

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a small, vibrant green tree with dark soil. The background is a soft, warm gradient of light. The tree is the central focus, with its roots and soil held gently in the palm of the hand.

# THE GOSPEL AND THE ENVIRONMENT

*How to think Biblically about climate change  
and our role as stewards of God's planet*

Produced by the Gospel in Society Today Committee  
of the Presbyterian Church of Queensland



## GOSPEL & ENVIRONMENT

Australian society regards our planet's developing ecological crisis as the most serious and urgent problem of our time. Research conducted by Griffith University in 2011<sup>1</sup> found that issues such as global warming, human overpopulation and projected food shortages are feared by the Australian public as far greater threats to our future than e.g. economic failure, changing moral values and even terrorism:

Problem	What do you think will be the most serious problem facing the world in the future if nothing is done to stop it?
Global warming/the environment	39.4%
Overpopulation	13.4%
Poverty/hunger	11.5%
The economy/unemployment	5.3%
Terrorism	4.0%
Peace/war (in general)	2.7%
Government/politics	1.4%
Energy issues	1.4%
Crime/drugs	1.3%
Money/cost of living	1.1%
Morals/values	1.0%
Debt/government spending	0.6%

More recent droughts, particularly in Queensland, and natural disasters such as cyclones and floods, have only heightened this sense of severity and urgency.

So where should Christians stand on this issue of the physical environment? Where *must* we stand, if we take our lead from the Bible? Christians have always believed that the world's greatest problem is humanity's rejection of God, and that the only solution is Jesus and growing more followers of him. *But isn't this a distraction from the much more urgent issue of climate change?* That's often how it's perceived in our society today.<sup>2</sup> Worse, Christians have always believed that God made humanity in his image, to rule creation as his representatives. *But isn't this belief in human superiority over nature in fact the chief cause of the West's pillaging of nature?* Many in our society argue that it's precisely this Christian belief which lies at the root of our developing ecological crisis.<sup>3</sup> So where should we stand? Our answer will have serious consequences for our involvement in environmental action, and for whether the Gospel we proclaim will receive a ready hearing in our society today.

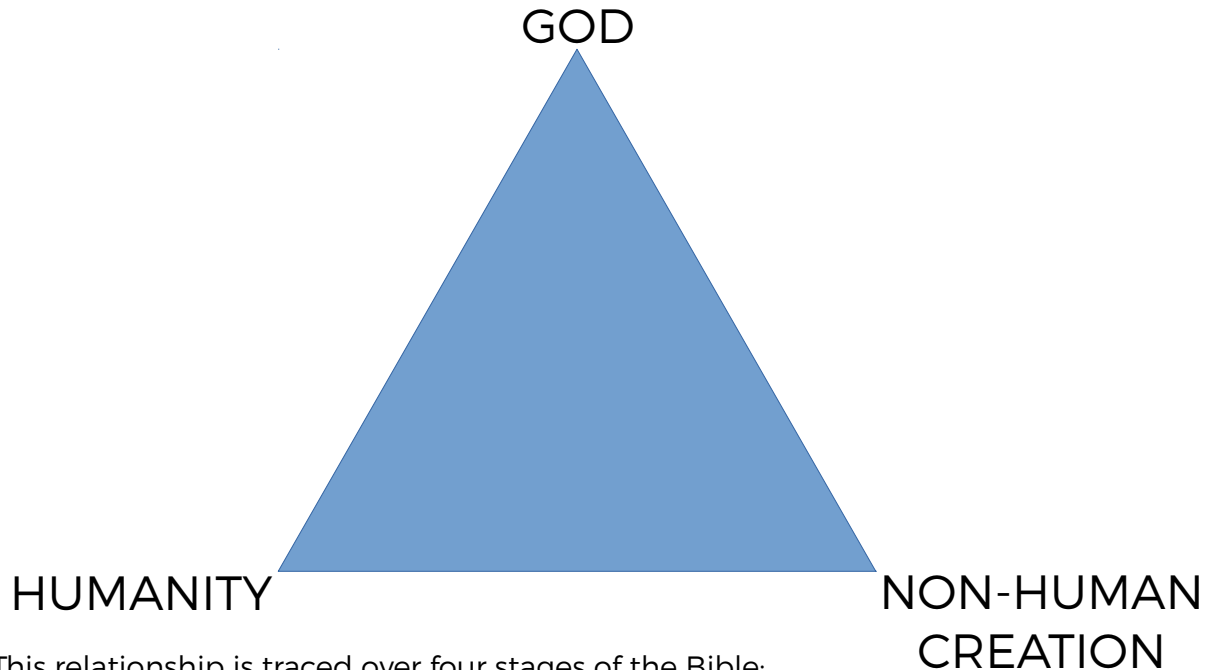
To lay a foundation, this paper outlines the place of non-human creation within the Bible's overall storyline, the storyline which reaches its climax in the Gospel, the good news about Jesus. It does so by focusing on the Bible's portrait of the "ecological

1 JP Reser et al., *Public Risk Perceptions, Understandings, and Responses to Climate Change and Natural Disasters in Australia, 2010 and 2011* (National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, Gold Coast, 2012), 20, [http://www.nccarf.edu.au/sites/default/files/attached\\_files\\_publications/Reser\\_2012\\_Public\\_risk\\_perceptions\\_Second\\_survey\\_report.pdf](http://www.nccarf.edu.au/sites/default/files/attached_files_publications/Reser_2012_Public_risk_perceptions_Second_survey_report.pdf).

2 e.g. Paul Collins, *Judgment Day: The Struggle for Life on Earth* (UNSW Press, 2010), 9-10.

