



## The Church's Role in Environmental Action

CALVIN B. DEWITT

Au Sable Institute and University of Wisconsin, Madison

“PRAISE GOD ALL CREATURES HERE BELOW.” This second line of the doxology professes the message of Ps 96:11-12: “Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is within it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them.” Today this joyful praise is diminished and muted. In many an inner city, the message of Ps 19 fails to inspire—for how, beneath blankets of smog, can one proclaim “The heavens declare the glory of God!” Earth no longer seems glad; we pollute and deplete its clear waters, we trample and destroy its green pastures (cf. Ezek 34:18). The seas become our dumping grounds; their leviathans pressed to the brink. The creatures, whose preservation God commands (Gen 6:19), are extinguished three species per day, cedars of Lebanon whittled down to twelve tiny groves, tropical forests the size of the state of Indiana destroyed each year. House is added to house and field to field; we are becoming the sole occupants of the land (cf. Isa 5:8).

Discontented, and driven by induced and insatiable appetites, we pursue all we can get, relentlessly pressing the earth. Daily we hear the message proclaimed by disciples of the first Adam: “Seek first yourself—and everything will be added unto you.”

What does the church have to say about this self-interested abuse of creation? What is the role of the disciples of the Second Adam in this time of creation's degradation?

### I. THREE QUESTIONS

Economist Herman Daly identifies two questions for addressing this thankless abuse of creation,<sup>1</sup> to which I add a third: (1) *How does the world work?* (2) *What is right?* and (3) *What must we do?*

Science seeks to discover how the world works. But, as Daly notes, to answer this single question is insufficient. If we know how the world works, but neither know nor care about what is right, our knowledge becomes self-seeking and degrades creation in the process. If we know the right, but not how the world works, we might, while seeking to preserve life, eliminate predators, thereby bringing sickly death to their one-time prey. If we answer these first two questions, but neglect the third by failing to put scientific and ethical knowledge into practice, creation's abuse will persist.

The Scriptures claim that knowing God's requirements is not sufficient. “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?...The one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation” (Luke 6:46-49; Matt 13:18, 22). Hearing, discussing, singing, and contemplating God's message is not the same as applying it; it is “nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice

and plays an instrument well,” warn the Scriptures (Ezek 33:30-32).

## II. WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

Modern society has largely segregated these questions as the domain of different institutions. Understanding this segregation provides insight into the role of the church in environmental action.

### 1. *How does the world work?*

In modern times, this first question has been relegated to universities and research institutions. Here are the generators of knowledge, writers of technical literature, authors of textbooks. The knowledge establishment is rigorous and disciplined; it keeps investigations highly focused; it objectifies the world for rigorous study and analysis. Funding and politics largely restricts its attention to this first question. Alongside are technologists who ask, What *can* we do? as they explore and develop feasible techniques. But their technical question is asked apart from its ethical companion, What *must* we do? While most liberal arts colleges need not restrict themselves to this first question, they generally do, led by those whose training has been in research institutions and who are in turn directed by what best prepares students for graduate study in research institutions.

### 2. *What is right?*

A century ago universities also had a major stake in the second question, What is right? In his report to the Trustees of Harvard, President Derek Bok describes a time when university presidents taught moral philosophy, the capstone course for every student. In this course the president professed the ethical and moral wisdom of the ages, advocated avoidance of greed, and disciplined students with long-established moral norms.

<sup>1</sup>Herman E. Daly, “Land and resources: nature’s forgotten contribution,” in *A Christian Land Ethic. Au Sable Forum Papers* (Mancelona, MI: Au Sable Institute, 1987).

---

page 182

But modern society regards moral issues as the concern of the church. The church still identifies as sin those actions that degrade people, society, and creation. Rooted in the Decalogue, the Torah, and Christ’s teachings, it professes an ethic for right living. But its moral interests are separated from the university, state, and society at large.

Legislatures and courts also address this second question, quite apart from the church. But courts have been shifting from courts of justice to courts of law—from institutions safeguarding the *right* to those that determine *legality*. It has been left for the church to distinguish between the legal and the right, to address the problem of sin, and to administer restorative forgiveness and love.

But, having thus segregated the question of values, modernism does more. It brackets out the issue of “rightness” altogether.

Modernism claims that the only route to knowledge is the physical sciences. Modernism reduces morality to the survival of the fittest species, corporations, or nations. Western modernism values radical individualism rather than the public

good. Relationships are understood in terms of competition and conflict for survival rather than cooperation, nurture, and mutual support....Meanwhile beauty, integrity, harmony, enhancement, and the good are reduced to sentimentality, which has no place in the “real world.”...We are defined as “consumers” and seem to placidly accept that dehumanizing, reductionist definition.<sup>2</sup>

Thus values—and so also the church—have been made largely irrelevant in these modern times. The descriptive, the technical, and the legal have overcome the ethical. To ask the question, What is right? has become nonsense. It may even be seen as threatening because it may “slow us up.”

