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For God So Loved the Cosmos: The Good News, Ecology and Christian Ethics

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Nature has long been considered a force far greater than humanity could ever match. However, the nonhuman natural world is currently being subjected to anthropogenic pressures as never before. As a result, some believe that we are facing the threat of environmental devastation, including the possibility of rapid global warming, radical climate change, and widespread species extinction. Others dispute the apocalyptic claims of many environmentalists as exaggerated and unfounded. Whatever the case, the debate has given rise to great soul-searching within many segments of the Christian tradition over the question of humanity’s relationship to the rest of the created world. Indeed, one reason for the introspection has been a kind of consensus among many environmentalists that Christianity is largely to blame for the crisis. I do not address the scientific validity of the claims of environmental devastation in this essay, nor do I attempt to indict Christianity for, or defend it from, any historical responsibility for the degradation of the natural world. Rather, I want to try to imagine what a Christian ethic looks like when addressed to the environment. I consider how, in light of Christ’s radical call, Christians should think and act with respect to the earth, its environment, and our fellow creatures (human and nonhuman) with which we share this world. I conclude that a genuinely Christian ethic will be ecologically sensitive and that the church should therefore model and encourage this sensitivity as part of its faithful witness of the gospel, that is, the good news of God’s reconciliation of the world to himself through Christ to the surrounding culture.

Reflections on the Current State of Environmental Ethics

Before outlining the contours of a Christian environmental ethic, I must note a few of the limitations of some of the modern approaches to environmental ethics. More so than in other fields of ethics, many environmental thinkers begin by questioning the primary place human concerns have in ethical reflection. It is widely thought that the alleged anthropocentrism of
traditional ethical theories makes them necessarily blind to the concerns of the nonhuman natural world and is the basic error that has allowed and encouraged humanity’s destructive treatment of the non-human natural world. In light of this critique of traditional approaches to ethics, environmental thinkers have pressed the boundaries of moral considerability, that is, what is considered as morally valuable, therefore, worthy of concern in moral deliberation, outwards towards a more inclusive perspective. In a review of approaches to environmental ethics, Robert McKim outlines three of the major approaches: extension of moral considerability to species represented by thinkers such as Holmes Rolston III and Bryan Norton, extension of moral considerability to other individual animals represented by thinkers such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan, and extension of moral considerability to entire ecosystems in such approaches as the “biocentrism” promoted by Aldo Leopold and J. Baird Callicott and the “deep ecology” promoted by Arne Naess and others. Each of these represents a greater widening of the sphere of moral considerability.¹

However, while expanding boundaries, the theories leave many issues unsettled. In particular, the question of humanity’s place in relation to the rest of the environment often lacks a convincing answer.² It is unclear, for example, what it means to be human in a biocentric theory such as Aldo Leopold’s classic “land ethic,” in which the “biotic community” as a whole is morally considerable. Indeed, often, rather than raising the status of the other creatures or of the ecosystem, this view achieves moral considerability by emptying the world of much of its substantive moral content in favor of a shallow “scientific” perspective. The term human is often reduced to a mere biological description of one species among many rather than a concept filled with both the ontological substance and the existential ambiguity so long associated with humanness. In addition to emptying humanity of its essential meaning, one may unintentionally undermine the concept of nature by the linguistic substitution of terms such as environment and ecosystem for nature—words with strong ties to a modern technological worldview. Just as we need a substantive concept of humanity, we need a substantive concept of nature, with all its imprecision and indeterminateness, to engage adequately in serious moral and aesthetic discourse.³ The value of both humanity and nature itself transcends scientific descriptions and explanations.⁴

