

AN EVANGELICAL RESPONSE TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS & WORLD POVERTY

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Introduction

In this paper we will consider the current environmental crisis and our response to it as Evangelical / Charismatic Christians. The care of this material world and the issues of inequality and poverty are very much on the political and social agenda in these days but what is a Kingdom response to these things?

In America we have climate change deniers who are strongly linked to the fundamentalist wing of the Christian church. In our own nation, we have parts of the church, such as the Quakers who are at the forefront of campaigning regarding the issues and actively took part in the Extinction Rebellion protests in London in 2020.

Dave Bookless defined four types of Christians¹:

1. The first are those who think that environmental issues are a bit dodgy – Christians should steer clear of them for risk of being called tree huggers, hippies, mother earth lovers, etc
2. The second group are those who think environmental issues are irrelevant. They say that the gospel is about saving people, not animals. Some of these Christians would go so far as to say that climate change is a myth, and that, given Christ will return and make things better in the end, what's the point of trying to save it. As mentioned above, this is a major theological stance among evangelicals in America.
3. The third group are those who say, well, I'm glad that someone is caring about it, but it doesn't have to be me
4. And then there is the fourth group, which hopefully we all identify with, who are those who know that concern for the whole of God's creation is fundamental to the God of the Bible and to his purposes for human beings.

Defining the Issues

First let us define what is at stake here and what has caused the present crises to emerge. Jeremy Rifkin suggests

*Our liberal disposition is ingrained in the concept of unlimited material advance. Now we are confronted with the economic reality of a finite planet which simply cannot sustain our expansionary value system...Ultimately the end of the expansionary economic period will usher in an entirely new philosophical ethos that will be as radically different from liberalism as the Reformation and Enlightenment were from the Middle Ages.*²

In other words, our mindset in the west is that our economies and our personal wealth should expand without limitation, whilst the world in which we live is limited in its material resources. These two notions are obviously on a collision course. We cannot continue to use up the world's scarce resources in an infinite manner. We cannot continue to pollute our atmosphere, our rivers and our seas and think there will be no consequence to our actions. There are consequences; however, we may not live to see them. Howard Snyder suggests,

¹ Dave Bookless, *Planetwise: dare to care for God's world* (Nottingham: Inter-varsity press, 2008)

² Jeremy Rifkin, *The Emerging Order: God in the Age of Scarcity* (1979 Putnam ISBN B0006DCHX4), p.9

*We inhabit an intricate biosphere consisting of a few inches of topsoil and a few hundred feet of oxygen. Although our ecological awareness is growing, we may be too late. We may not have enough time for making the required economic and lifestyle shifts to permit human life to continue past the middle of this century. Our present economic system is buying disaster for our children and grandchildren.*³

Chernobyl did not end when the fires stopped burning, but will remain an ecological disaster for centuries to come. Whilst the number of those who died directly from the effects of the meltdown of reactor number 4 was only 56, Chernobyl's name remains a by-word for man-made horror. The genetic damage done as a result both to humans and to wildlife is yet to be fully realised and will take generations to be fully revealed, however, already marked differences are being seen in, for example, the rats and mice in the forests around Chernobyl who have a very high ratio of anaemia, immune system problems, limited reproduction and other aberrations. It is most likely that similar effects will be seen in future generations of humans. This is just one example of human failure creating irreversible effects on the planet we inhabit.

The earth's resources are indeed scarce as they are not limitless. Today, we observe the rapid depletion of the earth's resources by the industrialised nations; we participate in the growing gap between rich and poor; on our TV sets we see news filled with malnutrition and starvation on unprecedented scales. Farmers tell us of the gradual decline of productive arable land because of the chemical pollution of fertilizers and herbicides. The earth is under threat from growing deserts, urban sprawl and global warming which it is now accepted is reducing the ice caps. Rich nations gobble up the resources of poorer countries and apply restrictive and protective trade tariffs in order to fuel an ecologically irresponsible technological materialism and safeguard extravagant lifestyles, raising the spectre of war over oil wells and mineral rights. This is what the Gulf wars were really all about not WMDs!

Is the practice of pumping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere an amoral activity? And yet all of us are involved in it every day as we drive in our cars, switch on our lights at home, buy consumer goods which have been mass-produced in factories which use up more and more of the world's precious resources and exploit workers by underpaying them in order for wealthy indigenous entrepreneurs and large corporations to become wealthier still.

