

LIVING FAITHFULLY IN GOD'S CREATION



Studies on
Christian life
in the
environment

by

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INTRODUCTION

For several years various environmental groups and scientists have raised their voices in our communities to protest against the exploitation and willful destruction of the environment, or to urge that we repair the damage already done. Sometimes the protests are extreme, perhaps reflecting the extreme damage that has already been done and is still being done to the environment. Sometimes they are not well-balanced. But undoubtedly they reflect the genuine concerns of people who have become aware of the value of our natural environment and the delicate balances in nature which can be easily upset, causing serious damage to all, including human beings as well as other creatures.

Unfortunately, the environmental concerns of people have seemed mostly to arise from pragmatic concerns about a bleak future rather than religious concerns about living in God's world.

The following six studies, by Pastor Aub Podlich, on Christian life and the environment, will help us to understand better God's design for his creatures and to live responsibly, reverently, and joyfully in his creation.

- Study 1: Keeping things in perspective
- Study 2: Human beings: special creatures
- Study 3: The cosmic scope of God's plan
- Study 4: What does 'dominion' mean?
- Study 5: Reverence for the earth
- Study 6: The church at work within God's cosmic plan

STUDY ONE:

KEEPING THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE

THE PLACE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CARE IN THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

- Environmental concern is not optional for Christian people. It is part of the life of praise, obedience, and sacrifice which issues from faith in Jesus Christ. It is a response to the cross of Jesus, an unnatural human activity, in that, like all true Christian good works, it is produced by the Spirit of Christ.
- For Christians, true environmental concern is never motivated by fear, despair, or hopelessness. We always work as people in whom God is at work. As surely as God's power was able to effect the resurrection and ascension of Jesus himself, so by his power we are able to live out the implications of our salvation. Christian environmentalists work within a spirit of certainty, assurance and hope. We are assured in Ephesians 1 that the time for final harmony is coming, and that we are both part of it and agents of it, right now.
- Like any concern, environmental concern may become a passion for individual Christians. It should never be allowed to become a crusade or an obsession. It is only one of many pressing contemporary issues for Christians. No single Christian can be pro-active in every such issue: the environment, abortion, social justice, poverty, family-related issues, racism, war and peace, etc. Do what you can, pray for others, and, if possible, take up only one major concern, as God gives you the gifts and strength. In this way, guard yourself against:
 1. unnecessary guilt
 2. placing at the centre of the faith, a concern which is really a fruit of faith.



BIBLICAL RESOURCES:

To be read and referred to in preparation for the discussion questions.

The 'environmental Gospel' is not THE Gospel

Galatians 1:6-9 John 3:16 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Human beings cannot save the world

Isaiah 40:6-8 Romans 3:9-18 James 4:13-14
John 15:1-5 Romans 7:18-20 Acts 4:12

The extent of sin is more deep-seated than our bad attitudes and actions which adversely affect the environment. Sin is what we ARE: creatures born blind, dead, and enemies of God.

1 Corinthians 2:14 Ephesians 2:1,2 Romans 8:7

Salvation, reconciliation and renewal are entirely God's work


Revelation 7:9-12 2 Corinthians 5:17-21
Ephesians 2:1-10 Revelation 21:1-5

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is it important for Christians to know that environmental care is not the gospel, but a fruit of the gospel?
2. Why should Christian concern for the environment not be motivated by fear, frustration, or a sense of doom?
3. In what way could some concern for the environment have more to do with our own base self-interest than with any real attempt to be faithful to God, or to show genuine care for his creation?
4. If most environmental problems are the result of human sin, what is the most pressing pollution that needs to be addressed on earth? (Ps 51:5-10)
How will you address this pollution problem:
 in yourself?
 in others?
Why is it vital that this problem be addressed first? (John 15:5)
5. Comment on this statement:
'True environmental concern begins for Christians in the water of baptism'.

STUDY TWO:

