDT would eventually develop, and DDT would simultaneously endanger many other species.<sup>45</sup>

Should species loss be a concern? Is it real? Some conservative Christians answer, “no” to both questions. Field studies reveal that, up to a point, increasing biodiversity produces increases in productivity. Conversely, depleted populations, along with species extinction, render ecosystems less diverse and productive. Even serious decreases in populations, short of actual extinction, may restrict ecosystem functioning. Optimally functioning ecosystems are needed. Therefore, we should be concerned with finding balanced approaches to such problems as preventing malaria and species depletion and extinction.

In reference to human “overpopulation,” E. Calvin Beisner published a paper entitled “Population Growth as Blessing or Blight?”<sup>46</sup>, in which he contends the world is nowhere near full, and that in obedience to God's command, we must further multiply and fill earth. Although Beisner recognizes that other creatures were likewise told to multiply and fill, he appears to show little concern for accommodating them. We must learn to deal with earth's fullness not just in terms of human populations, but also in recognition of other creatures' needs. There must be room for all. Moreover, Beisner only deals with filling earth in terms of space. He says there is plenty of room.

In Beisner's paper, ecology and carrying capacity are given only the slightest of nods. He asks: “Are we on the verge of overrunning the earth's capacity to provide all that we demand?”<sup>47</sup> His answer: “It is not the earth that provides what human beings demand. ... The earth provides us with very little.” For Beisner, it is human brain and brawn that provides for human “demands,” an answer that is neither scientific nor biblical. Such imagined self-sufficiency is dangerous. If experience suggests anything, it is that human manipulation of nature generally results in loss. We just don't seem to have sufficient ecological understanding.

Human intelligence and muscle power has its place, but to suggest that earth (ecology) plays a minor role is to tragically miss the idea that creation with its ecological relationships is our life support system. We do not live independently from ecology. Degraded environments, tragic products of human brain and brawn, suggest that resources *are* being stressed and that we may indeed be approaching earth's carrying capacity, regardless of spatial distribution. Such conditions should at least serve as a warning.

In the context of the equanimity exhibited by many anti-environmentalists, Isaiah 51:6 should alert us: “Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens vanish like smoke, *the earth will wear out like a garment*, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner; but my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed.”<sup>48</sup>

There are exceptions to the church's suspicion of science. A few, especially some younger believers who have been educated in science, are more comfortable with science. They don't see science as the inevitable threat other believers fear. It is these who have moved ahead in recent times to promote a Christian response to environmental needs, such as in the currently stalled effort to get the National Association of Evangelicals to endorse a statement on global climate change. However, many old guard evangelical leaders were

unmoved, exhibited a state of shock, in fact, and blocked the effort.<sup>49</sup> They feared that those who promoted environmentalism in the church were falling prey to “earth worship.”

Despite the church's caution over science, science is popularly thought to have credibility. Scientific achievements amaze most of us. Thus, even anti-environmentalists may sometimes use scientific evidence, especially if it appears to support a favored position. However, contrary scientific evidence may be simply dismissed as “junk science.” Often, there seems to be little effort to look at all sides in a balanced manner. If confronted with contrary scientific evidence, a common subterfuge is to insist that more research is needed, that the situation is not critical, and that we can afford to wait before making a decision.

Adventists have similar concerns as other conservative Christians regarding evolution and creation. At the same time, Adventist enthusiasm for health and medical sciences has promoted strong basic science education programs. We realize, in the words of Ellen White that: “True science and Inspiration are in perfect harmony.”<sup>50</sup> The expression, “true science,” suggests the possibility of false science and that not every scientific interpretation is correct or in harmony with the Bible, but it also suggests that some are. Indeed, a correct understanding of creation and the fall would urge just such an understanding.

In writing to the Thessalonians, Paul gives sound advice for those who wish to distinguish between truth and error, whether in our understanding of science or Scripture: “Test all things; hold fast to what is good.”<sup>51</sup> Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we must evaluate evidence and make intelligent decisions.

#### **Challenge 5. Environmentalism and Eschatology:**

Irrespective of how much we may want to justify creation care, Peter is emphatic in noting that “the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.”<sup>52</sup> Where does this leave us?

Conservative Christians, who anticipate an imminent return of Jesus, may consider caring for Creation as of little importance. Some may see thorough exploitation of resources without regard for future generations as feasible, and even necessary in light of their soon coming destruction anyway. “Why allow valuable resources to be wasted?” they may argue. Thus, long-range threats from global warming may not be taken seriously in light of the shortness of time. Forests may be thoughtlessly felled faster than they can be re-grown, and other resources recklessly and wastefully used. Contrary to greedy exploitation, including poor forest management, however, Isaiah 14:8 recalls that when, in realization that the Great Oppressor is dead, even trees of the forest and cedars of Lebanon figuratively rejoice in that “No one will come to cut us down now!”<sup>53</sup> Attitude is all-important, even in the context of Jesus’ soon return.

