

Christians and the Environment: How Should Christians Think about the Environment?

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Summary

The claim that Christianity teaches care for the environment has been challenged from both outside and inside the church. By those outside the church, the Christian faith has been accused of holding to a theology that encourages exploitation of the environment. This is based on both a misreading of Scripture as well as the unfortunate practice of some Christians. Those inside the church have put forth five challenges: (1) the utilitarian earth view, (2) the gnostic world view, (3) the conflation of earth keeping with environmentalism, (4) the “fear of Samaritans syndrome,” and (5) the no crisis/no stewardship philosophy. None of these challenges withstands the testimony of Scripture.

God created the world, holds everything together, and reconciles all things through Jesus Christ. Since the days of the early church, followers of Jesus Christ have known this remarkable teaching of Colossians 1:15-20, and for centuries prior to the Incarnation, God had also been affirmed as Creator. Since “the earth is the Lord’s,” humanity’s responsibility to “serve and keep” God’s creation had been part of the belief and action of God’s people for millennia (Ps. 19:1; Gen. 2:15). Thus since 1967 the claim of Lynn White, Jr., that the “Judeo-Christian tradition” was the cause of “our ecologic crisis” has been troubling.¹ White’s paper, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” which has been reprinted in numerous textbooks and other anthologies, is the main reason college students learn that Christians are the problem. “God planned all of this explicitly for man’s benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes” was White’s assessment of the Christian attitude toward God’s creation.²

AN APOLOGETIC TO OUTSIDE CRITICS

Francis Schaeffer was among the first Christian apologists to respond to White’s complaint. “The Christian is called upon to exhibit this dominion, but exhibit it rightly; treating the thing as having value in itself, exercising dominion without being destructive.”³ Moreover, as far back as 1554, John Calvin had interpreted dominion to mean a responsible care and keeping that does not neglect, injure, abuse, degrade, dissipate, corrupt, mar, or ruin the earth.⁴

God’s economy — “God’s plan or system for government of the world”⁵ — is always the context and framework within which the human economy works. A literal reading of Genesis 2:15 puts it thus: “And Jehovah God taketh the man and causeth him to rest in the garden of Eden, to serve it and to keep it.”⁶ Serving and keeping creation,⁷ not oppressive domination, is the biblical idea of economy. Jesus Christ — our model — reenforces this. The image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15) takes “the very nature of a servant”(Phil. 2:6-7). And Christians follow the Creator-Servant — the second Adam — joining Him in His reconciliation of all things to God, undoing the damage of the

first Adam by doing what Adam was supposed to do.⁸ Moreover, they cultivate society as part of God's creation while seeking and preserving truth,⁹ establishing civility, erecting civilized societies, and building the church of Christ on earth.¹⁰ They demonstrate that "a truly biblical Christianity has a real answer to the ecological crisis."¹¹

AN APOLOGETIC TO CRITICS WITHIN THE CHURCH

The first 25 years following White's paper saw the production of scores of defenses to outside critics.¹² Recently, however, challenges to the view that the Bible teaches being a custodian of God's creation have even come from critics within Christendom. These challenges include views that (1) the earth and everything in it belong to humanity; (2) the material world is unimportant or evil; (3) Christian earthkeepers are "environmentalists"; (4) environmentalists are frequently New Agers, and New Agers should be shunned; and (5) since there is no environmental crisis, biblical earthkeeping is unnecessary.

1.) The earth and everything in it belongs to man (Utilitarian Earth View). The first clear challenge from within came from James Watt, a professing evangelical, who became U.S. Secretary of the Interior under Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s. In his article, "Ours Is the Earth,"¹³ and numerous articles since 1981, he made clear that he viewed earth as "merely a temporary way station on the road to eternal life... The earth was put here by the Lord for His people to subdue and to use for profitable purposes on their way to the hereafter."¹⁴ Christian ethicist, Susan Bratton, herself an evangelical, countered Watt's article, pointing to the Bible's proclamation, "The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains."¹⁵ Bratton concluded that "his philosophy of management stems largely from economic and political considerations"¹⁶ and that "his economic and political views also greatly influence his ecotheology."¹⁷ Watt's beliefs and actions complicated the Christian apologetic response to outside critics because they seemed to validate White's claim against Christians. Thus apologists have had to remind critics within Christendom that the earth and everything in it *is* the Lord's and that the earth has other purposes than merely serving human needs.¹⁸