HUMAN BEINGS: SPECIAL CREATURES

- Human beings are truly special creatures, different from all other creatures. They are made in the image of God, and are somehow representative of God himself. Yet human beings are still creatures, sharing a common origin in the earth, a common home on the earth, and a common destiny in the new heavens and new earth, with all other creatures. These two biblical teachings, that people are at one and the same time special and ordinary creatures, need to be carefully balanced.
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- The assertion that 'God made everything for us' needs qualification. The world never ceases to belong to God. No creature owns the earth. All creatures are granted use of the created environment of which they are all part, but within strict guidelines or 'laws of nature'. Many of those guidelines are clarified by the God-given gift of science. For human beings, clear guidelines for the occupation of this earth are laid down in Scripture.
 - Our privilege to use the earth is never licence to abuse it. We are entirely answerable to God for what we do in his earth. We have no mandate from him to use the earth in such a way that basic building-blocks of creation are destroyed, or essential created relationships torn apart. We may use trees, but we may not destroy forests. We may mine for minerals, built cities, or farm the land, but we may not destroy vital networks in nature (ecosystems) to do so. We should recognise that because of sin there will always be a tension here between the rightful use of natural resources and exploitation of our environment.
 - Human beings, special as they are, remain creatures. They must not act as though they had absolute authority, imposing their arbitrary will on what does not belong to them. Their use of creation must always be sustainable, that is, use which allows the basic created relationships in that place to continue. People must work within the relationships God has ordained. The will of the human creature does not take precedence over all God's other creatures, and over the will of the Creator himself.

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Human beings as creatures

Genesis 2:7 *Psalm 8:3, 4*

Human beings as special creatures

Genesis 1:26-28 *Psalm 8:5-8* *Matthew 10:31* *Matthew 12:12*

God's ownership of all

Psalm 24:1 *Psalm 95:3-5*

God's special concern for all

Genesis 1:31 *Psalm 145:15-17*

All things are for God's glory, not that of human beings

Psalm 19:1 *Colossians 1:15-17*

Human beings and responsible use of created things

1 Corinthians 10:31 *1 Corinthians 3:21-23*

Human beings and sustainable use, careful, limited use

Genesis 2:15-17



FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what ways are human beings creatures like any other creature? In what ways are human beings special, different from all other creatures?
2. If God is the owner of all and has special compassion on all he has made, how should this affect our attitude towards those creatures or things which appear to have little value?
3. In what way does the following statement reflect attitudes that are clearly unbiblical: 'There was only rubbish growing on the block, so we cleared it all off'?
4. Is it ever possible to give glory to God at the same time as we arbitrarily impose OUR will on his creation?
Could there be certain environmental implications in the petition of the Lord's Prayer: Thy will be done?
5. In what circumstances might Christians say: 'This activity is clearly not a God-pleasing one, no matter how many jobs it produces'?
6. What is the difference between the rightful use of resources and the exploitation of resources, for instance, in relation to forests, mines, farmland?

STUDY THREE:

THE COSMIC SCOPE OF GOD'S PLAN

- ♦ In the beginning, God created everything that exists outside himself. Not only did he bring objects and creatures into being by his powerful word, but he fit all those objects and creatures together in inter-woven families, or relationships. Nothing was placed in isolation from its neighbour, its immediate environment, its ecosystem. The whole created order (cosmos) is a family made up of such interconnecting families. And all were made in relationship with their Creator, as Scripture makes clear. The science of ecology increases our knowledge and wonder at the intricacies of the relationships within creation.
- The basic relationships built into the creation are these:
The relationship of:
 1. God to his entire creation
 2. God to people
 3. People to people
 4. People to the rest of creation.
- ♦ Because all things are thus bound together, a break in one relationship has serious consequences for all the relationships. When the first people on earth broke the loving and obedient relationship they had with God, there was a 'flow-on' effect into their relationship with one another and the rest of creation.
- God in his grace came to the rescue of his creation. He sent Jesus Christ to bring God's reconciliation to people. But the reconciliation brought by the good news of Jesus is much wider than the 'people-God' relationship. Reconciliation through Christ embraces the whole creation, with all its interconnecting relationships. God's plan through Christ, which will be completed at the end of time, is to bring all things together again under Christ as head.



BIBLE RESOURCES:

Observe the breaking of relationships in the following:

- Genesis 3:8-24* The fall (God-people, people-people, people-earth)
Genesis 4:8-16 Cain and Abel (a man at odds with his brother is at odds with God and at odds with God and with the earth)
Numbers 35:33,34 Israel was constantly warned that to break the covenant with God would defile the land . . . the land itself would spit them out!
Isaiah 24:1-6 Sin has its consequences for the land.