3 e.g. the famous and hugely influential essay: Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203-7. There are many detailed responses to White's claim e.g. Hilary Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2009), chap. 1; Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), chap. 2.

triangle,"<sup>4</sup> the three-way relationship between God, humanity and non-human creation:



This relationship is traced over four stages of the Bible:

1. Rise of creation
2. Ruin of creation
3. Redemption of creation
4. Renewal of creation

What becomes clear is that the Biblical story drives us to avoid two extremes: *worship* of creation and *abuse* of creation. Instead, followers of Jesus will *enjoy and care for creation in worship of their Creator and Redeemer*.

This leads to some practical implications for followers of Jesus in relation to our environment, and finally, ways to engage with non-Christians on environmental issues.

## **GOSPEL & ENVIRONMENT: BIBLICAL OUTLINE**

### ***1. Rise of creation***

The ecological triangle, the three-way relationship between God, humanity and non-human creation, is in fact the major theme of the first chapters of the Bible. The Bible opens by emphasising three radical ideas:

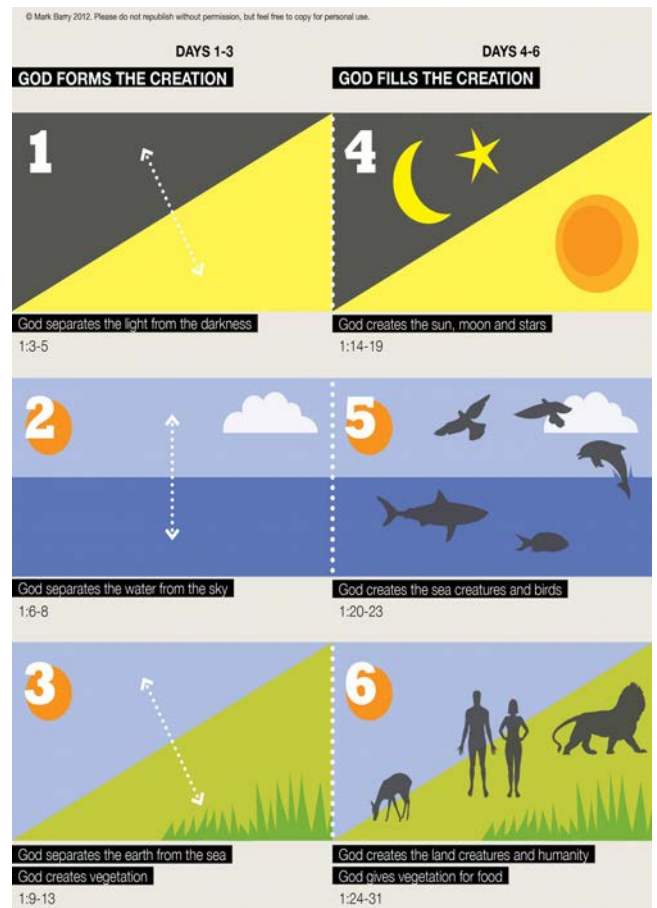
- 1) Non-human creation is God's good gift to humanity
- 2) Humanity is God's good gift to non-human creation
- 3) All creation, human and non-human together, is to be a theatre for God's glory

1) Genesis 1 particularly emphasises: non-human creation is God's good gift to humanity. God progresses creation until it's ready for humanity. Once God has created the earth (Gen 1:1), it is at first merely a watery darkness (1:2). It isn't called "good," because it's not yet ready for humanity. It has two problems: 1) it's "formless," without structure and 2) "void," empty of things. It's only gradually, over six days, that God makes things which in contrast *are* "good" (1:4,10,12,18,21,25). Over the first three days God *makes divisions* (overcoming "formless") and over the second three days he *fills those divisions* in the same order he made them (overcoming "void").

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<sup>4</sup> Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*, 111.

This gradual progression lays out all the beautiful components of non-human creation with which God has generously blessed humanity. In contrast, alternative ancient creation accounts such as those of Israel's neighbour Babylon usually depicted the gods creating the world without thinking of humans at all. Only once the gods became tired did they then make humans as an afterthought, and only so that humans could do the work of providing them with animal sacrifices to eat! Genesis turns that idea on its head. God creates with humanity in mind from the start. Even the sun and moon, often worshipped as gods by Israel's neighbours such as Egypt, are instead explicitly designed to serve human purposes: "to mark sacred times, and days and years" (1:14). When something does not serve *directly* as a good gift to humanity e.g. the night and the untamed sea, it is in contrast to everything else *not* called "good" (1:4,7). Only once the rest of creation is shaped and filled with goodness, ready for humanity, does God create humanity as the climax (1:26-30). Here God emphasises that it's *he* who provides food and blessing to humanity, not the other way around (1:29). In so many different ways then, non-human creation is shown to be God's good gift to humanity.



2) By itself, this could be taken to imply that we can do whatever we wish with non-human creation, because it's God's gift to us. But it can't be taken by itself, because it's not the whole story: Humanity is also God's good gift to non-human creation. God has been extremely generous to humanity in creation: subduing the chaos of formlessness, filling the void with goodness, gradually readying a habitat for humanity. Then he makes humanity explicitly *so that we might follow his model of rule over non-human creation*:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind *in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.*"

*So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.*

Genesis 1:26-27

In Genesis 1, God has been the one ruling over creation, subduing the formlessness and filling the void, not for his own benefit, but for the benefit of humanity. Now it's humanity who is to rule over certain aspects of creation *in the same way*, to "fill the earth and subdue it" (1:28). We are to do so not for our own benefit but for the benefit of non-human creation. Why? Because we're to rule creation precisely on the *generous, self-giving model of God himself*, ie in his likeness. It's only once God has given humanity to non-human creation that he sees "all that he had made, and it was very good" (1:31).

