

Image-Bearing: A Theocentric Approach to a Balanced Environmentalism

© Nollie Malabuyo • Westminster Seminary California • May 2005

Introduction

In an article in the *Washington Post* entitled “The Greening of Evangelicals,” Blaine Harden writes that there is evidence, in polling and in statements by prominent Christian leaders, that environmental stewardship is viewed by an increasing number of evangelicals as a responsibility mandated by God.¹ The National Association of Evangelicals in a statement called “Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility” affirmed that “God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part.”² *Christianity Today*, a leading evangelical magazine, even devoted an issue on evangelical environmentalism urging Christians to be “the most active and effective environmentalists in America.”³ And in a recent poll, the number of evangelicals who supported strict environmental regulations increased from 45 to 52 percent from 2000-04.⁴

In view of this surging interest, evangelicals have tried to formulate different theological bases for “creation care” or “earth care” (the preferred evangelical term for “environmentalism”).⁵ Moreover, with an apparent consensus forming on the Christian’s creation stewardship, the discussion has now shifted to humanity’s relationship to the created world: is he a responsible, prudent steward, or a dominating, capricious master who is concerned only for his own good? *In this paper, I propose that a creation-based doctrine of humanity as the image-bearer of God will naturally result in a balanced view between mankind’s responsible stewardship of creation and of his exercise of dominion over it.*

To establish my argument, I first briefly survey the various ecological theologies offered today. Next, I review the doctrine of the image of God in humanity. In the conclusion, I briefly list some significant implications of this doctrine to man’s relationship to the environment.

Ecological Theologies

Ecological theologies can be classified into two broad categories: *anthropocentric* and *biocentric*. These two theologies are often on the opposing sides of the environmentalism debate. An anthropocentric theology contends that mankind is the highest of all creatures made by God, and was given dominion over the earth and all the natural world of animals, plants, trees, mountains, valleys, rivers and oceans. Since he is God’s vice-regent over the created world, mankind has the right to exploit and use it for his own good and pleasure. A biocentric theology, on the other hand, emphasizes reverence and respect for all kinds of life, whether humans, animals, plants, or trees, and the entire inanimate geological world.

¹ Blaine Harden, “The Greening of Evangelicals,” *Washington Post*, February 6, 2005, A01.

² National Association of Evangelicals, “Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility,” October 2004.

³ *Christianity Today*, “Why We Love the Earth,” June 25, 2001.

⁴ Harden, “The Greening of Evangelicals.”

⁵ A helpful survey of “ecological theology” is found Steven Bouma-Prediger’s *For the Beauty of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 117-35.

Some anthropocentric theologies include the *conservation movement* and the *posterity movement*. The conservation movement emphasizes the interest of humanity over that of the natural world, which is seen by its proponents only as “natural resource.” Trees are for houses, furniture, and paper; mountains and rivers are for mining; land is for buildings and infrastructure, etc. The natural world has no intrinsic worth, except for its value in serving the needs and pleasures of mankind. Although the natural world exists only as a resource, humanity is nonetheless responsible for exploiting it responsibly and wisely.⁶ This theology, though worthy in advocating the wise use of natural resources, is biblically flawed. Scripture attests to nature’s intrinsic value assigned to it by God, when he pronounced his creation “good” even before man was created, and “very good” after man’s creation (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).

A second anthropocentric theology is the conservation of nature for future generations. This position is very similar to the conservation movement in that it expands the wise use of natural resources not only for the betterment of the present, but also of future generations. Spiritual nurture, as well as physical nourishment of children and children’s children, are mandated by Scripture (Deut. 6:7; Gen. 41:35-36). But like the conservation movement, this theology also fails to assign any intrinsic value to the natural world.

Biocentric environmentalists often charge that Christians are responsible for advocating an anthropocentrism that has caused the despoiling of the earth. Lynn White Jr. argues that the wanton exploitation of the created world with the use of science and technology, without regard for its intrinsic value and for posterity, is a consequence of the Christian doctrine that mankind was given “dominion” over the created world by God in Genesis 1:28.⁷ Others, like journalist Bill Moyers, have also accused Christian apocalyptic teaching with undermining environmental responsibility.⁸ If the world is going to be destroyed by fire in the end, why care for it? Both charges have some merit, but blaming Christians as the major cause of environmental degradation of the earth is faulty. James Nash, in arguing against White, rightly observes, “Ecological crises are not peculiar to Christian-influenced cultures. Non-Christian cultures have also caused severe or irreparable harm to their ecosystems.”⁹

A diverse collection of rights groups, e.g., animal rights, tree rights, the wilderness (forests, deserts, etc.) preservation movement, the deep ecologist, and the land ethicist, use biocentric theology. They argue that all living things have equal value, and that “all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and blossom and to reach their own individual forms of unfolding and self-realization....”¹⁰ Animal rights groups argue that animals also have rights that are to be respected by humans. So do tree rights and wilderness preservation groups. The land ethicist sees the land as an organic being made up of diverse elements and organisms (including humans) with intrinsic value

⁶ Bouma-Prediger, 127-8.