² McKim, 249.
³ Leo Marx, “Nature and Progress: Can This Marriage Be Saved?” Lecture at University of Virginia, November 4, 2002.
⁴ Neither is inherently or intrinsically valuable apart from being created and loved by God.
Furthermore, as John Milbank points out, the environmentalist’s turn to nature as a source of value is not new. He argues that the essence of modernity has been this very same attempt to escape the problems of the diversity of the human community in the “objectivity” of nature. According to Milbank, while environmentalists try to heal the “spirit/nature divide” with a return to nature, in this turn itself the divide appears most problematic. The fundamental problem of environmental ethics is the proper ordering, or valuing, of certain human needs and preferences relative to other human needs and preferences as well as the needs (and perhaps preferences) of the non-human natural world. When we turn to nature as something wholly outside ourselves that can determine this proper ordering, we posit a kind of distance between humanity and the non-human natural world in which humans appear most distinct from the rest of the natural world. This is merely anthropocentrism turned on its head, the same kind of relation that environmentalists condemn in traditional ethical theories. Nature cannot provide these answers because humans are part of the natural world; therefore, human observers cannot escape to an objective position from which they can observe nature and discover the values they seek. This would require a point of view that is possible only from an eternal perspective. Furthermore, the proper ordering of value that avoids this dualism cannot be found in the turn to nature because “only within human communities are individuals, including animals and plants, fully valued.” Therefore, since “the realm of culture ... is the only possible source of all our eco-problems,” environmental solutions depend on getting human community right. As Martin Lewis argues, the ultimate concern of most radical environmentalists “turns out to be not so much with the health of nature, but rather with the salvation of a human spirit that has supposedly been corrupted by civilization.”

While Milbank finds the solution in the Christian drama of fall and redemption, many environmentalists dismiss the Christian tradition as unfit for the task because of its alleged complicity with the current crisis. Christians may wonder how blame for the environmental condition has come to be placed at their feet. In “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” Lynn White, himself a Christian, issues a strong indictment of the Christian tradition. He argues that the source of the problem is the notion, derived from the Bible, that humanity is to dominate nature. According to White, Christianity

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6 Milbank, 261.
7 Ibid., 262.
natural world in such a way as to threaten severe consequences for human and non-human creation alike. It might seem idealistic, even simplistic and naïve, to suggest that Christianity is the answer to the ecological crisis. However, if, according to White, “what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them” and if “human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion,” we must wonder if the threat of ecological destruction does not indicate that something has in fact gone wrong that can be traced to our deepest convictions about the world.25 Christianity has been the dominate religion in the West, and it has certainly taught us much about these matters. Since much of the environmental destruction has occurred under its watch, an indictment of Christianity may be correct in certain respects. It seems White’s fears that “we shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis” are likely to be realized so long as Christians (and others) believe that “nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.”26 As James Nash writes, “we have done too little to discourage and too much to encourage ecological degradation.”27 However, Nash recognizes, as do Northcott and Milbank, that this does not mean that Christianity must leave behind its core theological tenets. Rather, “in the central core of the faith, we will not find a divine mandate to pollute, plunder, and prey on the rest of nature to the point of exhausting its character.”28 Indeed, Nash correctly discerns that the “Christian faith, when properly interpreted, has the impressive potential to provide firm foundations for ecological integrity.”29 While a radical reordering is necessary, it is not a reordering of Christianity per se, but a reordering of our commitment to the radical call of Christ, a call that the church has too often failed to heed and, as a result, failed to model for the rest of the world.

Toward an Ecologically Sensitive Christian Ethic

Christianity, perhaps alone among the possible grand narratives, is able to narrate the kind of universal story that can appropriately address the relationship of humanity to itself and to the rest of creation. A proper Christian “environmental ethic” will neither lose sight of the important status of humanity nor lose nature to a modern technological conception of “environment.” Rather, it will recognize the value of, as well as humanity’s place in, the non-human natural world precisely because it is part of a

