



Rooted Creation Care

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“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.
Matthew 22:37–40

“Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”
Matthew 19:14

Years ago, I was talking with a class about religion and climate change when a student asked how I would try to convince a climate change denier that it was real. “I wouldn’t,” I responded. “I would

It is not enough to change the minds of Christians so that they will understand the need for care of creation. What must be paired with this is incorporating the insights of creation care into the ministries of local Christian congregations, in order to mitigate the efforts of climate change on those who are bearing the brunt of this crisis.

talk with them about childhood asthma rates, code red air quality days, internal combustion engines, manufacturing, and pollution.” This brief exchange captures the dilemma at the heart of Christian engagement with creation care. Must we begin by converting Christians to a new ordering of values and faith that properly recognizes the inherent goodness of creation and our responsibilities for its care? Or alternatively, can we incorporate creation care into the human-focused concerns, ministries, and commitments they already hold dear? Both are important, and ultimately, both will be necessary.

Christians do need reformed understandings of ourselves as interdependent members of creation and of other creatures as objects of God’s love and concern in their own rights. But more than half a century of theological arguments focused on reconstructing core theological claims to foster worldviews rooted in human interdependence with creation has had far less of an impact than we had hoped. A recent study found no increase, and indeed some signs of decreased concern for the environment among Christians over the last forty years.¹ Instead of waiting for the widespread adoption of revised theological interpretations, we need to meet Christians where they currently are, and use faith commitments they already hold, to expand their care for creation.

Creation care’s ongoing preoccupation with theological revision and worldview shifting can be attributed largely to Lynn White, Jr.’s 1967 article, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.”² White blamed the dualistic and anthropocentric worldview that undergirds industrialized civilization, claiming that, “Despite Copernicus, all the cosmos rotates around our little globe. Despite Darwin, we are *not*, in our hearts, part of the natural process. We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim.”³ Further, he argued that (Western) Christianity was primarily to blame for this worldview, citing an “implicit faith in perpetual progress,” an anthropology that held that human beings shared in “God’s transcendence

¹ David M. Konisky, “The greening of Christianity? A study of environmental attitudes over time,” *Environmental Politics* 27, no. 2 (2018): 267–291.

² Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–1207.

³ White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” 1206 (emphasis in the original).

of nature,” and a creation story that supported human dominance of a world created for no other purpose but human use.⁴

Environmentally-minded Christians responded by either denying his claim that Christianity is any more anthropocentric than other religions, or, accepting his claim, working to reform these doctrines and the worldviews they supported. Creation care became the playground of ecotheologians trying to out-green each other by building less and less anthropocentric interpretations of the faith. For example, much work has been done to shift understandings of human roles in creation from domination to stewardship and on to kinship. Similarly, theologians have revisited claims about divine transcendence or recovered understandings of cosmic Christology and deep incarnation to overcome human alienation from the material world. This is all well and good up to a point.

Harmful and erroneous assumptions have shaped excessively anthropocentric articulations of many aspects of the faith. Whether or not the harmful anthropocentrism of our current civilizations arose from Christian doctrine, Christian theology has certainly been infected by it. Addressing these distorting assumptions is both necessary and long overdue. It is worthwhile to reconsider our dogmas, to listen to what the Creator is saying to us today, and to pass on faithful corrections to our traditions. But the urgent action our environmental crises demand cannot—and need not—await these reconsiderations of traditions and reconstructions of worldviews, both of which may take more than a generation to become influential.

LESSONS FROM CLIMATE CHANGE COMMUNICATION

Nearly sixty years of trying to convince Christians that our lifestyles are incongruous with our theological claims about God’s good creation has not led to the urgent action we need today. Similarly, in the thirty-six years since NASA scientists testified before Congress that anthropogenic climate change was a significant threat requiring immediate action, we have not only failed to reform our energy policies but have instead increased carbon emissions. For too many years those of us trying to preserve a habitable earth have focused our

⁴ White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” 1205.

time and energy on persuading climate deniers of the reality and seriousness of this problem. At the same time, deniers have shifted their arguments from denial that average global temperatures are increasing to arguments that they are increasing due to other non-human causes, and then to arguments either that climate change is beneficial or that, if it is dangerous, it can be easily controlled through market mechanisms or technological fixes.