God's saving grace includes all things

- Genesis 7:1-10* Animals too are saved from the Flood
Ephesians 1:3-10, esp 9.10 All things brought together in Christ
Romans 8:18-22 Creation groaning, waiting for liberation
Isaiah 11:1-9 Harmony among the creatures as Messiah rules
Psalms 98:7-9 Creation rejoices as the Lord comes to judge
Revelation 5:13, 14 The creatures join in praise of the Lamb who was slain



FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Saddam's oil fires in Kuwait and the Allied Forces' defoliation through chemical warfare of one-third of Vietnam, are good examples of how the shattering of relationships between people also destroys relationships with the earth. Can people inflict such damage on creation and remain in harmony with the Creator? What about abortion?
2. If creatures also benefit from relationships restored through the gospel, what evidence of this should we already be seeing in the relationships of Christians to other creatures? How should it affect the way we regard other creatures?
3. Is it appropriate to bless animals, or pray for them?
Is it appropriate to pray when you plant seeds or gather a harvest?
Is it appropriate that the creatures be allowed access to the places of worship with us? (Ps 84:3)
4. If the creatures are also involved in the final kingdom where Christ is the head, can we ever again approach the rest of creation in a spirit of total exploitation, greed, and selfishness?

STUDY FOUR:

WHAT DOES 'DOMINION' MEAN?

- God clearly gave human beings dominion over other creatures. But already at the beginning the command to have dominion was balanced by the command to 'till the garden and keep (protect) it' (Gen 2:15). This command was given to perfect people in a perfect world. Presumably they had the ability to carry out this command perfectly.
- ♦ We can no longer assume that people have this ability. Although the assertion that people are rulers of the other creatures is repeated after the fall, as in Psalm 8, it is clear that sin prevents us from perfectly carrying out God's mandate. Sin turns God's command to act as a loving ruler into a licence to exploit and destroy mercilessly and greedily. Sin also becomes that attitude which judges the rest of creation to be valuable or worthless according to its perceived value to human beings. Sin makes humankind, rather than the glory of God, the measure of all things.
- Christ sets us free through his death and resurrection, the benefits of which become ours in baptism. We are freed by Christ to be what God originally made us to be. But we still remain sinners, incapable of good deeds except 'in Christ Jesus'.



- ♦ Christians therefore exercise proper dominion, or lordship, over the earth only 'in Christ Jesus'. Moreover, the lordship of Christ becomes our pattern for lordship. Christ most commonly exercises lordship in servanthood, sacrifice, and suffering. We are therefore, above all else, servants of the creation on behalf of God, and answerable to God. As lords, our chief role is to protect the relationships laid down by God in his creation. This does not prevent responsible use and development and even 'improvement' of the creation via responsible and careful genetic engineering. Our role as lords may even involve careful culling of those creatures whose abnormal increase in numbers threatens the balance necessary for the continued health of other creatures.
- Human beings themselves remain special creatures, representing God in a special way. We allow no culling of human beings, born or unborn. Yet the exercise of lordship by people must surely involve the use of responsible birth control, that the one species of creature, human beings, does not become a plague on the earth, to the detriment of the lives of all other species, and of the very health of the earth, its food, and its vital atmosphere.

BIBLICAL RESOURCES:

The original commands

Genesis 1:27,28 *Genesis 2:15*

The continuing 'nobility' of human beings

Psalm 8

The use of Psalm 8:5-8 or parts thereof, in the New Testament

The psalm, or parts of it, is quoted or alluded to three times in the New Testament. Whereas it is clear that originally the psalm referred to human beings in general, in each case in the New Testament it is applied to Jesus Christ. Those passages are:

Hebrews 2:6-8 *1 Corinthians 15:27* *Ephesians 1:22*

The implication is inescapable: only 'in Christ Jesus' are we able to exercise dominion rightly.

All things (the New Testament phrase for the whole creation) become ours 'along with Christ'

Romans 8:32 (Note: the Good News Bible here, mistakenly omits the crucial 'along with Christ' point.)

Who inherits the earth?

Matthew 5:5 The meek are those in right relationship to God through Christ.

The world is inherited THROUGH FAITH

Romans 4:13

Even in the Old Testament, true kings were caring shepherds

(Note that 'shepherd' is a common Old Testament term for 'king'.)

Psalm 23 An excellent picture of dominion as caring and protecting

Psalm 72:1-14



FOR DISCUSSION

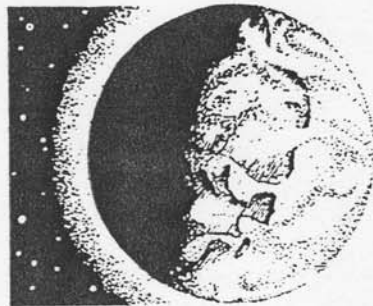
1. 'Everything was made for human beings to use. Therefore we can do what we like with it.' Comment on this.
2. Do we have any responsibility towards creatures which have no known benefit to human beings, and which may be unattractive and repulsive?
3. How do you see your role as lord of a piece of ground and the creatures that live on it, whether that area be as large as an entire country (politician), a pastoral or agricultural holding (grazier or farmer), or as small as a houseyard (an average home owner)?
4. Under what circumstances might our role as lords require active intervention in nature to cull a species which has reached plague proportions? Is that intervention required only when the plague adversely affects human livelihoods, or when it threatens other creatures too?
5. The old, beautiful word for farmer was 'husbandman'. In what way do you see the relationship of human beings to the land as being similar to that of a husband and a wife?
6. Why does lordship include responsible ways of limiting human population growth?