⁷ Fred Van Dyke, David C. Mahan, Joseph K. Sheldon, and Raymond H. Brand, *Redeeming Creation, The Biblical Basis for Environmental Stewardship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), 47-8.

⁸ Bill Moyers, “Welcome to Doomsday,” Belief.net, http://www.beliefnet.com/story/161/story_16167_1.html, December 2004. Accessed May 5, 2005.

⁹ James Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 88, quoted by Bouma-Prediger, 78.

¹⁰ Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1985), 67.

and moral standing. Thus, it preserves the goodness of everything that God has created, with humans having the highest intrinsic value in the created order.¹¹

Anthropocentrists claim that biocentrists are vague and uncertain as to where to draw the line between the rights of humans and the rights of the natural world.¹² Should we be all vegetarians and deprive the rights of the lettuce? Should we spare the flu virus and let humans die? All the created world has intrinsic value, but as will be seen in the next section, God placed his highest intrinsic value on humans above all other earthly creatures: “Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor” (Psa. 8:5).

The Image of God in Humanity

In contrast to the anthropocentric and biocentric theologies, I offer a **theocentric** ecological theology of wise and responsible creation care. This theology is centered on God’s image in humanity and God’s “cultural mandate” to humanity as stewards of his creation. The classic text for this view is Genesis 1:26-28:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”¹³

What is this “image” or “likeness” of God in humanity? The Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 10 has a helpful answer: “God created man male and female, after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, with dominion over the creatures.” At creation, God bestowed upon the human being his own perfect holiness and righteousness (Eph. 4:24) and an intellect (Col. 3:10) that is higher and unlike that of any other creature. This extraordinary image of God in man elevates him above the rest of creation and empowers him to have dominion over it. Although man was created as part of this physical universe, he resembles certain parts of creation such as the animal world, but he is also unique as the pinnacle of creation.

Moral Image

The moral image of God consists in true righteousness and holiness at creation. But even after the Fall’s corruption and without the Spirit of God, the unregenerate man is accountable to the natural law that God put within his soul (Rom. 1:18-21; 2:14, 15). The regenerate man, on the other hand, has natural law in his heart together with God’s revealed Word to enlighten him concerning God’s holy and righteous will for his life. But whether regenerate or unregenerate, man is endowed with the capacity to make moral choices.

¹¹ Bouma-Prediger, 133-4, favors the land ethic theology, but with several additions and corrections.

¹² Peter J. Hill, “Environmental Theology: A Judeo-Christian Defense,” *Markets and Morality* 3:2 (Fall 2000). Online. http://www.acton.org/publicat/m_and_m/2000_fall/hill.html.

¹³ Unless noted otherwise, Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001). Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The image of God that pre-existed before the creation of man is of Christ, the Son of God, who already existed in eternity. Therefore, since Christ is “*the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation*” (Col. 1:15), and man was created in the image of God, the regenerate are also “*predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son*” (Rom. 8:29). Christians are commanded to “*put off the old self with its practices and [to] put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator*” (Eph. 4:24). Immediately after the Fall, the process of renewal and redemption of the image of God in man began with God reminding Adam and Eve of their responsibilities of filling the earth and tending creation, although now “*in pain you shall bring forth children*” and “*by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread*” (Gen. 3:16, 19). As he is being conformed to the image of God’s Son in a fallen creation, the believer becomes more and more conscious of the moral and intellectual imaging his Creator assigned to him: first, obedience to and reverence towards the Creator himself; and second, responsible stewardship and dominion over creation in general.

Two commandments in the Decalogue have a direct bearing on man’s moral obligation towards creation. First, although the Sixth Commandment is directed against murdering *people*, a broader view may include living things in general that are part of God’s good creation – animals, plants and trees. God has pleasure in them (Job 38-41) and sustains them (Psa. 104:11-30; Matt. 6:26-30); animals are included in the Sabbath command (Exod. 20:10); and apparently will be part of the eschatological kingdom (Isa. 11:6-8; Rev. 22:2).¹⁴ But no matter how important they are to God, animals and plants are still subservient to the needs of man. They can be eaten by man for sustenance (Gen. 1:29-30; 9:3), and used as sacrifices to God in the old covenant (Gen. 9:20; Exod. 19:5-8; Heb. 9:22). This reinforces the fact creation is anthropocentric and man take precedence over all creation. But this also does not mean that man may abuse animals and plants for his own benefit and pleasure, as when man hunts animals and plants as trophies to satisfy his pride, and not for food that sustains his body. On the other hand, it follows that man may use or kill animals and plants for medical research that will result in the preservation of countless human lives.

