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Creation Care and the Christian

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CREATION CARE AND THE CHRISTIAN

Scripture urges a clear and consistent commitment to the protection of our environment.

From the very earliest description of God's creation of the Earth, Scripture urges the utmost care for our planet home. In the first of this two-part series, the importance of the stewardship of our resources was traced in the earlier books of the Old Testament.

A theology of creation is also conspicuous in the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. In fact, "The most characteristic feature of [Israel's] understanding of reality lay . . . in the fact that she believed man to stand in a quite specific, highly dynamic, ex-

istential relationship with his environment."¹ The different systems of life in the created world are thoroughly integrated in the wisdom literature—the natural order, the social order, and the heavenly. Qualities such as prudence, justice, and conscientiousness are all grounded in a creational perspective. Discerning these creation "orders" is considered

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Isaiah instructs that if God's covenant is broken and the responsibilities of stewardship neglected, deterioration and pollution of the earth will result: "The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left."

crucial. Behaviors that do not conform to these creational orders can ruin human lives and severely harm the created world. There is remarkable correspondence between the human and natural orders. For example: "Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise, Which, having no captain, Overseer or ruler, Provides her supplies in the summer, *And* gathers her food in the harvest. How long will you slumber, O sluggard?" (Prov. 6:6-9, NKJV). "The righteous know the needs of their animals, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel" (12:10, NRSV). Hans-Jurgen Hermisson states the principle well: "Ancient wisdom starts from the conviction that the regularities within the human and the historical-social realm are not in principle different from the ones within the realm of non-human phenomena."²

Ecclesiastes also reminds of the

close connection between human and animal life: "I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?" (Eccl. 3:18-21, NRSV).

Within the prophetic materials, Isaiah instructs that if God's covenant is broken and the responsibilities of stewardship neglected, deterioration and pollution of the earth will result: "The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting cov-

enant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left” (Isa. 24:5, 6, NRSV).

Jeremiah concurs, and highlights how Israel’s sins have affected the earth: “Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: I will now refine and test them, for what else can I do with my sinful people? Their tongue is a deadly arrow; it speaks deceit through the mouth. They all speak friendly words to their neighbors, but inwardly are planning to lay an ambush. Shall I not punish them for these things? says the Lord; and shall I not bring retribution on a nation such as this? Take up weeping and wailing for the mountains, and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness, because they are laid waste so that no one passes through, and the lowing of cattle is not heard; both the birds of the air and the animals have fled and are gone” (Jer. 9:7-10, NRSV).

Hear God lamenting the destruction of His created world from sin. Jeremiah understands God’s extensive involvement within the natural world: “It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens” (Jer. 10:12, NRSV).

Hosea exhorts Israel that one of the dire consequences of their gross sinfulness will be severe harm to the

ecosystems: “Listen to the word of the Lord, O sons of Israel, For the Lord has a case against the inhabitants of the land, Because there is no faithfulness or kindness Or knowledge of God in the land. There is swearing, deception, murder, stealing and adultery. They employ violence, so that bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, And everyone who lives in it languishes Along with the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky, And also the fish of the sea disappear” (Hosea 4:1-4, NASB).

Joel portrays the devastation of nature linked with coming Day of the Lord: “Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near, And it will come as destruction from the Almighty. Has not food been cut off before our eyes, Gladness and joy from the house of our God? The seeds shrivel under their clods; The storehouses are desolate, The barns are torn down, For the grain is dried up. How the beasts groan! The herds of cattle wander aimlessly Because there is no pasture for them; Even the flocks of sheep suffer. To You, O Lord, I cry; For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness And the flame has burned up all the trees of the field. Even the beasts of the field pant for You; For the water brooks are dried up And fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness” (Joel 1:15-20, NASB).

At the end of the Book of Joel,

God promises to restore all the damage done by the locusts and to restore abundant harvests. Judgment will be lifted, the curse driven back, and divine blessings again released. It is striking that the rejoicing over God's returning blessing mentions the natural world: "Be not afraid, O land; be glad and rejoice. Surely the Lord has done great things. Be not afraid, O wild animals, for the open pastures are becoming green. The trees are bearing their fruit; the fig tree and the vine yield their riches. Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God" (2:21-23, NIV).