The fact is that all behaviour has consequences. This stands ecologically as well as morally. As Pope Francis points out in his Encyclical *Laudato Si*,

*For human beings... to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins...to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God.*⁴

*Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost for ever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.*⁵

³ Howard Snyder, *Liberating the Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1996), p.39

⁴Address in Santa Barbara, California (8 November 1997); cf. John Chryssavgis, *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, Bronx, New York, 2012. Quoted in ENCYCLICAL LETTER LAUDATO SI' OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME (Rome: Vatican Press, 2015), p.8

⁵ Pope Francis, ENCYCLICAL LETTER LAUDATO SI' OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME (Rome: Vatican Press, 2015), p.25

In talking about the effect of all this on the poor, Pope Francis said,

*Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited.*⁶

In his encyclical he describes the effect of the current crisis on the poorest of the world and goes on to suggest,

To blame population growth instead of extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some, is one way of refusing to face the issues. It is an attempt to legitimize the present model of distribution, where a minority believes that it has the right to consume in a way which can never be universalized, since the planet could not even contain the waste products of such consumption.

Thus, the current state of injustice in the world is a direct result of continued and unabated consumerism on the part of 20% of the world's population, whilst the situation is exacerbated in developing nations through the ongoing exploitation of the world's scarce resources and the polluting of the planet by those countries which have been industrialised.

Creation & Stewardship

Our starting point as Christians is to acknowledge that creation itself is by God and for God. We can refer to a number of scriptures here.

Exodus 19:5 – *The whole earth is mine*

Psalms 24:1 – *the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.*

Psalms 50: 10-12 – *every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the insects in the fields are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it.*

Psalms 89: 11 – *The heavens are yours, and yours also the earth; you founded the world and all that is in it.*

It is clear from these scriptures that the planet we inhabit, including the natural world, all belong to God. They were created to glorify him in every aspect. According to Psalm 19:1 even the *heavens tell of the glory of God; And their expanse declares the work of His hands.*

God has quite deliberately left us clues in creation about his identity, purpose and power. Creation is his universal way of telling everyone who he is:

Romans 1:20 says, *For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*

Creation is the natural place of encounter with God. By this we don't mean that we should worship creation, but rather that creation testifies to the greatness of God. It is an orchestra we can join in with every time we step out of the front door.

Charles Spurgeon once wrote:

Doth not all nature around me praise God? If I were silent, I should be an exception to the universe. Doth not the thunder praise Him as it rolls like drums in the march of the God of armies? Do not the

⁶ Ibid., p.20

*mountains praise Him when the woods upon their summits wave in adoration? Does not the lightning write His name in letters of fire? Hath not the whole earth a voice? And shall I, can I, silent be?*⁷

Creation inspires us to worship and it also gives us insight into the character of God. Creation also shows us a God who loves the wild. Creation shows us a God who cares about the big and the small and the unseen. Creation shows us a God who is deeply mathematical. He is both the scatty artist, and the wise mathematician. Creation shows us a God who is awesome, wonderful, creative, majestic, worthy of all praise glory and honour. Creation directs us to the creator in whom we find love, life, light, glory, and truth.

Creation, and especially the earth, is not ours. It is God's and was given to humanity as a gift with the agreement that we would steward it on his behalf (Genesis 1:26-30). In our rebellion against God, we have failed in our part of the bargain. Pope Francis expresses it as follows:

*The creation accounts in the book of Genesis contain, in their own symbolic and narrative language, profound teachings about human existence and its historical reality. They suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to "have dominion" over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), to "till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15). As a result, the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature became conflictual (cf. Gen 3:17-19).*⁸

In that original divine mandate to humanity, two tasks were given: 'tilling' and 'keeping'. 'Tilling' refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while 'keeping' means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. The Hebrew word 'keep' here is *shamar* which means to watch over or guard. Interestingly, it is the same word used in the blessing in Numbers 6: *The Lord bless you and keep you*. The authors Douglas and Jonathan Moo point out that "as image bearers of God, our care and protection of the earth is thus a reflection of the care and protection that God shows us".⁹

It is important to note also that God did not stop caring about creation when he rested on day 7. He didn't put his feet up and say to the natural world – go for it, you're on your own now. He continued to be involved and He continues to sustain creation today. Psalm 104 gives us plenty of clues on this:

He makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains. They give water to all the beasts of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst.

The trees of the Lord are well watered, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. There the birds make their nests; the stork has its home in the junipers. The high mountains belong to the wild goats; the crags are a refuge for the hyrax.

The lions roar for their prey and seek their food from God.

The psalm proceeds for 35 verses praising the incredible creative and sustaining power of God. It tells us of a God who cares and provides for plants and animals, even when they serve no purpose to humans. In fact, God sustains animals such as lions that are even life-threatening to us. And yet, science reveals more and more about the beauty and complexity of God's creative and sustaining power, and shows us that all life is connected.

