

The Sacred Earth: Environmental Issues and the Gospel

Is the earth sacred ? - can we have a have a renewal of another sort?

The Environmentalist

One of our sons was an environmentalist, a recycler, never materialistic about his clothes, frequenting the charity shops. "Just think Mum, all in one go, you can buy something nice, give money to the poor, and re use something that someone else does not want, or need any more".

We gave up trying to equalise this unique son, with everyone else in our family. He was different from us then, and yet, now, we are more like him. What makes that so? What brought about the change in us?

We change like everything else in this tangible world, wearing away with one drip at a time, and so we are like a stone, changed and better carved by Him for Him. If the earth is truly sacred and belonging to Him, and not to us, then, as it is for us when we are renewed, may recycling be another sort of renewal?

But we are not powerful by ourselves.

We might think our country is huge, powerful, resourceful, and talented, and that nothing will stop us from greatness. But this is odd and old institutionalised and patriotic language. It sounds hollow these days, especially to young people. It is zeitgeist, or a spirit of the times of a strongly held belief, and it used to be thought of as progress and triumphalism, and along with our flag and our anthem, and any other patriotic nationalism, quite necessary. There is inherent in that thought, a self interest, unspirituality and an unreflective concern for God' work and His world. Contemplation is not contemplated here, in this triumphalism, just marching on to progress, often at the expense of other nations, well pleased with ourselves and what we have achieved. We think that we are powerful by ourselves, but we are not.

Where is God in This?

It would seem in right and careful thinking, that God would not ever want the extinction of a species, yet in that headlong and careless flight into modernisation we ignored that it was all His. But now there is a feeling growing within Biblical circles that we ought to be concerned, about the life forces connected with each other, and where and how we live. We are actually in that world, but not partaking of its present amoral instinct. We have long rightly censored that, but in an environmental sense we do connect with and partake of the earth.

God prepared the gourd to shade Jonah, but He also prepared the worm, that took away the shade, and added the sun and the wind, so that Jonah withered like the gourd. Jonah complaining and angry, needed the lesson from God, that God laboured over the gourd, the worm, the sun and the wind, that the gourd grew and perished. So God had laboured over the people (and their cattle) of the city of Ninevah, even in their wickedness. So Jonah's unreasonable displeasure is replaced with the displeasure of God with Jonah, for an attitude that excludes God's feelings in the outworking of His plan and pleasure.

Human sin can bring catastrophe not only upon humans but upon nature. Human greed leads to environmental pollution, and harms our earth today. Human sin causes air and water pollution, the forests to be cut, and the ozone layer to be depleted. Then we all suffer for the greed and lust of others, and it is only after generations of encouragement that we can see a slight improvement in that polluted environment.

Our Mouths are not Muzzled

In this present climate, profound moral and ethical issues have been named in the institutions and the churches, and because it is thought that justice should be indivisible, and universal, consequences must, and have followed. It is so. That is as it should be. But scandals and cover ups have not muzzled the mouths of Christadelphians, as they have other institutions, as we have avoided the public scandals. Therefore it is possible for us to retain the moral franchise that we have, with our clearly held and preached doctrines. So, in that climate, we may take advantage of our situation and speak authoritatively.

Things have changed for us Christadelphians, as they have with the old imperialistic pronouncements, (at least here in Australia), and we have made some profound additions. We needed to change, and so in the last decade we are pleased to notice more emphasis on care and enhancing the laws of Christ in our actions.

Why, in our ecclesia, we even call the "Commandments of Christ", "Scriptural Guidelines for Christian Living", with now rephrased commands and a hearty emphasis on the now introduced family life section. All institutions, including our own, need freshness and moral clarity to be known among them, and now it is mandatory to have these policies to endorse them and to employ them. Those changes are considered of prime importance, especially to those who insure our premises. Then not only must we change, but we must have change evident and demonstrated as well. We know that it has been demonstrated in the recent past, that the purchase on this moral franchise goes, when there are cover ups and unnamed scandals. But we Christadelphians have thankfully avoided that.

The Humanists and the Greens

When the knowledge of God, and His message in the Bible, was rejected in the last half of the last century, the teachings of God took on a different motivational force. Without God, the Humanists were then able to claim the right to be the proponents of the humane caring way, and also of the animal world, and the environment and the "no war" argument for peaceful coexistence in this world. All protests were taken over by the Humanists, and lost to those who would be guided by God.

The religious bodies, the historical church down through the centuries never did follow their own caring and peaceful Scriptural lessons, and that was the catalyst for many falling away from those unlovely institutions that brought chaos and suffering and endless wars into the earth. So in a sense that taking over of ideas by the Humanists should have been expected.

