

## Faith, Hope, and . . . Sustainability

David Warners and Jeff Bouman

Calvin College

### Introduction

One of our neighbors raised her family in the same house in which she was raised. Her home has been a place of nurture and family culture for several decades. The analogy of home care to creation care helps explain the connections between faith and sustainability. Indeed, the term 'ecology' has at its root, 'oikos' – a latin word meaning 'home'. Ecology is the study of our home, our place. Developing an ethic of care for our place makes sense whether the 'place' is our immediate residence or the broader creation. It is unwise to degrade one's home, to ignore holes in its roof or cracks in its foundation. Failure to care for our homes results in deterioration of our personal well being.

When we live in a home for a long time we begin developing an affection for our home. Homes are more than houses; they become places where cherished interactions and nurturing occur. When they work well, homes are places we love to be, and in fact, places we simply love. But is creation something we should love? Christians embrace the calling to love God, but are often uncomfortable with the idea of loving what God has made. Yet, scriptures are clear that God himself loves the creation deeply. In fact, he offered his son *because* he so much loved his 'cosmos' (John 3:16). And Christ came because of God's desire to heal the collective brokenness of his beloved creation (Col 3:15-20). If this is the God whose image we bear, how should our love and affection for our home take root?

Love is both an emotion and a commitment that produces altered behavior. One does not love a spouse, an aging parent, a child, or even a home without living in a way that reflects this love. Love requires setting aside self-interest for the sake of the beloved, a response that is not only undertaken when convenient or fiscally advantageous. Our thesis is that developing such a love response toward the creation is not only appropriate, but fundamental to Christian faith. Furthermore, working to reorient our lives in a more sustainable way is how such love becomes expressed.

### Hesitancies

So why is the Christian community in North America hesitant to seriously take up this challenge? Below we enumerate five major reasons for this hesitancy and counter each with a response.

#### **A. Since human souls are the primary focus of God's redemption plan, creation care is an ancillary distraction that has no ultimate importance.**

This hesitancy creates a false dichotomy between the responsibilities of serving our fellow human beings (Gal. 5:13) and serving the creation (Gen 2:15). Serving Christ means we are called to follow his example, and he came to earth to give up himself so that *all things* could be redeemed (Col 1:20). The entire picture is distorted, the entire picture demands our attention, and the entire picture will be redeemed. This is the work God calls us to – a comprehensive type of evangelism as recorded in Mark 16:15, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."

This is also a false dichotomy because of how intertwined the welfare of creation and the

welfare of human beings are. If we pollute the stream in our neighborhood the fish in that stream will be adversely affected, but so will our neighbors who live downstream. Continuing our contributions to global climate change will detract from the well-being of both human and non-human life. God's work in Christ is cosmic work. His promise of shalom is our cosmic hope. When we allow God to use us to promote his coming shalom, we will find ourselves not only directly tending to the needs of other humans, but also working to bring healing to the earth. Therefore, riding bicycles and recycling, composting and planting trees are not simply trendy activities, they are instead tangible, hope-filled illustrations of his coming shalom.

**B. Creation care is unnecessary because the creation will be destroyed when Christ returns.**

Two key questions arise in responding to this idea. First, *where* will the resurrected lives of Christians be lived after they die? And second, is there a future for *the earth itself* beyond the eschaton? Much rests on interpretations of key Biblical texts such as II Peter 3:10, where common interpretations have proclaimed that "the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare." Rather than destruction, these passages and others point to a *refining* fire that transforms cultural goods, and people, into what they were meant to be in the first place. The prophet Isaiah paints prophetic landscapes portraying wolves lying down with lambs, children leading parades with calves and lions in them, foreign ships sailing into the holy city with the wealth of the nations, and swords transformed into plowshares. These images proclaim that our redeemed lives will be lived on earth, with these cultural goods, refined and yet recognizable, and that there will be continuity between our current and future existence. A careful re-reading of key texts reveals this notion of earth-keeping being unnecessary as a deeply regrettable misinterpretation of scripture. Care for creation in the present is a way of testifying to the truth of God's promise to respond to the non-human creation's groaning just as he will respond to the groaning of his people.

