

Q. What is the Christian's responsibility toward the environment?

A. Environmental issues can be very controversial. There is a lot of propaganda that we should be skeptical of. Studies on the environment funded by grants from the government and science foundations are very lucrative for scientists, and we must never think that scientists are above being as totally depraved and sinful as anyone else. I have a degree in Environmental Studies, knew many environmental scientists, and remember them spending much of their time brainstorming about how to get grant money. And, although scientists would like us to believe that they approach a problem with neutrality, we should always consider whether a scientist's conclusion is influenced by his politics. I am not saying that everything you read about various environmental crises is a lie. Nor am I trying to apply a broad brush to environmental scientists that paints them all as money-grubbing con artists. But I am saying that, as with anything, what we read about environmental issues should be viewed with a skeptical eye.

Then again, there are those who are anti-environmentalists. They seem bent on scoffing at every environmental concern. We must be careful about this side of the spectrum, as well. For example, it is prudent to ask who is behind a report that concludes that emitting such-and-such into the air does no real harm. A little investigation may find that the study was funded by a group with ties to the industry whose factories are emitting such-and-such! On a larger scale, many activist groups with links to industry often work in concert to fund a particular political party and influence it to have an anti-environmentalist platform and issue anti-environmentalist propaganda.

So, environmental concerns are complex political and economic issues. Nevertheless, there are Scriptures that show the Christian's responsibility to the environment and toward God who is in control of it.

One of these Scriptures is very basic. It's in Matthew 7:12: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets." If we would not want

someone polluting our air, land, or water, then we should not be doing it to someone else.

But how is it that we have responsibility for the earth? In Genesis 1:27-30, we read,

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so.

This is a basic command by the Creator God to the man He created.

God repeats the basic point of this command after the Flood in Genesis 9:1-3 (except that He adds that man can now eat meat):

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered. Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things.

Now let's notice Genesis 3:17-20:

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust

thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living.

God's curse for Adam's sin included a curse on the land. Romans 8:19-22 tells us that this curse was not just localized or limited to the soil alone. The entire creation has been subjected to "vanity" (*mataiotēti*—emptiness as to results). So, as wonderful as the earth's environment is, it is not in the perfect state in which it was originally created. It is flawed. Before the Fall, Adam could get what he needed from the environment with apparently little effort. Now, we must put in a great deal of effort to get our needs out of the environment; and, like Adam clearing the ground, hoeing it, and removing weeds, our efforts to get our necessities unavoidably alter the environment.

We see, then, that God's commands to humans included these things:

1) Humans were to "be fruitful, and multiply." This means that they were to have many children. This command directly contradicts the advice of many environmentalists that people have few children so that the population does not grow, but rather declines.

2) Humans were to "replenish the earth." The word translated "replenish" in the King James Version means "fill," and it is so translated in many other versions of the Bible. Thus, God ordered humans to fill the earth. Many environmentalists would also not like this command because they see humans as if they were some kind of invasive species that has only a negative impact on the environment.

Environmentalists who take this stand are setting themselves up as little gods as if they can determine what the environment is *supposed* to be like. In essence, they are saying that every species on the face of the earth can have its natural impact on the environment *except man*. They see man's impact as always unnatural. But there is no rational reason to assume this. If they were logically consistent, even atheistic evolutionists should see that, if humans are merely a species that evolved on the earth, then humans should be allowed to do what they do naturally, including populating the earth, building homes, factories, etc., whatever the outcome on the environment may be. Thus, the environmentalists' desire to curb man's activities is logically inconsistent with atheistic evolution, but most environmentalists will not admit it.

The Christian view of man, on the other hand, holds more hope for a happy future for the earth's environment. The Christian understands that man is not an evolved species. Man is a unique creation, and God has given us rational minds and the responsibility to use them. He tells us to fill the earth, and so we should. But He expects us to use our minds to fill the earth in a thoughtful, considerate, measured, and wise manner. God does not want us to damage the environment (and we must be judicious in determining what constitutes real damage), or harm others in our use of the earth. Because they are witnesses to Him as Creator, I think He would also want us to preserve areas of natural beauty. These can also serve us as areas of rest and recreation. Because of sin, we have made mistakes in our handling of the environment and will continue to do so. But the problem is not man, as such; it is sin. And sin is not something most environmentalists, like nearly all people, want to face.

3) God told humans to "subdue" the earth. The Hebrew word translated "subdue" means to bring something under subjection. This means that people are to have a direct effect upon the earth so as to cause it to do what they want. This, of course, flies in the face of those who decry man's effect upon the environment and believe that the earth should be preserved in as much of a wild state as possible.

4) God told humans to have "dominion" over the fish, birds, and every living thing on the earth. The Hebrew word translated "dominion" means to tread down, dominate, or subjugate. That is, people were to bring the animals under their control. This contradicts the ideas of animal rights advocates who believe that animals have rights equal to people. God says they do not.

5) God gave humans both the plants and the animals for food. Of course, there are people who think they know better than God and believe that they should not eat meat. But God says He has given the animals to us for food (see Genesis 9:3).

6) God said that, because of the curse upon the creation due to sin, we would have to alter the environment through hard work to get what we need.

So, where does this leave us? It should leave us skeptical of various claims of environmental degradation without hearing both sides of the issue and making an intelligent judgment. Yet, it leaves us with a very definite responsibility to care for the environment. But it is a responsibility that is very different from that advocated by many

environmentalists. God does not see man as an invasive organism that must be stopped from affecting the environment. Unlike paganism and atheism, which see man as equal to the other organisms of the earth and the environment as something greater than us that we are to serve, the biblical approach to the environment is that God has given us the environment to serve us, and we are the chief creation with dominion over the other creatures.

God sees man as the creation made in His image. Yes, man is fallen, but he is still the ruler of God's creation to whom God has given the earth as a home, a source for the food and raw materials we need, a dwelling for other creatures who are not our equals but over whom we have rule, and a place of beauty on which to enjoy the lives God has given us. We are to use wisdom to conserve resources (it would seem wise to develop techniques for using renewable and sustainable resources as much as possible) and to manage the other creatures. We are not to squander and pollute as these are detrimental to the mandate God has given us and do not show love to our neighbor. But this is a far cry from the virtual worship of the environment by many who serve the creation more than the Creator (Romans 1:25).

Christians should be careful about jumping on the bandwagon of either of the extremes attached to the issue of the environment. Instead, we should look for the truth in Scripture and circumspectly use and care for the earth God has given us. We should do this so that it will continue to supply through future generations our physical needs, including places for recreation and the enjoyment of natural beauty.

But one in a certain place testified, saying, What is man, that thou art mindful of him? or the son of man, that thou visitest him? Thou madest him a little lower than the angels; thou crownedst him with glory and honour, and didst set him over the works of thy hands.

Hebrews 2:6-7