The environmentalism-eschatology dilemma is neither new nor unusual among Christians. For Adventists, the second coming of Jesus may color our views of environmentalism because caring for creation in the context of the Advent comes close to the core of our beliefs. How do we, or should we deal with the needs of creation in view of our belief in Jesus’ soon return? Why should we care when earth is going to be destroyed anyway? Even if we remove all other impediments to positive environmental action, in light of the coming end of the world, why should we worry about the needs of the environment?

Notwithstanding, Adventists *have* demonstrated concern for the environment. Since 1980, the church has made four official statements regarding environmentalism.<sup>54</sup> The first

was 1992, with two more in 1995, while 1996 saw yet another. But while such statements give official sanction to creation care, how have these statements impacted the way members, individually or even collectively, look at and respond to the needs of nature? My guess is that for most members in the pews, these statements, like a tsunami at sea, pass undetected beneath their keels. Official statements may make some people feel good, but unless they really motivate change, they do little. Regardless, they are a proper beginning.

Kit Watts, in an article entitled, “Is the Earth Still the Lord's?”<sup>55</sup>, points out that Adventists devote more print space to our concern for a six-day creation 6000 or so years ago, than we do to defend nature. With emphases on Sabbath nature walks, summer camps, and Pathfinders, Adventists almost without thinking grow up caring *about* creation, but may not learn to care *for* creation. Nevertheless, in order for individual believers to consciously develop positive attitudes toward creation care, attitudinal changes have to make both biblical and ultimate sense. By “ultimate sense,” I mean sense in light of the Advent. I will try to address this dilemma.

During the two millennia since Jesus departed, many have thought the Advent near. Paul wrote of this problem to Thessalonian believers: “Please don’t be so easily shaken and troubled by those who say the day of the Lord has already begun.”<sup>56</sup> Our own history similarly instructs us. We believe the Advent to be imminent for increasingly focusing reasons, but in the parable of the talents, the master instructed his servants to continue in business until he returned.<sup>57</sup> What does this tell us about tending and keeping now? If earlier believers had abandoned business because they thought the Advent was imminent, where would we be today?

In the third challenge to Christian environmentalism, we rejected dualism as unbiblical and concluded that like life now, the renewed life, along with the renewed earth, will be real, physical, and tangible. Just as Jesus told his disciples to “handle” him, so in the restoration we likewise will have similarly tangible and real bodies in a real world of plants and animals. This concept is important in grasping a reason to keep creation now, even while we see it being devastated by disasters and with the knowledge that before its renewal, earth will be cleansed to make room for renovation.

As we consider environmental needs in the light of the Advent, we may choose to focus on doomsday or we may look beyond to the new day with its restoration. Attitudes we have toward creation now will be the same attitudes we take into the new creation. As we were told to dress and keep the garden in the beginning, so we will have that same assignment in the world made over? If we treat creation in a selfish exploitive manner now, could we be expected to treat the new earth any differently should we, contrary to biblical evidence, happen to find ourselves included in it? No wonder, Revelation 11:18 says that those who destroy the earth will themselves be destroyed. Indeed, those who destroy earth will not be included in the new earth. Otherwise, the new creation would not be safe.

Why then should we look after a doomed creation? We do it because God made it and told us to keep it. It is His; He created it. For me, however, living now as we will live in the renewed earth makes additional and ultimate sense. Eschatology and environmentalism are, after all, not contrary ideas; they’re complementary. In fact, environmental abuse offers no hope for the future, but the Advent provides a hopeful way out to a new and better environment. We have Christian reasons to care for creation; environmentalism in the light of the Advent really does make ultimate sense.

### **Practicing Christian Environmentalism:**

## Living Like We Love Our Home:

Near the beginning of this essay, we asked if environmentalism would constitute a distraction from the real work of the church, or might it be part of what we're actually about? What is the answer? Several seeming impediments to positive environmental action have been identified, analyzed and, I hope, put to rest. I interpret biblical teachings together with science to say that when correctly understood, these impediments should not stand in our way, that environmentalism is not only something we may, but actually must be part of. In the beginning we were indeed given a mandate, not a mandate to exploit, however, but a mandate to be creative and care.