Biodiversity is important to our survival and yet we so often see creation as something to exploit – as merely a backdrop to our lives. We need to rethink our place in the world; a Biblical perspective shows

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⁸ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, p.48

⁹ Douglas Moo, and Jonathan Moo, *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2018), p.???

we are just one of many species who inhabit it together. It is interesting to note that many of the wild species described in the Bible are no longer present due to the actions of humanity. We have destroyed much of the creative material that the psalmist used as inspiration for Psalm 104.

The Bible is also clear that God cares for the parts of the world that no human is watching. In the story of Job, God replies to one of Job's complaints by saying: *Who cuts a channel for the flood or clears a path for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a barren land, on a desert where no man lives, to satisfy the parched wasteland and make it sprout with tender grass?* (Job 38:26).

Nothing is ever outside God's view. Even if it doesn't matter to us; it matters to God. We don't need a crisis to care for creation. It should be a natural part of our worship. Our stewarding of the earth and all its resources is an expression of our worship to the creator God.

Ecology is a Kingdom Word

The word 'ecology' is based on 'oikos', the Greek word for 'house' or household. Essentially, the Universe is God's household, but this word, as used in the New Testament, tells us that the world is a household and that everything within it is tied to everything else. Humanity and the world we live in constitute one ecological system.

'Ecology' describes the essential interdependence of all aspects of life on this planet; 'economy' (from Greek 'oikonomia') describes the ordering or managing of these interrelationships. The more closely we look at economic and ecological concerns, the more we see that the concerns of the two related areas of knowledge merge.

The gloomy future we potentially face, with respect to the ecology of the world leads us back to the Fall and the power of sin. Sin has always had disastrous effects in the natural world. Romans 8:20 tells us that *the creation was subjected to futility...* But now the effects of living with disregard for others and for the environment are catching up with us.

Facing the threat of ecological ruin, society tends to look for a technical solution which will solve the problems both for now and for the future. Historically, humanity has always been very inventive. It is this (as well as having a spirit) that raises us above the level of animals. We use tools and find technical solutions to the problems we encounter in our environment. The hope is that such a breakthrough will save us from the effects of our own environmental wastefulness and poor stewardship.

Howard A. Snyder presents a number of counter-arguments to the idea of a technical solution to the world's ecological problems as follows:

*First, technology does not operate in a magic vacuum; it operates within a finite ecosystem and therefore is limited in what it can do. Technology is simply a way of using sophisticated tools for shaping and ordering the matter and energy of our planet, but these resources are limited. Technology is not a power in itself; it is merely a way of using energy resources in a more concentrated way. Technology has given us the illusion of limitless progress, because it has released enormous amounts of energy for human use, but in using up more and more energy, we are borrowing from future generations. Thus, dependence on technology is a kind of ecological deficit spending ensuring an eventual and unpleasant day of reckoning.*¹⁰

In other words, we are spending tomorrow's resources today without a thought for what we are going to spend tomorrow. He goes on to define a second problem with a technical solution as follows:

...[it is] fundamentally anti-ecological. We are faced with a choice: will we view the world essentially as a machine or as a garden? Will we see the earth as a factory or as a home? Will we opt for technology or ecology? This is not an either / or choice but a question of dominant models. If ecosystem is kept as the controlling reality, technology can have a human face; but if the controlling reality is

¹⁰ Snyder *Liberating the Church* p.42

*technosystem, mechanistic technology takes over and life suffers from being squeezed into the 'clockwork orange' habitat for which it was never meant. Then the world becomes essentially mankind's substitute Eden – its symbol of the rebellion and sign of autonomy. But this is suicidal, for we are not autonomous, not from each other, not from God and certainly not from our earthly habitat.*¹¹

This is not saying that all technology is bad. We are not Luddites attempting to smash up the machinery of the modern world. But we must recognise that technology is not amoral, that it tends to create its own morality of means, and it has an inherent tendency towards totalitarianism and depersonalisation.

Pope Francis suggests that, *science and technology are wonderful products of a God-given human creativity.*¹² But he goes on to suggest, *yet it must also be recognized that nuclear energy, biotechnology, information technology, knowledge of our DNA, and many other abilities which we have acquired, have given us tremendous power. More precisely, they have given those with the knowledge, and especially the economic resources to use them, an impressive dominance over the whole of humanity and the entire world. Never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely, particularly when we consider how it is currently being used.*¹³

In discussing this further, he suggests that the issue is not that technology and industrialisation are inherently evil but that they have developed ahead of the accompanying ethics that should govern their use. Thus, it is market forces that have been left to determine supply and demand and thereby production. This results in the governing 'ethic' being profit, particularly of large multinational companies and financial institutions across the world. As such, the market is left to exploit the resources of the world (land, labour and capital) to deliver the highest profit into the 'haves' using the consumerism of the developed world as the driving force behind it (see *Justice to the Poor* below).