Even more so than Genesis 1, Genesis 2 emphasises that humanity is God's good gift to creation. To mark this shift in emphasis, the order of presentation is in several ways reversed, There were no plants on the earth, because "there was no one to work the

ground" (Gen 2:5). So God forms Adam from the ground (2:7) and plants a garden (2:8) for him "to work it and take care of it" (2:15). That's the purpose for which God forms Adam: to benefit the non-human creation. Like Genesis 1, there is something "not good" here, but unlike Genesis 1, it's not so much that the man lacks anything for himself. Here, it's that there's no "helper" to help him with this task of benefiting the non-human creation (2:18). So God brings the animals and birds, formed from the ground, to Adam (2:19). Adam is not so far above these other creatures also formed from the ground that it was beyond consideration that his helper might come from among them. Yet, among them there is in fact "no helper" suitable for Adam's task (2:20). They are in fact non-human creation which Adam must rule for their benefit like God does. So God forms Eve, not from the ground but from Adam himself, and brings her to Adam (2:21-22). Only then is it clear that Adam now has a suitable helper for his special task (2:23), his wife (2:24). In Genesis 1, the order of presentation – light, land, plants, sun, moon, fish, birds, animals, humanity - highlights just how much non-human creation was made to benefit humanity. In Genesis 2, the order of presentation - man, plants, animals, birds, woman, marriage - highlights just how much humanity was made to benefit non-human creation.

3) Human and non-human creation are mutually God's good gifts to each other, but together *all creation* serves a higher purpose: it's a theatre for God's glory. Far from reversing God's previously displayed generosity, this God-centred higher purpose actually gives us *our deepest and greatest good*: the gift of God himself. It works like this: When we enjoy non-human creation as God's good gift to us, we appreciate God himself, his generosity to us. When we mirror God's generous self-giving rule over creation, benefiting not ourselves but the non-human creation, we put God's own goodness on further display in the world. So creation is like a *temple*, a theatre for the display and appreciation of God's glory. The temples of the false gods of the nations around Israel had "images" of their respective gods, made by humans, to display each god's glory. The true and living God instead fills the earth with his own true and living "images" (Gen 1:26-27), humans made by him, to display his glory. Similarly, as theologian Greg Beale points out, the words translated "work" and "care" in Genesis 2:15 suggest that Eden is like a temple:

When these two words occur together later in the Old Testament, without exception they... refer either to Israelites "serving and guarding/obeying" God's word (about 10 times) or, more often to priests who "serve" God in the temple and "guard" the temple from unclean things entering it (Num 3:7–8; 8:25–26; 18:25–6; 1Chr 23:32; Ezek 44:14). Therefore, Adam was to be the first priest to serve in and guard God's temple.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, the gold and precious stones noted as lying just outside the garden (Gen 2:11-12) are those materials that are later used for the tabernacle, the portable tent-temple (Exodus 25), and the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8). This suggests that Adam's task of working the temple-garden was to involve extending it out to also encompass those lands which contained these temple materials. It's hard to think of a weightier motivation to creation care: it's our specifically human role in making creation function as a temple of God, an appropriate theatre of God's glory.

Some environmentalists are deeply concerned that Christianity assigns humanity such a central role in the world.<sup>6</sup> They fear it devalues the non-human world and gives us a licence to exploit it in whatever way we humans wish. Of course, some Christians have confirmed their fears by abusing the Bible in precisely this way. But it's clearly an *abuse* of the Bible. The opening chapters of Genesis cohere in being not so much *human*-centred as they are *God*-centred. While Christianity does acknowledge the centrality of humanity within creation, it's a centrality not only of special privilege (non-human creation is God's good gift to humanity) but also of special responsibility (humanity is God's good gift to

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5 Gregory K. Beale, "Eden, the Temple, and the Church's Mission in the New Creation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 1 (March 2005): 8.

6 e.g. White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis."



non-human creation). No one is more responsible to 'serve' and 'guard' the non-human creation than we are, and all for the sake of our Creator's glory. As we will now see, it wasn't by *living out* of this vision for humanity that our environment has been ruined. Far from it, our environment has been ruined precisely by our *failing* to live it out.

## 2. *Ruin of creation*

At the start of the Bible's story, God is at the centre of a beautiful relationship between human and non-human creation. All humanity has to do is keep listening to God, following *his* definition of the good and the not good, gradually making the world ever more a theatre for God's glory, as God's representatives in the world. To make clear the importance of listening to God, God explicitly tells Adam to eat from every tree in the garden *except* the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, lest he die (2:16-17). Adam will demonstrate right knowledge of what's good and what's evil by listening to God, by enjoying his creation *without* eating from tree that he forbids.

But this is where humanity comes to ruin, and all creation with us. Adam and Eve break the ecological triangle. They ruin their relationship with God, with each other and with non-human creation, and they do so because they forget what we have seen so far.

A serpent, an unclean beast from outside the garden, "of the field" (3:1), enters the garden. It's unchallenged by Adam, despite his being tasked to "guard" the garden (2:15), and it challenges Eve to eat from the tree forbidden by God:

*"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."*

Genesis 3:4-5

God has only withheld this tree from you because he's selfish and doesn't want you to enjoy the glory of knowing good and evil like he does, claims the serpent. The irony is that humanity *would* be like God in knowing good and evil *precisely by* listening to God and so rejecting whatever God says is evil! Yet the seed of doubt has already been sown. What God says is no longer trusted. He might be simply withholding out of selfishness:

*When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.*

Genesis 3:6

It seems Adam has been "with her" the whole time, going along with it all instead of performing his God-given task of guarding the garden (2:15). Together they're seduced by the glory of becoming wise by their own means. They forget the obvious: non-human creation is God's good gift to humanity. *Look at creation* and know that God *is* generous and *not* withholding. That's why creation is by rights a theatre for *God's* glory, *not ours*.