We often think of environmentalism in negative terms, like pollution, global warming, ozone depletion, mass species extinction, erosion, with resulting economic loss, and so on. But there is a positive side as well. Howard Frumkin, makes this point in an article, *Beyond Toxicity: Human Health and the Natural Environment*.<sup>58</sup> He says, "Contact with the natural world may be directly beneficial to health." His approach is from an evolutionary perspective, but health enhancement from positive encounters with nature happens because of the way we were designed and put together. Thus, caring for creation benefits us now, not just future generations.<sup>59</sup>

A healthy environment enables the Gospel. Ellen White observes that "medical missionary work...is the gospel in practice..."<sup>60</sup> She refers to the "Gospel of health"<sup>61</sup> and indicates that a healthy environment *is* indeed health inducing: "Nature is God's physician," White wrote, referring to pure air, sunshine, beautiful flowers and trees.<sup>62</sup> "The things of nature are God's blessings, provided to give health to body, mind, and soul."<sup>63</sup>

Larry Boughman,<sup>64</sup> in an article entitled, *Campus Beautification: A Factor in Integration of Faith and Learning*, referred to Mavis Batey, who wrote about the gardens of Oxford and Cambridge. She thought the universities' gardens embodied the philosophy of simplicity and excellence so necessary for both students and professors to flourish in their intellectual endeavors. In fact, she regarded the gardens as more essential than professors. We may question this, but it does underscore the value of a beautiful environment that goes beyond merely pleasing the eyes. Natural environments are enhancing environments for spirituality, health and learning. Such environments have also been shown to lessen violence and vandalism

Two roads branch before us, one popular and easy, but leading to devastation, while the other more challenging way leads to life. We have seen that the church, when considering environmental action, has experienced difficulty deciding which road to take and what its role should be. Proclaiming the Gospel of salvation is the first work of the church. Caring for creation supports the Gospel. Romans 8:21 tells us, moreover, that nature will also be liberated when the sons of God are revealed. The good news is also for creation. And in the end, as we tend and keep creation now, so we will continue to care for Eden made over.

Consequently, how should we live now? Caring for creation, hallmarked by humility and simplicity, will be a way of life. Treading lightly on creation, as did Jesus, we give as we receive. And what a joy it is.

There are payoffs here and now from keeping creation. And these payoffs even go beyond improved health and learning, for nature also brings peace and teaches lessons about God, thereby enhancing spirituality - all qualities Christian believers should treasure. How, therefore, when we know all of this, can we even think of destroying what God has made?<sup>65</sup>

The cost of environmental neglect is high; the payoff for care is indeed generous – and eternally ongoing. Now it is up to us.

*Only what we know can we love. Only what we love can we protect.*<sup>66</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:13,14.
- <sup>2</sup> <http://www.humaneventsonline.com/article.php?id=7591>
- <sup>3</sup> Lewis G. Regenstein, 1991. *Replenish the Earth*. The Crossroad Publishing Company, 370 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Particularly note chapter one.
- <sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 12:4, NKJV. Note also Jeremiah 9:10 in which “both the birds of the heavens and the beasts have fled; they are gone.”
- <sup>5</sup> 2 chronicles 36:21.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. Particularly note chapter 3-6.
- <sup>7</sup> Lynn White. 1976. “Historical Roots Of Our Ecological Crisis” *Science*, vol. 155: pp.1203-1207.
- <sup>8</sup> Joseph K. Sheldon. September 1989. “Twenty-one Years After “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” How Has the Church Responded?” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*. Vol. 41. pp. 152-158.
- <sup>9</sup> See Van Dyke in <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1991/PSCF9-91VanDyke.html> p. 2
- <sup>10</sup> Lawrence E. Joseph. 2000. *James Lovelock, Gaia's grand old man*. <http://www.salon.com/people/features/2000/08/17/lovelock/print.html>.
- <sup>11</sup> Reported in *Christianity Today*, in an article, “Why We Love the Earth,” by Howard A. Snyder. June 25, 2001.
- <sup>12</sup> From: Francis A. Schaeffer. 1970. *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology*. Tyndale House Publishers and Coverdale House Publishers.
- <sup>13</sup> Joseph K. Sheldon. Ibid. p. 7.
- <sup>14</sup> Some would consider the term, “Christian Environmentalism” an oxymoron.
- <sup>15</sup> Suggested by Dr. Leonard Brand.
- <sup>16</sup> See p. 9.
- <sup>17</sup> Sheldon, Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Harwood A. Lockton. 1992. “Seeing Green: Adventists and the Environment.” *College and University Dialogue*, Vol 4(2).  
[http://www.answeringgenesis.org/docs2002/0320\\_earth\\_day.asp](http://www.answeringgenesis.org/docs2002/0320_earth_day.asp)
- <sup>19</sup> Genesis 1:22.
- <sup>20</sup> Ellen G. White. 1952. *My Life Today*. Review and Herald. P. 340
- <sup>21</sup> Emphasis mine.
- <sup>22</sup> Ellen G. White. 1890. *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets*. Pacific Press Publishing Association. p.49.
- <sup>23</sup> Emphasis mine.
- <sup>24</sup> See: <http://www.salon.com/people/2000/08/17/lovelock/print.html>
- <sup>25</sup> <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~nurelweb/papers/irving/ct-new-age.html>
- <sup>26</sup> Described as raised Seventh-day Adventist who converted to the Baptist faith in:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constance\\_E.\\_Cumbey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constance_E._Cumbey)
- <sup>27</sup> Some of these have actually gone to an extreme that would be considered unbiblical.
- <sup>28</sup> See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/03/magazine/03QUESTIONS.html>
- <sup>29</sup> See: <http://www.southbendtribune.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060216/Lives05/602160496/-1/LIVES/CAT=Lives05>
- <sup>30</sup> <http://leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/ecology.html>
- <sup>31</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer. Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Quoted in: <http://catholic.net/RCC?Periodicals/Inside/01-97/creation.html>
- <sup>33</sup> Fred Van Dyke. September 1991. “Ecology and the Christian Mind: Christians and the Environment in a New Decade.” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*. Vol. 43: pp 174-184.
- <sup>34</sup> Humberto M. Rasi. 1991. “Fighting on Two Fronts: An Adventist Response to Secularism and Neopanthemism.” *College and University Dialogue*.
- <sup>35</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:16.
- <sup>36</sup> Ephesians 4:23.
- <sup>37</sup> Colossians 3:10.
- <sup>38</sup> See Ecclesiastes 12:7.



