

**Evangelical Environmentalism:
An Assessment of Its Worldview and Theology**

E. Calvin Beisner

Address to the Philadelphia Society

Annual Meeting

Oak Brook, Illinois

April 25, 1998

The last three centuries in the West have seen a transformation in attitudes toward the natural world. With some exceptions, most Westerners at the end of the seventeenth century saw the natural world as a hostile environment to be survived by constant struggle. Largely as a result of the wealth and consequent security made possible by the Industrial Revolution, by the mid-nineteenth century increasing numbers were seeing it as a friendly, if risky, place to be conserved for its beauty and resources. By the mid-twentieth century, partly because of the loss of faith in modernism brought on by two world wars, partly because of the penetration of Eastern attitudes into the West, and partly because of the increasingly visible human impact on the environment, more and more people began to see nature as a sacred thing threatened by expanding populations and economies.

We might describe these three stages as:

1. Survivalism: man's struggle to survive by overcoming the hostile forces of nature. We can associate this stage with Isaac Newton's adage, lying at the root of much scientific investigation, that nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed.
2. Conservationism: man's effort to conserve the beauty and resources of a nature now harnessed for human benefit. We can associate this stage with naturalists and outdoorsmen like Henry David Thoreau, John James Audubon, John Muir, and Theodore Roosevelt.
3. Preservationism: man's effort to protect nature for its own sake as a complex web of interdependent biological and physical relationships from destruction by a triumphant humanity. We can associate this stage with Wilderness Society founder Aldo Leopold, author of the revered *Sand County Almanac*.

In the last three decades, a fourth stage in the transformation has developed. Preservationism has given rise to *environmentalism*, which expressly repudiates what it calls the anthropocentrism of conservationism and preservationism, replacing it with a biocentric or even ecocentric view. Environmentalism has drawn heavily from Eastern religious and New Age world views, often explicitly embracing pantheism and consequently worshipping nature. It insists that the

environment, and each thing in it, has intrinsic value apart from any human use for it. Some environmentalists have become overtly hostile to people, arguing, for example, that mankind has quit the contract with nature and become an enemy to the environment, a view evident in their propensity to call people pollution, a plague, or a cancer on the earth.

A common charge by many environmentalists is that Christianity, teaching as it does that man should have dominion over the world, is to blame for environmental degradation. The desire to respond to this charge, coupled with their own concern for environmental stewardship, has led a number of evangelical Christians to enter the debate over environmentalism in an effort to spell out a Biblical path for creation stewardship. The best known evangelical environmentalist has been Calvin DeWitt, professor of environmental science at the University of Wisconsin and founder, in 1980, of the Au Sable Institute for Environmental Studies. Other important figures in the movement have been Loren Wilkinson, now professor of philosophy and interdisciplinary studies at Regent College, and Vernon Ehlers, professor of physics at Calvin College. These and other evangelicals, led by Ronald J. Sider, long a prominent voice in the evangelical Left, in 1993 founded the Evangelical Environmental Network, under the auspices of Evangelicals for Social Action and growing out of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, to promote creation stewardship among evangelicals.

For the most part, evangelical environmentalists have repeated uncritically the empirical claims of secular and New Age environmentalists, particularly in regard to alleged disasters like acid rain, global warming, ozone depletion, rapid species extinction, and the view that population growth and economic growth must be slowed or reversed to prevent or recover from these disasters—claims that I, in three books, have argued are false. However, they have made a valuable contribution to environmental discussion by countering the secularist and New Age world views of most environmentalists. On most theological issues—especially those at the defining center of the Christian faith—evangelical environmentalists have maintained orthodoxy. They have thoughtfully set forth how Christian faith and ethics offer the best solution to environmental problems. They have insisted that neither a secularist, technicist world view, nor a New Age, pantheist world view can provide an adequate foundation for environmental reform.