The last verse of the Book of Jonah is striking. In dialogue with Jonah, God patiently explains the reasons for His mercy toward the city of Nineveh to his petulant prophet: "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?" (Jonah 4:11, NASB). The book ends with God's intriguing reminder of His profound mercy that includes not only the wicked Ninevites, but also the animals.

God's statement to Jonah should not be surprising. We are often so confined within our busy routines that we forget how important the natural world is to the Creator. The concluding question in the Book of Jonah pointedly includes the animal

kingdom in God's tender regard. God instructed Jonah that by having mercy on Nineveh even the animals could be spared.

The psalmist already expressed the same sentiment: "Your righteousness is like the great mountains; . . . O Lord, You preserve man and beast" (Ps. 36:6, NKJV). "The Lord is good to all, And His tender mercies are over all His works" (145:9, NKJV).

Christians might be slow in linking their theology with ecology, but in God's thinking there is a close connection between redemption and creation. Christians rejoice in the doctrine of salvation, but they often need a more comprehensive theology of life!

The prophet Zechariah is another who reiterates the pervasive biblical theme of human sin destroying the earth: "Thus has the Lord of hosts said, "Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another." But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears from hearing. They made their hearts like flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets; therefore great wrath

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came from the Lord of hosts. And just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen,' says the Lord of hosts; 'but I scattered them with a storm wind among all the nations whom they have not known. Thus the land is desolated behind them so that no one went back and forth, for they made the pleasant land desolate'" (Zech. 7:9-14, NASB).

"Open your doors, O Lebanon, that fire may devour your cedars. Wail, O cypress, for the cedar has fallen, because the mighty trees are ruined. Wail, O oaks of Bashan, For the thick forest has come down. There is the sound of wailing shepherds! For their glory is in ruins. There is the sound of roaring lions! For the pride of the Jordan is in ruins" (Zech. 11:1-3, NKJV).

Again God laments the broken ecosystems of this earth. Repeatedly He instructs through many biblical writers that His concern includes all of the created order.

Strikingly, He also promises that ultimately the original perfection of creation will be restored: "I will make a covenant for them With the beasts of the field, with the birds of the air, And with the creeping things of the ground. Bow and sword of battle I will shatter from the earth, To make them lie down safely" (Hosea 2:18, NKJV).

Within the promises of the final removal of sin and the restoration of Eden perfection, the animal kingdom is pointedly included. The prophet Isaiah waxes eloquent as he describes the righteous reign of Christ re-establishing justice and righteousness on the earth: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, The leopard shall lie down with the young goat, The calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; And the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the

Paul has a profound theology of life: “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Paul’s theology soars within and is shaped by his inclusive vision of all things under the Lordship of Christ, moving toward the final renewal when God will be all in all.

cobra’s hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper’s den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord As the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:6-9, NKJV).

New Testament

This same “theology of life” is also found in the New Testament, which again includes reference to God’s care for His creation. Jesus’ own appreciation for animals is demonstrated repeatedly in His teachings. He stresses that even the lowliest of creatures are loved by God: “Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten before God” (Luke 12:6, NKJV). This echoes Psalm 84, in which sparrows are welcomed nesting in God’s sanctuary!

Jesus stresses the divine concern for earth’s smaller creatures: “Look

at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them” (Matt. 6:26, NKJV). He also compares His care for Jerusalem with a mother hen’s concern for her chicks (24:37). And the Architect of two lavish Old Testament sanctuaries marvels at the astonishing beauty of the flowers He created: “Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these” (Matt. 6:28, 29, NASB).

Because of His incarnation, the human body is no longer only warped and sinful. Human flesh is once again exalted. Moreover, Jesus restores health to crippled limbs and damaged bodies as a “preview” of the perfect world He promises where sin, sickness, and death will be removed.

The Apostle Paul strikingly links

Christ's resurrection to the environmental renewal of this planet: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope" (Rom. 8:18-20, NKJV). As Ben Witherington sensitively notes: "The resurrection of Christ, the destiny of believers, and the destiny of the earth are inexorably linked together."³ Jesus is not only the Savior of individual people, nor only the God of the historical people of Israel, He is also the Maker of Heaven and Earth, the gracious and powerful Creator and Restorer of the entire created order.

Paul has a profound theology of life: "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:16, 17, NIV). Paul's theology soars within and is shaped by his inclusive vision of all things under the Lordship of Christ, moving toward the final renewal when God will be all in all.

