

Ecotheology: An Opportunity for Transformed Evangelical Environmental Vision

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Evangelical Christians have been criticized for embracing theologies that may promote a lack of environmental responsibility. I would like to make a case for a re-ordered imagination of evangelical ethic and engagement with the earth that expands to a recognition of the intimate link between justice, environmentalism, and the ministry of reconciliation given by Christ. Environmental engagement is an integral aspect of the Christian pursuit of justice because individual choices deeply affect others and matter to God as an opportunity to practice reconciliation.

ON SEPTEMBER 21, 2019, an estimated four million people participated in a global climate strike demanding policy change from legislators worldwide. The environmentalism tide is turning in many ways, with scores of individuals taking action to live more sustainably and nation-states beginning to change environmental policies. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Climate Change have been working since 2014 to assist in creating national climate action plans. The UN Development Programme Global Outlook Report of 2019, states that “overall this report finds many reasons for optimism, but much work remains. It’s clear that business as usual simply isn’t good enough anymore” (Doyle 5). According to the Pew Research Center, citizens in countries with high carbon emissions per capita appear to be less concerned with issues and impact of climate change. This category includes the US, Canada, and Australia. Polarization characterizes America’s public opinion on environmental issues (Wike). Everyone seems to be talking about the environment, but regardless of public opinion, Americans don’t seem to be slowing down their consumption rates.

Lyn White, in his infamous article, “The Historic Roots of the Environmental Crisis,” targets Christianity as the culprit to blame for the current ecological and consumption crisis. Though there is discussion of stewardship theology in Evangelical Christian spheres of America, there still seems to exist attitudes of resistance against environmental action. In some churches across America there is silence concerning the issue, perhaps because of the highly politicized nature of the topic. In other churches, White’s claim is perpetuated by teachings that inadvertently sustain habits of consumerism. Indifference towards environmental

destruction caused by evangelical attitudes is a danger to Christian witness and a shallow response to God’s call for renewed relationships with each other and with the earth. I would like to make a case for a re-ordered imagination of evangelical ethic and engagement with the earth that expands to a recognition of the intimate link between justice, environmentalism, and the ministry of reconciliation given by Christ.

The state of the planet is reaching new lows. Current environmental issues range from pollution, wildfires, droughts, flooding, hurricanes, rising sea-levels, melting permafrost due to climate change, and immense loss of biodiversity. According to the recent UN Outlook report, the last four years were the warmest on record, with July 2019 reaching the highest temperatures ever documented (Doyle 6). The report also clearly demonstrates the growing governmental commitment to battling climate change present in most countries. A key player in this development has been the Paris Agreement, drafted in 2015.

The Paris Agreement, a UN climate change prevention initiative signed by 195 nations, aims to “stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that will prevent dangerous human interference with the climate system, in a time frame which allows ecosystems to adapt naturally and enables sustainable development” (Doyle). It seeks to maintain transparency and aid in assisting developing countries deal with the impacts of climate change. During a speech on June 1, 2017, President Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris Agreement. President Trump argued in a speech following this decision that “The Paris Climate Accord is simply the latest example of Washington entering into an agreement that

disadvantages The United States for the exclusive benefit of other countries. The Paris Accord is very unfair at the highest level..." (Shear).

The data suggests however, that the US is one of the primary leaders in pollution. Regardless of the Paris Agreement, fairness doesn't seem to be in order here. Contributions to the environmental crisis are not evenly distributed between nations. According to the International Energy Association, after three years of decline, the United States upped energy demand by 3.7% in 2018. Global CO2 emissions from fuel combustion have been on the rise since 2017, reaching 32.8 billion tons in 2018 (IEA). Following China, America is the second largest cumulative polluter of the environment. The 2019 data will be released early November of this year. While climate action has accelerated, there is still an "unprecedented transformation needed to limit impacts of climate change" (Doyle). The choices made by Americans, and other developed countries, greatly impact the rest of the planet, and in turn, marginalized people.

The Christian call to surrender our lives for others and to live for justice and peace directly contradicts the "America first" attitude demonstrated by President Trump. Psalm 37:8-9 says, "Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret- it only leads to evil. For those who are evil will be destroyed, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land" (ESV). Included in God's plan for redemption is a vision for restored creation, where we will dwell with God forever. The Bible has a lot to say about creation and about the land itself. It also informs a Christian attitude towards possessions and resources that is rooted in humility, generosity, and hope. An article by Daniel Salas provides an alternative to White's claim, exploring how ecotheology, which is the study of the integration of religion and nature, can be a valuable addition to wider environmental discourse because of its compelling arguments for change. Salas notes that, while confronting environmental degradation and issues of environmental justice from a religious perspective might not be able to solve the myriad of problems entirely, Christianity has capacity to create methods for change that are universal. According to Salas, secular thinking that seeks to swear off religion in hopes of modernization, can be rigid and unable to change the culture of consumption currently predominant. It is Christianity that enables the reimagination of environmentalism that can lead to changed behavior (Salas).

