

## The Earth is the Lord's and Everything in it (Psalm 24:1).

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### Biblical background to Creation and Creation Care

- 1) **God made everything.** All three members of the Godhead were involved in Creation:
  - a) The Father: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth* (Genesis 1:1).
  - b) The Son: *Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made* (John 1:3); *For by him all things were created: things on heaven and things on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him* (Colossians 1: 16).
  - c) The Spirit: *The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters* (Genesis 1: 2).  
God made the world *ex nihilo*, out of nothing.
  
- 2) **God made everything very good.** *God saw all that he had made and it was very good* (Genesis 1: 31). See also Psalm 8: 3-4. *When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?*
  
- 3) **The process of Creation is adornment.** The Genesis account almost reads as if God makes a mass of clay in verse 1, and then spends the rest of the chapter adorning it and beautifying it in a step-by-step manner. It is as if he is working clay, rather than snapping fingers. The beauty, diversity and complexity of Creation are beyond our understanding. The more that scientists discover, the more they discover how little they know. Matthew 6: 28-29: *See how the lilies of the field grow ... even Solomon in all his splendour was not dressed like one of these.*
  
- 4) **God has made people in His own image** (see Genesis 1: 27). Human beings are different from the rest of Creation in certain important respects. They have personalities that can think, feel, decide, and ultimately know God. Through Christian sanctification, we are increasingly transformed into the image of God. Human beings are made from dust (Genesis 2: 7; Psalm 103: 14), and yet have a special place and role in Creation, as follows: a) *to fill the earth and subdue it* (Genesis 1: 27); and b) *to work the earth and take care of it* (Genesis 2: 15). This balance is important. The bounty of the Creation is there for our use and wellbeing, but we must take care of the Creation if we want the bounty to continue.
  
- 5) **The ecological crisis is at root a spiritual crisis.** The ecological crisis stems from the Fall. The Fall led to separation at three levels: a) between people and God; b) between people and people; and c) between people and the non-human Creation. *Cursed be the ground because of you, through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life* (Genesis 3: 17). The state of Creation is related to human sin in several places in the Bible, for example: *How long will the land lie parched and the grass in every field withered? Because those who live in it are wicked, the animals*

and birds have perished (Jeremiah 12: 4). *As for my flock, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you trample the rest of the pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet* (Ezekiel 34: 17-19)? *Because of this [i.e., the sin of the people] the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying* (Hosea 4: 3). God holds us accountable to how we treat his Creation. *The time has come for ..... destroying those who destroy the earth* (Revelation 11: 18).

- 6) ***There is a mysterious way in which God's saving plans extend to all of Creation.*** *The Creation waits with eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the Creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole Creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time* (Romans 8: 19-22). This is a passage of critical importance. In some mysterious way that is beyond our understanding, Creation will be restored<sup>1</sup>. There are many other relevant passages. *God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through time to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross* (Colossians 1: 19-20). In Ephesians 1: 9-10, Paul talks about *the mystery of his will ..... to bring all things in heaven and on earth under one head, even Christ*. The idea of future harmony being ushered in can be found, for example, in Isaiah 65: 17-25, and in Hosea 2: 18 we see God planning a covenant with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. It is noteworthy that in Mark 16: 15 we are told to preach the good news to **all Creation**, and in John 3: 16, we are told that God so loved **the world** .....
- 7) ***Though fallen, God loves and sustains his Creation, and stakes his ownership of it.*** *The earth is the Lord's and everything in it; the world and all who live in it* (Psalm 24: 1-2). In the story of Noah in Genesis 6-8, we see God's care for all creatures. In Genesis 9, after the Flood, God makes a covenant with all life on earth (Genesis 9: 10; 17). Psalm 104 is all about God's design and sustaining of Creation. God stakes his ownership over Creation in very direct terms: *The land must not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine and you are but aliens and tenants* (Leviticus 25: 23).

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Peter 3: 7 and 10 are often interpreted as meaning that the Creation won't be renewed, but will instead be destroyed: *By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men and the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare*. However, there are problems with this interpretation. First, the context of the passage is the "destruction" of the world through the flood, and, as we know, the flood did not totally destroy the world. Bouma-Prediger, a fluent reader in Greek, notes that "this verse represents perhaps the most egregious mistranslation in the entire New Testament. The Greek verb in question here is *heureskein*, 'to find,' from which we get the English expression 'eureka.' In other words, the text states that after a refiner's fire of purification (verse 7), the new Earth will be *found*, not burned up. The Earth will be discovered, not destroyed" (Bouma-Prediger, S. 2001. For the beauty of the Earth: a Christian vision for creation care. Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan).

