

Responsible Stewardship of God's Earth: The Ecological Thread

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Introduction

- Global significance of climate change
- Some doubt for biblical reasons
- Others doubt for scientific reasons
- Climate change is anthropogenic



Looking at Theology!



Counteracting Climate Change

- Counteracting measures will come at a cost
- Economics and life style
- Rank consumerism and greed



What do Christians think?

- Most think that problems of climate change need to be addressed by -
 - Scientists
 - Big Business
 - Governments
 - Philosophers
- But is there also a theological problem?
- Most think the church has no role to play except at the practical level



The role of the Church

- The church definitely has a role practical role
- Christians can encourage a range of earth-friendly practices
- Schools play an important role
 - Developing habits and ways of thinking
 - Reduction of environmental pollution and green house gases
 - Use of renewable energy
 - Lower dependence on fossil fuels
 - Reducing carbon footprint in homes
- But the church must also wrestle with theological issues connected with climate change

The Lyn White Thesis

- Lynn White, historian, gave a important lecture in the 1960s on 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis'
- He admits that science and technology have played a major role in causing the looming environmental problem.
- But ...



The Hammer Blow

- The church has also been complicit
- White says: Christianity must bear a huge burden of guilt for the problem
- White made these points as a solution to the crisis
 - Need to address the religious underpinning of science and technology. Nature must not be seen as enemy to conquer
 - Church and theology need to engage in the task of theological revision
 - Need to move away from an anthropocentric world view
 - Need to move away from an hierarchical view to a more democratic view where man and nature are companions

St Francis of Assisi



- Patron saint of ecologists
- Saw the trees and animals as his friends
- Wrote wonderful Canticle of the Sun in celebration of creation
- Talks of brother Sun and sister Moon

Canticle of the Sun St. Francis of Assisi

Praised be you, my Lord, with all
your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
who is the day through whom you
give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant
with great splendour; of you Most
High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be you, my Lord, through
Sister Moon and the stars,
In the heavens you have made
them bright, precious and fair.



Reaction to White's Thesis

- Widely discussed over past 40 years
- Endorsed and rejected
- Blaming Christianity amounts to blaming God
- God gave Adam and Eve the command to rule over the earth



Who is to blame?

- White's thesis can be criticised on historical grounds
- We cannot discount the influence of post-Enlightenment rationalism and individualism
 - Cannot pin the blame for the present crisis on the western capitalist world and the Judeo-Christian tradition
 - Non-western cultures shaped by non-Christian religions have also played their part
- Admittedly, eastern religions are more nature-friendly
- Western secularism promoted culture of consumerism, exploitation and domination in the modern age
- Modern secularism, not the Christian faith, has been the major 'cause' of the environmental crisis

Differing Theological Reactions

- There are differing theological reactions to the phenomenon of climate change
- There are three main groups or schools of thought:
 - Reconstructionists
 - Apologists
 - Revisionists

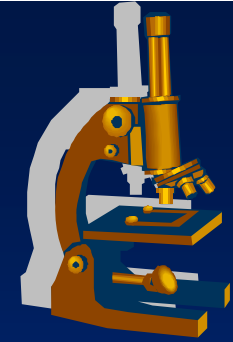
Reconstructionists



- Most radical response
- Complete rejection of the theological tradition
- Complete rejection of biblical teaching generally
- Rejection of the church's traditional dogmatic teaching
 - Replace this with their own postmodernists construction teaching
- See Christian theology as entirely to blame for the crisis
- Christian church is also to blame for the oppression of women because of its inherent patriarchalism
- Oppression of women linked with the oppression of nature



Apologists



- Belong to the conservative end of the theological spectrum
- Defend Scripture and the Christian tradition
- See a problem with the way the biblical teaching has been misunderstood
- Their mission is correct misunderstanding
- Interested in the interface between theology and science—a good thing!

Revisionists

- Mediate between the reconstructionists and apologists
- Take the church's creedal and scriptural teaching as a given—like the apologists
- But they work creatively with tradition to develop a stronger theological platform—unlike apologists
- See themselves as 'reformers' like Luther

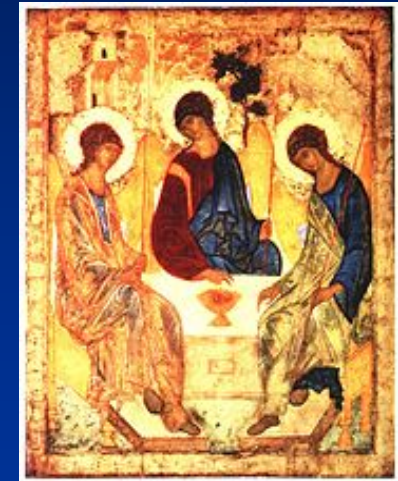


Reforms of Revisionists

- Redress the imbalance in emphasis between creation and redemption
- Strengthen its doctrine of creation
- Understand salvation not just in personal individual terms, but in cosmic terms
- Christ is also the cosmic Saviour and Lord
- Paul speaks of the *whole of creation groaning in labour pains* as it waits for Christ (Rom 8:18-25)
- Christian theology needs to rethink the way it understands nature and its relation to grace

