

Going Green for God

Article for Unit One

Environmentalism is everywhere. We are surrounded by advertisements, slogans, bumper stickers, and marketing campaigns urging us to “go green.” Nearly every city has some sort of festival on Earth Day in April. And political debate often centers on contentious environmental issues. What does this mean for people of biblical faith?

Caring for Creation

Many Christians have suggested that speaking of “creation care” is more accurate than promoting a “Christian environmentalism.” “Creation,” after all, is what an older generation of Christians called the environment. They learned their lessons from the Bible and from the everyday experience of managing farms, pastures, and orchards. Stewardship of creation was not an abstract idea for farmers; it meant keeping their farms productive for generations to come.

The Bible speaks very clearly about the goodness of creation and the role of people in protecting and managing it. Genesis 2:15 says God put Adam in the garden “to work it and take care of it.” The Hebrew words *abad* and *shamar* can also be translated “serve” and “protect.” The same words—“serve and protect”—appear on some police cars, signifying their role in cultivating and protecting the good from whatever threatens it.

Loving Our Poorest Neighbors

In the New Testament, Jesus’ strongest “environmental” command was to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39), which finds expression in our missions work. Missionaries around the world serve people who live much closer to creation than we. Most of the world’s poor live in rural areas, barely able to meet their basic needs.

Many of them are faced with environmental crises. Deforestation means rain runs off the land instead of soaking in; so wells run dry, streams stop flowing, and fertile soil washes away. One in six people on earth lacks safe drinking water, and half lack improved sanitation. Today and every day, 30,000 children under the age of five will die, many from environmental causes.

Compassion for the poor leads development groups like Plant with Purpose to fight the root causes of disease and poverty. They help people in desperate places plant trees, restore soil fertility, and grow food. Creation care ministry focused on “the least of these” combines the Old Testament commands to “serve and protect” the creation with the New Testament commands to love our neighbors.

Making Connections, Saving Money

With our modern, industrial economy, people have become increasingly disconnected from the creation that provides for their needs. Decisions about the stuff we buy and the energy we use may affect neighbors we never see.

Many churches are finding that improving the energy efficiency of their church buildings has a two-fold effect on their neighbors. First, they save money on utility bills,

allowing more of their tithes and offerings to be used in ministry. One large Texas church was able to reduce its energy bill by over \$1 million a year. Second, by wasting less energy, churches reduce the asthma-causing pollution emitted at power plants. Since pollution from coal-fired power plants kills over 30,000 Americans every year, “going green” is clearly a way of loving our neighbors.

Leave No Child Inside

We may be raising the first generation of dedicated indoor dwellers, “screenagers” who never want to be far from electrical outlets and remote controls for the flat-panels that dominate their lives. The church has a role in creating healthy environments for outdoor play and cultivating a mind-set that says “leave no child inside.” Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, writes, “Christians should take the lead in reconnecting with nature and disconnecting from machines.” For some churches, that means ministries teaching single mothers how to pitch a tent, taking inner-city kids to a state park, or taking Sunday School classes fishing.

Creation care might mean starting a farm or a garden. In Idaho, the Boise Vineyard’s “Garden o’ Feedin’” provides over 1,200 low-income families with healthy produce. Other churches, like Atlanta Community Fellowship, sponsor community gardens on abandoned lots to revitalize neighborhoods, build relationships, and allow residents to grow fresh vegetables. Some churches have even started farms to connect people with creation on a larger scale.

Being Salt and Light

The church has sometimes given in to unchristian judgmentalism and self-righteousness. The environmental movement sometimes also suffers from a kind of legalistic rule-keeping, in which going green means ticking off a laundry list of actions to save the planet. Christians understand that our significance comes from our relationship with God, not the things we do. Christians who wrestle with our pharisaical attitudes can share the need for grace and humility with those outside the faith.

We have some things in common with the environmental movement: care for the common good, a desire for community, even a recognition of the sacred nature of creation. We can build on this common ground to share the gospel. When churches open their grounds to create gardens, when we help kids grow closer to God by connecting to creation, when we protect the environments that poor people depend on, and when we practice joyful and intentional simplicity, we are being witnesses to the power and love of Jesus the Creator. And that’s just what the world needs.

by RUSTY PRITCHARD

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