

Let all that has DNA praise the Lord!

Professor Colin Russell discusses the Christian response to environmental issues



The popular idea that “Environment” was invented about 1960 is quite wrong. People became aware of it (though not by that name) over 100 years earlier. There have been three stages of development, or phases of environmental awareness, corresponding to ever-deepening recognition of the problems.

First phase: **RECOGNITION OF A CHANGING SOCIETY**

Here are some of the main issues that opened people’s eyes to the problem:

1. Urbanisation

The scale of urban squalor greatly increased since about 1850 due to huge population drifts to the towns. With water monitoring and new towns there came new prominence to purity of water and air, as did “the population explosion, the carcinoma of planless urbanism, the new geological deposits of sewage and garbage” condemned by L. White.

2. Industrialisation

Pollution problems began on a large scale in the early 1800s, due to acid rain and other chemical emissions, and mountains of industrial waste. Since then, Torrey Canyon (1967) and Chernobyl (1986) were wake-up calls to everyone.

3. Transport

First railways, then cars helped to pollute the air, but nothing as dangerously as the large aircraft, especially jumbo-jets.

4. Recreation

Increased mobility showed the contrast between country and town and led to the Conservation Movement, National Parks, the Countryside Commission in various forms from 1960s, Nature Conservancy (1946) and even a Department for the Environment (1970).

5. Natural disasters

These always happen, but we are more aware of them and they have probably increased. Tearfund cites 20 natural disasters in the 1950s and 87 in the 1990s. Be it floods, volcanoes, earthquakes and now the Tsunami of 2004.

6. Changed social outlook of 60s and 70s

Alternative lifestyles came into vogue; anti-authoritarianism; romanticism; individualism, “MY car . . .”; anti-science.

Second phase: **RECOGNITION OF AN EARTH IN PERIL**

This is what has happened chiefly since the 1960s. Three main dangers threaten the earth:

1. Pollution

Acid rain was recognised in the 1850s, *Silent Spring* and the misuse of insecticides came to the fore in the 1960s; lead, oxides of nitrogen and sulphur in the air were noticed in the 1970s and the hole in ozone layer due to CFCs was discovered in 1974.

2. Running out: unsustainability

Food shortages were predicted in 1890s; deforestation; rain forests; loss of biodiversity; Bengal tigers; snowy owls etc.; 25% of known species will be lost by end of the century.

Ask yourself; essential or frivolous?



Consider adopting the ‘LOAF’ principles:

Locally produced,

Organically grown,

Animal friendly,

Fairly traded.

This is about theology, about a world that makes sense only in the light of the Gospel

3. Climate change

The greenhouse effect. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2001: at present rate temperatures rise by 1° in 2025, and 3° in 2099, roughly 1 foot global rise in oceans. Huge flooding. Extreme weather more frequently. Also storms and cyclones affected. Now certain that this is due to human activity - CO₂.

Responses to these perils include practical steps like

- Recycling
- Avoiding unnecessary consumption: paper etc.; lights off; insulate your home.
- Selecting "green" products - intelligently.
- Going for sustainable energy
- Flying as little as possible as jet consumption is more than several thousand cars.

BUT all this not enough; to save the earth (literally) we need one more insight:

Third phase: RECOGNITION OF THE CALL OF GOD

This is about theology, about a world that makes sense only in the light of the Gospel.

In fact Christians had been well aware of this since at least the 17th century: William Derham, John Ray etc. In the last 10 years or so signs that at last the church as a whole has recognised its call; it must therefore lead and proclaim the truth.

If you turn to 1st three chapters of Bible what you read is not about science, evolution, the age of the earth etc. What is given here is wonderfully developed in the rest of the Bible.

1. The earth is God's creation: Gen. 1:1

The earth is not a *bit* of God; not pantheism (Babylonians); but a lump of created matter. It is meant to show the glory of God; hence science. Let all that has DNA praise the Lord!

2. The earth belongs to the Lord: Gen. 1 - 3

God commands matter, living things, humanity; he curses and blesses. Hence: We are tenants not owners; not ours to grab or exploit. "It is up to us as consumers and voters to do better justice to the 'house' we have been invited to keep, the world where we are guests." [Rowan Williams].

3. The earth is intended to be good: Gen. 1: 10, 12, 18 etc.

Trees "pleasing to the eye"; Jesus and the lilies of the field etc. Enjoy it and conserve it! Mountain experiences can be awesome affirmations of God's goodness.

Christianity is an earth-affirming faith, "the most materialistic religion". [Temple].

4. The earth has been spoilt: Gen. 3:17-19

Weeds & thistles are symbolic of our spoilt world; our

aggression; greed; carelessness; ignorance. *We* are part of the problem. "The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" [Rom. 8:22]. This, we understand, has something to do with ourselves.

5. The earth has been placed in our hands: Genesis 2:28

Much misunderstood passage. Called not to dominate but to be God's viceroys; stewards. From the Greek, steward = ecologist! Stewards are faithful, not always successful.

Conclusion

What must we do?

1. Practice

Put into practice what we know to be desirable. Your conscience!

2. Pressurise

Government; retailers; chemical firms; letters to newspapers

3. Preach

Sermons in church; religious education. God forbid we should exaggerate or ignore it.

4. Proclaim

"God so loved *the world* that He sent His only Son". He entered our polluted environment and redeemed it. We live in a critical period of Salvation-history.

YOU have a part to play: "Lord, here am I, send me".



Chemicals from local factories pollute the streets in North India



You can't see the ozone layer, but when it is damaged the sun can kill



Global warming can be seen in more extreme weather

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