The Humanists may have first hijacked the argument from the church, taking some beliefs from the Biblical perspective, while rejecting God and His Scriptures, but now the Greens best convey that message, as a more overt political message. The Greens mandate is an ecological belief, that all of life is interconnected, and that we are dependent on a system of relationships that are universal.

We are now far from the authority of the church in our secular society, and that waning influence has a terrible affect on our parenting, presenting many challenges. We know now that many children in our own society, hear the word "God" and "Jesus" and think at once that they are what we would call profanities. There is no connectedness with God, His son, or the Bible, or with any belief system that might make such divine words more relevant and meaningful. So the

trend has run a long way from the intended reverence expected for the name of God and His son.

A Different Path

Can we take a different path, and suggest that there is an opportunity here? There is an opportunity for teaching not only how we treat each other with grace and respect, which we are so anxious to preach now, but also how we treat His creation. It is a difference that we could add when we preach of the future plans that God has for His earth.

We could say that we can have a religious point of view of the environment, and that spirituality flows from such a belief system, and in it we can nurture one another, and attend to these relationships both in the natural and the human worlds, in the earth in which we live, and we can try to improve them all, for His sake. We need not take the path that the earth owes us something, as Genesis 1: 28 in its stark command, could imply to us. That command, in a second glance, does not encourage us to exploit the earth, as it might suggest to some. Subduing and dominating the earth, does not mean taking unfair advantage, and wastage of the environment.

We can do so much more to encourage better care of the earth not only for our sakes. We can move forward from tending the Eden garden for human benefits, to doing so because it is God's Eden. We can encourage an impulsive concern with great respect for God's gifts to us, not just the buying of time to improve the air and ensure the life of plants and animals, so that it will be better for us. If we only think in a three tier system, of the environment as God at the top, with humans next, and the earth for their use, we do not have within our psyche the divine need to preserve His gifts. But if we could view it all as a cycle and recycle like a never ending chain of God's goodness then we may respect it more.

There are verses which indicate that God will roll up the old and renew the earth. But surely in those, we can better envisage the rolling up of sin and wickedness and greed which have spoiled the earth, to be replaced by a "better place" and a better prepared "city", Hebrews 11:16. The earth is still His, and He alone can renew it. I think that He does not speak of abandoning the earth. Even if some think He may abandon the earth later, that is no excuse to damage it now.

Connectedness

But because of the declining resources and the damage being done to our continents and the surrounding seas, the Greens are "forced to have a connectedness to the creation". They are not a religious party, but their party cares about the earth, and despite their probable unbelief, or at least, their misbelief, whatever they say, it is God's earth. The Greens belief in organic connectedness which functions without any religious connection, can function as they wish, but our spiritual connectedness is to the Father for He is the Creator of it all. That is much more profound, and our organic connectedness is harnessed to Him. In giving a meaning to our beliefs and practice, and understanding His earthly creation, we can take a more understanding path in our lives. If we could more inter connect these two paths we might please Him more.

Daily Disciplines

The daily disciplines often encouraged by the different secular groups are -

1. meditation,

2. recycling and
3. caring for the environment, beginning with one's own living space,

and these are really earthly parallels of our unique heavenly rhythms -

1. prayer,
2. Bible reading,
3. witness, and love of our neighbour,

in the Scriptural disciplines, that used to be so widely accepted. But because Christianity is so often irrelevant there is now no connection between these two paths.

Is it that a spiritual ecological impulse is to be stifled because it is from the Humanists, or from the Greens?

Can we also be scientifically sensible, because it is God's earth?

Would we dare not care for His earthly treasures, and those gifts of His to us, given for our benefit, and joy?

Biblical Answers and Spiritual Values are the Answer

So much of the daily life of everyone in the workaday world has little to recommend it. The institutions are empty of meaning and resources are stretched. They do not function on spiritual values, or even have a language of spelled out interconnectedness.

If our rigid and mostly only historically defined belief system, is connected only to a future triumph, without an enlarged present creed to accompany that, we could easily become irrelevant. Our present creed about Biblical behaviour, could easily be extended to encompass our connectedness with the environment as well. So, is it not possible, to present a Biblical ecological outlook as well? Those with a passionate searching for meaning will look for something new to transform them. Will these Biblical illiterates and strangers to churches, ever look within our structure to find the answer, if we only concentrate on the past and the future?

We have the fullness of past, present and know of the future for our human existence. But, all creation bears the image of God, it is not just ourselves that are made in the image of God. The birds, the animals, the insects, the fish in the sea, the herbs and the grasses, the weeds even, and the trees and the earth itself. It is we, belonging to this human race, ever since the industrial revolution who have damaged almost to extinction. Why do we damage it so?