25 White, 1206.
26 Ibid., 1207.
28 Ibid., 8.
29 Ibid., 7.
creation that God loves. Drawing on Scripture and theology, such an ethic will, while humbly acknowledging its fallen, imperfect condition, affirm the good of nature and the primary Christian virtue of love as the appropriate rule for human action in relation to God, fellow humanity, and the whole of creation. Furthermore, in the face of the widespread suffering of this world—both human and animal suffering (and even the suffering of the whole “biotic community”—the Christian will be called to work to ease that suffering out of love; and when, inevitably, those efforts are not enough, the Christian will be comforted by the hope of the final eschatological redemption of the world, that is, of all creation. Therefore, a principle of respect for the value of all things that has its source in God’s love for creation can be derived that will provide us a framework for decision-making that grants universal moral considerability while recognizing a hierarchy of consideration derivative of the gift of life given by God to all living things and the high status of humanity in the order of creation.

The place to begin is with Scripture. Numerous passages form the framework for a biblical environmental ethic. I outline only a few here (and even those deserve a more complete exposition), but I highlight some of the key themes contained in some of these passages. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is the creation account in Gen 1 and 2: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth.” Several points from these familiar passages need to be emphasized. First, God sees what he has made as “good.” Second, God creates humanity distinct from the rest of creation. Genesis records that God made humanity, unlike the other animals, in his own image and likeness (Gen 1:26–27). Also important is that God’s instructions clearly state that humanity is to “subdue” and “have dominion over” the earth and all of the living things on the earth (Gen 1:26–30). While God blesses other creatures in the creation, God specially blesses humanity (Gen 1:28) and establishes a special relationship with Adam in the garden (Gen 2:15).

The OT records God’s continuing relationship with his creation. In the account of the flood, God preserves the diversity of creation by having Noah place animals of every kind on the Ark. Genesis 8:1 records that while the earth was covered with water “God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark.” Later on God establishes his covenant not only with Noah and his family, but with all creation: “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your

However, even this text read in isolation may not justify the kind of nature-domination that White claims western Christianity has promoted. It is interesting to note that the Gen 2 account seems to imply that the Earth was barren prior to God’s planting of the garden that was given to Adam to tend. If this is the case, in addition to its connection with procreation, the filling commanded in Gen 1:28 could also be related to Adams responsibility to tend and keep the garden, i.e., filling it with plant and animal life.
descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the
birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many
as came out of the ark . . .” (Gen 8:9-11).

In addition to God’s continuing relationship with creation, the scriptures
speak of creation both revealing God’s glory and actively praising God. This
is particularly prevalent in the Psalms. Throughout the Psalms the psalmist
sees God’s glory recognized and praised by the natural world. For example,
Ps 19:1-5:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

In contrast to the image of a glorious creation giving praise to God,
natural destruction is attributed to sin and separation from God. The earth is
cursed by God following the Fall. In addition, the flood recorded in Genesis
attributes the destruction of everything on the earth to God wrath over human
sinfulness. Furthermore, the plagues that strike the Egyptians because of
Pharaoh refusal to release the Israelites are largely environmental cata­
trophes (i.e., flies, disease, hail, locusts). Further devastating environmental
destruction is foretold by the prophets for those who do not follow God. For
example, Isaiah prophecies concerning the destruction of Israel and then of
her conquerors all include scenes of vast environmental destruction.
Speaking of the destruction that will come to Assyria, he writes,

The glory of his forest and his fruitful land
the LORD will destroy, both soul and body,
and it will be as when an invalid wastes away.
The remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few
that a child can write them down. (Isa 10:18-19).

Isaiah prophesies similar destruction will come to Israel (Isa 9:18-19).
Yet despite this destruction, there is still hope, for “[a] shoot shall come
out from the stump of Jesse” that will restore creation (Isa 11:1). At that
time, Isaiah writes,

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them . . .
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
This “shoot” will not only restore Israel, but will heal the enmity between all of creation as well.