Nonetheless, there are some significant points at which the application of world view, theology, ethics, and Scripture to environmental questions among evangelical environmentalists should improve. In my book *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry Into the Environmental Debate*, I discuss these at length. Today I would like to focus for you just on world view and theology.

How Should We Perceive Our World?

An important part of debates over environmentalism has to do with just how we should understand our world. Evangelical environmentalists frequently insist at the start that we must not perceive it as "our world," since "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1). Of course this is true, and it provides a critical premise for a Biblically grounded understanding of environmental stewardship. But as in many doctrinal matters emphasizing one truth (Christ is God) to the exclusion of another (Christ became man) can lead to error (Christ's human form was a mere appearance), so here evangelical environmentalists rarely acknowledge an important

balancing truth: "The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to man" (Psalm 115:16).

Human stewardship of the earth takes place in a context of subordinate ownership. All too often, the truth of Psalm 24:1 is brought forward as if it negated any claim of human ownership-and hence of decision-making prerogative-over land. But Psalm 115:16 and the many passages of Scripture (such as the eighth commandment) that assert or imply the reality of human ownership-albeit subordinate-also necessarily imply human freedom and responsibility to make many decisions about what will be done with the earth.

Indeed, that people will make such decisions is inevitable. The great questions are who will make them, within what legal frameworks, on what grounds, and with what consequences? Will most land use decisions be made by individuals, private bodies, or civil governments? Will they be made on utilitarian grounds, with ends justifying means, or deontological grounds, with transcendent moral absolutes justifying both ends and means? Will they be made with the benefit of the individual, the human community, or the whole biosphere in mind? To whom are people accountable for the use of creation? How and to what extent can we know and ensure the consequences of our decisions? These questions are where the rubber meets the road in environmental decision making, and mere insistence either that the earth belongs to God or that God has given it to men does not yield clear answers to them.

Another question that needs more careful consideration by evangelical environmentalists is whether the creation as we find it, before it has been transformed by human action, should be left as it is. Secular environmentalist Barry Commoner asserts as the third of his four laws of ecology, "Any major man-made change in a natural system is likely to be *detrimental* to that system." Unfortunately, some evangelical environmentalists tend to accept this assumption uncritically. For example, Vincent Rossi writes (summarizing and explicitly embracing Commoner), "nature knows best."

But two Biblical teachings lead to a different understanding of nature and man's relationship to it. One, that God cursed the earth because of man's sin, implies that much of what we find in nature untouched by human hands is *not* good and *should* be improved. The other is that even before the Fall and the Curse God gave man a stewardly responsibility to subdue and rule the earth (Genesis 1:26-28), and when He placed man in the Garden of Eden, He instructed him to cultivate and guard it (Genesis 2:15), implying that it is right and good in principle for people to interfere with nature. True, because of our sin and ignorance, sometimes our interference causes more harm than good. But this only means that we need both to learn how to use creation wisely and to have our hearts so transformed as to have the will to do so. It does not imply that we should not interfere.

One reason for confusion over the kind and extent of legitimate human transformation of the earth seems to me, after reading many evangelical environmental writings, to be a failure to distinguish properly between the earth as a whole and the Garden of Eden. For instance, the authors of *Earthkeeping in the Nineties*, in discussing the nature of the subduing and ruling to which Adam was called in Genesis 1:28, point to Genesis 2:15, where he is told to *till* and *keep* the Garden of Eden. From this they conclude, "Human ruling, then, should be exercised in such a

way as to *serve* and *preserve* the beasts, the trees, and the earth itself. . . ." However, the Biblical text makes it quite clear that the Garden Adam was told to till and keep was not the same as the earth he was told to subdue and rule. It was *part* of the earth, a specially sanctified part, but outside the Garden was wilderness. It was specifically the *Garden* that Adam was to till and keep (2:15). In contrast, it was the *earth* that he was to subdue and rule (1:28). All of the earth was "very good" as God created it (1:31), but Eden was specially good, the Garden within Eden was even more specially good, and the trees of life and of the knowledge of good and evil in the midst of the Garden were still more specially good. Adam's dominion mandate involved his transforming, bit by bit, the rest of the earth from glory to glory.