He declares that the created world reveals the very nature of the

Godhead: "Ever since the creation of the world his [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Rom. 1:20, NRSV).

Paul represents the intricate intertwinning of all life, arguing that the entire creation has been affected by human sin, and is enduring the resulting suffering, reflecting Old Testament sentiments. He writes poignantly: "The creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now" (Rom. 8:21, 22, NASB).

Paul does not envision a redemption consisting of the removal of elect humans from the lower earthy regions to higher spiritual realms, as in Gnostic systems circulating at his time, but rather by Christ healing the earth itself. One does not find the negative Gnostic denial of the value of creation.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul identifies Christ fully and explicitly with the Creator of all things, even the invisible powers of creation. Christ is also identified as the One in whom "all things hold together" (Col. 1:17, NIV). The power of Christ created everything and holds them in His providence (echoing Psalm 104).

In the final book of Scripture, the entire world is dramatically encompassed with divine judgment. In Revelation 7:1, four angels are pictured: “After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow *on the earth or on the sea or on any tree*” (Rev. 7:1, NASB, italics supplied). These four were joined by another angel having the seal of God, with the command: “Do not harm *the earth or the sea or the trees* until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads” (vs. 3, NASB, italics supplied).

After the seventh trumpet sounds in Revelation 11, the 24 elders fall on their faces and worship God as they cry out against those who have wreaked havoc on the created world: “We give You thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, who are and who were, because You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign. And the nations were enraged, and Your wrath came, and the time came for the dead to be judged, and the time to reward Your bond-servants the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name . . . , and to destroy those who destroy the earth” (11:17, 18, NASB, italics supplied).

The Apocalypse concludes with the resplendent restoration of this world that the Old Testament prophets promised earlier, reminding

again that redemption involves the renewal of God’s original creation. The material world will participate in redemption. Salvation is never described as an escape from the earth, but rather, a reclamation of the earth! God’s salvation is earth-affirming! None of God’s creation is irrelevant. Throughout Scripture we are never allowed to forget the profound value that God places on all life.

This surely suggests that authentic Christian faith must include ecological concern. Since God is the creator and sustainer of this world, and we are created in God’s image and to be His image-bearers on the earth, certainly this must include loving concern for this world as manifested by the Creator. Any negative interference with His creation would be an audacious presumption.

As we have seen, biblical writers have forewarned some of the serious implications involved. And indeed, what they described is what has actually happened. Polluted air and contaminated water are among many currently grave ecological problems. How tragic that Christians have been delinquent in treasuring God’s creation as He does. We must not neglect creation care even though we expect the soon coming of Christ.

Pioneering ecological theologian Joseph Sittler insists: “When we turn the attention of the church to a definition of the Christian relationship

Secular materialists believe that the world is unfolding in an endless process. Pantheists believe God is in eternal emanation with this world. Atheists think the world evolved by chance out of matter. New Agers worship the earth as divine. Buddhists and Christian Scientists do not believe the world is real. By contrast, biblical Christians believe God created this world with lavish care and declared it “very good.”

with the natural world, we are not stepping away from grave and proper theological ideas; we are stepping right into the middle of them. There is a deeply rooted, genuinely Christian motivation for attention to God’s creation, despite the fact that many church people consider ecology to be a secular concern. ‘What does environmental preservation have to do with Jesus Christ and His church?’ they ask. They could not be more shallow or more wrong.”⁴

Secular materialists believe that the world is unfolding in an endless process. Pantheists believe God is in eternal emanation with this world. Atheists think the world evolved by chance out of matter. New Agers worship the earth as divine. Buddhists and Christian Scientists do not believe the world is real. By contrast, biblical Christians believe God created this world with lavish care and declared it “very good” (Gen. 1:31, KJV). As one hymn writer in-

sists: “This is My Father’s world.” Scientists are realizing more and more how intricately tuned this world is for life.

Bible writers also insist that God is no distant or absent landlord. His hand is still seen in the storms, the thunder, and the rain (Ps. 77:17, 18). He causes the wind and the darkness (Amos 4:13). God is active in and through all of creation, “for in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28, NKJV). In the Gospels, when Jesus walked on earth, He continued to demonstrate His Lordship over nature:

His first miracle changed water into wine for a wedding feast (John 2).