Climate change denial is not about the science, as demonstrated by the evolution of denialism itself. It is the protest of those with a vested interest in maintaining business as usual, and it works by fomenting doubt that stifles action rather than by rational arguments based on evidence. Those who study climate change communication have identified a much more productive path towards engagement and action than trying to convince deniers of “the science.” Side-stepping those invested in denial and avoiding debates about worldviews or ideologies, this approach focuses on the things that people already care about. Because the changing climate impacts everything on earth, anything someone cares about—from winter sports and lobster dinners to breathable air and potable water—can be an entry-point for meaningful and productive communication about climate change.

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Christians who want to promote creation care can take a lesson from climate change communication by eschewing debates over whether Christianity is too anthropocentric and instead focusing on the most fundamental core commitments of our faith: loving our neighbors, and particularly caring for vulnerable children. Across denominational divisions, Christians affirm the biblical witness that the two great commandments are to love the Lord our God, and to

love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37–40; Mark 12:29–31; Luke 10:27). While the Gospels do not explicitly spell out what loving our neighbors entails, in Luke, Jesus expands upon that command with the story of the Good Samaritan. This man came upon a Jew, stripped, beaten, and left for dead by the side of the road. Rather than passing by while muttering thoughts and prayers, the Samaritan treated his wounds, gave him shelter, and provided for his care during his recovery (Luke 10:29–35). Jesus commands his followers to “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37). According to this parable, loving our neighbor requires caring for their physical needs. In the Gospel of Matthew, it seems that salvation may turn upon whether such real, physical aid is given.

In Matthew 25, Jesus describes the judgment of the nations, in which the Son of Man will dismiss to eternal punishment those who did not feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, or visit the sick and incarcerated (Matthew 25:31–46). The ways many church communities respond to these demands through food pantries, clothing drives, health clinics, and prison ministries demonstrate that caring for the physical and psychological needs of their neighbors is a value to which the community has already devoted time, energy, and money to living out. Caring for children, the little ones to whom Jesus said the kingdom of heaven belongs, might be an even more fundamental commitment, as evidenced in both widespread investments in children’s ministries and the simple biological programming that inclines human adults to protect children.

CARING FOR THE CHILDREN

Given these commitments, children’s health is probably the most accessible entry point for motivating meaningful action in creation care. Political ideologies may leave Christians divided over extending material relief to various populations, but no one can blame children for harms done to them or deprivations suffered by them. Children are innocent victims. Like all humans, children need functioning ecosystems to thrive, and they are much more sensitive to problems in their ecosystems than adults are. Because their bodies and minds are still growing and developing, nutritional deficiencies or toxic exposures

that might not incapacitate an adult threaten to harm children for the rest of their lives. They are at once the most sympathetic and the most vulnerable victims of environmental degradation and injustices.

The particular issues that can be used to motivate any given congregation, or individual Christian, to engage in creation care may vary based on the particular hazards threatening children in their community and the ministries in which the congregation is already invested. If the congregation is addressing food access through a food pantry or feeding ministry, education on children's nutrition could lead to starting a community garden focused on children's participation. If the church has an afterschool program, parents' day out, or other focus on children's education, learning about the importance of unstructured outdoor play and the impact of green spaces on childhood development can encourage participants to restructure their program and create more spaces for such play. A church that already sponsors a community clinic might use childhood respiratory illnesses or the impacts of toxic exposures to inspire community abatement projects addressing air quality, lead, asbestos, and other environmental threats to children's health. The list could go on.

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A key feature to this approach is keeping the focus on concrete actions and real-world impacts, rather than trying to change worldviews. We have wasted too much time and energy trying to persuade people to change ideologies, under the mistaken assumption that human beings are rational decision makers who can—let alone do—impartially analyze evidence and revise our worldviews on the basis of a persuasive argument. We have acted as though right behavior, or orthopraxy, required right belief, and we have assumed that if we can just get our theologies right, then right behavior would inevitably follow. Other factors, however, can be much more important than worldview in determining behavior. One recent study found that, although

people with a more ecocentric worldview were, *on average*, more environmental than those with anthropocentric ones, there were many *individuals* with anthropocentric worldviews who were more environmental than individuals with ecocentric ones.⁵ Worldviews and theological doctrine are not the only things that influence the ways Christians do—and do not—care for creation. We have paid too little attention to the ways changed behaviors can precede, and indeed can lead to, changed beliefs.