Is this a mere technical point of Biblical interpretation? No, it has important implications for our understanding of the environment and our role in it. Among other things, it implies that much that we find in the earth would not, without human transformation, have been as God intends it to be *even had the Fall and the Curse never occurred*, and therefore that transforming the earth from its natural state is, in principle, good. It also implies that the extension of human dominion over more and more of the earth is to be not lamented but celebrated. And it should remind us that, contrary to romantic notions of the natural abundance of the earth, people really must transform the earth in order to support very many of us. Calvin DeWitt's picture of the earth's natural bounty is mistaken:

In creation's garden-so abundantly yielding blessed fruits, sustainably supporting humankind and all life in its God-declared goodness-the social, economic, and political structures we created have themselves been overtaken by the world market and the dynamics of science and technology.

Without industry and trade, "the life of man" is, as Thomas Hobbes put it, "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short." Mere hunting and gathering, after all, can only support one or two people per square mile in the best natural habitats. Were we to restrict ourselves to the food obtainable that way, human population could not rise above, perhaps, 30 million-about 1/166th of our present population.

The Meaning of Dominion

It is a commonplace of environmental literature-secular, feminist, deep ecology, New Age-to blame Christianity and the Bible for environmental degradation because of the doctrine of dominion. Evangelical environmentalists have sought to answer this charge not by repudiating the doctrine of dominion but by developing a more nuanced understanding of it than the common caricature that sees it as justifying wanton destruction of the natural world. Such clarification is an important step in responding to the anti-Christian charges of many environmentalists. However, some evangelical environmentalists appear to set forth new misunderstandings of dominion in their effort to avoid the caricature. This happens in two ways.

First, some argue that the meaning of *subdue* and *rule* in Genesis 1:28 is specified by *till* and *keep* in Genesis 2:15. But the distinction between earth and Garden makes this a questionable procedure. Furthermore, the meanings of the words themselves simply are too divergent for the latter to define the former. Subduing and ruling are quite different from tilling and keeping.

Second, on the supposition that the command to till and keep does define the command to subdue and rule, some, like Orin Gelderloos, emphasize that the word translated *till* or *cultivate* in Genesis 2:15, is to serve. From this it is a short step for these authors to turn to Christ's teaching that though He is Lord He came not to be served but to serve, and to insist that Christ's suffering servanthood is therefore the real model of human dominion over the earth.

Now, we must not reject this insight entirely, for it does rightly remind us that Christ's model of lordship is one of servanthood. Yet it is open to serious objections. First is the illegitimacy of assuming that Genesis 2:15 defines the dominion mandate in Genesis 1:28, since earth and Garden are not synonyms. Second, although the word may rightly be translated *to serve* or *work for* another in some contexts, it is properly translated thus only when it is followed by the accusative of a *person* or *persons*. When it is followed by the accusative of *things*, it is properly translated *to labor*, *work*, or *do work*, e.g., to till the ground, a vineyard, or a garden. While indeed all of man's tilling of the earth should be service to God, it is inaccurate to say that it is service to the earth itself. Third, even Christ's lordship, characterized as it was by self-sacrifice (Philippians 2:5-11), is not always and toward everyone a lordship of service. Toward those He is saving, the Lord is tender and gentle (Isaiah 53), but those who rebel against Him He will rule "with an iron scepter" and "dash . . . to pieces like pottery" (Psalm 2:9). Similarly, while tender cultivation is suited to a garden, forceful subduing is suited to all of the earth that has not yet been transformed into the garden.

In short, subduing and ruling the earth should metamorphose gradually into tilling and keeping the garden as the earth is progressively transformed into the garden. The dominion mandate, properly understood, gives man legitimate authority to subdue and rule the earth, progressively conforming it to his needs and the glory of God. That people *do* and *will* rule the earth is unavoidable. *How* they rule it is the crucial question. Will they rule it consistently with the commandments of God's law, or with some secular humanist notions of right and wrong, or with the values of Eastern religions?