As we might expect from the special place of humanity in creation, outlined above, the ruin of humanity is the ruin of *all* creation. Adam and Eve's eyes are indeed opened (3:7), but not to the knowledge of good and evil which the serpent promised (3:5). Instead, all they see is that they're naked. They make crude clothing to cover themselves, their innocent intimacy as husband and wife now broken. Then they hide not only from each other but also from God (3:8). So God must deliver the sentence of which he warned, and its effects reach far beyond humanity alone:

*To Adam God said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,'*

*"Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it*

all the days of your life.  
*It will produce thorns and thistles for you,*  
and you will eat the plants of the field.  
By the sweat of your brow  
you will eat your food  
*until you return to the ground,*  
since from it you were taken;  
for dust you are  
and to dust you will return.”

Genesis 3:17-19

Not only are human relationships now broken, but our relationship with non-human creation is now broken also, all because we broke our relationship with God. The ecological triangle is broken. Humanity's relationship with non-human creation was originally marked by enjoyment and service. Now it's marked by pain and opposition.

Sometimes Christians claim that humanity is too insignificant to have ruined the creation of the almighty God, e.g. by changing the climate through CO<sub>2</sub> pollution.<sup>7</sup> While this might sound humble, it implicitly denies the explicit claims of the Bible about the special, God-given place of humanity in the world. Humanity was made to be immensely significant to non-human creation, as God's representatives in the world. It's precisely that fact which makes *us* responsible for the misalignment we constantly find between ourselves and non-human creation. In Genesis 3 it's human sin which brings a curse on the ground. In Genesis 4, it's further human sin which intensifies this curse on the ground (4:10-12). In Genesis 6, the *whole world* is flooded in response to *human violence*:

*God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah, “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth.”*

Genesis 6:11-13

Humanity sins and the earth suffers. That's the pattern. So Christians in fact have every reason to believe that the sinful actions of humans could bring ruin on the whole planet.

### **3. Redemption of creation**

As the Bible presents the ecological triangle, the fate of non-human creation is bound to the fate of humanity, which in turn is bound to humanity's relationship with God. We've just seen how this is so negatively. But it's also true positively.

As God rescues Noah and his family from the flood in the ark, so also two of each kind of animal and bird are rescued along with them in the ark (Gen 6:19-21). It's humans who are charged by God with the conservation of the animals and birds. When God makes a subsequent commitment to never again flood the whole earth, it's a covenant not only with humanity but equally with non-human creation as well (8:20-22, 9:8-16), an “everlasting covenant between God and *all living creatures of every kind on the earth*” (9:16). If humanity gets a post-flood restart, so does non-human creation. The fates of human and non-human creation are inextricably linked.

Of course, the post-flood restart has the same fundamental pre-flood problem: humanity is sinful; our relationship with God is still broken. Therefore, the relationship with non-human creation is also not what it was pre-ruin. Animals will kill humans, and humans will now eat animals, not plants alone (9:1-6). So the real hope for non-human creation is that humanity will be reconciled to God.

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<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Bernard Daley Zaleha and Andrew Szasz, “Why Conservative Christians Don't Believe in Climate Change,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 71, no. 5 (January 1, 2015): 19-30.

This hope is launched by God's promise to "bless" Abraham (12:1-3) ie to reverse the "curse" (3:17-19). Through this promise, God forms a new people, the nation of Israel. The plan is that Israel will live in renewed relationship with God, listening to and obeying God's law given to them through Moses. According to this law, their love for God will be shown in their love for their human neighbours and for the non-human creation as well:

"For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year *let the land lie unplowed and unused*. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and *the wild animals may eat what is left*. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove. Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that *your ox and your donkey may rest*, and so that the slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed."

Exodus 23:10-12<sup>8</sup>

According to this plan, all the nations on earth will be blessed through Israel, learning from Israel how to re-connect with God, joining with Israel in actually doing so:

In the last days...

Many peoples will come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the temple of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways,  
so that we may walk in his paths."

The law will go out from Zion,  
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

He will judge between the nations  
and will settle disputes for many peoples.

They will beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation,  
nor will they train for war anymore.

Isaiah 2:2-4

And when the God-human relationship is thus restored, so will the relationship between human and non-human creation:

The wolf will live with the lamb,  
the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;  
and *a little child will lead them*.

The cow will feed with the bear,  
their young will lie down together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

*The infant will play near the cobra's den,*  
*the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.*

They will neither harm nor destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
for the *earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD*.

Isaiah 11:6-9

That's a vision of the ecological triangle being completely renewed.

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<sup>8</sup> In 1 Corinthians 9:7-12, Paul uses the Mosaic command to "not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain" (Deut 25:4) as proverbial of God's concern for the rights of *human* workers, *not* of animals. Indeed, looking at Deuteronomy 25, this command is nestled among a wealth of commands about human treatment of other humans, confirming that Paul has read this *particular* command rightly. Yet this does not apply to *all* Mosaic commands about non-human creation. Many of them *do* show God's concern for non-human creation, not humans alone, eg trees in Deut 20:19, and land and animals in Exod 23:10-12.



Unfortunately, as we read through the Old Testament story, we find it's the story of Israel *failing* to listen to and obey God. Much like Adam, they fail in their crucial calling. Indeed, just like all the nations around them, they commit idolatry: instead of caring for creation in worship of their Creator, they “worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25). As earlier, our greatest and deepest good is the gift of God himself, so to settle for anything less as ultimate is in fact impoverishing and degrading.

Nevertheless, it *is* from this nation of Israel that God brought his own Son into the world, bringing Israel's mission to its climax. Jesus is God become flesh, become part of his own creation, that he might dwell with us, as one of us, and redeem us (John 1:1-18). Jesus lived the human life we all should have lived but have not: in harmony with God his Father, with other humans, and with the non-human creation. In contrast to Adam and Israel, he alone resisted the temptations of the evil one, and so he alone was able to be “with the wild animals” (Mark 1:13).<sup>9</sup> Jesus is the “image” of God which humanity was always meant to be. As he died on the cross, Jesus died the death we all deserve to die for our sins, but which we now no longer have to, because he has done it for us, taking the curse from us. As Jesus rose bodily from the dead, he inaugurated the *new creation*, life uncorrupted and incorruptible, which he offers to all who would trust in him (1 Corinthians 15). This is how Jesus creates a new people for God, the church, who really are reconciled to God. This is the good news of Jesus, not just for Israel, but for all humanity.