- <sup>40</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:44.
- <sup>41</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:20; emphasis mine.
- <sup>42</sup> Luke 24:39 NKJV.
- <sup>43</sup> See: <http://www.vschlesinger.com/StewardshipWars.html>
- <sup>44</sup> For examples of such caution see: <http://www.interfaithstewardship.org/pages/cornwall.php>. This includes the Cornwall Declaration of the Interfaith stewardship Alliance. On another page of the same site, banning DDT is said to have been misguided.
- <sup>45</sup> An article in the Washington Post succinctly chronicles the history of DDT use and its promise and problems: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/04/AR2005060400130.html>
- <sup>46</sup> [Http://www.reformed.org/webfiles/antithesis/v1n4/ant\\_v1n4\\_growth.html](http://www.reformed.org/webfiles/antithesis/v1n4/ant_v1n4_growth.html)
- <sup>47</sup> I would have been much happier with the use of the word, “needs” rather than, “demand.”
- <sup>48</sup> This is from the English Standard Version. Emphasis mine.
- <sup>49</sup> See: [http://cbn.com/cbnnews/news/05429a.asp?](http://cbn.com/cbnnews/news/05429a.asp)
- <sup>50</sup> Ellen White. 1930. *Messages to Young People*. p. 190.
- <sup>51</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:21.
- <sup>52</sup> 2 Peter 3:10.
- <sup>53</sup> This quote is from the New Living Translation.
- <sup>54</sup> See: <http://www.Adventist.org/beliefs/statements/index.html>
- <sup>55</sup> Kit Watts. March 16, 2006. “Is the Earth Still the Lord’s?” *Adventist Review*. pp. 24-27.
- <sup>56</sup> 2 Thessalonians 2:2, NLT.
- <sup>57</sup> Luke 19:13.
- <sup>58</sup> Howard Frumkin. 2001. “Beyond Toxicity: Human Health and the Natural Environment.” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*; 20(3). pp. 234-240.
- <sup>59</sup> For other examples of the environment enhancing life see: Jane: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/04/AR2005060400130.html>. Essman, February 1993. *Conservationist*, Vol. 47, Issue 4, p. 47; “Fighting Crime with Leaves.” 8/28/97. *Christian Science Monitor*. Vol. 89, Issue 192. p. 5; “Petunias In The Playground.” 7/27/91. *Economist*. Vol. 320, Issue 7717. p. 56.
- <sup>60</sup> Ellen G. White. *Counsels on Health*. Chapter Title: “Medical Missionary Work” page 532, paragraph 4
- <sup>56</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ . *Medical Ministry*. page 259, paragraph 1
- <sup>62</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ *My Life Today*. p. 135, paragraph 2.
- <sup>63</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ *Counsels on Health*. P. 169, paragraph 2.
- <sup>64</sup> Larry W. Boughman. 1994. “Campus Beautification: A Factor in Integration of Faith and Learning.” *Christ In The Classroom: Adventist Approaches to the Integration of Faith and Learning*. Vol. 14.
- <sup>65</sup> While anti-environmentalists may cite Romans 1:23 to bolster a claim that environmentalism is tantamount to earth worship, we cite Romans 1:20 to show that earth keeping preserves evidence of the invisible attributes of God.
- <sup>66</sup> On a sign at the entrance to the *Centro de Interpretaciones de la Naturaleza* (Nature Interpretative Center) near Tulum, Quintana Roo, Mexico.