2.) The material world is unimportant or evil (Gnostic World View). Another challenge from within is a dualistic view that teaches the separation between matter and spirit, while arguing that the material world is evil. Christian apologists counter this notion with New Testament texts that affirm matter in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, the resurrection of the body, and the reconciliation of all things to God.¹⁹ God loves *the cosmos* (John 3:16), pouring out divine love to all creation. Mirroring God's knowledge and love, we work to know and care for God's world. As it is inconceivable to honor Rembrandt and yet despise his paintings, so also is it inconceivable to honor the Creator and yet despise His works and workings. To the Creator of matter, matter matters.

While honoring God, we also need to know how creation works. We need to know the human economy so we can maintain, refine, and employ it in our service to God's economy. If we are careless about science and economics — not caring about how they work and what they describe, creation's economy will suffer. Inside critics who would disparage the material world have made it

necessary for apologists to reaffirm the importance of the material world to its Creator as well as the disciplines for knowing and caring for it.

3. Christian earthkeepers are environmentalists (Conflation of Earthkeeping with Environmentalism). A third challenge within Christendom is lumping all who care for creation into the category “environmentalist.” Thus Christians who practice earthkeeping out of dedication to God may be unjustly identified with pantheism (identification of the world with God), paganism, and violent tactics, thereby raising suspicion of other Christians. A student of mine, for example, was chided by another for “having New Age tendencies” when she, out of Christian conviction, picked up a discarded aluminum can along a campus sidewalk.

Moreover, new believers might be expected to abandon “environmental interests.” Another student, upon her conversion, had been taught that caring for creation was inimical to accepting Christ; her mentor had taught her that Christ is a beautiful Savior, but not the Lord of creation. This challenge by inside critics has moved apologists to call for discernment and care when judging fellow Christians’ actions toward creation.

4.) Stay away from New Agers (Fear of Samaritans Syndrome). While New Age belief is a problem that needs to be addressed,²⁰ there is a greater problem: shunning “New Agers” and thereby denying them the opportunity to hear the gospel. After a speech I gave to a New Age organization on the New Testament meaning of the Kingdom of God, many of the 250 conferees inquired about the gospel. Only two had been connected with a church; the rest had not heard the gospel message.

As the conference concluded, their leaders asked why Christian picketers were treating them as evil people. Regrettably, these people would not have heard even from me had I not mistaken them for a Christian group when I accepted their invitation to speak. The apologetic response in this instance has led us to discover that many in the New Age do not know God and have not yet been told the gospel, which they desperately need and which we should share with them.

5.) Since there is no ecological crisis, earthkeeping is not necessary (No Crisis/No Stewardship Philosophy). Finally, many people are engaging in debates over whether there is even an environmental crisis. Underlying this debate are the troubling implications that we need to have more or better data before we can take action and that if things are not as bad as we thought (or are getting better or never were bad at all), we do not have to act.

The biblical imperative, however, is for stewardship on behalf of God’s creation no matter what the condition of creation. Christian environmental stewardship is not crisis management but a way of life. God’s call to serve and keep the garden is our calling whether it is our vegetable garden or the whole of creation, and no matter if it is being degraded, staying the same, or improving. We need not have all the data, but we must be dedicated to imaging God’s love for the world in our lives and landscapes. Responding apologetically to inside critics on this matter has shown that responsible stewardship is not an option but a continuing privilege and responsibility.

RESPONDING IN TRUTH

Our society is discovering that environmental problems are more spiritual than technological. People everywhere are looking for the way, the truth, and the life. The time is ripe for offering the living water that only Christ gives to the world as an expression of God's love. The time has come for us to carefully seek to learn all that the Bible teaches us about the Creator, creation, and stewardship of His world. We must seek to understand what creation reveals about God's divinity, sustaining presence, and everlasting power. We must discover what creation teaches us about its God-given order and the principles by which it works. We must not selfishly keep the good news to ourselves. We must tell. We should so behave on earth that our testimony to our Creator is clear. We should so behave on earth that heaven will not be a shock to us.