This analysis leaves us in a position where the solution to the crisis for the environment and for justice to the poor is economic, global, political and ethical. The situation will not change without the willing participation of all parties. However, self-interest, whether individual, national or multinational, tends to mitigate against any real solution being sought. Hence, we find ourselves on the edge of ecological meltdown (literally) whilst the international community plays political games often based on false ideological paradigms (e.g., former President Trump causing USA to withdraw from the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change).

As we confront the environmental crisis, we as individuals have the choice of determining Kingdom principles written into scripture itself which include justice, mercy and freedom from oppression. These can then form the basis of our response to the challenges ahead.

The Church's Mission

The church has suffered for nearly two thousand years from dualistic myopia. This has arisen from the influence of Greek thinking which saw the natural world as 'evil' and the spiritual world as 'good'. The ultimate aim of all humans, therefore, was to escape from these mortal bodies and exist in a netherworld in some spiritual form (see Plato's notions of Forms as a source of this thinking).¹⁴ These ideas were very influential on the Patristic Fathers and shaped theological ideas of salvation, heaven and hell.

¹¹ Ibid, p.42

¹² Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, p.75-76

¹³ Ibid., p.77

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of Greek thinking, see N.T. Wright & Michael Bird, *The New Testament in its World* (London: SPCK, 2019), pp.142-169

As a result of this thinking, salvation has been shaped around the notion of escaping from this world and existing with God in a heavenly other world for eternity. Our mortal bodies have been seen to be part of the world that is dying and our bodily functions and desires (pleasure, food, sex, etc.) have been seen as a necessary evil but an evil nonetheless, requiring mortification in some form. This is in contrast with the notion of celebrating our physicality as part of the creation that God has declared as being good.

Not only has this thinking influenced our notions of salvation, but has also shaped our eschatology in the last two hundred years. J.N. Darby, was one of the founders of the Brethren, and also the inventor of Dispensationalism and the notion of a pre-tribulation rapture. This theology has been a massive influence on American evangelicalism and especially American Pentecostalism. The reason it is so caustic is that it takes the view that the world is just running down as we head towards the Great Tribulation and the rise of the Anti-Christ. Jesus will return to snatch away a few faithful souls before letting the world destroy itself. He will return to judge those who are left but ultimately will make a new heavens and a new earth. The product of this theology is that, therefore, it does not matter what we do to the planet as it's destined for destruction anyway.

This theology has crept into our worship. The following are a few examples:

When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation and take me home.... I am already home. This world is the home that God has given me.

This world is not my home. I'm just a-passing through... Again, this highlights the transitory nature of my sojourn in this mortal body.

When we arrive at eternity's shore, where death is just a memory and tears are no more... Eternity is seen as being a future sojourn elsewhere in some form of out of body experience.

The truth is that none of this reflects salvation and eschatology as presented in the Bible. John 3:16 says, *For God so loved the world...* The word 'world' is translated from the Greek *kosmos* which can mean the universe, the earth as well as the entire human family. You could say it means everyone or even all of God's creation. In Mark 16:15, Jesus tells the disciples to *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation*. Endemic in Paul's writings is the cosmic dimension of salvation. We are told that God's will ultimately is that all things should be *summed up in Christ* (Ephesians 1:10). Romans 8:18-25 speaks of creation being *subjected to futility* but is waiting to be *set free* and share in our freedom.

Ultimately, corruption came into creation as a result of humanity's fall, but Jesus came to release the whole of creation from that corruption, to restore that which had been lost, so that once more creation shall reflect God's glory in all of its fulness. As is declared in Habakkuk 2:14, *For the earth will be filled With the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea*.

At the beginning, God declared that his creation was *very good*. From the fall he set in place his plan to redeem and restore his creation to its original goodness. That plan was focussed on humanity, and specifically, one man – man of very man; God of very God. On the cross, he suffered the full brokenness of creation so that he might become the source of its repair. In his resurrection, he gave the guarantee of the resurrection, not just of humanity, but of all creation. In his exaltation, *he now reigns until his enemies are made a footstool* (Hebrews 10:13).

For in subjecting all things to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him. But we do see Him who was made or a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of His suffering death crowned with glory and honour, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. (Hebrews 2:8-9).

When Jesus returns, it will be as Lord of all creation. He will deal with his enemies and all that opposes the great work of salvation. We will be alongside him in resurrected bodies. The *kosmos* will submit

fully to his just and righteous reign and all things will return to the harmony that was within creation at the beginning.