How can we better balance our present and future salvation?

Is salvation only about rescuing people, or about caring for creation as well?

In reality it is all encompassing and to do with right relationships between God, humans and the earth, and how we can restore fractured souls to God?

Can we then add it is also about doing tiny bit to restore the despoiled earth they/we inhabit, that we, the most resourceful, have wantonly created?

We may say but "we are not of this world", that we can have no (political) say. But we do have a say about living a moral life. So it is not outside our realm to have a say about living an environmental life.

Christadelphians are anti war

Triumphalism, and the wars that it creates, are far from the sacred connectedness that God and His son asked us to hold. Many sensible people have spoken out against war, and we have sung the songs and read the poems, imploring "us" to refrain from war.

It was Wilfred Owen who said, "My Subject is War, and the Pity of War", and later, "Go tell those old men safe in their beds, that we took their orders and are dead", and subsequently died on the Somme a week before the end of WW1. Owen allegorically retells the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac. He illustrated the pride of men unlike Abraham who were willing to sacrifice a whole generation of young men, to ill founded, and ill advised, careless and destructive decisions.

Bob Dylan using direct Biblical references, composed a long and angry song, about prideful men of war, "fasten the triggers for others to fire", and "then you sit back and watch" (with pride), "as the death count gets higher and higher".

And Peter, Paul and Mary sang about the irony of war, "Where have all the flowers gone, ...", "Where have all the girls gone, ...", "Where have all the soldiers gone, ...", "Where have all the graveyards gone,...", "Gone to flowers every one." "Long time passing ...", "Long time ago... ", "Oh, when will they ever learn?", "Oh, when will they ever learn?"

Christadelphians have long held out against any involvement in war, because we are conscientious objectors, but we give as our reason that God did not order the war. Perhaps we can enlarge our message for being anti war. Can we say, "We do not wish to destroy the earth". "The long term effects of war outlast any tyrants that are set up". "We will not bless one side against another, for that is the prerogative of God." And so on. Saying no to weapons was outdated when Christ said, "Love your enemies", and so there is no "just war" that will make that statement obsolete.

It is for us to find our best resources to solve the human problems of despair and injustice. Refusal to fight is no surrender or passivity. We are not pacifists, or peace-at-any-price people. We have a respect for the human spirit, and an unwillingness to give in to the quick and simplistic solution. We practice that in our ecclesias. We try and try again for reconciliation.

There is a part of God in everyone, and whether that is developed or not is not our prerogative to decide about another of God's creatures. Good cannot be split off from bad, nor can we abandon empathy, restraint and social concern for all God's creatures. We know that. We feel have a great well of sympathy. All of us God followers, do flinch, when we see unpleasantness or crime or cruelty. We teach our children how to best solve problems so we should not forget those lessons ourselves. We teach children fairness and thinking of others better than themselves, and to carefully consider all sides for reconciliation.

Environmentalism by Law

Wars were justified for imperialism, and colonialism, and racial discrimination and slavery were once entrenched. Unassailable farming practices, and use of water and pesticides were considered our considerations, to do with them as we wanted, dipping, tipping and pouring where we willed, ignoring the rising salt around the water holes, and without any thought of the down river flow. Industry and commercialism and making money were our rights. Now we know that it is not so. By law we are forced to accept the environmental creed. We are checked in the amount of water rights we can purchase. We are checked in what we can successfully poison

and grow. We are checked by the recycling police to recycle effectively. We are checked by the behaviourists that we behave effectively. God never entered into the considerations when the making these laws were envisioned.

But the real environmental issue, is what our misuse of the natural environment, or our environmental misbehaviour does to our own psyche, and our connection with Him who created it, and us all. We know that good behaviour is important not only for good relationships, but also for our own well being. And so our psyche is enhanced with good behaviour. Whether that psyche is constrained by the limitations of our recycling, and whether we are irritated by the limitations that are set upon us, or how much we will be penalised, remains to be seen. For it is now no longer a matter of conscience. It is a matter of law. It is to be hoped that our psyche is improved by our constraint to pollute the earth. That will be a struggle for many of us. It is the first time in history when our use of the environment, even us believers now, have been threatened by our use and misuse of it, and that includes space exploration, and such things as genetically engineering and modified produce. We are the first generations in history where family abuse is a matter of unlawful behaviour, and that has touched on some Christadelphian families. It is the first time in history where our ecclesial gatherings have been directly regulated by an outside law for good and safe behaviour.

We are regulated by law over many issues and by and large we approve of those laws. There is no suggestion here of marching for this or that, or petitioning for this or that, but in our correct restriction on being part of the Humanist or the Greens heist, and restraining ourselves from political involvement, do we remain unmoved by the social issues that surround us, and have nothing to say?