NOTES

¹Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-7.²*Ibid.*, 1205.³Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1970), 72.⁴John Calvin, commentary on Genesis 2:15 in *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (Grand Rapids: 1948). This teaching is strongly reenforced by Revelation 11:18: "The time has come...for destroying those who destroy the earth."⁵This definition, interestingly, is the first definition of "economy" in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1981).⁶*Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible: A Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953).⁷This is the title of the book by Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Service* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).⁸See Ronald Manahan, "Christ as the Second Adam," *The Environment and the Christian: What Can We Learn from the New Testament?* C. B. DeWitt, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 45-56, who writes, "The work of the last Adam is as broad as the reach of the damage of the first Adam" (55).⁹See, for example, Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), xv-xxiii, 126-92, 409-17.¹⁰See Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992) and Ronald Manahan, *A Re-Examination of the Cultural Mandate: An Analysis and Evaluation of the Dominion Materials* (doctoral dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1985).¹¹Schaeffer, 81. The term "crisis," employed by Schaeffer here, should be used advisedly. I agree with Ron Elsdon that in most situations "it is wrong to refer to an environmental crisis, since this word implies the existence in time of a sudden and decisive change, either for better or worse." Ron Elson, *Bent World: A Christian Response to the Environmental Crisis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 9.¹²See Joseph Sheldon, *Rediscovery of Creation: A Bibliographical Study of the Church's Response to the Environmental Crisis* (Metuchen, NJ and London: ATLA and Scarecrow Press).¹³James Watt, "Ours Is the Earth," *Saturday Evening Post* (January/February 1982), 74-75, cited by Bratton (see note 15).¹⁴Ron Wolf, "God, James Watt, and the Public Land," *Audubon* 83(3) (May 1981):65, cited by Bratton.¹⁵Susan Bratton, "The Ecotheology of James Watt," *Environmental Ethics* 5(3): 225-36. Here Bratton is quoting Ps. 24:1, *New American Standard Bible* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Co., 1973). See also Psalm 104:24 and 1 Corinthians 10:26.¹⁶*Ibid.*, 225.¹⁷*Ibid.*, 234.¹⁸For example, to express God's goodness and creativity (Gen. 1 and 2); for God's pleasure in His creatures (Job 38-40); to bring God praise (Ps.

104, 148); to witness to God's glory, divinity, and everlasting power (Ps. 19:1; Acts 14:17; Rom. 1:20); and to induce human beings to seek Him (Acts 17:27).¹⁹See, for example, Ray VanLeeuwen, "Christ's Resurrection and the Creation's Vindication," *The Environment and the Christian*, 57-71.²⁰See Douglas R. Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986)

THE CASE AGAINST RADICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM

by Ronald Nash

Summary

The environment in America is cleaner today than at any time in this century. Despite all the good that the environmental movement has accomplished, it is time to step back and recognize some of its significant weaknesses. For one thing, extremists have co-opted the environmental movement while motivated by hidden religious and political agendas having nothing to do with environmental issues. The environmental movement also needs to mature and realize that success in dealing with future environmental problems will require more than appeals to emotion; it will need careful thinking and more attention to good science. Meanwhile, Christians need to recognize the warning signs of environmental extremism and act accordingly.

Thanks to the efforts of people who care about the environment, Americans today enjoy the benefits of an environment that is cleaner than at any time in the past 50 years.¹ No one that I know wishes to turn back the clock and wipe out the important environmental gains of the past 30 years, but many knowledgeable people are beginning to express concern about extremists in the environmental movement. One feature of radical environmentalism is the often disguised religious and political agendas to which many of the extremists are committed. Radical environmentalism is not about good stewardship or conservation; it's about using the environment issue for ulterior religious or political reasons. More often than not, radical environmentalists base their activities upon bad or unsupported scientific claims.

MAJOR TYPES OF RADICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM

Three major branches of radical environmentalism exist, commonly known as the Greens, the deep ecologists, and the animal rights movement. The group known as the Greens is the most politically sophisticated, a fact that explains the care they take to hide their true agenda from the public. This movement has become the new home for hard-line socialists who want coercive governments to function as the mechanism for destroying private property rights. This may explain why members of this group are sometimes called "the watermelon environmentalists" — green on the outside, but red on the inside.