A second commandment in the Decalogue that has a bearing on man’s moral responsibility towards the created world is the Eighth Commandment. Because God created all things, he possesses all things: “*The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein*” (Psa. 24:1). God is the ultimate owner of everything in the universe, but this does not mean that man has no right to own property. God gave the earth to mankind, not as the ultimate owner, but as stewards: “*The heavens are the Lord’s heavens, but the earth he has given to the children of man*” (Psa. 115:16). Man was appointed by God to be a responsible, wise, and profitable steward of his possessions until he takes full possession of them when he comes back, as in the parables of the talents and the minas (Matt. 25:14-31; Luke 19:11-27).

Irresponsible and wasteful use of God’s creation is then tantamount to stealing from God, and these two parables are a warning that man will suffer eternal punishment for irresponsible and unprofitable stewardship of God’s possessions. D. James Kennedy makes the connection between man’s disobedience to God’s will and robbing God of his glory: “Instead of exercising dominion in the name of God, we have abdicated and relegated this world to the control of the dark and bloody god of

¹⁴ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments, Manual for the Christian Life*, translated by Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1996), 207-10.

this world, Satan. In so doing, we have robbed God of His rightful glory in the world He has made.”¹⁵ The idea of responsible stewardship is discussed further in the cultural mandate section.

As the image of God, man mirrors God’s will in these two commandments. As God brought life to his created beings, so is man commanded to respect and preserve these living things. As God possesses all things, so man also possesses things. Thus, he is to be a responsible steward of God’s possessions entrusted to his care, and he is not to steal his neighbor’s possession.

Intellectual Image

Man’s imaging of God consists not only in his moral capacity, but also in his intellectual or rational capacity. What the environmentalist culture call the earth’s “biodiversity” or “eco-diversity” is only a finite manifestation of God’s infinite creativity. This creativity is imaged in humanity’s prolific and creative intellect. Even after the Fall, mankind’s ingenuity, imagination, and resourcefulness as the image of God (Gen. 9:6; Jas. 3:9) are evident in the flourishing of the arts, music, science, and industries. Meredith G. Kline writes that God’s common grace are given to both the regenerate “city of God” and the unregenerate “city of man.” Man’s creativity is evidenced in “the accumulation of knowledge, skill, and resources that proved conducive to notable progress in those industries and arts that minister to the physical and aesthetic needs and pleasures of man (Gen 4:19-22).”¹⁶

In addition to imaging God in his creativity, man is also endowed by God with discernment between what is good and what is evil after they ate of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:22). Solomon’s judicial wisdom is said to have been given by God (1 Kgs. 3:28). In the republication of the cultural mandate after the Flood, God authorized man to exact capital punishment on murderers, saying, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” (Gen 9:6).

These two intellectual attributes of man as the image of God, creativity and judicial wisdom, weigh heavily in responsible environmentalism. As the intellectual image of God, he is able to find methods and products to use available resources for the betterment of both humanity and the created world. This does not mean that through science and technology, the earth is on its way to utopian bliss. On the contrary, Paul says that “creation was subjected to futility,” “in bondage to decay,” and “has been groaning together” until the eschatological redemption comes (Rom. 8:20-21). But until that day comes, “what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness” (2 Pet. 3:11)? We are to “renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (Tit. 2:12). All of these biblical injunctions for holy living in this age include not only personal covenant faithfulness, but also covenant obligations to the created world, for God made his covenant of nature not just with humanity, but also with all of his creation (Gen. 9:8-10).

It follows then that as regenerate mankind eagerly waits for the earth’s redemption, he is to use all of his skills, creativity, and wisdom to “bring order out of chaos, and higher order out of lower order, actually *making* more resources than we consume,” through “a healthful, beautiful environment for the vast majority of mankind everywhere.”¹⁷ Advances in science and technology

¹⁵ D. James Kennedy, *Led by the Carpenter, Finding God’s Purpose for Your Life* (Nashville: Nelson, 1999), 4.

¹⁶ Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Overland Park, KS: Two-Age Press, 2000), 182. For another brief but helpful discussion of mankind’s “vast array of cultural possibilities,” see Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Engaging God’s World, A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 31-33.

have resulted in the enhancement of humanity's welfare, economic growth of industrial societies all over the world, and improvement of environmental quality. Environmentalists have always maintained that these advances are impossible to achieve concurrently – they are all contradictory to each other. For example, environmental quality has to be sacrificed for economic growth. However, there are some worldwide indicators which show that this is a faulty assumption, including increased life expectancies, falling inflation-adjusted prices, increasing wages, and a healthier environment coupled with environmental awareness.¹⁸

The Cultural Mandate

It is notable that in Genesis 1:26-28, what follows the creation of man in the image of God is the cultural mandate – the idea of man's "dominion" over the earth. This dominion images God's dominion over all of his creation. God blessed man, and made him his vice-regent or co-ruler over his creation, giving him authority over all of the creatures of the earth. In Genesis 2:15, God commands Adam to "work it and keep it," referring to the Garden of Eden. What does "dominion" mean? And how is man to "subdue" the earth, and to "work it and keep it"?