Yet it's not good news for humanity *alone*. That Jesus restores the “image” of God in humanity is good news for *all creation*. This is how the apostle Paul puts it:

*The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

Colossians 1:15-20

And this “image” of God is restored, not in Jesus alone, but in all who trust in Jesus and who are therefore being transformed to be more and more like him. As Paul again says:

*Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.*

Romans 8:29

That the image of God is being restored in humanity by Jesus really is the great hope for non-human creation:

*The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.*

Romans 8:19-21

Non-human creation is depicted as longing to see the followers of Jesus. As earlier, the fates of human and non-human creation are inextricably linked. It's Jesus who restores humans to God, so it's Jesus who is the ultimate hope for non-human creation also.<sup>10</sup>

9 For more specifically on Jesus and the non-human creation, see Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures*, chaps. 3-5.

10 See further Jonathan Moo, “Romans 8.19-22 and Isaiah’s Cosmic Covenant,” *New Testament Studies* 54,

This results in a paradox for us today. Understandably, many argue that what's needed to fix the climate is that we focus on that issue almost exclusively. Its severity and urgency would seem to merit such a focus. As such, a focus on spreading the good news about Jesus is considered a dangerous distraction from the most serious and urgent cause of our time.<sup>11</sup> Yet paradoxically, if people becoming followers of Jesus is what gradually restores them as God's image bearers in the world, as it makes them more and more like Jesus himself, living more and more in harmony with God, humanity and non-human creation, then the greatest good for the environment will be more people becoming followers of Jesus. Then they'll be passionately committed to ruling and caring for non-human creation, like Jesus whom they follow, as restored image-bearers, not for themselves but for Jesus' sake.

#### 4. *Renewal of creation*

Of course, while the storyline of the Bible *climaxes* in Jesus, that's not where it *ends*. It ends with the last chapters of Revelation. It ends with the *full new creation*. This vision of the new creation gathers up the threads of hope from everything before it in the Bible – Genesis 1, Eden, Abraham, Israel, Jerusalem, the temple, Isaiah's vision – and proclaims that God will re-create the ecological triangle even better than before it was ruined. Even the sea and the night, those things which were not “good” in Genesis 1, are now gone:

Then I saw “a *new heaven* and a *new earth*,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was *no longer any sea*. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, *coming down out of heaven* from God, prepared as a *bride beautifully dressed for her husband*. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be *no more death or mourning or crying or pain*, for the old order of things has passed away.” ...  
Then the angel showed me... *the tree of life*, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the *healing of the nations*. *No longer will there be any curse*. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be *no more night*. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will *reign for ever and ever*.

Revelation 21:1-4, 22:1-5

It's striking that instead of people going up to heaven, heaven comes down to people. This is a surprisingly earthly hope for the future. Some Christians have claimed that we need not concern ourselves with the earthly environment, because it's destined to be destroyed, and heaven alone is our future.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, heaven will have a new home on earth. So we must treat the earth now as it actually is now and will be forever, a sacred theatre of God's glory, not something insignificant.

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no. 01 (January 2008): 74–89.

11 e.g. Collins, *Judgment Day*, 9–10.

12 See e.g. Zaleha and Szasz, “Why Conservative Christians Don’t Believe in Climate Change.” A text often used to support this view is 2 Peter 3:10. Yet it must be noted that the best manuscripts say that “the earth and everything done in it will be *laid bare*” (NIV) rather than than “*burned up*” (KJV), which is only in later manuscripts. This suggests that Peter uses the “fire” language in this passage as imagery, as is common in the prophets, for divine judgement of human works, not to describe a physical process (see further Thomas R Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 383–388). However, even if thought to mean a literal destruction of the present earth, that would not change what the rest of the Bible makes clear, that the earth is to be treated as a theatre for God's glory now, just as the new earth in the end will be a theatre for God's glory even more so.

Equally striking, however, is that this is a vision of ecological renewal which goes far beyond anything we could humanly hope to achieve ourselves. The hope is for our planet to be *completely renewed*, and it can only be *God* who ultimately does that. In contrast, many environmentalists claim that if we only act now, we have the science and technology to fix our climate.<sup>13</sup> Yet when people assume that the destiny of the planet is ultimately in human hands, they display the human-centredness of which Christians are often accused (as above). The Bible, in contrast, places ultimate hope not in ourselves but in God. It's God-centred. The passionate commitment to the environment which followers of Jesus must display cannot be motivated by its ultimate results, over which we may find we have far less control than many imagine. It must be motivated by faithfulness to Jesus himself, emulating his generous, self-giving rule over creation, out of gratitude for his generous, self-giving to us in both creation and redemption.

## GOSPEL & ENVIRONMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR BELIEVERS

### 1. *Environmental stance*

From the preceding Biblical outline, it will be clear that followers of Jesus must adopt a Gospel perspective on the environment. This will differ radically from non-Gospel perspectives, eg any perspective which encourages environmental worship or abuse.

Contrary to some secular perceptions of a Christian environmental stance, Bible-driven Christians will not treat the environment as less important than themselves, as if bearing God's image gave them such license. That would be to completely misunderstand the nature of image-bearing, which is to *reflect God's own generous, self-giving rule over creation*. It would be to treat creation as if it were a theatre for *our own* glory, forgetting that it is in fact a theatre for *God's* glory.