These themes continue in the NT writings. The Gospel of John mirrors the Genesis account of creation, while emphasizing the role of the Word in God’s creative process: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). John writes that although the Word was “in the world (Gk: cosmos), and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him” (John 1:10). In the person of Jesus, the Word that has been with God from the beginning and is God “became flesh and lived among us” making God known to the world. Later in John, Jesus says, “For God so loved the world (Gk: cosmos) that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16–17).

Furthermore, according to Paul, through humanity’s redemption, creation itself will be “set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21).

The ideas of divine revelation through creation and its praise of God are also repeated in the NT. In Luke, as Jesus enters Jerusalem amid the loud praises of his disciples and others, the Pharisees ask Jesus to stop the festivities. Jesus replies, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out” (Luke 19:40). In addition, Paul says that God reveals Himself through the creation: “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Rom 1:20).31

These biblical texts, as well as a number of others, support important theological themes that also point toward an ecologically sensitive ethic. I highlight three of these themes here: the good of creation, the primacy of the Christian virtue of love, and the eschatological hope of redemption.

Larry Rassmusen notes that the word creation referring to one vast entity does not appear in the Bible. On the other hand, the verb form, creating, is common, leading Rassmusen to conclude that this highlights the sense of the Creator’s ongoing creating and sustaining of the world. He suggests that the

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phrase *ongoing created order* would better convey the energy, dynamism and change that are present within creation.\(^{32}\) As noted above, God declared this creation “good.” Yet we see in the story of the fall that it was affected by human sin. What was once a beautiful, abundant garden in which humans and animals lived in peace became a place where thorns and weeds would grow and humans would have to till the soil and kill animals for food and sacrifice. Throughout the Hebrew ritual sacrifices there is a strong reminder of the suffering the created world must undergo because of human sinfulness. As a cursory reading of Leviticus will show, one result of the laws of ritual sacrifice was that the tabernacle and temple altars were regularly awash with the blood of sacrificed animals. Although we might quibble with Calvin’s belief that God created all things for the sake of humanity, he understood that nature bore part of the punishment for humanity’s fall. He writes, “If the reason is asked, there cannot be a doubt that creation bears part of the punishment deserved by man.”\(^{33}\) Yet this is not the end of the story. Again as noted above, scripture speaks of a time when the creation will be set free from this curse and will freely participate in the kingdom of God. The bodily resurrection of Christ is testimony to this redemption of all creation. As Michael Northcott argues, “[a] Christian environmental ethic requires as its source and guide the knowledge of God as the creator and redeemer of all life which is definitively revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word.”\(^{34}\) It is not only the spiritual soul that is saved through Christ, but the body is perfected as well as a sign of the high status given to the created world by God. This highlights the way in which creation is not properly understood as a static event, but rather as a dynamic, ongoing ordering of the world by God.

In light of this, humanity is called to properly recognize God’s ordering; in Christian terms, we are to have the “mind of Christ.” As James Nash writes, “The affirmation that humans are made in the image of God is not a sanction for despotic exploitation, but rather a mandate for responsible representation of divine benevolence and justice, especially when perfected in Christ.”\(^{35}\) This idea of Christian modeling of “divine benevolence and justice” is best captured in the command to love God and neighbor. This love commandment is the fulfillment of all the law and the primary rule for properly ordering human action in relation to God, fellow humanity and the


\(^{33}\) John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.2.1.5.


\(^{35}\) Nash, 8.
whole of creation. However, despite the primacy of love in discussions of Christian ethics, Susan Bratton notes that love is not the focus of much of Christian ecological discussions. Nevertheless, Christians should rethink their conceptions of who counts as a neighbor. Perhaps, the ideal of neighbor love is not limited to one’s human neighbors. Indeed, H. Richard Niebuhr argued that “[my neighbor] is man and he is angel and he is animal and inorganic being, all that participates in being.”