At its root, all the environment problems in the world today can be reduced to one simple issue: we as fallen people think we, rather than God, own Creation.

To recapitulate the seven points on the Bible's teaching of Creation:

1. God made everything
2. God made everything very good
3. God adorned and beautified His Creation
4. God made humans in His own image
5. The ecological crisis is at root a spiritual crisis
6. God's saving plans extend to all Creation
7. God owns His Creation, and loves and sustains it

With this understanding, we must ask the fundamental question: why does Creation exist?

### **Why Does Creation Exist?**

Creation exists to display God's glory. *All things were made by him and for him* (Colossians 1: 16). Several psalms declare the glory of God as a result of what He has made (e.g., Psalms 19 and 148). In Isaiah 55: 12-13 we see imagery of Creation itself bursting out in praise of its Creator (the mountains and hills singing and the trees clapping their hands). And in the famous praise song of Revelation 5: 13, we should note that it is *every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea* that praises God. A passage of fundamental importance in understanding the purpose of Creation is Romans 1: 18-20: *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them. For since the Creation of the world, God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.* This passage has huge implications. Creation displays God's power and divine nature to all people. God uses the wonders of what He has made to draw people to Himself. And those who reject Him are therefore without excuse. Obviously, Creation does not, in itself, give saving grace, as provided through Jesus Christ, and described in the Scriptures. But Creation is the key component of God's common grace to all people, intended to draw us into His saving grace.

The implications for Creation care are as follows:

1. If we carelessly deface Creation, we are cutting off part of God's revelation to people. Many of the animals mentioned in Psalm 104 and Job 38-39 no longer live in Israel - part of God's revelation has been lost.
2. If God owns His Creation, and loves it and sustains it, and we are destroying it, we are working against God.

The job of caring for Creation is therefore Christ's work. It is not something that we should surrender to the New Agers, because it is properly part of Christian mission. God wants us to live lives that glorify Him in every way. This includes evangelism, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, and living lives rooted in biblical morality and personal holiness. However, it also includes caring for Creation, and learning about the

glories of God from studying Creation. We should be explaining to others how Creation tells us about the nature of God. This is why caring for Creation is *integral* to biblical Christianity. We are at the beginning of some very exciting developments in the evangelical church worldwide, where believers are rediscovering for themselves what the Bible has to say about Creation and our need to care for it and to learn about the Creator through it.

### **Background information on the current state of Creation**

With this background on the biblical teaching on Creation, and our need to be good stewards of it, it is now time to review briefly what the current state of Creation is. This section has a particular focus on the world's species, because that is my expertise. The state of Creation can also be approached scientifically from the perspective of degraded ecosystems and resulting loss of livelihoods to people, especially to the poorest of the poor.

1. The number of species on the planet is not known. About 1.8 million species have been described, but it is thought that there are some 10-20 million species in existence, possibly more. In other words, most species remain unknown to science. Of the 1.8 million known species, only 44,838 have been assessed for their level of extinction risk. Of these, 869 are extinct and 16,928 are seriously threatened with extinction.
2. Four groups of species have been completely assessed for their extinction risk: birds (12% of species threatened); mammals (22% threatened); amphibians (31% threatened); and conifers (35% threatened). It is not known how representative these four groups are of species as a whole.
3. Of the 869 extinct species, 60 still survive in zoos or botanic gardens, but not in the wild. There have been 29 documented extinctions of species in the last 24 years, but because it takes a very long time to establish that a species is extinct, this hugely under-estimates the total number that has been lost.
4. For every group of species looked at so far, the number of threatened species is increasing. Birds are becoming more threatened only slowly, mammals a bit faster, and amphibians and corals much faster.
5. Until recently, there were thought to be five main reasons driving the loss of species:
  - a. Loss of habitat. The loss of habitats, such as rainforest, wetlands and grasslands, is the threat that affects by far the largest number of species.
  - b. Over-hunting and over-fishing. This threat has hugely reduced the populations of economically valuable species. Although this threat is worldwide, it is currently particularly severe in Southeast Asia and China, where many species are used for food and medicine.
  - c. Invasive species. These are species that have been introduced outside their natural ranges, and which displace the native species. Examples include rats and cats on islands, which often wipe out native birds.
  - d. Pollution. Many species are particularly sensitive to pollution. A recent dramatic example relates to vultures in India, which, over the last 15 years