One problem with the doctrine of dominion, however, is that it simply does not give direct, pat answers to lots of the specific questions that arise in environmental discussions. Should we drill for oil? Here? How? Should we mine coal? There? By boring (which is much more dangerous to the miners), or strip mining (which can leave ugly scars on the land, although the scars can be restored to beauty)? Should we log old-growth forests? Where? How much, if any, should we preserve? Inferring specific answers to these and many other specific environmental questions from specific passages or Scripture, or even from general principles of Scripture, is not only not easy, it is impossible. The implicit condemnation of certain activities in the following statement carries considerable emotive impact, but it cannot be supported by clear inference from Scripture:

It is, perhaps, an indication of our fallen condition that we humans have not only seized the Genesis commandment to rule as a permit to use nature only for *human* comfort, but have also interpreted the sacrificial death of Christ as being only for *human* salvation. Thus the most compelling argument in favor of any degradation of the environment, whether it be strip-mining a hill, clear-cutting a mountain, or butchering a whale, is always the contribution such an action will make to *human* survival-if not the actual survival of individuals, at least the survival of a

certain kind of comfort or security.

The unique message of the Christian gospel, however, is not only the proclamation of the infinite worth of human life (for God, in Christ, died to redeem it); it is also the importance of being willing to give up that life-or at least to forgo one's comfort and material security-for the sake of another.

There are, in fact, several problems with such reasoning. First, the Bible does put a priority on human survival (e.g., Exodus 21:28), and there is nothing wrong with our doing the same. Second, it is not always clear that strip-mining a given hill, clear-cutting a given mountain, or butchering a given whale is wrong. Anyone who has traveled through the lush, rolling farmland of southern Illinois and observed the thousands of small lakes and ponds that dot the landscape, providing excellent stopovers for migratory birds, not to mention great bass fishing and lovely scenery for people, is observing the long-term impact of strip-mining in that region, for most of the lakes and ponds are played out strip mines. Some species of trees grow back best after logging when there is no canopy, i.e., after clear cutting; others do better under a canopy, i.e., after selective harvesting. And there is no reason why sensible hunting of whales need threaten their survival as a species. Third, there is a difference between giving up one's life to save another human being and giving it up to save a hill, a forest, or a whale. The one makes sense; the other is, to say the least, questionable. The Bible does, after all, make a clear difference between human and other kinds of life. It forbids taking innocent human life (Exodus 20:13), but under the Mosaic system it required killing some innocent animals as sacrifices (e.g., Exodus 34:20).

That we are, therefore, to think through issues of environmental stewardship with the Biblical doctrine of dominion in mind is certainly true. It should provide some guiding boundaries for our thinking. But it cannot by itself give us all the specifics we need. Generations of thought and experience must teach us how to answer the specific questions.

Can We Ignore the Curse?

"Cursed is the ground because of you," God said Adam had sinned; "through painful toil you will eat of 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 3:17b-19).

There is a marked tendency among evangelical environmentalists to ignore the Biblical doctrine of the Curse. Repeatedly we encounter references to God's evaluation of creation in Genesis 1:31: "it was very good." But most evangelical books on the environment never mention the Curse. The *Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation* never mentions it. When I pointed this out to EEN leader Ronald Sider, he replied, "the *Declaration* does very clearly talk about the Fall, and it clearly talks about the fact that in Jesus Christ all things are going to be restored, and that's not just individuals but it's the groaning creation." I responded:

But there is a difference between the fall and the Curse. The fall is man's sin, and the Curse is God's response to man's sin. The Curse is on the earth, and the Curse specifically mentions a

degradation of the earth that makes it less fruitful than it initially was. The *Declaration*, for instance, quotes Genesis 1:31 as saying God declares all creation good. The only degradation that the *Declaration* mentions occurring to the earth is all through human action.