We can also be Biblically Minded about God's Treasured Earth

Are we unthinking and indifferent believers in the progress of social climate and technological and economic determination? Have we moved God to the edge of our understanding, to a set of doctrines He gave us, which can sound hollow if we show no concern for that which He created as well?

Job (28) is a wonderful example of environmental questioning, regaling us with how clever we think we are on His earth. But then Job makes the call for wisdom, and a place of understanding. He suggests that man knows not the price, nor any of the living, but that it is God who understands the way of it, and He knows the place of such things.

Is He reduced by us to a sort of constitutional Head, where we do not consider the care of any of His six day creation, as a worthy subject for preaching? Surely salvation has to do with right relationships between God and His creation, the creation of the universe as well as those who live in it.

Both Psalms 104 and 148 place a value on the earth that is no lower than us humans who inhabit it. And Paul in Romans 8:22 reminds us that in this corrupt and evil world “the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together”.

Is it not also true that “Christ has all things under him. ... for that God may be all in all” ?

Because we have a moral perspective, and are able to consider right and wrong does not make us superior and separate from nature, which we are part of. Certainly we are different, but we have found to our chagrin that we are not the only ones of creation that are expendable. Destruction of every species, human, animal and plant we now know is all possible. Creation

Spirituality, or Environmental Theology (as ecotheologians may call it), can be extended far wider than just putting a Scriptural perspective on the Greens approach. We really should veil the Greens approach and enhance the message that God's creation of nature and humans are all provided for His witness. To devalue nature, we abandon one whole concept of God's purpose.

Is the Argument Hijacked?

The environment was not a word in the vocabulary of our generation. But now our children talk about it, and understand it. Now the Humanists and the Greens politicians and the environmentalists have hijacked the argument, and now we hear it is for humanity that we care for the earth, but not for God whose earth it is.

God is never used in the argument. It is as if they do not care for the Creator of it all. So recycling may become our second nature, but for the wrong reasons. We have allowed their reasons for the support of the environment, and abandoned our support for the environment, in case we get embroiled in politics.

If our leaders could urge change we can also respond. Why? For His sake. But it seems we are reticent to speak publicly, about God's gifts to us in our environment. Why is this so?

It is a reasonable explanation that in our preaching there are so many important issues to deal with, and this issue could easily be crowded out. But, just maybe, this consideration is all part of the big blessed picture that will all help in people re evaluating their life style and position. Perhaps the balance could be readjusted, so that the young people will feel their point of view, so nurtured in education today, is valuable.

This is not a message in favour of political activity or responsibility, but just an awareness that by our recycling we are preserving our environment, for His sake. If we reconsider the messages of Job, David and Paul, we may become more environmentally responsible.

God Made the World

It is His universe, and we can and do say that. But then we can do so much more than that. We can, like Paul in his address on Mars Hill, emphasised to those Athenians, that God made the world and all that is therein, seeing that He is Lord of heaven and earth.

We could repeat Paul's message that God gave to all, life and breath, with fresh air to breathe, and clear water to drink, for us all (humans and animals and plants, and fish in the sea) to dwell on the face of the earth, and has determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of our habitation, and that in Him we all live and move and have our being, for we are His offspring. "Therefore repent".

Adam and Eve had that responsibility and their sin did not absolve them from that. They were created gardeners, and when they fell from their former state, and were expelled from the special garden, they were given caretaker jobs of the earth. They carried the care of the earth responsibility with them. Abundant thorns and thistles, they had, but herbs and grain for bread, albeit now labouring with sweat. They made our job more difficult, but we are not absolved from the responsibility of being gardeners, or earth carers, either.

To say we are unskilled in best caring for the earth, that we cannot recycle, and giving up on the garden, is irresponsible, and an avoidance of the first work we were given. But it is still possible that we can place that care in with our other responsibilities and approach that also with

humility. We are required also to pray and praise and teach one another, and to make disciples for Him, and we would not avoid those, so why avoid the care of His gifts?

It is for Him We should not avoid making our own property as fireproof as possible, or help that to be less flood prone, and we should help clean our rivers from debris and harmful weeds and salt, and recycle, generally doing as much as we are able to be good carers for the earth. Not because we are good citizens, not because we want to be good stewards of the earth because we might need its benefits, but because it is God's earth, and He gave it to us for our enjoyment. It is His treasure, and it needs renewal after our neglect.

We can acknowledge that it is all a gift from God and that we need to preserve His treasures that He so freely gave, on the earth. Why? Because it is sacred and we do it for Him, and His sake, for His praise.

So, can we have an environmental message as well, in our preaching?

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