He walked on water (Matt. 14:25-27).

The stormy sea knew His voice and obeyed His command (Mark. 4:35-41).

His command immediately withered the fig tree (Matt. 21:18, 19).

Perhaps an increased appreciation for life might help lay the foundation for linking ecology to theology. Our care of the earth would be sensitized if we deepen our appreciation for it, reflecting the loving relationship God exhibits toward all created life. Rather than wondering where God's creation fits into our lives, we would better ask: "How can our lives fit into God's purposes?"

Fish obeyed Him (Matt. 17:24-27; Luke 5:1-11; cf. Jonah 1:17; 2:10).

Disease was healed by His authority, including the dreaded leprosy (Luke 17:11-17).

Death could not remain in His presence (Luke 7:16; John 11).

Paul Santmire goes so far as to say of Jesus, that He "can be thought of as an ecological figure as well as an eschatological figure."⁵

Although disobedient human beings resist Him, "the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9, NASB) has a tender regard for His erring children, "as well as many animals" (4:11, NASB). The mighty Lord of history is the Lord of all life. He is active on our planet and promises to bring redemption to all life. The extensive data of both the Old and New Testaments encourage us—if they do not indubitably require us—to develop an ecological reading of biblical faith. Christians must not pit history against nature. The biblical

doctrine of life has obvious ecological implications for the church. There is more to good stewardship than returning tithe.

What Can Be Done?

Perhaps an increased appreciation for life might help lay the foundation for linking ecology to theology. Our care of the earth would be sensitized if we deepen our appreciation for it, reflecting the loving relationship God exhibits toward all created life. Rather than wondering where God's creation fits into our lives, we would better ask: "How can our lives fit into God's purposes?"

Christians should learn to value God's love of matter. This would help us become conscientious in recycling everything possible: glass, cans, plastic, batteries, newspapers, phone books, packing foam, plus using white paper on both sides. Many communities now have set up recycling centers. It takes extra time to sort and store materials at home

and then take them to a recycling center. But concern for our fast-depleting natural resources and quality of air could be important motivators. As Christians do this, they will be praising the Creator by caring for His creation.

Moreover, families could replenish the soil by composting. Burying fruit and vegetable peelings restores nutrients back to the soil. There are many other issues of water conservation that could be addressed. For example, turn off the water when brushing your teeth. Wet the toothbrush, and then turn off the faucet until needing to rinse. It has been calculated that one gallon of water could thus be saved each brushing. Keep a container near faucets to collect running water when changing temperatures (from hot to cold, or vice versa). Use that collected water for plants.

Christians could become more appreciative of the miracle of food itself! This would help sensitize us to the issue of wasting it. It is not easy to be motivated to be frugal with the earth's abundant treasures in a land of plenty. However, when Jesus fed the 5,000 and later the 4,000, He instructed the disciples to "Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost" (John 6:12, NKJV). Jesus, who could provide a miracle meal for thousands out of one small lunch, teaches us the value of food and the privilege of eating by urging

that nothing be wasted.

Diet is also related to ecological concerns. The vegetarian diet should be revisited for it is critically related to ecological issues. It is not hard to find statistics regarding the wastefulness of a meat diet. There is the wasteful "funnel effect" of many pounds of grain fed to a single steer. The same amount of grain could be used to feed far more people.

A few years ago, it was thought that animal protein was of paramount importance for optimal health. Today what we know of human physiology yields irrefutable evidence that the optimum diet for human beings does not include the flesh of dead animals. In fact, the ingestion of animal flesh puts an enormous strain on the human body. Furthermore, cattle are vegetarians. They get their protein from plants. By eating dead animal flesh, one is getting protein second-hand. The huge amount of water used to grow fodder for animals destined for slaughter is also well documented. The same amount of water could serve a much larger community of people. Some studies even show that not only is our water supply being slowly depleted on this basis, but also our deep underground aquifers are being polluted by the seepage from immense amounts of cow manure resulting from present methods of animal husbandry. These are but a few of the serious ecological issues

related to the meat industry, let alone the frightful cruelty to animals involved. Stephen Webb is correct: “As long as it is more acceptable to say that we love meat than it is to say that we love animals, our views on animals will continue to be deeply distorted.”⁶