Though there is great potential for Christianity to transform environmental ethic, Christian attitudes towards nature can often be ambivalent. In American evangelical

circles a variance of views concerning nature and theology exist. Christian teachers reference the glory of God in creation, and the "general revelation" of God's character through what He has made. The beauty and immense complexity of creation is spoken of, often in arguments pertaining God's existence. However, many theologies are not fully articulated, creating a vague and often shallow impression that lacks the full depth of richness available from Scripture. There is often a disconnect between word and action. Joseph Sittler (1904-1987), a professor of theology at the University of Chicago, was an avid believer in an integrated theology of the earth. He claimed that there is a split between the idea of grace and perceptions of nature in Christian Western thought. In an essay concerning this topic, Sittler argues that the scope of our idea of grace has narrowed to exclude the concept of physical matter. This provides the opportunity to develop mindsets that abuse nature, because it is seen as existing outside of the region of soul and spirit. He claims that the Incarnation and work of reconciliation through Christ is a promise of grace for all of nature, that nothing can be called "common or unclean" (Sittler 43). He clearly and compellingly confronts this narrow view of redemption and gifts the reader with a theological vision that understands God's covenant with the earth itself as christological obediences before all else. Following the story of Noah in Genesis, God makes a covenant not only with mankind, but with the earth itself:

And God said, "this is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth" (Genesis 9:12-13, NIV).

Sittler reminds us that all creation was made through Jesus, and that He has promised to redeem it.

The disembodied view of grace articulated by Sittler extends to teaching in the church that has received critique from scholars. A.J. Swoboda critiques the prosperity theologies that came into focus at the beginning of the twenty-first century, aiding in attitudes of greed and consumerism. Prosperity teaching holds that financial wealth and physical wellness are rewards of faith from God, emphasizing personal happiness. Swaboda argues that even subtle embracement of prosperity teachings create thinking which proceeds environmentally damaging lifestyles for evangelicals. A worldview that believes God grants prosperity and happiness to those who have faith and views physical things as separate from the spiritual will naturally produce passivity to environmental issues.

Andrew Village conducted a series of surveys among conservative Protestant Christians in the UK that affirms Swaboda's claim. Village found a predominantly negative correlation between literal interpretation of the Bible and environmentalism. He argues that literal interpretation of the Genesis account of creation, which guide an acceptance of dominion and stewardship theologies, are directly connected to a negative concern for the environment. Dominion theology can allow room for exploitation of natural resources. Village's research came as a response to Lyn White's article on the roots of the ecological crisis that targets Christianity as a main culprit. White notes, "God planned all of this [nature] explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes" (White 1205) According to White, technology has grown out of Christian attitudes that are realizations of "the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over nature" (White 1206). Though Christians might renounce this extreme dominion theology, lived out action speaks negatively. Village's research marks an indifference to the environment, that "imperils our Christian witness since it opens us to the accusation that Christianity, with its dominion theology, has caused or greatly contributed to the ecological crisis, and that Christians are insensitive to needs outside our own 'church concerns'" (Gorospe 256). Many conservative evangelicals hold an underlying view that environmental care does not matter because God has given us the earth and it will one day be destroyed anyway. This contributes to inaction.

In response to several decades of criticism, some have taken steps to make environmental care an integral aspect of the evangelical mission. In the 2010 Cape Town Commitment, evangelicals committed themselves to "urgent and prophetic ecological responsibility," and calls for "lifestyles that renounce habits of consumption" (The Third Lausanne Congress). While there certainly has been progress, current global environmental concerns have "not been countered in the faith community with a response worthy of their significance" (Warners 221). Stewardship theology, the predominant principle of environmental engagement, has been critiqued by many scholars as a limited guide for advancement. The idea of stewardship acknowledges that God is the creator and sustainer of the earth, and that human beings are mainly called to be "stewards" of what God has made, as appointed at the Garden of Eden in Genesis 1-2. Stewardship here refers to dominion as utilizing and conserving resources, not dominating and destroying (Gorospe). The limitations of this principle are in its association with business and economics. It emphasizes

management over relationship. It also extends the values of the corporate world of production and efficiency, which are important, but do not grasp the full extent of God's call for creation care. God did not create the earth merely as a natural resource. The earth is not meaningless matter waiting to be used by people, nor is it "valuable only in an instrumental sense, in so far as it contributes to the welfare, development, and advancement of human beings" (Gorospe). Another critique on stewardship theology is the lack of emphasis on the interconnectedness of the earth and humanity's dependence on it (Warners). We need the earth to survive far more than it needs us. Yet, God has given us the opportunity to cultivate and care for His creation.

How do we respond to this power? While environmental stewardship has been a beginning, evangelicals are invited to a re-ordered imagination that guides care of the earth, one that is rooted in relationships, humility, and reconciliation. As Gorospe and Warners both suggest, the first step to change is lament and repentance of the current state of degradation. Passivity is interrupted by allowing brokenness to grieve and change us. The earth is groaning now, louder than ever before, with approximately 15% of Earth's land surface remaining in a condition resembling pre-human interference. Romans 8 says,

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now (Romans 8:13-22 *ESV*).