The deep ecologists are pantheistic fanatics with New Age, Hindu, or Buddhist overtones. Such organizations as "Greenpeace" and "Earth First" represent this group. Members of this movement

favor radical confrontation, which leads them to be far less pragmatic than the Greens. The pantheism of the deep ecologists teaches “that all organisms and entities in the ecosphere... are equal in intrinsic worth.”² As one proponent says, “Unless the need were urgent, I could no more sink the blade of an ax into the tissues of a living tree than I could drive it into the flesh of a fellow human.”³ According to David Foreman, “A human life has no more intrinsic value than an individual grizzly bear life. If it came down to a confrontation between a grizzly and a friend, I’m not sure whose side I would be on. But I do know humans are a disease, a cancer on nature.”⁴

The animal rights movement is also pantheistic. It believes all of life is one, indivisible whole. No form of life is better than another. One of its favorite terms is “speciesism,” which it defines as a bias

for one’s own species against others. Humans are the only creatures who can be guilty of speciesism, which makes it the radical environmentalist’s corollary to racism and sexism. The best-known organization representing this movement is People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA).⁵

Many radical environmentalists do not have the environment as their top priority. In 1992 the top 12 environmental groups raised \$638 million. Six-figure salaries abound in the offices of these organizations. Saving the environment has proven for some to be an easy path to financial success. A second motivating factor is the political agenda of a new breed of socialists, who regard private ownership of property as a major source of evil on the planet. A third motivating factor is the New Age religion of people in the Greenpeace and Earth First organizations. Political and social radicals love the implicit revolutionary nature of contemporary environmentalism; they see it as a way of mobilizing the masses into supporting their radical agenda.

Vice President Al Gore’s 1992 book, *Earth in the Balance*, exhibits many traits of environmental extremism. Gore asks Americans to embark “on an all-out effort to use every policy and program, every law and institution, every treaty and alliance, every tactic and strategy, every plan and course of action — to use, in short, every means to halt the destruction of the environment and to preserve and nurture our ecological system.”⁶ Writing in *The Yale Law Journal*, Robert Hahn calls Gore’s position the “kitchen sink” theory of environmental policy. In other words, it is a policy in which we are supposed to do everything all at once, oblivious to cost or necessity.⁷

EVANGELICALS AND RADICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM

It is hardly news that the theological and cultural liberals who control the National and World Council of Churches have ties to environmental extremist groups. What is surprising is the ease with which many evangelicals have embraced elements of environmental extremism.

Evangelicals need to be perceptive enough to recognize the dangerous religious and cultural implications of radical environmentalism. Alas, such is not the case. Friends of mine have stumbled into public gatherings where evangelicals and perceived allies from the other side of the theological tracks have been found together fervently singing hymns to “Mother Earth,” an exercise with clearly pantheistic overtones. Other evangelicals unthinkingly urge Christians to

support one or another radical environmentalist organization. To a large extent, this evangelical fascination with environmental extremism is part of a larger surrender to the cultural political ideology of the religious left, a phenomenon I discuss in my 1996 book, *Why the Left Is Not Right: The Religious Left: Who They Are and What They Believe* (Zondervan).

One representative of the evangelical left, Tony Campolo, claims to recognize the dangers of environmental extremism, especially the dangerous links to pantheism, the worship of nature in place of God, and an antibiblical elevation of all forms of life to an equal status with human beings. These concerns are supposedly reflected in the title to Campolo's 1992 book, *How to Rescue the Earth without Worshipping Nature*.⁸ However, Wilbur Bullock, a retired professor of zoology at the University of New Hampshire, notes that Campolo often bases his claims "on some very selective manipulation of Scripture as well as reliance on considerable nonbiblical emotional mysticism."⁹ Bullock puzzles over Campolo's tendency to worry that worms might feel pain and that hateful talk might lead plants to wither and die. Campolo's casual indifference to his own warnings that Christians should not regard all life as equally valuable especially troubles Bullock. According to Campolo, "One of the ways Christians can demonstrate their readiness to be led by the Holy Spirit is by making a commitment to the animal rights movement."¹⁰

