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# *Is Christianity Bad for the Environment?*

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**F**rom Greta Thunberg to politicians declaring climate emergencies and multinational companies scrambling to declare their eco-friendly credentials, nature and the environment are issues that most people take increasingly seriously. Just look at the many challenges facing our natural world: climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, sea level rise, and so on. You don't need to be an eco-warrior to admit we have a problem.

Sadly, Christians historically have had something of a checkered record on the environment. In 1967 in the journal *Science*, Lynn White Jr. wrote a hugely influential essay called "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" in which he laid the responsibility for the state of the environment partly at the doors of the church. Referring to a "Christian arrogance toward nature," he proposed that the ecological crisis wouldn't abate "until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."

Decades after White's remarks, some Christians still reinforce this stereotype. For example, some ten years ago, controversial megachurch pastor Mark Driscoll reportedly said, "I know who made the environment and he's coming back and going to burn it all up. So, yes, I drive an SUV."

## **Misunderstanding the Creation Account?**

This negative attitude shown by some Christians toward the natural world can be rooted in a misunderstanding of Genesis 1:26, where God creates humankind and gives them "dominion" over creation. While *dominion* includes the idea of ruling over, it also includes the concept of *taking care*. If you drop your kids off at school, you're handing dominion over them to their teachers. Presumably you expect to get them back safely at the end of the day! God has given us a beautiful world, one the Bible repeatedly tells us that God cares about deeply. So if we claim to love God but we neglect or damage the things he cares about, we are hypocrites.

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### **Why Should We Care? Secular Responses**

But my secular friends also have a question to answer when it comes to the environment: *Why should we care?* After all, behind every environmental campaign lies the implicit assumption that a particular issue—climate change, ocean plastic, extinctions, deforestation, or whatever—is one we should care about. But why?

Over the years, there have been various secular attempts to answer that question. Some environmentalists have appealed to emotion, trying to provoke our *guilt* (look at the polar bears drowning!) or our *compassion* (look how cute that baby seal is!). But what if you don't *feel* the emotion? Emotion seems a poor basis for something so serious as ecology.

Others have appealed to the human benefits and consequences. For example, pesticides in the food chain cause human illness; sea-level rise threatens human cities; we need bees and insects to pollinate our fruit and crops. In other words: we should care about the environment *because it's good for us*. But surely this is the very kind of selfishness that White accused Christians of: nature matters because it's there to serve us. (And presumably bits of nature that have no use to us can be strip-mined, burnt, or driven to extinction?)

I would boldly suggest that *every* secular attempt to justify caring for the natural world ultimately falls flat. So, is there a better way? There is, and it lies right there in the Bible, namely in the Bible's claim that the world is God's good gift to us. Treating it with care, just as you would a beautiful gift from a spouse or a friend, is a fitting response and a powerful basis for creation care.

### **What Has Gone Wrong?**

But there is one last question concerning the environment: *what has gone wrong?* One of the most influential environmentalist activists of the past few decades is Gus Speth, former dean of the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale University and a senior environmental adviser to the US government. A man of no religious faith as far as anyone is aware, Speth offers a fascinating diagnosis. Though he once thought that decades of "good science" could address the most urgent environmental problems, including ecosystem collapse and climate change, his wizened opinion had changed. He proposed that the critical "environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy"—cultural and spiritual underpinnings that science alone can't tackle.

But the Bible *does* know how to transform hearts and minds. It tells the story of what God has done, in and through Jesus, to deal with the damage that sin has wrought to us and to creation. The cross is God's answer both to the damage in our hearts and the damage in creation. As the final hymn stanza of "This Is My Father's World," by Maltbie Babcock, reminds us so beautifully:

*This is my Father's world: Oh, let me ne'er forget  
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,  
God is the ruler yet.*

*This is my Father's world. The battle is not done:  
Jesus who died shall be satisfied,  
And earth and heaven be one.*