**C. It won't make a difference – what will happen will happen regardless of how we respond or live out our lives.**

The problem with an ecological fatalism toward the destruction of creation is that it ultimately fails to believe what the Bible tells us about hope. In an ironic twist the idolatry that is often misappropriated to those who promote creation care is better recognized as an idolatry of those who espouse a kind of "realism" that denies the hope of the gospel. In his magisterial book *Surprised by Hope*, NT Wright provides a contemporary rationale for the hope of the Christian gospel. Wright argues that most Christians are woefully unaware of the actual hope of the scriptures. This ignorance has resulted in only two eschatological options: either a universalist syncretism, where everyone gets to their own kind of heaven; or a fire and brimstone caricature, where God punishes all but the most holy. Wright denies this dichotomy with a wonderful vision for a much larger hope. Among other texts, Wright cites the poetry of Isaiah 54 as a promise from a loving Father to his children. Acknowledging human pain, homelessness, and the deepest longing to truly flourish, God paints picture after picture of a world made new. We read about barren women giving birth to many children, people without shelter enlarging their tents, and the permanence of his steadfast love to his people. Bouma-Prediger writes, "In a world of wounds, there is hope amid hopelessness, for our Redeemer is the Creator – a God of unsearchable compassion and unquenchable love." If we believe God's promises are true we will hold hope for his creation.

**D. Things aren't nearly as bad as the environmentalists claim; human beings are resilient and will 'adapt' to any changes that arise.**

This perspective calls into question the legitimacy of science as a means for understanding reality. However when science is done carefully, reviewed and confirmed, its findings are foolish to ignore (when the diagnosis is cancer, we consider it unwise to discredit the oncologist in favor of treatment advice from a mechanic). And within the scientific community today there is clear consensus that the way the human presence is being played out on earth is not sustainable. Science does not tell us *why* or even *that* we should change our behavior, but it certainly illuminates what conditions are like now and what they will be like in the future if we continue with our current unsustainable living.

With regard to climate change it is foolish to ignore scientists or to think the effects will only be environmental. Climate change will intensify inequalities between nations; it will erode financial and political security, and foment social unrest. While the impacts on ecological integrity are already being recorded, it is naïve to propose that human beings will somehow be able to 'adapt' and escape being adversely affected themselves.

**E. God would never let things get as bad as predicted; we just need to continue to trust him and he will take care of us.**

This type of response is useful to absolve ourselves of any wrongdoing. It promotes a convenient 911 type of a God who is ready to save us from disaster regardless of how much we mess things up. The problem is, scripture is not supportive of such fallacy. We are given directives for how God desires us to live out our days. The Bible is replete with God's disappointment and righteous vindication for when the expectations he has set have not been lived out. We can only conclude from this that God really does care about how we live our lives. If he didn't we wouldn't have need for the Ten Commandments, the beatitudes or the

fruits of the Spirit.

Neither does the Biblical account support the notion that God will swoop in to rescue a people who are reaping what they have sown. Humanity has been created with free will and is expected to act responsibly and compassionately. If we make bad choices – self-serving choices that do not reflect a Christ-like servanthood for the rest of creation (Phil 2:5-8), justice will come down (Is. 5:8, Ez. 34, Rev. 11:18). While Christ's sacrificial gift is the ultimate rescue package, in the mean time God's vision for shalomic justice is one He expects us to take seriously and fervently practice. Since planetary health is being threatened by our misguided and self-motivated actions, our response should be one of repentance and restoration.

Conclusion

Taking care of our home here on earth by living more sustainably is something the secular world is finding much motivation for doing – by considering the rights of future generations, the rights of other species, recognizing the connections between caring for creation and improving human life, and preserving beauty. Christians have all these motivators to stimulate a response, plus more. We believe the world is deeply loved by God, a love we are called to emulate. Creation is not ours to do with as we please but it belongs to God (Psalm 24:1). He has entrusted us to steward it wisely, use it responsibly and preserve the conditions necessary for all its inhabitants to flourish. Redefining our lives so that instead of eroding, we help insure the sustainability of the creation demonstrates our reverence and deep love both for the Creator, and for what he has made.