### 3. *What must we do?*

“We do what the market dictates” is a common response to this third question. In politics we often find ourselves protecting “the market” so it remains free to dictate human behavior and the purpose and use of creation. Individualism provides an essential raw material upon which the market makes its competitive selections. An economics is nurtured that takes no account of creation’s integrity nor cares for the creatures. Communities are reduced to individuals, vocations to jobs, professors to instructors, education to training. But, as key reformers of the church such as Luther and Calvin professed, economic life without consideration for God’s nature, without concern for fellow creatures, is no longer an authentic economic life. “It deviates from the loving response to God and one another which is expected in economic life also.”<sup>3</sup>

Then what must we do? The usual answer is “get a job” or “get a good job.” We are told that a good job is one that pays “good money.” We are not encouraged to examine whether “good” means just that or if it simply means “more.” We are not encouraged to discover that the dictionary defines “job” either as “a small miscellaneous piece of work undertaken on order” or “something done for private advantage.”

In the Christian tradition, What must we do? is a question of *vocation*, not one

<sup>2</sup>C. Dean Freudenberger, *Global Dust Bowl: Can We Stop the Destruction of the Land Before It's Too Late?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990) 36-37.

<sup>3</sup>Bob Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979).

of mere occupation or “making money.” It is a question of faithful obedience, of thankful trusteeship. This we have known for centuries. and need not repeat it here. But we must ask: In this time of unprecedented knowledge of how the world works, unprecedented understanding of conservation and stewardship, and unprecedented ability to mobilize people and technology, why do we experience an unprecedented degradation of creation? Further, at this time of unprecedented knowledge and environmental degradation, What is the role of the church?

### III. THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Creation has integrity; creation’s Maker has integrity. How can this be translated into action? *Respecting creation’s integrity*, we discover the relations and sustaining interactions among earth’s creatures, using such knowledge to sustain those creatures under our care. *Respecting the Creator’s integrity*, we learn from the giver of Torah about right relations and

sustaining interactions between people, God, and creation. Imaging God's integrity, we adopt the mind of the One through whom all things are ecologically held together and use this renewed mind to save, redeem, and restore creation.

While the world has assigned the question What is right? to the church and then separated itself from such concerns, the church must not thoughtlessly restrict itself to this assignment. The world may wish the church so to confine itself, while leaving the other two questions to the world. But such is not the church's mission. The church is *agent*, not mere observer.<sup>4</sup> *The role of the church is to deal with all three questions interactively.* It is to understand creation, know the right, and act to save, heal, and restore.

But how? The church needs to (1) develop a substantial knowledge of creation, (2) rediscover and emphasize scriptural ecological ethical teachings, and (3) know it is empowered to act.

### *1. Developing a substantial knowledge of creation.*

In his book on land degradation, agriculturalist and ethicist C. Dean Freudenberger recounts how his corn yields in an African village had fallen considerably even though he used methods previously proven effective. Upon asking a local villager for advice, he was told "Go into the forest and see what it teaches." In time he found this was good advice.<sup>5</sup>

The university of creation is a marvelous teacher and it is ready to teach the church. The body of believers must open this university so that it can teach people—in churchyards, woodlots, nature preserves, camps and retreat centers, and on college campuses. These classrooms of creation's university are not mere backdrops for human activity. Abused and degraded environments are dynamic teachers. And aided by persons with insight and abilities to help us see, they become creation's teachers.

### *2. Rediscovering scriptural ecological teachings.*

The Scriptures are a rich source of ecological teaching; they form the core basis

---

<sup>4</sup>"I purposely speak of the Church as the *agent* of the Kingdom, rather than merely as a sign or symbol....*Agent* comes from the Latin verb *agere*, 'to act'....The Church...does the work of God..." Howard A. Snyder, *The Community of the King*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977) 13.

<sup>5</sup>Freudenberger, *Global Dust Bowl*, 47.

for the church's response to creation's degradation. The task of keeping the Earth (Gen 2:15) is reinforced by the prohibition of its destruction (Rev 11:18). By the correct imaging of God and in the exercise of dominion in the manner of Christ (Phil 2:5-8), disciples of the Last Adam join the Creator in keeping creation (Gen 1:28; Deut 17:18-20). Keeping their eyes continually upon the land (Deut 11:11-12; Ps 104:10-13), they care for it as God does. They work to undo the work of the First Adam, bringing restoration and reconciliation of *all things*, doing the tasks the First Adam failed to accomplish (cf. Isa 43:18-21; 65; John 1; Rom 5; 1 Cor 15; Col 1:19-20; 5:17-21). Refusing to press creation relentlessly for selfish gain, they provide for its Sabbath rests (Exod 23:10-12; Lev 25-26; Ps 119:36). Eschewing riches, they seek contentment (Phil 4:12b; 1 Tim 6:6-21; Heb 13:5).

The Bible is a long-standing guide to right living on earth. Creation is a powerful teacher

of the ecological principles whereby it is ordered. We must know and understand both to warrant creation's trust.