- have declined from tens of millions of birds to just a few thousand due to poisoning by the veterinary drug Diclofenac.
- e. Accidental mortality. Unintended mortality, often called bycatch, is particularly severe in the oceans, where it is often completely unmanaged. Examples of species whose populations have collapsed due to bycatch include sharks, sawfishes, leatherback turtles and albatrosses.
6. However, in recent years it has become clear that there are new emerging threats that are starting to have major effects on wild species:
    - a. Climate change. There is now strong evidence of climatic changes having serious impacts on species. The most seriously impacted group so far is corals, which die as ocean surface temperatures become very warm. As coral reefs die, other species in the ecosystem are also affected, and fisheries, on which poor people depend, collapse.
    - b. Disease. In recent years, there have been reports of new diseases affecting a wide range of species. The fungal disease chytridiomycosis has infected hundred of species of amphibian since 1970, and many of these are probably now extinct. New diseases have also been found in mammals and corals.
  7. All of the threats to the world's species in the end come down to one thing: that people are not living in harmony with Creation. We are not fulfilling the mandate to take care of all the God has made (Genesis 2: 15). We treat Creation as if it belongs to us, not to God (Leviticus 25: 23; Psalm 24: 1). This selfishness with regard to God's earth is not only causing the extinction of species and the degradation of ecosystems, but is also a major cause of poverty. Since 1960 the world's population has doubled, but the global economy has grown six-fold. The growing wealth, especially in western countries, is a larger factor in driving the unsustainable consumption of the earth's resources than the rapidly growing human populations in developing countries.
  8. Despite the overwhelmingly negative trends in the world's species, there is some good news as a result of conservation activities. For example, 5% of the world's threatened mammal species now have increasing populations. This includes several species of great whale that are recovering since the end of commercial whaling. Sixteen bird species have been prevented from going extinct in the last fifteen years because of well-targeted conservation. And because of the greater amount of data now available, we increasingly know when and how to act to save species.

### **What Does a Distinctively Christian approach to Creation Care Look Like?**

Some distinctively Christian approaches to Creation care are beginning to develop, and these are sometimes at variance with certain elements of the environmental movement. Some important issues are:

1. Christians acknowledge God as the owner of all of Creation. Whatever we might think, and whatever our legal systems might say to the contrary, we do not actually own anything (Leviticus 25: 23; Psalm 24: 1). We were made to be tenants (Leviticus 25: 23) but in our sinful nature we want to be owners (see the Parable of the Tenants in Matthew 21: 33-45): *But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance."* (Matthew 21: 38). Our job as tenants is to produce fruit to bring glory to God: *He will rent the*

*vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.*  
(Matthew 21: 41).

2. Nevertheless, Christians affirm a unique and essential role for people in stewarding and caring for Creation. Human beings are not just another species.
3. Christians affirm that people have the right to use Creation in a responsible way. God has provided the fruits of Creation for our enjoyment and livelihood, and we should use Creation in a balanced way, where we enjoy its benefits, yet do not obscure Creation's primary role of displaying God's glory. The benefits of Creation will, in any case, only last if we take care of it. The notion of using Creation carefully goes all the way back to the Old Testament law: *If you come across a bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young. You may take the young, but be sure to let the mother go, that it may go well with you and you may have a long life* (Deuteronomy 22: 6-7).
4. The Christian approach to Creation care involves communities of people in conservation activities. This is because Creation care is all about restoring relationships. As we care for Creation, we seek to put into practice the work of Christ in restoring relationships between people and God, people and people, and people and the non-human Creation.
5. Christians seek to tell the truth about the state of Creation, without exaggerating or diminishing the scale of the current environmental crisis.
6. Our conservation work continually causes us to give glory to the Creator, not to His Creation. We give thanks to God for His Creation, and we seek to restore a grateful relationship with God for His Creation.
7. As shown above, the state of the world's species, and of the Creation more generally, is deteriorating rapidly, and there is precious little hope within the secular conservation movement. However, as Christians we have the hope that God will not give up on his Creation. To quote from one recent paper on the topic: "Perhaps of greatest importance [in terms of reasons for dialogue between evangelicals and secular conservationists] are the resources that authentically Christian theology can bring to an otherwise bleak environmental situation by establishing the grounds for hope. By this we mean something more than simply the belief that at the end of time God will restore his creation and that the loss of the dodo from Mauritius and the golden toad from the Monteverde Cloud Forest in Costa Rica is therefore not the end of the story. Of course this future hope is an important one, but when we say "grounds for hope," we are referring to our present situation as well. Evangelical Christians are committed by their biblical beliefs not only to the conviction that God himself cares for His universe in a daily and ongoing way but also that He helps and guides people in their conservation efforts. We are therefore not on our own against the relentless forces of unsustainable development and rapacious materialism. Every time we celebrate a conservation success story such as the recovery of the white rhinoceros in southern Africa, we are strengthened in this present hope that God is working with us to redeem his creation. Furthermore, these present successes are a

very real foretaste of even greater things to come on that day when God will fully restore all that He has made."