Presently, we live in the now / not yet of the kingdom of God. We have come under his reign but have not yet been fully restored. In the same way, the world is under the reign of Christ but not yet fully restored. Also, Jesus has taken back the mandate to rule on behalf of humanity that was given to Adam in the first place (see Romans 5:18-21). He has recapitulated the divine intention and succeeded where Adam failed. His righteous reign is working its way through the earth, *bringing many sons to glory* (Hebrews 2:10), until the work of restoration is complete. As agents of the kingdom, we are called to work alongside him in his restoring work. This begins with bringing people back under his authority through the word of salvation, but it also includes picking up again the divine mandate to steward the earth and to care for creation so that, in all ways, it may once more display the glory, wisdom and love of God.

This work has been defined in the Five Marks of Mission as follows:

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

In this paper, we are primarily concerned with marks 4 and 5. *Caring for the earth and its creatures is a core part of what all Christians are called to do.*¹⁵

Justice to the Poor

Let us consider just one aspect of our current crisis for a moment: world poverty. It is argued by capitalists that the markets are amoral. This is not true. Any system acquires the morality and values of those who take part in it (see Plato). Thus, we must first consider the motive and morality of western businesses; in the west, with the shareholder domination, the motivation for business is the bottom line – ever increasing profit, regardless of social consequences.

All companies, from trans-national corporations to small businesses (unless they deliberately adopt an alternative stance) are motivated by the need to make enough profit to satisfy their shareholders and incentivise their directors. I am not, at present, arguing against these things; merely stating them as fact.

Those arguing for Free Trade insist that these activities should go on unchecked and unregulated. The problem is that the power rests with the trans-national corporations who are free, unchallenged by national governments and international law, to pursue policies of supplier price reduction and control in order to maximise their profits, without consideration of the concept of the ‘reasonableness’ of the prices they pay developing country suppliers. One only has to make a cursory investigation into the ‘cheap’ supermarkets to establish that these companies can only sell their goods at reduced rates because they exploit the supply chain and buy from producers at rates that make it impossible for such producers to make a reasonable living. Shopping in such supermarkets (and they are not alone in this) is a moral choice as much as an economic one.

The reality is that, in their rhetoric, governments of rich countries constantly stress their commitment to poverty reduction, yet the same governments use their trade policy to conduct what amounts to robbery against the world’s poor. When developing countries export to rich country

¹⁵ Dave Bookless, *Planetwise: dare to care for God’s world* (Nottingham: Inter-varsity press, 2008) p.16

markets, they face tariff barriers that are four times higher than those encountered by rich countries.¹⁶ Those barriers cost them more than \$100 billion a year — twice as much as they receive in aid. Trade is reinforcing global poverty and inequality because the international trading system is managed in such a way as to produce these outcomes. The rules of the game reflect the power of the vested interest of the developed nations. Trade barriers in rich countries are especially damaging to the poor because they are specifically targeted at the goods that the poor produce, such as labour-intensive agricultural and manufactured goods.

Even if all trade barriers that currently exclude developing nations from having access to western markets were to be lifted, many of the poorest countries lack the infrastructure to take advantage of market openings. Within developing countries, poor people similarly lack access to productive assets such as land and capital, and to healthcare, education and infrastructure provision. Thus, lacking access to land, marketing infrastructure and financial resources, the poor are often least equipped to take advantage of market opportunities and most vulnerable to competition from imports.

John Maynard Keynes stated in 1944 that ‘proper economic prices should be fixed not at the lowest possible level (as is the current practice of trans-national corporations and the free market) but at a level sufficient to provide producers with proper nutritional and other standards’. Meanwhile, powerful multi-nationals have been left free to engage in investment and employment practices which contribute to poverty and insecurity, unencumbered by anything other than weak, voluntary guidelines. Any move to open up the global market to the poorer nations must introduce a level of morality beyond the pursuit of profit, i.e., it must include a requirement to pay a fair and consistent price for goods produced which will keep producers ‘in proper nutritional and other standards’.

No civilised community should be willing to tolerate the extremes of prosperity and poverty that are generated by current trade practices, and none of us should be willing to accept the abuse of power, injustice and indifference that sustains those practices. Simply saying that if we open up those markets all poverty will be solved is irresponsible and immoral.

In my experience (Richard), most evangelicals simply ignore this issue, preferring instead to focus on spiritual things. In 2004 my wife and I established a Fair-Trade shop. Our aim was to support certain Christian projects with which we were in touch, and to use any profits for overseas mission. From the beginning, we had far more support from Anglicans, Methodists, Quakers and Catholics than from evangelicals.

This whole issue has been exacerbated by some proponents of prosperity teaching who proclaim that, under the blessing of God, we can pursue an ever more materialistic lifestyle. Fundamental to this is the belief that God has blessed the West and not the East when the reality is that our prosperity is far more a product of the imperialism and economic exploitation of developing nations than of any righteousness on our part. I do believe that God does call us to prosper¹⁷ and to be blessed to be a blessing. He may indeed give us abundant resources, but as John says in 1 John 3:17, ‘whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?’