### 3. *Knowing the power to act.*

The Scriptures affirm that we are empowered to act. Just as Christ acts creatively and redemptively, so must Christ's church. When we pray "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth," we also offer ourselves to God as agents of the kingdom, as those who *act* in behalf of the kingdom for whose coming we pray.

Critical to such action is the need to refresh our understanding of "calling" or "vocation." At this time of creation's degradation, vocation certainly means discovering and desisting from our contribution toward creation's groaning. We are to seek God's kingdom, to bring *shalom* and restore integrity to a degraded creation. Vocation involves trust and stewardship.

The life of the church with creation (1) cooperates with nature rightly, (2) expresses sensitive care, (3) experiences blessed awe and wonder for the works of God, and (4) looks forward in joyful anticipation to the New Creation.<sup>6</sup>

The Christian mission is to the whole creation. We understand this to encompass not only the geographical dimension but also all the areas of life upon which the Christian gospel can be brought to bear.<sup>7</sup>

## IV. CHURCHES AS CREATION AWARENESS CENTERS

In responding to creation's degradation and the Scripture's teachings, a growing number of churches are becoming *Creation Awareness Centers*.<sup>8</sup> Congregations are growing in their understanding of the degradations of creation, hoping to respond clearly and deliberately. For many the concept of a "Creation Awareness Center" provides the vehicle for developing a coordinated response. But how might a congregation proceed?

<sup>6</sup>See H. Paul Santmire, "The Future of the Cosmos and the Renewal of the Church's Life with Nature," *Word & World* (1984) 410-421.

<sup>7</sup>Statement of the American Baptist Board of International Ministries as quoted in Dennis Testerman, "Missionary Earthkeeping: Glimpses of the Past, Visions of the Future," *Missionary Earthkeeping*, ed. C. DeWitt and Ghilleen T. Prance (Mercer University, 1991). In press.

<sup>8</sup>For example, posters on the topic were mailed to 11,500 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregations. The ELCA's South Central Synod of Wisconsin has officially designated some churches as Creation Awareness Centers and its Justice and Care of the Earth Task Force has produced supporting publications.

One procedure being used enables a congregation to develop specific ideas into an organized, coherent statement to those with the authority to move ahead. It taps the undiluted strengths, talents, and abilities of the congregation, focusing these on the assessment of opportunities and necessities on the local, regional, and global level.

This method can be summarized as follows:<sup>9</sup> Each person in a circle of eight to fifty congregational members is given two index cards on which they write their two best ideas on how to make their church a Creation Awareness Center. They pass both cards to their right. Then they do a "sifting pass," handing the one they judge the better of the two ideas to the right, retaining the poorer one. This sifting pass is repeated three to seven times, after which each

person reads aloud the better of the two ideas currently in hand and turns it in. This completes round one. Next, each person is given a new blank card upon which to write an idea which has not yet been expressed. The procedure used in round one is repeated and a second set of “better” cards is turned in. Finally, anyone still holding a card with an important idea reads and submits it. Following the session, a document is prepared with ideas from the cards turned in organized under appropriate headings. The document is then distributed to those who should receive it, and these are assisted to assure further development and implementation.

Creation awareness is the beginning. But awareness leads to wonder and knowledge, then to respect and love, and finally, to saving and redeeming action. As a Creation Awareness Center, a church that visibly respects God both as Creator and Redeemer can become a window on creation preserved and restored—a window on new creation “in which right-ness dwells.”

## V. KEEPERS, TENDERS, AND REDEEMERS OF CREATION

What is the role of the church—of disciples of the Second Adam—in this time of creation’s degradation? Is it not to affirm this: As God keeps us (Num 6:24), so must we keep the creation (Gen 2:15); as our Creator tends us and all creation so must we tend the Garden? Imaging our Sustainer, we must sustain creation; reflecting our Redeemer, we must reconcile all things (Col 1:15-20), even as we pray “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth.” As disciples of the Second Adam (1 Cor 15:22), we must undo the degrading work of the first Adam and do the things Adam was supposed to do.<sup>10</sup>

While creation remains God’s possession (Ps 24:1), still God *trusts* us with its care! For this trust we give our Creator thanks; for this trust we seek to respond faithfully. Our thankfulness breaks forth in our preserving, tending, and restoring creation’s fruitfulness. *Thankful trusteeship* is our joyful vocation. Thankful stewardship is our grateful praise.

“PRAISE GOD ALL CREATURES HERE BELOW!”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>See C. DeWitt, *A Method for Identifying Ideas on Making Churches Creation Awareness Centers* (Mancelona, MI: Au Sable Institute).

<sup>10</sup>See Ronald Manahan, “Where the First Adam Fails, the Last Adam Triumphs,” in *New Testament Teachings on Environmental Stewardship*, ed. C. DeWitt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991). In press.

<sup>11</sup>By so ending I aim to affirm H. Paul Santmire’s “second option” stated in *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 217-218.