Evangelicals are divided into two camps over this issue. A position that is perilously close to the biocentric view of radical environmentalists takes the word "dominion" to mean "service to creation in behalf of the Creator." Calvin B. DeWitt, an advocate of this position, takes the Hebrew word *radah*, translated "rule" (NIV, NASB) and "have dominion" (KJV, ASV), as implying "to rule by serving." The word *abad*, translated "to work it" (NIV), "to dress it" (KJV, ASV), and "to cultivate it" (NASB), is taken to denote "to serve." It rejects "dominion by domination," as "license to do whatever meets one's self-interest... a misappropriation of the image of God."¹⁹

However, although I agree that mankind has rule and dominion over creation as God's stewards, he is hardly in the service of nature. The word *radah* is a strong verb in the sense of ruling over one's enemies and over other nations (Isa. 14:2, 6). It is even used in the sense of "treading" over a winepress (Joel 4:13)! The word *kabash* ("subdue") is also a strong word, the subduer even requiring force to subdue one who is hostile to him. Thus the word implies "rape" (Est. 7:8), conquest of Canaan (Num. 32:22, 29; Jos. 18:1; I Chr. 22:18), and forced servitude (2 Chr. 28:10; Neh. 5:5; Jer. 34:11, 16). But DeWitt correctly scolds those who use this word for the wanton abuse of creation for selfish motives, as "worthy of punishment, even death."²⁰ The strong sense of *radah* is tempered in Psalm 72 where the *radah* (verse 8) of the Messiah is described as one of righteousness, justice, peace, and prosperity.²¹

It follows then that mankind's dominion as the image of God is not only of superiority and priority over the rest of creation, but also one of wisdom and responsibility, "with God and his perfect moral law at the center and human beings acting as his accountable stewards."²²

¹⁷ E. Calvin Beisner, *Where Garden Meets Wilderness, Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate* (Eerdmans, 1997), 102, 112.

¹⁸ Beisner, 107-12.

¹⁹ Calvin B. DeWitt, *Caring for Creation, Responsible Stewardship of God's Handiwork* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 40-7. See also Van Dyke, 89-101.

²⁰ DeWitt, 43.

²¹ R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Electronic edition.

²² Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, "A Biblical Perspective on Environmental Stewardship," http://www.acton.org/ppolicy/environment/theology/m_protest.html.

Conclusion

A wide chasm exists between radical biocentric environmentalists whose priority is to protect the environment even at the cost of humanity's needs, and anthropocentric advocates who see the priorities of the former as misguided extremism. Even within evangelical circles, the environmental care debate is fraught with complex theological and practical issues, but one that encourages Christians to take it seriously. In this paper, I have argued that the Biblical position is the theocentric position, with God enduing man with his image, giving him moral and intellectual capacity to rule over creation as God's wise and responsible steward. Some implications of this position that have a significant bearing on creation care are summarized below.

First, although the earth and all its fullness were created "very good," Christians must be careful not to divinize himself (as God's image) or the created world – this is idolatry. However, because God created all living things good, we are to have a healthy respect for all living things, especially for man's life, dignity, and well-being, because he was created in God's image.

Second, we are not to assign equal intrinsic values to both humanity and the non-human creation, because mankind's rightful place in creation is his dominion over creation and uniqueness as God's image-bearer. However, this dominion does not mean selfish, irresponsible abuse of creation, and is to be tempered with wise and responsible stewardship.

Third, mankind's creativity is to be fostered and considered to the benefit of both humanity and the created world. If there is an apparent conflict between the welfare of humanity and of the environment, humanity takes precedence over the environment, but this precedence also comes with responsible use of creation.

Fourth, environmental issues are so complex that a wholistic, long-term approach is preferable over simplistic, short-term, knee-jerk solutions. The solution to the rising oil prices is not just drilling for oil in the Arctic, but also encouraging energy conservation measures such as building energy-efficient homes and vehicles, alternative-fuel vehicles, car pooling, mass transport, and alternative energy resources research especially on nuclear energy and waste. These measures were successful in lowering gas and total energy consumption for many years after the Arab oil embargo of 1973. With man's creativity, is it not conceivable that the successful energy conservation of three decades ago could be duplicated and even exceeded today?