Similarly, Bible-driven Christians will not treat creation as insignificant because it isn't meant to last. That would be to forget that the earth is a theatre for God's glory now, and that the earth's ultimate destiny is to become a theatre for God's glory *even more so*. In God's plans the earth is not insignificant, so it can't be in ours either.

On the other hand, in contrast to some non-Christian environmental stances, Bible-driven Christians will not worship the environment as ultimate. Mother Nature is not the one to whom we owe everything. God is. A restored planet is not our salvation. God is. The earth is not our ultimate hope. God is.

Instead, Bible-driven Christians will take a stance of *active, self-sacrificial care for the environment*. This will be *God-motivated* in three ways:

- 1) In the beginning, God gave us non-human creation as a good gift, to be enjoyed. He also gave humanity to non-human creation as a good gift, to rule creation in his image and likeness, reflecting his self-giving generosity, thereby glorifying God as he deserves. *Environmental care is part of what we were made for.*
- 2) Now, God's Son Jesus has with his own blood paid for our sins against God himself, against other people and against non-human creation, so that he might restore in us this image of God. *Environmental care is part of what we were saved for.*
- 3) In the end, creation's role as a theatre for God's glory will not diminish but expand and intensify. As new creatures in Jesus Christ, that's the new creation reality toward which we are meant to be moving now. *Environmental care is part of heading where we're headed.*

That's how the Biblical storyline centred on Jesus should shape our environmental stance.

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<sup>13</sup> e.g. Tim F Flannery, *Atmosphere of Hope: Searching for Solutions to the Climate Crisis*, 2015.

## 2. *Competing priorities*

Of course, that's a very general stance! The difficulties come when you get down to the details of modern life, where the Bible doesn't give *specific* directions. There are choices to make that aren't always obvious. For example, you could drastically reduce your CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by simply ditching your car. Yet what if that meant having to leave your job, or not attend your church? Instead of buying clothes shipped from overseas, producing more CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, you could invest time in making your own. Yet what if that meant having less time to invest into other people's lives? You could stop buying cheap food based on unethical treatment of animals and unsustainable farming practices. Yet what if that ethically and sustainably farmed produce costs more money which could otherwise be given to support Gospel mission? What does God expect a Christian to prioritise?

All these ethical dilemmas are based on the same fundamental problem: we're finite creatures, living in a broken world; our capacity to address that brokenness is not infinite. We face this same problem even before considering the environment, when it comes to balancing evangelism and practical love. Which is more important, fulfilling the church's *mission* to share with people the good news about Jesus, or fulfilling the church's *character* to love people practically as Jesus has loved us? In this case, the Biblical answer is clear: we can't fulfil one without fulfilling the other (eg Acts 6:1-7). It wouldn't be loving to others if we kept silent about their only hope of redemption in Jesus (so character requires mission), and our message about Jesus' transforming love would be weak without any practical demonstration (so mission requires character).

That's really how we should think about environmental care. It's not a competitor to evangelistic mission. It is instead essential to the church's character, which is in turn essential to the church's mission, just like loving our neighbours. In fact, carefully caring for the environment *is* a way to love our neighbours: a better environment is better for them. So while we'll never *perfectly* evangelise, love and environmental care, of course that's no excuse for dropping or de-prioritising one of them. They interlock tightly.

The fact that we can't manage everything perfectly within our limited capacities will mean that we can't judge each other, or be too harsh on ourselves, over the *specifics* of environmental care. One Christian's attempt to integrate evangelism, love and environmental care will differ in the details from another Christian's.

However, in the same way that it's simply impossible for a *genuine follower of Jesus* to be simply uninterested in evangelism and love, so it is also with creation care. In the same way that fellow church members must challenge, encourage and spur each other on to greater and greater deeds of evangelism and love, so they must to creation care.

A huge help to Christians in this area is the power of what a church community can do together far beyond what individuals can do alone. Church members can form a co-op for buying in bulk direct from sustainable and ethical farms, reducing the money and time costs while increasing the environmental benefit compared to doing so individually. A church with the necessary land and skills can create a community garden, producing food which is local, reducing shipping emissions. A church can organise a clothes swap, reducing the need to buy new clothes shipped with emissions from overseas. Older parents can teach younger parents how to use cloth nappies more easily and effectively, reducing the call for disposables. Of course, these are just a few examples. Yet each will benefit the environment more, and more efficiently, than individual action alone.

What's particularly striking is that such cooperation won't benefit the environment *alone*. In addition, it'll build closer community: between Christians, strengthening our love; often

also between Christians and non-Christians, providing a relational context for evangelism. Such moves toward environmental action by churches need not stand in tension with their evangelism and love. They can be mutually reinforcing.

### **3. Concrete issues**

Of course, perhaps all these suggestions are non-controversial, when there are environmental issues which are indeed controversial. So what follows are just three brief Gospel-shaped reflections on specific environmental issues, which are hopefully indicative of how other issues beyond the scope of this paper might also be addressed.

#### **i Population growth**

Human population growth has been a central concern for environmentalists since Paul Ehrlich wrote in the *The Population Bomb*:

We must take action to reverse the deterioration of our environment before population pressure ruins our planet. The birth rate must be brought into balance with the death rate or mankind will breed itself into oblivion.<sup>14</sup>

We humans do tend to be huge consumers of natural resources, and we habitually create waste while failing to manage it. So it's easy to see how even many Christians now believe that the best thing for the planet is to have fewer children.

Yet clearly it's difficult to square this sentiment with humanity's mandate to "be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth" (Gen 1:28 & 9:1). Without qualification, children are a beautiful gift from God (eg Psa 37:26, 112:2, 127:3, 128:3). We could and should say much more about the immense worth of children in relation to areas *other* than the environment, eg their direct significance to marriage, church, God's glory etc. Yet even just in relation to the environment, as we've seen, the environment's one great hope is *humans in whom the image of God is being restored by Jesus*. So people who have many children and raise them to know their Creator in Jesus can hardly be condemned as anti-environment! It may be true that more sinful people means more environmental mess. But it's equally true that having more people passionately committed to the environment out of loyalty to Jesus is better for the environment than having fewer such people.