This evangelical scientist's verdict on Campolo's book is highly critical: "We need to be concerned with rescuing the earth. We will be held responsible as stewards for what we have done to counter the effects of sin on God's creation. We must attempt this 'rescue' on biblical terms. 'Nature' is God's creation — nature is not God. Mankind is to use but not abuse nature. In spite of his excellent title, Campolo's approach is too close to worshipping nature. For that reason I cannot recommend this book as a real contribution to the Christian approach to environmental problems."¹¹

Christians need to show more discernment when joining various environmentalist movements. Radical organizations have always found ways of using impressionable, unthinking people to follow their lead. The importance of recognizing the hidden, often anti-Christian agendas of some of these groups cannot be emphasized too much.

ECOLOGICAL HYSTERIA

Economist Peter Hill uses the term "ecological hysteria" to refer to a common technique of the environmental extremists. As Hill explains, "The news is continually filled with stories of where the next disaster is coming from and how we are on the brink of destruction from one catastrophic event or another. Pesticide poisoning, global warming, acid rain, asbestos, radon and electromagnetic radiation are among the many dangers that are about to overtake us.... American citizens have been only too ready to accept the worst-case scenarios and many regard careful scientific inquiry into the extent of these dangers as irrelevant."¹² A good example is the alar scare that caused so much needless harm to apple growers in the late 1970s. Other examples include the well-known hysteria generated by scares of alleged global warming, thinning of the ozone layer, acid rain, and the like.

Joseph Bast and his coauthors provide a report card on the current status of putative environmental crises. They argue, for example, that the “crisis” of acid rain has been disproven and never was a problem; that global warming and ozone depletion are disproven theories that are not currently problems; that threats from automobiles and nuclear power plants used to be problems but now have been nearly solved in the West; that pesticides and toxic chemicals continue to be problems but can be managed with careful action; and that deforestation and resource depletion are problems largely in third world countries.¹³

NATURAL POLLUTION

Radical environmentalists are silent about the many kinds of pollution created by natural phenomena. Since the start of the Industrial Revolution, humans have produced far less air pollution than that produced by just three volcanic eruptions: Krakatoa in Indonesia (1883), Katmai in Alaska (1912), and Hekla in Iceland (1947). When Mt. St. Helens exploded in 1980, it poured 910,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. When Mexico’s El Chicon erupted in 1982, it released 100,000,000 tons of sulfur. Other volcanoes that spewed hundreds of thousands of tons of pollutants into the atmosphere include Mt. Pinatubo in the Philippines (1991) and Mt. St. Augustine in Alaska (1976). Environmentalists who worry about the effect of chlorine on stratospheric ozone seldom mention that volcanoes and other natural phenomena pump 650 million tons of chlorine into the atmosphere each year, many times the amount of stratospheric chlorine traceable to such chloro-fluoro carbons as freon.

OTHER CRITICISMS OF RADICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM

Space limits me from providing detail on a number of other problems of radical environmentalism, including the environmentalists’ silence about the staggering environmental destruction that has occurred in socialist states, pollution that will take decades and trillions of dollars to clean up. This silence, from people who typically regard big government as the planet’s savior from pollution, merits more attention. While improvements in the environment are important, several critics of environmentalism contend that even more improvement could have been achieved without the massive increases in governmental bureaucracy in America and the enormous costs of governmental regulation that followed.

The environmental movement today is in desperate need of growing up. Much of its early success resulted from appeals to emotion rather than to more rational approaches to problems. It needs to think less about the present and begin the more difficult task of addressing long-term solutions — solutions that will require careful attention to good science.

I don’t know anyone who wants people to drink polluted water, breathe polluted air, or eat carcinogens for supper. No thoughtful Christian can support contempt or disregard for God’s creation. Wise Christians will practice stewardship with regard to God’s creation. In effect, the concept of stewardship allows us to use nature, but not to abuse it. Wise Christians will therefore respect a prudent environmentalism but will oppose those extremists who seek to exploit concern for the environment for the sake of their own hidden religious and political agendas.