In a time when many Seventh-day Adventists are turning away from a vegetarian diet, perhaps we need to revisit this matter in the light of ecological concerns. We already are aware of Ellen White’s advanced counsel that meat-eating brings disease. The damaging results of eating flesh foods: “Meat eating deranges the system, beclouds the intellect, and blunts the moral sensibilities.”⁷ “We are composed of what we eat, and eating much flesh will diminish intellectual activity. Students would accomplish much more in their studies if they never tasted meat. When the animal part of the human agent is strengthened by meat eating, the intellectual powers diminish proportionately.”⁸

Importantly for Christians, Ellen White links meat eating to spirituality: “A religious life can be more successfully gained and maintained if meat is discarded, for this diet stimulates into intense activity lustful propensities, and enfeebles the moral and spiritual nature.”⁹ “Eating the flesh of dead animals has an injurious effect upon spirituality. When meat is made the staple article

of food, the higher faculties are overborne by the lower passions. These things are an offense to God, and are the cause of a decline in spiritual life.”¹⁰ “Whatever we do in the line of eating and drinking should be done with the special purpose of nourishing the body, that we may serve God to His name’s glory. The whole body is the property of God, and we must give strict attention to our physical well-being, for the religious life is closely related to physical habits and practices.”¹¹ “The highest interests of the being are imperiled by the indulgence of appetites unsanctioned by Heaven.”¹² “The moral evils of a flesh diet are not less marked than are the physical ills. Flesh food is injurious to health, and whatever affects the body has a corresponding effect on the mind and the soul.”¹³

Ellen White is no longer alone in connecting meat-eating with spirituality. Philosopher Stephen Webb refers to this issue through the biblical record of the life of Daniel, in his book *On God and Dogs*: “The Book of Daniel, for example, tells the story of how Daniel and his friends refused to eat the impure food of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king. Instead, they ate only vegetables, and ‘at the end of ten days it was observed that they appeared better and fatter than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations’ (Daniel 1:15). It is tempting at this point to argue that even the Bible

A meatless diet allows humans to live in peace with God's creation even before the second coming of Jesus. We know from Scripture that at Christ's return, the diet for both human beings and animals in Eden restored will again be vegetarian, as it was in the first Eden. One day, all killing will cease and people and animals will stop doing harm to each other.

understands that eating less meat is better for one's physical as well as spiritual health."¹⁴

Adventists have been aware of these advanced principles for a century. And we have known that the meatless diet is part of the wholistic doctrine of life that the Bible teaches. But perhaps we haven't paid due attention to the crucial ecological issues involved with eating meat. We should reconsider these ecological issues. Even worse is the extreme cruelty to animals involved in their slaughter.

Ellen White addressed this issue long ago: "Think of the cruelty to animals that meat eating involves, and its effect on those who inflict and those who behold it. How it destroys the tenderness with which we should regard these creatures of God!"¹⁵

The intelligence displayed by many dumb animals approaches so closely to human intelligence that it is a mystery. The animals see and

hear and love and fear and suffer. They use their organs far more faithfully than many human beings use theirs. They manifest sympathy and tenderness toward their companions in suffering. Many animals show an affection for those who have charge of them, far superior to the affection shown by some of the human race. They form attachments for man which are not broken without great suffering to them."¹⁶

"What man with a human heart, who has ever cared for domestic animals, could look into their eyes, so full of confidence and affection, and willingly give them over to the butcher's knife? How could he devour their flesh as a sweet morsel?"¹⁷

A meatless diet allows humans to live in peace with God's creation even before the second coming of Jesus. We know from Scripture that at Christ's return, the diet for both human beings and animals in Eden restored will again be vegetarian, as it was in the first Eden. One day, all

killing will cease and people and animals will stop doing harm to each other (Isa. 11:7-9).

As we await this glorious future, we can begin to live by the compassionate patterns of God's governance and care for all of His creation. Moreover, since what we eat matters, and affects us intellectually, ethically, spiritually, economically, and ecologically, Seventh-day Adventists could be at the forefront of ecological concerns with our long-standing counsel on meat-eating alone. In the process, we will be offering praise to God for His glorious creation by how we live and eat, in a better and more honest relationship with the created world—finally linking our theology with ecology as the Creator has been suggesting all along—and, as He also has tried to teach us throughout Scripture, how to love the world as He does. □

This article concludes a two-part series.

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