What difference does this make? All the difference in the world regarding what we expect to find in nature. We have already seen that God made a difference between the Garden of Eden and the rest of the earth; the former was more glorious than the latter, and Adam was commissioned to transform the earth into the Garden while cultivating and protecting the Garden. These truths implied that not everything Adam found outside the Garden even before the Fall and the Curse would already be as they ought to become. It would need to be subdued and ruled in order to be transformed into greater glory. The Curse intensifies this recognition. The earth outside the Garden, already less glorious than the Garden, was by the Curse made even less glorious than it began. Indeed, it was "subjected to frustration" and the "bondage to decay" (Romans 8:20-21). Instead of submitting readily to Adam's dominion, it would rebel against him. Instead of producing abundant fruits for Adam's sustenance, it would produce thorns and thistles. In other words, it would behave toward Adam as Adam had behaved toward God—a fitting punishment for Adam's sin.

In this light, romantic longings for some pristine planet beautiful that existed before the twentieth century, or the Industrial Revolution, or European civilization, or Western civilization, or perhaps even before any real civilization, are seen to be empty. From the Fall and the Curse on, there never has been such a place. Thus when DeWitt laments, "Creation's garden abundantly yields blessed fruits, sustainably supporting us and all life in its God-declared goodness. We 'disciples of the first Adam' have made the choice to extract more and yet more of the fruits of creation—even at the expense of destroying creation's protective provisions and blessed fruitfulness," we might sympathize, but we must not mistakenly think he describes a historically real option. We cannot choose between "creation's protective provisions and blessed fruitfulness," on the one hand, and civilization's agricultural, industrial, and market activities, on the other. Because of the Curse, creation by itself simply does not abundantly yield blessed fruits. It does yield fruits, some good and some (thorns and thistles) bad, but it becomes abundantly fruitful only under the wise and resolute hand of man.

Since the Curse, earth no longer is "this Eden of a planet." (Indeed, it never was; only a tiny part of it was Eden.) It is legitimate, therefore, for Adam's race, particularly under the redeeming rule of Christ, to seek to transform cursed ground back into blessed ground. It should be no surprise, in light of the Curse, that "even from the time of Adam and Eve, humanity has not been satisfied with the fruitfulness and grace of the Garden—the productive and beautiful creation that God has provided for us." A dissatisfaction (which must not be confused with discontent) that DeWitt understands as sinful is instead a proper response to a cursed ground.

Even when evangelical environmentalists do mention the Curse, they usually cannot invest it with any particular significance. For instance, *Evangelical Christianity and the Environment*, a summarizing committee report of a 1992 forum jointly sponsored by the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission and the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, after boldly confessing, "We wholeheartedly affirm that the universe, as created by God, is good," immediately added, "We experienced some uncertainty and disagreement as to the nature and

presence of evil in relation to creation. We did not attain clarity as to whether death as experienced before humankind's fall should be regarded as natural or evil, or as to exactly what the 'curse' brought with this fall, or how it operates." Admirable as the second statement might be for its candor, it highlights precisely what I am getting at here: the failure of evangelical environmentalists to come to grips with the implications of the Curse. Indeed, obscured in the first statement is a hint at the problem. It would have been entirely true to affirm "that the universe, as created by God, *was* good." But the universe *is* not now as it *was* when it was created by God, and man's sin is not the only thing that has changed it; God's curse has, too, and not for the better. (But we need not despair. Christ's redeeming activity also is transforming it, and not for the worse. More about this later.)