A LESSON FROM THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

Focusing on concrete, real-world harms experienced by our neighbors can foster alliances between people motivated by different core values while encouraging more systemic analysis and action, and even ultimately shifting worldviews. In its earliest stages, the modern environmental movement focused on wilderness and wildlife conservation, national parks, and endangered species. Environmental activists spent little time or energy on topics that directly impacted most people's daily lives. But in 1982, North Carolina announced its plans to build a toxic waste facility to dispose of PCB-contaminated soil in Warren County, which also happened to have the second lowest average income in the state and the highest percentage of black residents.⁶ As the residents of the county organized resistance, a coalition of diverse activists joined for different reasons.

Civil Rights activists were motivated by the racial injustice behind the siting of the dump in a predominantly black community. Anti-toxic activists, galvanized by their victory in the Love Canal case in New York, joined to protest the increasing rates of toxic exposure forced on average citizens, and especially on women and children in what should be the safety of their own homes. Environmentalists brought their own investment in environmental protections and the hazards such a facility posed to the local water and soil. Communities of faith responded out of their commitments to love their neighbors,

⁵ Nicola J. Sockhill, Angela J. Dean, Rachel R. Y. Oh, and Richard A. Fuller, "Beyond the Ecocentric: Diverse Values and Attitudes Influence Engagement in Pro-environmental Behaviours," *People and Nature* 4, no. 6 (2022): 1500–1512.

⁶ Bob Drogin, "Toxic Dirt Dumping Facing Opposition," *Washington Post*, January 6, 1979, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1979/01/06/toxic-dirt-dumping-facing-opposition/2f2723fe-d0c0-464d-b252-eb4040856f32/>.

neighbors that were facing toxic exposure over their vocal objections. These groups did not share a core motivational concern, but the building of that toxic waste facility was a violation of what each held central to their identities.

The protests of that summer gave birth to the Environmental Justice Movement (EJM), which redefined “the environment” that needed protection to include the places that people live, work, study, play, and worship. These early EJ activists did not wait for everyone to come into perfect alignment on a single moral issue before taking action. They responded to a concrete threat based on a variety of moral commitments, and they launched a movement that shaped the next forty years of environmental activism and policy.

The Warren County protests inspired the United Church of Christ to commission a study, published in 1987, on the effects of toxic waste citing decisions on minoritized communities.⁷ That study, and many done since, have demonstrated that communities with higher percentages of minoritized people are more likely to have a toxic waste facility located near them, and to have more such facilities, than are communities with higher percentages of white people. A movement started by outrage over one particular instance of injustice led its members to analyze and understand the broader systemic factors implicated in the disproportionate impacts of environmental racism. Furthermore, the EJM fundamentally altered the core values and concerns of the American environmental movement. Although none of the so-called “Big Ten” environmental groups included EJ issues and concerns in 1980, nearly all have made EJ issues a central part of their work in more recent years.

Those involved with the EJM did not await a consensus on the existence of environmental racism before engaging in activism. Nor did they wait for all of the data to be collected and the scientific case made that this was a systemic issue patterning life in the United States. Activists began by opposing one concrete injustice in which human well-being was threatened through environmental desecration. In doing so, they learned more about how environmental benefits and burdens are distributed, and about how power and privilege are

⁷ *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* (New York: Commission for Racial Justice, United Church of Christ, 1987).

mediated through the environment. Similarly, Christians promoting creation care do not need to await consensus on the environmental crises we are facing or try to enumerate all of the harms these crises will cause before taking action. Engaging with ministries and actions that are already obviously connected to core Christian commitments can teach participants about the issues and create the consensus we are looking for.

FROM DIRECT ACTION TO SYSTEMIC ACTIVISM: AN ILLUSTRATION

Connecting other core values to certain concrete acts of creation care lays a foundation for both doctrinal reform and systemic activism. Imagine a congregation, First Protestant USA, that demonstrates no particular care for creation, but has a demonstrable commitment to feeding the hungry. They have a food pantry with volunteers distributing nonperishable groceries five days a week. A new resident, Mary, is passionate about food justice. She hears about this ministry and starts volunteering at the food pantry and attending worship services. As Mary gets to know other members of First Protestant, she asks about the history of the food pantry ministry and talks about issues of food access. At her urging, the food pantry leadership committee pulls together some geographical and demographic information.

First Protestant is located in what used to be a thriving area of town, but as higher income residents moved to the suburbs (and most members now commute several miles to worship on Sunday mornings) the median income of the area has steadily declined. Most of the people the food pantry serves live within three miles of the church. Mary and a handful of other food pantry volunteers map out the area and find that there are several fast-food chains, check cashing establishments, and liquor stores, but there are no grocery stores for miles. The only place in the neighborhood that you can buy a piece of fruit is the basket on the counter of a convenience store that makes most of its money from lottery tickets and cigarette sales. The only vegetables to be found are the wilted lettuce and slice of tomato that top a hamburger. The food pantry volunteers discuss what they have learned and agree to take this information to the rest of the congregation.