I am not saying that God does not bless us materially, but He may also call us to live in poverty in order to reach the poor. As David Smith puts it, ‘*has the acculturation of the churches to a culture shaped by fundamentally materialistic values resulted in the eclipsing of the authentic message of Christ?*’¹⁸ To

¹⁶ Kevin Watkins, *Eight broken promises: Why the WTO isn’t working for the world’s poor* (Washington: Oxfam International, 2001), p.3

¹⁷ I define prosperity here as enough to meet my needs and enough to bless others (see 2 Corinthians 9:8).

¹⁸ David Smith, *Mission after Christendom* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2003), p.90

have material goods may not be wrong in itself but our model in terms of lifestyle is the Lord Jesus Himself.

David Smith goes onto say that, '*Western Christianity runs a serious risk of becoming an ideology justifying a global system that stands under the judgement of God*'.¹⁹

It is time for evangelicals to realise the demands upon us to bring justice to the poor, not because it is a nice thing to do but because it is a Kingdom ethic which Jesus came to establish.

Liberation theology arose as a challenge to existing structures in Latin America. It identified the collusion between the official church and corrupt governments in keeping in place structures of oppression and exploitation. Drawing upon Marxist ideas It sought to apply religious faith by aiding the poor and oppressed through involvement in political and civic affairs. It stressed both heightened awareness of the 'sinful' socioeconomic structures that caused social inequities and active participation in changing those structures.

The liberation theology movement gained strength in Latin America during the 1970s. Because of their insistence that ministry should include involvement in the political struggle of the poor against wealthy elites, liberation theologians were often criticized—both formally, from within the Roman Catholic Church, and informally—as naive purveyors of Marxism and advocates of leftist social activism.

One of their key sources was the Exodus narrative – the liberation of the slaves from Egypt. This was applied to the socioeconomic structures of Latin America in an attempt to bring liberation to the poor.

Whilst this movement has been criticised and limited in its effectiveness, its influence remains strong. It encourages us to see liberation of the poor as part and parcel of bringing God's kingdom to earth. It encourages us to challenge structural sin in society through peaceful, and yet political means as necessary.

We believe the evangelical church needs to take its lead in challenging injustice from those who have gone before by all means possible, as this is part of the kingdom mandate given to us.

The Environmental Crisis

The evangelical church generally has remained silent regarding the environmental crisis. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, a lot of those who deny climate change are connected to the evangelical right wing of America. It is these voices that are heard loudest in the evangelical world. Secondly, many of these same people have an eschatology that sees the end game as escape from this world through 'the rapture' to await the new heavens and the new earth (see above). Thus, the notion of looking after this world is an alien concept since it is, in their mind, doomed for judgement and destruction anyway.

What is lost in these blinkered unbiblical theologies is the fact that the original mandate – purpose – of humanity was to steward the earth on God's behalf. We are the custodians of the earth given the task of caring for God's world and filling it with his glory (see *The House of God* below).

In the Christian world, we evangelicals have left it to the Methodists and the Quakers to speak out on these issues, whilst trying to save people for heaven. And yet this is the biggest crisis facing our world ever. The sad thing is, the gospel is very relevant to this whole crisis and is the context in which we can present an alternative vision of the world's future. I believe it is time for us to speak up on these issues.

In addition, we can affect the thinking of the culture in which we live, not just by speaking out, but also by adopting a more responsible lifestyle. On 1st January 2019, I (Richard) turned vegan. I did this,

¹⁹ Ibid., p.122

not because I no longer want to eat animals, or to have a healthier diet (although both of these things are by-products of this decision), but because I felt I needed to do something to change the world.

The reality is that the exploitative farming methods which produce animal produce for us to consume are contributing a significant amount of carbon into our atmosphere (up to 15% of the total). In addition, as the world population increases (currently on track to hit 10 billion by 2025), using our current methods, there will not be enough food produced to feed everyone. However, if we moved to a plant-based diet, this problem would significantly diminish. For me, this has been a moral choice. It has also given me many opportunities to speak about these issues as people have enquired concerning my decision to turn vegan.

This is just one area where we can model a different way of living. All of us as Christians need to consider our consumer mentality and think about how we use our precious resources as individuals so that we can speak out on these issues. We also need to be at the forefront of discussions and campaigns concerning recycling, cleaning up the oceans, stopping deforestation, etc.

The House of God

Hebrews 3:1-6 tells us that Jesus was 'faithful as a son over His (God's) house'. We too are called to be faithful over God's house, whether that be our local church or the world we inhabit.