We must also lament and repent because of the people affected by environmental degradation. This is especially important for North Americans because developed nations are disproportionately contributing to environmental degradation, and vulnerable nations are disproportionately affected (Wike). The UN Global Outlook Report states, "governments increasingly recognise that climate is inseparable from wider societal goals to... reduce inequality" (Doyle 8). Even if it were true that it does not matter to God how we interact with creation, and He would destroy it eventually, social justice and environmental justice are inseparable. This immediately marks environmental issues as important for Christians because God cares deeply for the marginalized, the poor, and the vulnerable. Land and resource use are always integrated with deep-set power dynamics. We live in the aftermath of a long history of inequalities created by colonialism and imperialism during

modernization. Habits of consumerism have led to exploitation, violence, and domination of many indigenous and marginalized people. God is very clear about how Christians should engage with power and respond to injustice. Mark 10:42-44 says, "...You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant" (ESV). The "fairness" referenced by President Trump does not align with a biblical view of power. Nearly every economic system in place is the result of a history of oppression. This cannot be overlooked. The environmental crisis is a central justice issue because even though the poor contribute the least amount of carbon emissions, they are most affected by climate change and pollution. Shifts in evangelical thinking in the past twenty years have increased social awareness in the church, but without recognizing the links between environmentalism, poverty, and inequality, progress will be stunted. A new way of engaging with creation care, informed by social justice as well as environmental, is labeled a "reconciliation ecology" (Warners).

Reconciliation ecology emphasizes our interconnectedness with the earth and one another. This theology begins with the belief that injustice comes from broken relationships, including with the land. This framework encompasses hope for restoration of all that God has made. The biblical text that roots reconciliation ecology is 2 Corinthians 5:17-20;

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Reconciliation ecology is informed by a vision of the gospel that permeates every dimension of life. Jesus is transforming, redeeming, and reconciling all things. The gospel gives us the capacity to acknowledge the deep brokenness in relationships between the earth and humanity, but hold this in tension with the hope that Christ is making all things new. As we are transformed "from one degree of glory to another" (2 Corinthians 3), our lifestyles are also transformed. The gospel incrementally changes the way we engage with everything, including resources and physical

matter. We are called to live with abundance and life but not abundance that exploits other beloved image-bearers and destroys the creation that God has made.

What does it mean to take up the ministry of reconciliation in application to environmental justice? Changes in policy are undeniably necessary, but the call for lifestyle changes for the individual remains as well. As Warners states, "Reconciliation ecology is the business of both the individual and the church. Each member of every household is in a position to better understand how their actions influence life around them. But Christ's body, the church (and its manifestation in Christian colleges and universities), represents a potentially powerful place to practice and teach reconciliation ecology corporately." No matter where you are in life, it is a responsibility to take charge of whatever agency is available to you. In a beautiful book exploring reconciliation, Katongole and Rice note, "The work of reconciliation... includes taking time to cultivate habits of ordinary peaceful existence—habits like listening, welcoming strangers, planting gardens, raising children and keeping house... we are to seek peace of the places where we find ourselves" (59). The choices we make in our daily lives can seek peace or contribute to systems of injustice. Every American will have the opportunity to use resources which are a power way to vote with action towards reconciliation. Whether you are aware of it or not, you have power as a consumer. Toxic cycles of consumerism can be broken. In Christ, our identities are not in what we purchase.

One major way to practice reconciliation on an individual level is to combat the single-use mindset. If we believe that all things are made by God and that resources are precious gifts, it simply does not compute to use something once and then throw it away. The things we throw away do not just disappear. Nearly every plastic item you have ever thrown away either has been shipped off to another country, buried in the earth to pollute the soil, or somehow drifted into our oceans to exist for generations. God doesn't waste; in the natural world all matter is recycled, reused, and all things are brought to new life in death. Refusing single use plastic, reusing what you have, and learning to live simply are small ways to join with God's heart for matter. These kinds of changes require grace because changing a system takes time. We need margin to closely examining how our lifestyles cause harm out of sight. Mindful consideration of what habits you allow into your life reflect reconciliation and embody hope.

Although individuals cannot change the whole complex system of economics and politics, individuals are the ones that create social change. This begins on

the individual level, broadens to households, communities, and onward to legislative change. Even as there is sin and degradation, the resurrection of Jesus has given birth to a new creation of which we can all be a part. The earth is being renewed, and as God promised, there will be a time when this will come to fulfillment. We can be motivated to work for renewal now, because the fruit of our labors will not be wasted. Reconciliation is not comfortable. Yet, it is a gift that Christ has invited us to join in the meaningful work of restoring all of creation and bringing hope and peace to even the darkest of places we find ourselves in.

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