Mary gives their report during a “Missions Moment” on Sunday, describing the church as located in the center of a food desert. She

shares testimony from some of the families the food pantry serves about how difficult it is to get to the grocery store using the town's unreliable bus service, and notes how many children in their own neighborhood have no access to fresh fruits or vegetables. Another member, Susan, is a busy pediatrician who has never volunteered with the food pantry, although she writes an extra check each week to support its work. Susan speaks to Mary after the service about childhood nutrition. The food pantry team sponsors an educational session with Susan and a social work student from the local college who is studying food access.

A number of attendees stay after the talk to discuss ways to build from the food pantry to address these issues. They form a "First Protestant Fresh Food Access" team. This congregation, still unconcerned about caring for creation, can nevertheless be galvanized to action by this environmental injustice. Their already-held commitments might inspire a variety of ministry responses. They could supplement their food pantry, which up until then had only provided non-perishable goods like peanut butter and jelly, to carry fresh fruits and vegetables. A few members who were already concerned about pesticides and nutritional deficiencies in their own industrially-grown produce might start a community garden or plant a food forest on their grounds to make fresh produce available seasonally in the neighborhood. First Protestant could send its youth group to a nearby agricultural area to engage in a gleaning ministry over summer break. The list could go on, and any of these possibilities offers a pathway into creation care.

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Our industrial food systems alienate us from the real sources of our nourishment and encourage ignorance of our dependence on functioning ecosystems. Even just sourcing and stocking fresh produce for the food pantry reminds volunteers that food comes from things grown in the soil rather than from grocery stores and factories. When members engage in planting and gleaning ministries, they begin connecting to the land that produces the food we consume on

an even more personal level. They do not need to be persuaded that our neoliberal economy has alienated us from the true source of food to reach out their hands and harvest a fresh tomato from a community garden rather than select a gas-ripened one at the grocery store.

Through these ministries, First Protestant's initial commitment to feeding the hungry first grew into a concern about the injustice of food deserts. From there, it raised issues regarding human interdependence with the natural world. It has begun to shift worldviews. At the same time, members see that while all of their ministries have helped, none of them have fixed the food access problem. First Protestant simply does not have enough money, space, or volunteers to supply everyone in their neighborhood with fresh produce. They realize this is a larger, systemic problem, and it is going to take a larger, systemic solution.

The Fresh Food Access team might reach out to other local congregations to establish partnerships in any (or all) of their feeding ministries. They might tap into the professional experience or personal networks of members to get the town council working on attracting a grocery to the area, or even work with a regional chain directly. Or they could team up with their new partners to launch a food cooperative to open their own grocery in the neighborhood. Meanwhile, one of the youth who went on a gleaning trip comes home from college after learning about industrial agriculture, and brings a regenerative farming representative to speak to the congregation. After that talk, members might join an existing Community Supported Agriculture program or start a new one to support local practitioners of regenerative farming.

These next steps open pathways for the congregation to delve more deeply into their passion for food both through local, concrete steps of planting, growing, and providing, and in larger, more systemic ways. They do not need to be persuaded either that environmental degradation will lead to food shortages or that God commands them to love the soil to engage in these actions that will both secure nutritious food locally and change their own understandings of their relationships with food and land. But as their understandings of these relationships are changing because of their new experiences with food and agriculture, their pastor can draw on the rich resources ecotheologians have developed to help them articulate those new understandings and root them in their long-professed faith commitments.

Notice that none of the people involved in these ministries would necessarily identify what they were doing as “caring for creation.” Their primary motivation throughout was loving their neighbors by providing nutritious food to the hungry. But that motivation could lead them into ministry engagements with soil, water, and growing things that transform their fundamental understandings of themselves and their relationship to the rest of the creation. We do not need to start by persuading people that Christianity requires care for creation (even though it does). Neither do we need to start with agreement about the systemic causes of the concrete problems Christians know we should be addressing (like lack of access to food and potable water, or sufficient shelter and clothing). And we certainly do not need to start by convincing Christians that anthropocentrism, or what one might also call “prioritizing the welfare of other human beings,” is the cause of all of our environmental problems (which it might not be). We can meet people where they are, find the ways of loving their neighbors that are already their own, and build from there through concrete responses to real material needs. ⊕

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