Man and woman were created in God's image with the mandate to rule over His household and a charge to take care of it. God initially left nothing in the created order which was not subject to humankind. But, the writer to Hebrews (2:9) says, when we look around us today, we do not see a fully ordered, balanced, peaceful world. In many ways we see just the opposite. But what else do we see? We see 'Jesus...crowned with glory and honour'.

God fashioned and shaped humanity in His very image to have fellowship with Him to care for His beautiful, balanced, dynamic world. They failed. But Jesus has come, truly God and truly human, to restore the ecological balance of God's order; to take back the reins of the rulership of the world and bring all things under His control. Through His once-for-all death and resurrection a new, restored order is now at work within this fallen world. And we, the Church, are a part of God's restoring work. Thus, we too are called to be faithful over God's household just as Jesus was, until 'creation itself will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Romans 8:21).

Ultimately, this restoration will be complete after His return, and the 'lion will lie down with the lamb'. In the meantime, we should be an example to the world and wherever possible seek to exhibit Kingdom principles in the management of our own resources. We should also be those who speak out against injustice and corruption in the world's systems. Is this not what we are encouraged to do in Isaiah 58? In this passage it makes it very clear that God is not interested in religion that takes no account of bringing justice to the poor and oppressed. God has not changed in this respect, and if our spirituality or faith takes us into the presence of God but does not lead us from there to reach out to the world with His love, such spirituality is worthless.

(Re)wilding as a prophetic metaphor for the church in this season

In the last couple of years, the notion of 'rewilding' has come into more common parlance. Rewilding is a progressive approach to conservation. The charity 'Rewilding Europe describes rewilding as 'letting nature take care of itself, enabling natural processes to shape land and sea, repair damaged ecosystems and restore degraded landscapes. Through rewilding, wildlife's natural rhythms create wilder, more biodiverse habitats.'²⁰

Rewilding is a new ecological narrative that signals a move from conserving what is left of "nature" (as was common practice under 1970's protectionist ecology) to a radical approach that looks for

²⁰ Rewilding Europe website: <https://rewildingeurope.com/what-is-rewilding/>

restoration and renewal not just preservation.²¹ ‘Fundamentally rewilding offers people stories of redemption, reconnection, hope and discovery’.²²

Rewilding practitioners from across Europe have co-formulated a set of principles that characterise and guide rewilding in a European context. All equally important:

Offering natural solutions

By providing and enhancing nature-based solutions, rewilding can help to mitigate environmental, social, economic and climatological challenges.

Thinking creatively

Rewilding means acting in ways that are innovative, opportunistic and entrepreneurial, with the confidence to learn from failure.

Complementary conservation

By enhancing wild nature and its myriad benefits at all scales, rewilding complements more established methods of nature conservation.

Letting nature lead

Rewilding lets restored natural processes shape our landscapes and seascapes in a dynamic way. This will see us intervene less in nature going forwards.

Working at nature’s scale

Rewilding means working at scale to rebuild wildlife diversity and abundance and giving natural processes the opportunity to enhance ecosystem resilience.

People are key

Rewilding embraces the role of people – and their cultural and economic connections to the land – working within wider, naturally vibrant ecosystems.

Building nature-based economies

By enhancing wildlife and ecosystems, rewilding provides new economic opportunities through the provision of nature-based livelihoods and income.

Acting in context

Approaching rewilding with a long-term knowledge of the environmental and cultural history of a place. Taking account of the cultural, political and physical realities of landscapes and seascapes in rewilding efforts.

Working together

Building coalitions and providing support based on respect, trust and shared values. Connecting people of all backgrounds to co-create innovative ways of rewilding and deliver the best outcomes for communities and wild nature.

Knowledge exchange

Exchanging knowledge and expertise to continually refine rewilding best practice and achieve the best possible rewilding results.

²¹ Paul Jepson and Cain Blythe ‘Rewilding – the radical new science of ecological recovery’

²² Ibid., p153

The concept of rewilding is a powerful prophetic metaphor for the church. By exploring and applying many of the principals of rewilding, the church can offer stories of redemption, reconnection, hope and discovery, not just in terms of people coming to faith, but also in terms of the way the church speaks into the current environmental crisis.