Of course, Christians also need to follow the Biblical storyline right through, beyond creation. The mandate to multiply God's image-bearers in the world has been transformed by Jesus into the great commission to make disciples (Matt 28:16-20). Some of those restored image-bearers will be our biological children, but most won't be. From the start Jesus defined his family spiritually, not biologically (Matt 12:46-50), and emphasised that marriage and children are not our final destiny (Matt 22:30), such that people like Paul can fulfil Christ's commission even without marrying and having children (Matt 19:10-12; 1Cor 7). None of this in any way lessens the goodness of raising children under Christ's commission. It just means there are other ways to fulfil Christ's commission *in addition*, such that having children isn't *necessarily* a focus of every Christian life.

There will be many important factors as couples consider how many children they should try to raise; environmental care will just be one. In regard to the environment, one couple might consider having fewer children to be one way of reducing their environmental impact. Another couple might consider having more children, each raised to know Jesus and care for his creation, to be even better for the environment. And of course other factors will count just as much if not more so. So, as noted above, neither couple could judge the other. Though differing in their specific approaches, the important thing is that every couple make a faithful response to Jesus as their Creator and Redeemer.

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<sup>14</sup> From David Stradling, *The Environmental Moment: 1968-1972 Classic Texts* (University of Washington Press, 2013), 38-39.



## ii GM food

Some environmentalists, e.g. Greenpeace, are opposed to Genetically Modified food because of the perceived risk that existing crops will be contaminated by GM crops in ways that are unpredictable.<sup>15</sup> However, other leading environmentalists now acknowledge that these risks can be adequately controlled and that at the same time GM crops can deliver massive benefits to the environment.<sup>16</sup>

So how should a Christian think about GM food? Should we support it or oppose it?

Perhaps we should think about GM food as just another instance of technological progress, about which the Bible is in general ambivalent. The Bible portrays technological progress as neither inherently good nor inherently evil. Technological progress merely makes humanity more capable, and that enhanced capability can be used for good or for ill. It depends what's done with it. GM crops can be used to solve drastic food shortages even while removing the need for pesticides, in which case supporting GM food is just loving our neighbours and caring for creation. Alternatively, a bio-corporation can contractually obligate farmers to swap naturally reproducing crops for non-reproducing crops, leaving their communities forever at the mercy of that particular bio-corporation themselves, in which case opposing GM food is just loving our neighbours and caring for creation. GM crops are neither inherently good nor inherently evil. Our stance must be based on what's done with them in relation to other people and the environment.

## iii Sustainable farming

Several factors make it inappropriate to be specifically prescriptive on farming practices. There are different kinds farms, and even similar kinds of farms often operate in very different situations, making very different possibilities open to each. Yet the Biblical view of non-human creation outlined above will still have strong implications for farmers, even if their implementation will differ significantly from farm to farm. Consider the following principles as examples:

- Short-term financial gains should not be made at the expense of long-term damage to the land, water systems and wildlife.
- Animals, even if destined to be eaten, are while they live to be loved by humans, as humans are loved by God, not treated as inanimate objects for profit.
- Food produced should be as healthy as possible, out of love for the people who'll eat it.

These are general principles within which a Bible-driven farmer will always do their best to operate within their context.

A more specific example of a farmer trying to let his faith in Jesus shape his farming is Joel Salatin of Polyface farm in the US. Based on his Christian convictions about animals and the land, Joel has formed the following principles for his own farming:

GRASS-BASED: Pastured livestock and poultry, moved frequently to new "salad bars," offer landscape healing and nutritional superiority.

INDIVIDUALITY: Plants and animals should be provided a habitat that allows them to express their physiological distinctiveness. Respecting and honoring the pigness of the pig is a foundation for societal health.

COMMUNITY: We do not ship food. We should all seek food closer to home, in our foodshed, our own bioregion. This means enjoying seasonality and reacquainting

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<sup>15</sup> "Genetic Engineering," *Greenpeace International*, accessed March 22, 2016,

<http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/campaigns/agriculture/problem/genetic-engineering/>.

<sup>16</sup> e.g. Will Storr, "Mark Lynas: Truth, Treachery and GM Food," *The Guardian*, March 10, 2013, sec.

Environment, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/mar/09/mark-lynas-truth-treachery-gm>.

ourselves with our home kitchens.

NATURE'S TEMPLATE: Mimicking natural patterns on a commercial domestic scale ensures moral and ethical boundaries to human cleverness. Cows are herbivores, not omnivores; that is why we've never fed them dead cows...

EARTHWORMS: We're really in the earthworm enhancement business. Stimulating soil biota is our first priority. Soil health creates healthy food.<sup>17</sup>

These specific principles are a good example of a Christian farmer shaping his farming practices around Christian convictions about humanity, animals and the land. But of course they only work for *his kind* of farming in *his situation*. The general approach which all Christian farmers should take is to similarly apply Christian convictions about humanity, animals and the land to their own contexts, often resulting in different specifics.

## GOSPEL & ENVIRONMENT: ENGAGING UNBELIEVERS

### 1. *Word and deed*

As noted above, the chief environment-related support for the message about Jesus will come when we *actually put into practice* the Bible's vision of creation care. This should be part of the church's Christ-like character whether non-Christians are watching or not. Yet if they see that character in action then they may find it compelling. It may disarm them of negative preconceptions about Christians and the Gospel which would otherwise prevent them giving us a hearing. Indeed our environmental action as encouraged above may even provoke them to ask us our *reasons*, analogous to 1 Peter 3:13-16:

*Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ... In your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.*

As pastor Tim Keller notes, there's real benefit in Christians being able to *explain their reasons* for creation care.<sup>18</sup> The reasons summarised earlier are Gospel-centred. So explaining them will involve explaining the Gospel, at least in brief, which is evangelism.