STUDY FIVE:

REVERENCE FOR THE EARTH

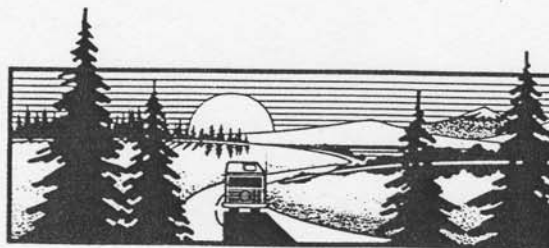
Christians see three main reasons why human beings are to respect, even revere, the earth:

1. **This is God's earth.** It comes from his breath and his fingers, and is still upheld by his gracious word. It is his good and gracious work.
2. People are to respect the earth because of **the incarnation.** God, who in the Old Testament calls the earth is 'footstool' (Is 66:1), that is, the place where he rules, in the New Testament becomes a human being and comes down to earth as Jesus Christ. This earth has been walked on, sailed over, slept upon, even bled on, by the Son of God.



Just as the presence of the Lord at a wedding at a particular place (Cana in Galilee) added something special for all time to all marriages where he is welcomed, so his physical presence in a particular land (Israel) has added something special to all lands. The ancients called this 'something special' 'COMMON HOLINESS'. Common holiness is holiness that comes about by the association of common things with God and his special actions. It is called 'common' holiness to distinguish it from the 'special' holiness of God in his word, sacraments, and holy people, the saints.

3. We are to respect the earth because of **Christ's continuing presence** in it in his people (who are his body) and in his word and sacraments. By coming to us in, with, and under bread, wine, and water, Christ honours all creation, just as once he honoured all people, especially women, by coming in the body of a young woman.



BIBLICAL RESOURCES:

The earth as God's possession and realm

Psalm 24:1

Isaiah 66:1

Deuteronomy 11:12-15 (in particular Israel, the Promised Land)

The presence of God through the incarnation

The Christmas story (*Luke 2*)

The gospel stories of Jesus in Israel

The continuing presence of Jesus on earth

Matthew 28:20

Matthew 28:18-20 Christ in baptism and the taught Word

Matthew 26:26-28 The presence of the body/blood of Christ in Holy Communion

1 Corinthians 6:19; 12:27 People as God's temple, Christ's body



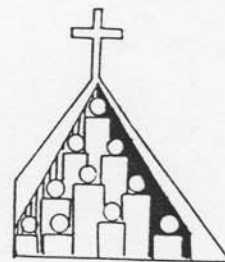
FOR DISCUSSION

1. How can we best guard against turning reverence for the creation into worship of the creation?
2. How important is it that Christians learn to stand in awe and wonder before the things God has made?
3. 'The earth is sacred.' In what sense is that true? Where does the sacredness of the earth derive from?
4. If the earth is sacred, how will that affect our attitude toward it?
5. How can science increase our sense of awe and wonder at the earth and its creatures?
6. Consider the fact that God used his own creation (a human body for Jesus, water in Baptism) and a joining of his creation with our 'creation' (bread and wine in Holy Communion) to work a salvation that has consequences for all creatures. How does this broaden your view of the Christian faith? If so, in what way?

STUDY SIX:

THE CHURCH AT WORK WITHIN GOD'S COSMIC PLAN

- ♦ God's final goal for the creation is to restore everything in harmony in a new heaven and a new earth, where Christ is the head. Everything that was once 'subjected to frustration' (Rom 8) through sin, corruption, and the curse, will be 'set free from its bondage to corruption'. This will only happen at the end of time, when Jesus returns in power.
- ♦ In the meantime, the people of God are called to wait, watch, and be faithful. They are called to lives of faithful prayer and praise, just as the whole creation at the beginning culminated not in the creation of humankind, but in the Sabbath, which became for Israel its day of rest and praise. Not only are God's people to join in the praise of all creation, but they are to uphold and preserve that praise as they uphold and preserve the creatures which utter it. As each species falls casualty to human excesses and is driven to extinction, praise of God is diminished - a song is stilled.
- ♦ Through the gospel, God reconciles his broken people to himself, and in their reconciliation lies the hope for the eventual salvation of the whole creation, which waits eagerly for the return of Jesus, when the sons of God will be revealed (Rom 8:18-25).
- ♦ We are the first-fruits of the new creation. The church gives the first glimpses of creation redeemed and restored. In the way that Christians both individually and as a church, act towards the creation, people should both see and experience a foretaste of the harmony that will exist in the new creation after the end of time.
- ♦ In the worship life of the church, the ancient creature-praise psalms come to life, and the perfect creature-praise of heaven (Rev 4 and 5) is anticipated as creation and Lord meet in the sacraments. In the sacraments Christ once again walks with his creation, as he did with the wild beasts in the desert (Mark 1:12,13). As Creator he comes to be with creatures in Holy Communion, where there is an anticipation of the final harmony of the creation with its Lord in the age to come. Through water, and through bread and wine, the Lord of the whole creation comes to be with his creatures. The sacraments are the sign and guarantee of future SHALOM.