NOTES

¹See Joseph L. Bast, Peter J. Hill, and Richard C. Rue, *Eco-Sanity* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1994), ch. 2.² Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology* (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 1985), 67.³ Edward Abbey, “The Crooked Wood,” *Audubon* 77 (November 1975), 25.⁴Quoted by Douglas S. Looney, “Protector or Provocateur?” *Sports Illustrated*, 27 May 1991, 54. The quote comes from Dave Foreman, *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior* (New York: Harmony Books, 1991), 54.⁵For a Christian critique of the animal rights movement, see Harold O. J. Brown, “Hiding among the Animals,” *Christian Research Journal*, Summer 1996, 10-19.⁶Albert Gore, *Earth in the Balance* (New York: Plume, 1992), 274.⁷Robert W. Hahn, “Toward a New Environmental Paradigm,” *The Yale Law Journal*, May 1993, 1740.⁸(Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992).⁹Wilbur L. Bullock, a book review in *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 45 (1993): 138.¹⁰Campolo, 71.¹¹Bullock, 138.¹²Peter J. Hill, “Environmental Theology: A Judaic-Christian Defense,” unpublished paper, Wheaton College Economics Department (1993), 18.¹³For documentation of these claims, see Bast, 178.

A RESPONSE TO RONALD NASH

by Calvin B. DeWitt

I join Professor Nash in affirming the need for “clear thinking and good science.” And I agree that extremism is a problem of our time. As Christians we need to strive for truth and civility, not hysteria, on issues concerning God’s creation. As Nash rightly points out, we already have made significant progress on caring for creation and should not “turn back the clock and wipe out the important environmental gains of the past 30 years.”

I think we also agree that we must deal with extremists by ministering to them in civil and Christian ways, not by denying them the opportunity to learn that Jesus Christ is the Lord of creation. Thus, while being discerning, we also must be caring, bringing them the Good News. My concern is not that there are extremists (there always are), but rather, that we act extremely toward them in showing them by our words and lives that Jesus Christ is Lord of creation. Recently, for example, when I spoke to a Deep Ecology group, I found they had never heard the biblical teachings on caring for creation. Afterward, three of the 15 members began attending discussions on creation stewardship at the local evangelical campus ministry.

I agree with Nash that we must seek and avail ourselves of the means for finding the truth, including “good science.” His illustration of chlorine is a case in point. As free hydrogen is highly reactive but not when part of the water molecule, H₂O, so is free chlorine highly reactive but not when part of chloroflourocarbon (CFC) molecules. While we know scientifically that volcanoes annually put immense quantities of chlorine into the atmosphere, we also know that chlorine in this form is highly reactive — as in swimming pools and water treatment plants — quickly forming compounds that make it unreactive. But chlorine that is a part of CFCs such as Freon is not reactive at all, but is innocuous. Unlike free chlorine, which is “wild” and quickly “tamed” by reacting with other things, the chlorine in CFCs is “tame” until it is hit by solar ultraviolet radiation 25-40 kilometers above the earth’s surface, where it becomes “wild” and free — quickly binding with

ozone to produce oxygen, and thus destroying the ozone. Remarkably, the chlorine (temporarily bound to oxygen atoms) is then released again as free chlorine, free to repeat the process time and again. The problem, of course, is that the ozone molecules in the stratosphere are one of God's remarkable provisions for shielding the earth from our sun's ultraviolet radiation. The ozone layer intercepts life-destroying ultraviolet rays that radiate from the sun, preventing them from reaching the earth.¹

This example of "clear thinking and good science" just brought the Nobel Prize in chemistry to its discoverers, Professors Paul Crutzen, Mario Molina, and F. Sherwood Rowland. "It is the first time the Nobel Prize has recognized research into man-made impacts on the environment. The discoveries led to an international environmental treaty which by the end of this year bans the production of industrial chemicals that reduce the ozone layer," states the news release of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. I respectfully submit that the scientific understanding of ozone chemistry and the protective ozone layer is trivialized by commentators such as Joseph Bast and his coauthors in their "report card" when they say that ozone depletion is a "disproven theory."

