

CARING FOR GOD'S WORLD

The Biblical Imperative for Conservation

from an address by John Stott

The title "Caring for God's World" neatly captures the twin truths that the world belongs to God (He is its Creator) and that He has committed it to us (we are its caretakers).

1. The Creation by God

As in redemption, so in creation, we need to develop a Trinitarian understanding of God's work.

God the Father created all things in the beginning by His "great power and outstretched arm" (Jeremiah 32:17). In contrast to the grotesque polytheism of the Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish*, Genesis 1 attributes the creation to the bare word of the one true God.

The New Testament also speaks of the creative activity of the Son. The world exists through Him (He is its agent), for Him (He is its heir), in Him (He is its integrating principle) and under Him (He is its Lord): see Colossians 1:15-17; John 1:3; Hebrews 1:2,3. Indeed, it is in the man Christ Jesus that the cultural mandate to subdue the earth is fulfilled. Reflecting on Genesis 1, the psalmist wrote of man (male and female) that God had "put everything under his feet" (Psalm 8:6). Then, reflecting on Psalm 8, the writer to the Hebrews wrote that "at present we do not see everything subject to him (man). But we see Jesus... 'crowned with glory and honour' (Hebrews 2:8,9)", with everything under his feet (Ephesians 1:22). So, even while human beings fail to adequately obey the mandate to care for the environment, Jesus Christ is the environment's creator, heir, sustainer and lord. As the second Adam, the head of the new creation, He exercises sovereignty over it.



In addition to the creative initiative of God the Father and the agency of His Word through whom all things were made and are sustained, "The Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:1-3); "As a hen sits upon her eggs, that she may hatch her young, so the Holy Spirit was brooding as it were upon the waters" (Luther); "When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth" (Psalm 104:30).

It is a wonderful truth that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were together involved in the creation of the world and are together involved in its conservation and control. They brought it into being. They hold it in being. One day, they will liberate it from its present bondage to decay and invest it with the freedom of God's glory.

2. The Delegation to us

Scripture tells us both that "earth is the Lord's" (Psalm 24:1) and that He "has given it to man" (Psalm 115:16). These assertions do not contradict each other. The earth belongs to God by creation and us by delegation. This does not mean that He has handed it over to us in such a way as to relinquish His own rights over it, but that He has delegated to us the responsibility to preserve and develop the earth on His behalf.

How, then, should we relate to the earth? If we remember both its creation by God and its delegation to us, we will avoid two opposite extremes and instead develop a third and better relationship to nature.

CREATION CARE AS MISSION

First, we will avoid the deification of nature. This is the mistake of pantheists, who identify the Creator with His creation, of animists who populate the natural world with spirits and of the New Age's Gaia movement which attributes to nature its own self – contained, self-regulating, self-perpetuating mechanisms. But all such confusions are derogatory to the Creator. The Christian de-sacrilizing of nature (the recognition that it is creation, not creator) was an indispensable prelude to the whole scientific enterprise and is essential to the development of the earth's resources today.

We respect nature because God made it; we do not reverence nature as if it were God and inviolable.

Secondly, we must avoid the exploitation of nature, which is the opposite extreme. This is not to treat nature obsequiously as if it were God, but to behave towards it arrogantly as if we were God. Genesis 1 has been unjustly blamed for environmental irresponsibility. It is true that God commissioned the human race to "have dominion" over the earth and "subdue"



it (Genesis 1:26-28) and that these two Hebrew verbs are forceful. But it would be absurd to imagine that He who created the earth handed it over to us to be destroyed. No, the dominion God has given us is a responsible stewardship, not a destructive domination.

The third and correct relationship between human beings and nature is that of cooperation. God has deliberately humbled Himself to make this divine-human partnership necessary. He created the earth but told us to subdue it. He planted the garden but put Adam in it "to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15). This is often called the cultural mandate. For what God has give us is nature; what we do with it is culture. We are not only to

conserve the environment, but develop its resources for the common good.

It is a noble calling to co-operate with God for the fulfilment of His purposes, to transform the created order for the pleasure and profit of all. In this way, our work is to be an expression of our worship, since our care of the creation will reflect our love for the Creator.