Isaiah 41: 17ff "*The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the LORD will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs. I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set pines in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together, so that people may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the LORD has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it.*

Pete Atkins and Adam Daubney have developed nine principals of the rewilded of the church:

1. God is (re) wilding His church – creating variety and vibrant life across the landscape. Some life that re-emerges will resonate with Church history, not least as recorded in Acts (which could be seen as rewilding) but we will also be led by the Holy Spirit to a new future which we will only see fully as God reveals and establishes it, i.e., wilding. Our role is to watch, listen, pray, cooperate, follow His lead.
2. The church is enabled by the Holy Spirit to move from an attitude of “preserving what’s left” to one of seeking restoration and renewal of what is in place and beyond that to the creation of an immense variety of new Christian communities – changing the landscape.
3. Hearing God and obeying is key – like nature responding to its prompts. Listening/discernment/prophetic becomes a lifestyle of the church.
4. Into a barren area life comes from seeds blown, dormant life re-emerging, deliberate planting or existing life flourishing/multiplying.
5. Introducing those with apostolic, prophetic or evangelistic gifts (“functional species” in environmental speak) will accelerate the process. Pioneers can be some of these people: innovating, seeing possibilities, helping others find a new place.
6. Disturbances can accelerate – they force change and re-evaluation and create space for different varieties of Christian initiative and new communities.
7. Linking across boundaries adds richness and diversity. Ecumenical and mixed economy working is important (including both what is already established and the new).
8. Leaders who release and encourage others to pursue God-given vision are needed to accelerate rewilding.
9. Communicating the vision is accelerated by places where experiments are tried (practice) and then telling those stories. We will learn as much from things that don’t go well as we will from vibrant new communities.

Rewilding marks a change in posture from attempting to preserve man-made ecclesiastic structures, to encouraging the flourishing of a variety of creator-driven expressions of church. What grows up will produce an array of natural domesticated and wild flora, which in turn has a positive impact on the fauna of the surrounding area (birds, butterflies and other wild creatures).

In actual fact, there is good Biblical precedent for this. Firstly, we have the sabbatical year (Leviticus 25:4). Every seventh year, the land was to be left uncultivated and the nation of Israel were to live off the harvest of the previous year. This was instituted to allow the land a year to recover so that the harvest of subsequent years would return to give a maximum yield. Then in the 50th year, there would be a year of Jubilee. In this year, all debts would be written off, any land sold by a family would be returned to them as their eternal heritage, and the land would lie fallow for a further year. Effectively, the land would have a three year rest every fifty years.

Whilst, in our modern setting, it is not necessarily feasible to suggest such an event, perhaps such solutions should be part of the discussions for aiding the world to return to a state of equilibrium.

Practicalities for churches, individuals and families/households in caring for creation

It is easy to feel guilty or overwhelmed when thinking about the current environmental crisis. The key is to start now and start small. Changes to our purchasing habits, diet, energy providers, and so on, all make profound differences over time. Multiply this across the local church, or indeed the church network, and the impact is significant. These changes demonstrate not only a love for the creator, but also our neighbours; caring for creation is a potent witness to the world.

There are many online resources which can help us find creative and simple ways to help the natural environment, starting with your garden. These include:

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/community-and-advice/green-living/>

<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/actions>

There are also many ways to make your voice heard at higher levels, such as through campaigning or writing to your MP:

<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/get-involved/our-campaigns>

<https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/>

However, the best place for churches to start is by signing up to the EcoChurch initiative:

<https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/how-eco-church-works/>

The vision of EcoChurch is for churches of all denominations to care for creation as an integral part of loving their neighbours and following God faithfully. It is also part of our mission to bring all things back inline with the divine intention of our loving creator.

EcoChurch offers free online surveys and supporting resources which are designed to equip your church to express your care for God's world. These resources focus on five areas: your worship and teaching; how you look after your buildings and land; how you engage with your local community and in global campaigns; and in the personal lifestyles of your congregation. The actions you take count towards a prestigious Eco Church Award at Bronze, Silver or Gold level.

EcoChurch is run by the Christian Environmental Charity 'A Rocha': <https://www.arocha.org/en/>

Conclusions

Where is all this leading? We cannot live as if our economic and ecological choices have no moral implications. We cannot pretend that we in the West are blessed and that those in the developing world are not blessed. We are in a privileged position but we will also be held accountable before God for the way we have used our abundant resources and for the approach we have taken to those less privileged than ourselves.

The accumulation of consumer goods and the pursuit of our own self-interest may bring short-term satisfaction. In these things we may be no better or worse than our neighbour, but that is not the

point. Retail therapy is a western phenomenon more to do with the poverty of spiritual life than a means of real self-help.

We are not suggesting that our focus should be simply to live in environmentally friendly housing, cycle to work every day, and buy organic or fairly-traded food. These things may go some way towards helping to a small extent. We do think we can be an influence for good and against injustice and we can be the conscience of society in these issues so that society changes. At the moment we have allowed Greenpeace to do this function whilst we have concentrated on higher, more spiritual matters. It is time for the New Churches to take their part in seeking to alleviate this global crisis.

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Helpful Websites:

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<https://ecochurch.arochoa.org.uk/how-eco-church-works/>

<https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/>

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/community-and-advice/green-living/>

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