As we do not consult tabloids or other uninformed sources for clear thinking about moral truth, neither should we consult poorly informed sources on how the world works or on how things are going in creation, no matter how good their intentions may be. We must, as Nash so rightly points out, get to "clear thinking and good science." And that is pretty easy to come by.²

I believe we also must be careful in making judgments about extremism. For example, in citing a book that "exhibits many traits of environmental extremism," Nash also opens the question of the "extremism" of Noah. The author he cites writes, "Noah is commanded by God to take into his ark at least two of every living species in order to save them from the flood — a commandment that might appear in modern form as: Thou shalt preserve biodiversity....In spite of the clear message from a careful reading of this and other Scriptures, critics have gained currency...." And then this writer asks the question that should grip every believer, "How can one glorify the Creator while heaping contempt on the creation?" A careful reading of Genesis 6–9 will show that Noah fits pretty well within Robert Hahn's definition (cited by Nash) of the "kitchen sink theory of environmental policy" — "a policy in which we are supposed to do everything all at once, oblivious to cost or necessity." Nevertheless, Noah and the ark must be taken seriously.

Finally, I agree with Nash that we must avoid hysteria. While I also understand his citing Joseph Bast "that deforestation and resource depletion are problems largely in third world countries," I must ask, Is that not also part of God's creation? and, Are we uninvolved in its destruction? An even bigger question is this: Is Jesus Christ Lord of creation? If our answer is yes, then what happens anywhere in creation must be of interest to believers. And if our neighbor's house — or the forests of Brazil or Surinam — is on fire, a person should be allowed to "pull the alarm" without being considered extreme or called an "alarmist." In fact, if we are to take Ezekiel 33 and 34 seriously, it might even be our God-given duty.

Most of all, in dealing with our stewardship responsibility for creation, we must acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord of creation by what we say and sing, and also by what we do. People should know

by our work and lives that we follow — in word and deed — the Son, who is beautiful Savior *and* Lord of creation.³

NOTES

¹See J. G. Anderson, D. W. Toohey, and W. H. Brune, *Science* 251 (39-45): 1991; and M. J. Molina and F. S. Rowland, *Nature* 249 (810): 1974.²For example, one can consult textbooks in environmental science, such as Bernard J. Nebel and Richard T. Wright, *Environmental Science: The Way the World Works*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993), and search the Internet for “Conventions on Climate, Ozone, and Biodiversity.”³See C. B. DeWitt, *Earth-Wise: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1994), a small book written for adult Sunday School discussion. A bibliography of Christian stewardship publications is available from Au Sable Institute, 731 State St., Madison, WI 53711, or call (608) 255-0950.

A RESPONSE TO CALVIN B. DEWITT

by Ronald Nash

DeWitt greatly exaggerates alleged evangelical lack of interest in the environment. He spends much of his article condemning Christians for not caring about the environment, when in fact it is DeWitt’s brand of radical environmentalism they shun. Many Christians believe that we should act prudently to stop pollution and other forms of environmental harm, but avoid environmental extremism that does little but fill the coffers of extremist environmental groups and expand the size and power of a coercive government.¹

DeWitt tells us we ought to care about God’s creation, when the important issue is how our concern for the creation should be manifested. On this issue, DeWitt’s article has nothing to say. What does seem clear is that “concern for the environment” is not legitimate in DeWitt’s thinking unless it manifests itself in his kinds of actions. As I explain in my book about the religious left,² ideology, arrogance, or misinformation about the other side blinds many cultural liberals in the evangelical camp. This leads them to think that any person who disagrees with them does so because of some moral or intellectual failing. DeWitt appears to question the Christian profession of one evangelical who differed with his view of the environment. It is possible, I suppose, that DeWitt may attempt to brand me as an environmental ne’er-do-well. However, my moderate, centrist position on the continuum of environmental views cannot be reduced to any of the five positions he critiques in his article.

DeWitt thinks the ecotheology of those Christians whose environmental views he disdains really flows from their economic and political views, and not the Scriptures. Yet does DeWitt really think that his own economic and political views have had no influence on his ecotheology? Does he really believe he draws his views exclusively from Scripture with absolutely no input from secular sources that just happen to be on the far left of both the political and environmental spectrum? His article’s use of Scripture suggests otherwise.