The difficulty in coming to grips with the Curse stems, I think, from a false prior assumption common to evangelical and other environmentalists-one mentioned above. It is, in the words of Vincent Rossi, restating Barry Commoner's third law of ecology, the notion that "nature knows best," or as Lionel Basney put it, that "left to itself, [nature] knows what to do" and ". . . it is this 'looking after itself' that is nature's mark. To be what it is, to be the delight of the One who made it, it does not need our interventions or (for that matter) us." Environmentalists of every stripe have a tough time admitting that nature can do anything wrong or destructive. Yet as Gregg Easterbrook painstakingly and repeatedly details, nature's destructive powers-demonstrated in ice ages (Ever stopped to think what three-hundred-foot-thick ice sheets did to habitats and species when they covered all of North America, Europe, and Asia down to the 40th parallel-that is, as far south as San Francisco [almost], Salt Lake City, Denver, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, New York, Madrid, Ankara, Tashkent, and Beijing?), hurricanes, tornadoes, droughts, floods, volcanoes, earthquakes, tsunamis-far outstrip anything humanity has done or can do.

One evangelical environmental writer has given the Curse much more careful thought than most. In *Healing the Earth*, Richard Young insightfully wrote:

It is clear from Scripture that nature was affected by the fall and that the curse on the ground marks a relational skewing between humanity and the earth. The problem is to comprehend the precise cause-effect relation. Is the curse on the ground to be understood as a direct pronouncement of God or the natural consequence of humanity's deviant behavior? That is, did God directly cause a change in the ground and vegetation so that they would not yield as before, or did God indirectly allow a change in productivity by letting humanity's chosen path take its natural course?

. . . . The wording [of Genesis 3:17, "Cursed is the ground because of you."] is ambiguous. It could mean that the ground will produce poorly because of divine action or human abuse. In either case the notion of a curse as judgment is upheld, either direct or indirect. Yet one cannot ignore the potency of a divine pronouncement nor the Hebrew notion that a curse carried with it the power to make it happen. Behind the utterance in Genesis 3 stands the omnipotent God, the God who spoke things into existence (Heb. 11:3), who healed with the spoken word (Matt. 8:8), and who pronounced a curse on a barren fig tree and it withered to the ground (Mark 11:14, 20-21). This suggests that the curse is more than merely the natural consequences of human abuse of nature.

Young then considers a common evangelical environmentalist interpretation of the Curse and finds it wanting:

It is very appealing today with crimes against the environment making headlines to interpret God's curse on the ground as indirectly resulting from human wrongdoing. The authors of *Earthkeeping in the Nineties* contend that "the ground is cursed because we are set against it. . . . In short, the curse describes not a quality in the earth itself, but human misuse of dominion." Granberg-Michaelson agreed, saying, "Adam's disobedience does not intrinsically change the character of God's good creation. Instead, the picture presented is that human rebellion will infect and mar the creation; yet God's grace acts to restore the proper fellowship between God, humanity, and all creation." If the curse represents the natural consequences of our abuse of the environment, then Paul's statement in Romans 8:20, "the one who subjected it," must refer to us (represented by Adam) rather than God. That is, God did not subject the earth to futility, we did. The intrinsic goodness of creation, however, can be maintained without having to dissipate the curse into "human misuse."

Traditionally, the curse on the ground has been understood as a direct action of God in which He holds back the natural productivity of the land. Genesis 5:28-29 reads, "When Lamech had lived 182 years, he had a son. He named him Noah and said, 'He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the Lord has cursed.'" The unproductiveness of the ground was not only attributed to God but also characteristic of the antediluvian era. The antediluvian unproductiveness could not be the result of pollution from modern technology or centuries of harmful agricultural practices. . . .

Romans 8:20-21 also tends to support the traditional view: "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 glorious freedom of the children of God." The agent that caused creation to be subjected is not stated, which leads some to contend that humans, by their irresponsible environmental behavior, have subjected creation to bondage. Against this is the parallelism of the two passive verbs. The same One who subjected creation to bondage will be the One who liberates it from that bondage. Traditional understanding recognizes God alone as the Liberator and Savior of humankind and all creation.

The biblical evidence supports the idea that God directly cursed non-human aspects of creation as part of the judgment upon the human race. The curse did not change the inherent quality of nature, only its relational status. With the fractured harmony of the original ecosystem, the death process began for all creation, and the present ecological structure emerged. Because of the integrity of the created order, God could not have pronounced death upon humans and not include [sic] the rest of creation. Paul says in Romans 8:22 that all creation groans, being under the curse.