### 2. *Concrete issues*

Furthermore, explaining the *Gospel* foundations of creation care can raise questions about the foundations of *secular* environmentalism, and whether they're actually stronger or weaker. What follows are two examples of how this can be made concrete.

#### i **Species extinction**

Stuart Pimm is one of the world's leading researchers and activists in the fight against species extinction, recognised with awards such as the Heineken Prize for Environmental Sciences.<sup>19</sup> He finds it easy to give his reasons for this: "As a Christian, I believe we have a responsibility, a stewardship."<sup>20</sup> That's the image-of-God responsibility for creation outlined above. He goes on: "You know the Bible says, 'God so loved the Cosmos that He gave his only son,' and for me that's a very powerful." That's the Gospel motivation outlined above.

<sup>17</sup> Joel Salatin, "Principles," *Polyface, Inc.*, July 25, 2011, <http://www.polyfacefarms.com/principles/>.

<sup>18</sup> Timothy Keller, "Can Faith Be Green?" (Redeemer Open Forums, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City, November 16, 2008), <http://www.gospelinlife.com/can-faith-be-green-an-open-forum-8109>.

<sup>19</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heineken\\_Prizes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heineken_Prizes)

<sup>20</sup> Julia Osterman, "A Conservation Conversation with Dr. Stuart Pimm," *Voices for Biodiversity*, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://voicesforbiodiversity.org/articles/a-conservation-conversation-with-dr.-stuart-pimm>.

Many secular environmentalists share Pimm's admirable drive to rescue species from extinction. But *what reason can they give?* For most secular people, we came from *nothing but evolution*. In that case, *why* care about species extinction at all? Isn't species extinction just a normal result of natural selection? Why not just let it be? Perhaps because it's often human impact which is threatening other species and we should take responsibility for our impact. But again, *why?* If humans are *not* God's image bearers, if we're just a normal part of nature like any other, then our impacts on other species are just natural contributions to natural selection, and we've *no responsibility* to remedy those impacts more than other animals or indeed the non-sentient forces of nature. Of course, many secular environmentalists still *do* feel a deep responsibility to rescue other species, even when they can't explain from their own worldview *why* they should. This could be a great opportunity for them to seriously consider the Biblical story, and whether it in fact makes much more sense of their moral feelings about the environment than the story of humanity and the world they've been living by so far.

## ii Climate change

Similarly, many secular environmentalists are deeply concerned to prevent or at least minimise climate change. But again the question arises: *why?* Perhaps because of the potentially huge impact on our own species. Yet, from a purely evolutionary perspective, shouldn't such climate change be construed as merely further environmental pressure leading to further natural selection and adaptation? Why tamper with that process? Furthermore, from a purely materialistic perspective, the ultimate end for planet earth makes it all pointless. The sun will one day expand to a giant and collapse, leaving no life on earth at all. From this perspective of the end, what does it matter if there were more generations of humans, or fewer, before our inevitable extinction? Of course, very few people actually think and feel this way, Yet it's a question for them *why* they don't, *if* they continue to espouse a purely materialistic worldview.

By contrast, the Gospel-centred Biblical outline above gives ample reason to be deeply and actively concerned about climate change. Our belief in the God-given, image-bearing faculties of humans, affected but not destroyed by sin, gives us strong reason to trust that the global scientific consensus on climate change is at least in the ball park. Our belief that we are bearers of God's image, an image being restored through the redemption of Jesus, makes us take responsibility for climate change as at least partly the result of our own sin, and also gives us a clear responsibility to take remedial action. Our belief that the earth is a theatre for God's glory gives us strong motivation to do whatever we can to conserve the environment as given to us by God, not to selfishly ruin it further. Our belief in the earth's ultimate destiny, not to be a lightless, lifeless rock, but even more so than currently a theatre for God's glory, makes all such efforts in no way pointless.

## 3. Attitude

It's a claim worth graciously discussing with friends, family, workmates and neighbours: the Biblical storyline, with its climax in the Gospel of Jesus, provides far stronger motivation to creation care than any other story of humanity and the world. If that's true, then of course as above we can't simply claim it; we need to demonstrate it in our lives. Even then, we'll need to honestly admit that as Christians we've often failed to live out our own convictions about God, humanity and creation. Yet when we're doing our best to follow Jesus in this area, environmental issues need not make us defensive. We should see them as an opportunity to help people consider the Biblical storyline centred on Jesus, that that they too may be saved by Jesus, along with us and the earth itself.

## **GOSPEL & ENVIRONMENT: CONCLUSION**

The Bible tells the story of a triangular relationship between God, humanity and the rest of creation. Human and non-human creation are mutually God's good gifts to each other, and together they form a temple-like theatre for God's glory. Our specifically human role as God's representatives is to rule and care for the environment for the sake of God's glory. It's our rejection of God which broke that God-humanity-environment relationship, leaving us failures in our role and the environment ruined. As God-become-human, it's Jesus Christ alone who can restore the God-humanity-environment relationship. Based on Jesus' death in our place and resurrection to new bodily life, it's God who will completely renew creation, human and non-human together, in the end. In the meantime, followers of Jesus are being restored as God's representatives in creation. We therefore don't worship the environment, or abuse it. We do our best to treat the earth as what it is now and one day will be even more so: a theatre for God's glory. Environmental care is therefore an essential part of the church's Christ-like character, which in turn is an essential support for the church's Christ-proclaiming mission. In fact, it's this Biblical story of God, humanity and the rest of creation, centred on the Gospel of Jesus, which provides stronger motivation to environmental care than any other. If we're sacrificially caring for the environment out of loyalty to Jesus as we should be, we should feel emboldened to talk with people about the Gospel reasons for our environmental care.