An indication of how DeWitt's environmental extremism acts as a filter for his understanding of Scripture appears in his handling of John 3:16, which DeWitt quotes as support for his claim that God loves the physical universe. The Greek term *kosmos*, translated as "world" in the text, does *not* mean the physical universe. It refers to the personal world of humankind for whom Christ died. DeWitt's claim that John 3:16 teaches that God pours "out divine love to all creation" suggests that he thinks Jesus died for flies, tadpoles, shrimp, rocks, rivers, and trees — an obvious indication that either his judgment or his handling of Scripture merits careful scrutiny. When an author attempts to use John 3:16 as a proof-text for radical environmentalism, ideology has clearly taken control of his hermeneutic. Another sign of questionable theology appears when DeWitt writes, "To the Creator of matter, matter matters." DeWitt certainly appears to suggest here that God values inanimate matter in such a way as to place it on the same level with human beings.

DeWitt reportedly was a member of a group urging congressional support for a problematic endangered species act. He justified his political activism on the grounds that the Genesis account of Noah's ark mandates such legislation. DeWitt's position conveniently ignores the fact that all animals other than those saved in the ark were destroyed in the flood sent by God. Genesis 6–8 would hardly seem to be a relevant proof-text for politicians debating a highly questionable piece of legislation dealing with endangered species. To make things worse for his case, 2 Peter 3 teaches that the Flood foreshadows the Day of the Lord in which God will destroy the earth by fire. Neither the destruction of animal life during the Flood in Noah's day nor the promised destruction of the world in the future seems compatible with DeWitt's eccentric reading of John 3:16.

Nothing in my comments should be construed as lack of interest toward the earth or its nonhuman population. I simply think it's interesting to see the odd ways in which religious left extremists twist Scripture to suit the political and environmental presuppositions that form their ecotheology.

Since the primary agent of environmental activism is big government, it is interesting to ask why so many environmentalists ignore the abominable environmental record of socialist states — the epitome of big and coercive government. Furthermore, I cannot help but wonder why DeWitt's article is silent about the significant improvements in the environment in the United States in the past two decades. At least in the United States, the environment today is cleaner than at any time in the past 50 years. (For information about the many scientists who question extremist claims about global warming, acid rain, ozone depletion, and other alleged crises of the present, see chapter 4 of the book *Eco-Sanity*.³)

Harold O. J. Brown recently noted how the ecology movement has become "increasingly captive to essentially non-Christian and intellectually indefensible ideas."⁴ He warns of "an ominous link between radical feminist religion and ecology," and he notes how "essentially pagan and idolatrous ideas are being insinuated into Western consciousness under the cloak of concern for the environment, personalized as 'Mother Earth' and increasingly worshipped as the goddess Gaia."⁵ Interestingly, the extremist views found in Vice President Gore's *Earth in the Balance* include praise for advocates of the Gaia principle.

While Brown believes that Christian concern for ecology is appropriate, he regrets that insufficient "serious biblical thought is being given to the problem. As a consequence, legitimate concern for

the environment and the future of humanity on an earth with limited resources is being infiltrated with and captivated by some of the most eccentric and quasi-pagan varieties of radical feminism. Many church circles — especially but not only the World Council of Churches — have already gone far towards abandoning biblical monotheism in favor of a syncretistic, pantheistic preoccupation with the recently invented goddess Gaia.”⁶

And where does Calvin DeWitt stand on all this? I have searched his article in vain for any warnings about this pantheistic worship of nature. Indeed, his discussion of proponents of New Age pantheism obscures the issue by failing to see the difference between New Age persons, whom we should love and witness to, and the New Age ideology, which has no place in a biblically informed ecotheology.

NOTES

¹See James Gills and Ronald Nash, *Government Is Too Big* (Tarpon Springs, FL: St. Luke’s Institute, 1996).²Ronald Nash, *Why the Left Is Not Right: The Religious Left: Who They Are and What They Believe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).³Joseph L. Bast, et al, *Eco-Sanity* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1994).⁴Harold O. J. Brown, “Living by Gaia’s Laws?” *The Religion and Society Report*, September 1996, 5.⁵Ibid.⁶Ibid.