. . . . God's curse should be understood as His easing up on His sustaining influence on the natural order so that it begins the process of disease and decay. As such, the curse affects relations within the creation order, not the quality of creation. God's creation remains intrinsically good.

If all creation is suffering under a divine curse, then it might be inferred that nature is also in a fallen state and that there was a cosmic fall; but if so, nature's fall cannot be analogous to the fall of humanity. Nature is not morally responsible and could not fall on account of its own crime. It might be better to say that humanity morally fell, and nature was implicated in that fall, not that nature fell. It is only in this sense that we can speak of a cosmic fall and the need for a cosmic salvation. The solidarity of humanity and the environment necessitates the idea of a cosmic disordering as the result of Adam's sin and a cosmic reordering through the work of Christ (Col. 1:20).

Does this mean that nature is now somehow inherently evil? Does it imply that man can do as he pleases to it? Certainly not:

This perspective retains the inherent value and goodness of nature. There is no evil in nature that precipitated its fall, nor did the curse render the physical realm evil and something to be shunned. . . . Nature lost neither its value nor its inherent goodness; God still values it, and we are still responsible for taking care of it.

Other writers would do well to think seriously about Young's observations. Evangelical environmentalism could not help but be strengthened by incorporating them.

Cosmic Redemption: Yes or No?

One theological issue on which evangelical environmentalists have contributed some excellent insights is the scope of redemption. Sometimes drawing on the insights of Greek Patristic thought, sometimes on that of contemporary Eastern Orthodox theologians, they have insisted that both the Old and the New Testaments depict redemption as encompassing not only human souls but the whole created order. In this they undoubtedly are right (Romans 8:18-25; Colossians 1:15-20; Revelation 21; Isaiah 65:17-25). It is one of the most important contributions of evangelicals to environmental thought and provides a helpful alternative to New Age thought.

Closely related to the cosmic scope of redemption is man's role in it. Obviously Christ is Redeemer. But what role, if any, do the redeemed play in the restoration of the earth to glory? Most evangelical environmental writings have not addressed the question, but *Earthkeeping in the Nineties* did so in an insightful way:

[I]n Christ, both as Creator and as Redeemer, God is immanent in creation. The "equality with God" enables the creating Word to share the flesh of his creation in an immanence which does not grasp at either glory or survival, but which leads ultimately to death. Likewise, though Christians transcend the world, they are also directed to become a redemptive part of what they transcend. Humans are to become saviors of nature, as Christ is the savior of humanity (and hence, through humans, of those parts of creation placed under their care).

This idea of men and women being, along with Christ, the saviors of nature is not simply theological speculation. It is implied in all of those many Scripture passages which speak of redeemed humans as 'fellow heirs' with Christ. As Christ is Ruler, Creator, and Sustainer of the

world, so also are we to be. Being heirs with Christ involves (as Paul saw) being crucified with Christ; it also involves sharing in Christ's sustaining, suffering activity in creation.

Most specifically, this startling-but orthodox-idea of humans sharing in the redemption of creation is taught in [Rom. 8:19-22].

Similarly, the *Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation* affirms:

Because in Christ God has healed our alienation from God and extended to us the first fruits of the reconciliation of all things, we commit ourselves to working in the power of the Holy Spirit to share the Good News of Christ in word and deed, to work for the reconciliation of all people in Christ, and to extend Christ's healing to suffering creation.

Because we await the time when even the groaning creation will be restored to wholeness, we commit ourselves to work vigorously to protect and heal that creation for the honor and glory of the Creator-whom we know dimly through creation, but meet fully through Scripture and in Christ.