This distinctively Christian hope was brought home to me very forcefully some years ago. In 1984, I had the privilege to visit Mount Kilum in Cameroon, the second highest mountain in West Africa, a place that is famous for a number of species that occur nowhere else in the world. I was leading a team to gather information on the conservation situation on the mountain, and to make recommendations for how the area could be saved. The situation we found was one of the worst that I have ever seen. Forest clearance was rampant, driven by the spread of low-intensity agriculture. But the agricultural methods were so poor, and the crop yields so low, that none of this forest loss was lifting the local people out of their poverty. On the contrary, the water table was being jeopardised, putting at risk the year-round flow of water in the streams. All the important species for conservation were in small and declining populations. One day I took time out from the work, and climbed a small peak overlooking Lake Oku, a stunningly beautiful crater lake on Mount Kilum, to spend a day in solitude with God. And these are the words that came to me as I contemplated the ongoing destruction of this very special place:

*"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thornbush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briers the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD's renown, for an everlasting sign, which will not be destroyed." (Isaiah 55:8-13)*

I could almost feel the trees clapping their hands. But I had no idea back then that this was God's prophecy for Mount Kilum. To believe that the conservation situation on the mountain could be turned round would have seemed ridiculous – the pressures causing the destruction of the forest were so great. My faith was not strong enough to believe that anything could be done about it. But God had his own plans for this place that he made and loved. He is indeed a God of hope.

#### **Some Important Christian Initiatives on Creation Care**

A number of evangelical organisations have come into existence over the last 20 years, focused on exploring the biblical approach to Creation care, and putting it into practice. One of these, A Rocha International (<http://www.arocha.org/>), consists of an international co-ordinating body, with national movements in eighteen countries, and several more in the process of being formed. Other organisations include the Au Sable Institute (<http://www.ausable.org/au.main.cfm>), the John Ray Initiative (<http://www.jri.org.uk/>), and the Evangelical Environmental Network (<http://homepages.tcp.co.uk/~carling/een/>).

"A Rocha" means "the rock" in Portuguese, and was founded by two British missionaries, Peter and Miranda Harris, in Portugal in 1983. For the first ten years of its existence, A Rocha was based entirely in southern Portugal, where a Christian field study centre was established, and conservation work was carried out in the Alvor estuary. After this, A Rocha expanded significantly, and there are now national A Rocha organisations in 18 countries: Portugal; Lebanon; Kenya; UK; France; Czech Republic; Canada; USA; Finland; Bulgaria; India; South Africa; Ghana; Netherlands; Peru; Brazil; New Zealand; and Switzerland. An A Rocha organisation is being formed in Uganda.

A Rocha is characterised by five Cs:

- Christian
- Conservation
- Community
- Collaboration
- Cross-cultural

Several A Rocha projects run field study centres, and there is a strong focus on community life, practical conservation and environmental education. A Rocha UK is based in Southall in the outskirts of London near Heathrow, in a community dominated by Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. A Rocha UK pioneered the restoration of the formerly derelict Minet Country Park in Southall, which is now a public amenity. This has been a significant act of witness by Christians in a multi-cultural society. A Rocha UK also runs a programme called Eco-Congregations, assisting churches to be environmentally sustainable. A Rocha also runs Climate Stewards, through which people can offset their carbon emissions by supporting tree planting projects, currently being implemented by A Rocha Ghana.

### Study Questions

1. Do you see caring for Creation as an integral part of Christian ministry? Or do you see it as an optional extra after, for example, evangelism, discipleship, or social work? See Genesis 2: 15.
2. How do you think God feels about the destruction of His Creation? See Revelation 11: 18; Genesis 1: 31
3. In what ways does Creation display God's glory? See Romans 1: 18-20.
4. What can I do to care for Creation in a more God-honouring way?
5. What can my Life Group collectively do to care for Creation in a more God-honouring way?
6. What can HTCD as a whole do to care for Creation in a more God-honouring way? Should we seek to become certified by A Rocha as an Eco-Congregation? Should we aim to be carbon-neutral? Should we offset our carbon through A Rocha's Climate Stewards programme?