BIBLE RESOURCES:

God's final goal for the creation

Ephesians 1:1-10

Romans 8:18-21

Snapshots of the redeemed creation

Isaiah 11

Isaiah 2:2-4

Revelation 21:1-5

Sabbath-rest as culmination of creation, and praise as the chief response

Genesis 2:1-3

Psalm 8:1

Psalm 57:7

Psalm 108:5

Creature-praise

Psalm 98:4, 7-9

Psalm 148

People of God joining with creature-praise

Psalm 98

Psalm 150

Revelation 5 The worship of heaven, earth, angels, and people combine



God's people as first-fruits

James 1:18

- First-fruits are:
1. dedicated to God (Exod 23:16, 19)
 2. signs and guarantees of other fruit to come (Rom 8:23)
- The 'fruits' that follow us can be other believers, or (in the light of the scope of God's redeeming activity) the whole creation.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what way does true godliness benefit the environment?
2. Why does the command to love embrace also genuine concern and care for the environment?
3. In what way can a deeper understanding of the nature and scope of Christian worship have benefits for the environment? If creatures are our fellow worshippers (eg Ps 98; Rev 5:11-14), should we regard them in a new light?
4. To which special initiatives in environmental care could you point as signs and a preview of the new heaven and the new earth (eg land care, sustainable use of forests, and other actions in which we catch glimpses of Isa 11:2-9 and Rev 21:1-5)?

SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

GOD'S PEOPLE IN GOD'S CREATION - A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE ENVIRONMENT

It stands to reason (and makes good economic sense) that if the church is to be a sign of right relationships to come, it will look very closely at its way of doing things now, with a view to eliminating bad stewardship of resources, outright waste, and negative impacting on the environment. Here are some suggestions as to how this might be done:

- (a) The church should consider carefully its stewardship of the great deal of property and real estate it owns. All too often the church which 'believes in the creator' unnecessarily bulldozes natural bushland for buildings and car parks. Careful attention should be given to the kinds of people who are elected to the controlling boards of camp-sites and college and school grounds, so that no 'develop at all cost' attitude ruins priceless environmental assets.
- (b) The church should carefully examine its use of energy, its heating, lighting, and petrol use. Its gardens and grounds should be a highlight of any neighbourhood, a refuge for birds and animals, and places of delight. There should always be in a church ground an abundance of flowers and shade trees.
- (c) The church worship should make greater use of the creation. Harvest Thanksgiving, seasonal thanksgivings, special creation-centred liturgies, indoor gardens, hanging baskets, and a profusion (not just a bunch) of flowers, all add to our appreciation of the creation and its Creator and Redeemer.
- (d) The church library should have suitable books on many areas of environmental care, from the 'handy hints' type of thing, to solid theological studies of creation and environment-related topics.
- (e) Following the precept of St Paul who urges his people to 'follow my example and way of life', the inhabitants of the manse can take a lead in caring well for their own gardens.
- (f) The church can take its people out into the environment more, first to enjoy it, as in bushwalking, picnics, fishing expeditions, and the like, and then in promoting and joining in with community projects of tree-planting, soil-care, and the like.
- (g) A city church can enjoy the fellowship of some of their country brothers and sisters by arranging environmental awareness days and tree-planting on some of our struggling farmers' lands, or by spending a day doing farm chores.
- (h) And in all our own living as individuals and Christians we should all, for love of Christ, strive for simplicity of living, a non-materialistic life-style, a love of simple things, and a gentle walk on the earth with all our fellow creatures, all of us being close kin to the earth to which we will all return one day.
- (i) And on our graves, or with our scattered ashes, let others who love the Lord scatter flowers, in the certain hope of the resurrection and of the praise of all the creatures, when the Lord of all life comes again!