Every Christian should embrace these insights. What evangelical environmentalists need to do now, however, is to harvest fruits from them, for they are ripe. The effects of the atoning death, victorious resurrection, and triumphant ascension of Christ sweep over all of creation, including man, animals, plants, and even the ground itself. They include the restoration of the image of God in the redeemed and through them-and by common grace even through many who are not redeemed-the restoration of knowledge, holiness, and creativity in working out the cultural mandate, including human multiplication, subduing and ruling the earth, transforming the wilderness by cultivation into a garden, and guarding that garden against harm.

No doubt some evangelical environmentalists will disagree with me sharply here, but the point deserves discussion: In my view, the amazing leaps in economic productivity and human material prosperity stemming from the application of the Christian world view through the legal, political, economic, scientific, and technological advances propelled by Medieval and Reformation churchmen and scientists are a foretaste of the restoration of the cursed creation foretold by Paul and entailed by the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ.

What we ought to expect, if we believe in the transforming power of Christ in the lives of the redeemed and, through them, on the cultures in which they live, is an increasing reversal of the effects of the Curse, a progressive transformation that parallels the growth-both intensive and extensive-of Christianity through the centuries. While Biblically sound social analysis repudiates the secularist ideology of inevitable Progress, nonetheless the Christian doctrines of creation, fall, curse, redemption, and consummation equip us with a linear concept of time and a Biblically grounded faith that God is indeed working in time and space to restore this fallen and cursed world to glory (Matthew 13:24-43), and we ought to see-and can see if we are looking-evidences of this in history.

Indeed, the cosmic implications of Christ's redeeming work, coupled with our understanding of the image of God in man (see chapter 7), suggest a specifically Christian perspective on the

troubling question of resource depletion over which so many people wring their hands. For generations people have worried about the world's running out of various resources-especially energy resources. Yet, paradoxically, the long-term price trends of all extractive resources-animal, vegetable, and mineral (including energy resources)-are downward (save one). I say paradoxically, because falling prices indicate falling scarcity, which is precisely the opposite of what we intuitively expect as people consume finite resources. What explains this paradox? It is a combination of the Curse-reversing effects of redemption and the creative aspect of the image of God in man-the latter enhanced by the former.

Christian economist Gary North has argued that many Christians-especially scientific creationists-have made a great mistake in embracing the secularist understanding of the universe as a closed system and therefore of the Second Law of Thermodynamics-entropy-as applying unvaryingly throughout time and space. The universe is *not* a closed system. Its Creator is distinct from it and-we are not deists, after all-constantly interacting with it. Many of Christ's miracles involved reversals of entropy (turning water into wine, healing diseases and injuries, calming storms, raising the dead). Not only this, but we must keep in mind that entropy applies only to the *physical* world (matter and energy); it does not apply to the spiritual world. And Scripture teaches that there is a domain of spirit-including the human soul, or mind-that interacts constantly with the physical world, causing matter and energy to behave in ways they otherwise would not, that is, in anti-entropic ways. It is precisely for this reason that C. S. Lewis argued that every effect of the mind on the body-and through it on any physical thing outside the body-is, strictly speaking, a miracle, i.e., something that nature, left to herself, could not do (but not something contrary to nature).

In short, Christians have a world-view (Christian theism, metaphysical realism, mind/body dualism) and doctrinal (creation, curse, and redemption) foundation from which to offer a fresh perspective on the effect of human economic activity on the availability of resources. This fresh perspective, which sees resource supplies as increasing rather than decreasing as human civilization becomes increasingly adept at using the God-given powers of the mind to manipulate nature, is more consistent with both Biblical doctrine (e.g., God's abundant provision for His creatures' needs) and historical data (falling resource prices) than the gloomy perspective of those (whose predictions regarding resource supplies have consistently proven not only premature but pointed in the wrong direction) who insist that the world is fast running out of resources.

E. Calvin Beisner is national spokesman for the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation and former associate professor of interdisciplinary studies at Covenant College (1992–2000) and of historical theology and social ethics at Knox Theological Seminary (2000–2008). He is author of *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate* (1997) and ten other books.