A Paradigm Shift

- Paradigm shift
 - Changing worldview
 - Different way of viewing reality
- White's thesis played a major role in bringing about a paradigm shift
- Greater emphasis on the First Article
 - Broadening the horizon of theology
 - Creation not simply a secondary concern
 - Creation takes its place alongside redemption and the work of the Spirit
 - Central to the work of the Triune God



Humans and Nature Together

- Traditionally, theology has focused on
 - God and human beings
 - Sin and grace
 - God's judgment on sin
 - God's forgiveness in Christ
- God and humans have formed the two foci of the theological ellipse
- Paradigm shift -
 - Nature and the ellipse give way to a triangle
 - Paradigm of God and humanity give way to the paradigm of God, humanity, and nature
 - Bonded together by the love of God
- Question
 - Do we stand before God alone, apart from nature?
 - Do we stand before God together with nature, as part of nature?



Stewardship = Responsibility

- Stewardship is wide term—includes care of the earth
- The Greek word for stewardship means being responsible and accountable for planning and administering the affairs of the household
- God puts human beings in charge of his household,
- God gives humans the task of being good stewards, managing and caring for the environment
- We are to look after the trees, the birds, the fish and the animals for God, the creator and the owner of all
- Stewardship is connected with being in the image of God

A Larger Context

- God's command to take care of the earth needs to be put into a larger context
- Context of our redemption in Jesus Christ
 - God the Father created us
 - He redeemed us from sin through his Son
 - He calls us to faith through his Spirit
- God's mandate to us to take care of his earth is
 - Not only a command but an invitation
 - It something we want to do in gratitude for his act of redemption

Recent Debate



- Debate has arisen in recent times -
 - Concept of stewardship in describing the ecological responsibility of Christians
 - Traditional idea of stewardship implies an anthropocentric view of the world
 - Humans are the pinnacle of God's creation
 - Humans are made in the image of God
 - God gives humans his mandate to rule and have dominion and to subdue the earth

What Place do Humans have in the World?



- Anthropocentric worldview
 - Humans in the centre
 - Responsible control over the non-human world of nature
- Biocentrism
 - Christian tradition cannot accept the idea of biocentrism
 - Advocates the equality of all life forms
 - Humans no longer privileged but seen as just one species among many
- The Bible teaches that there is a hierarchy of existence
 - Humans are different from and higher than the non-human creation—but dominion must not become domination

Criticism of Metaphor of Stewardship

- Criticised by reconstructionists for the following reasons
 - Too managerial, and androcentric (male-centred) and Eurocentric
 - Colonial connotations
 - Supports ideas of lordship and mastery
 - Assumes human supremacy
 - Presupposes a relationship between humanity and nature
 - Stewardship is meaningless to people who are poor, marginalised and disfranchised
 - Open to abuse
- Critics call for a biocentrism

Response to Criticism

- Stewardship metaphor is not without its problems
- Two criticisms we cannot accept on biblical grounds
 - We cannot apologise for the human-centred (anthropocentric) worldview projected by the Bible
 - We must oppose the idea of biocentricity
 - Humans are qualitatively different from the rest of creation
 - Humans are created in God's image to care for the earth
 - Humankind is called to love the earth just as it is called to love the neighbour
 - We are not entitled to dominate and exploit the earth for personal gain
- We stand before God *with* nature and not above it

Real Problems with Stewardship

- Problem is not God's mandate, but human sin
 - Excuse to ruthlessly dominate and exploit the earth
 - To take from it all we can get without due thought of replenishment or sustainability



Theology of Responsible Stewardship

- Strengths of a theology of responsible stewardship or custodianship
 - God is the creator and owner of the earth
 - Humans do not have the right to use and abuse the earth as they please
 - Humans are responsible for the way in which they use the earth
 - Humans have a God-given mandate to protect and care for the earth
 - Humans are to promote the flourishing of the non-human creation
 - Humans are given dignity and value as representatives of God in creation
 - The model of stewardship is found in the servanthood of Jesus Christ
 - Calls for a lifestyle of sacrifice on behalf of both fellow humans beings and the non-human creation

The Virtues of Stewardship

- Respect and receptivity
- Self restraint and frugality
- Humility and honesty
- Wisdom and hope
- Patience and serenity
- Benevolence and love