Conceiving of the non-human natural world as neighbor could have radical implications for our approach to environmental problems. This is not to say that all creatures are to be loved in the same way. It seems that concepts of equality that often apply to interactions with our human neighbors would not apply in the same way to non-human neighbors. Indeed, asserting the equality of the non-human natural world may lead to situations where great human suffering would result. Nevertheless, even if the nonhuman natural world does not have equal status with our human neighbors, it does not mean that Christians are not to love it properly. According to Augustine, the Christian is to love the things God loves—not for their own sakes, but for the sake of God.

Thus does God love creation? God evidences his love for creation in several ways. As noted earlier, God declares his creation to be good and God’s covenant with Noah included a covenant with nature as well. In addition, it would seem that the resurrection itself is an affirmation of God’s love for creation. The resurrection was not merely a spiritual resurrection, but a bodily one as well, reflecting the essential compatibility of spirit and flesh and showing that the created world can and will be perfected. It seems clear then that it is proper to say that God loves creation. However, while God loves the whole of creation and continues to order and sustain it, it is incorrect to say that God loves all things equally. Rather, we should affirm that God loves all things properly. Scripture indicates that humanity occupies a special place in the heart of God: “Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the L ORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today” (Deut 10:14–15). However, as Bratton writes, there is no reason to assume that agape pouring into human beings cannot be extended toward the environment. . . . Agape should . . . relate us to our social and physical environment in a network of relationships reflecting original . . . divine intent. Indeed, it is in these relationships of divine intent that we are able to discern the true

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value of nature. Bratton writes, "It is God's love directed toward nature in
blessing, covenant, and other forms that gives nature worth. Because agape
love for nature must come from God, humans who purposely ignore or avoid
divine influence cannot perceive nature as truly valuable." Unlike the
environmentalist who tries to turn to nature to find some independent source
of value, Christian ecology finds ultimate value rooted in God's love. Rather
than reinforcing the dualism of the human/nature divide, finding value in
God's ordering allows humans to both fully embrace their place in the
created order and take appropriate responsibility for our actions within that
created order. From a Christian perspective, human recognition of the "in­
trinsic" value of nature is possible only because it is loved by God.

In fact, an ecological model that emphasizes love may be richer than
other Christian models such as stewardship because it recognizes an
"exchange of your needs or resources for the needs of the other, rather than
just coexistence with the other." Bratton writes, "In implementing the
stewardship model, we often see ourselves primarily as farmers tending crops
or as foresters preventing forest erosion, and thereby avoid the deeper
implications of 'living with' or better 'being with.' In contrast, "agape
requires that other creatures and the Earth be free to fulfill their own rela­
tionship with God and their own destinies."41

This raises the important question of the status of certain parts of the
non-human creation such as wilderness. For some environmentalists,
wilderness seems to function as some kind of ideal natural state in which all
human intervention is some how detrimental and even immoral. On the other
hand, close observation of nature seems to call into question the idea of
natural perfection; nature itself seems fallen in that the natural world is
frequently a place of pain and suffering. From a distance wilderness may
look pristine, but up close we see a violent and deadly place where some
animals tear others apart for food and whole herds starve when food supplies
run out. Perhaps that was an aspect of Calvin's insight when he said that
nature seems to bear part of humanity's punishment. In a world in which
animal suffering is considered, nature seems less and less like a benign,
independent source of value that can save humanity and more and more like
something that groans with us in anxious anticipation of God's redemption.
If this is the case, how is it we should think of the suffering of nature vis-à­
vis the eschaton?

Perhaps two things can be said here. First, the example of Genesis
indicates that nature was ordered and that order will be restored at some

38 Ibid., 15.
39 Ibid., 24.
40 Ibid., 24.
41 Ibid., 20.
point in the future. In the Genesis story the first humans were in a garden where all their needs were provided for by the natural world and where they could “walk” with God; after their sin, they were cast out into a wilderness in which they would have to hunt for food and cultivate the land in order to survive. Yet, in a somewhat cryptic passage that has traditionally been interpreted as a reference to the coming of Christ, God’s curse of the serpent contained the promise of a time when His order would be restored: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen 3:15). Secondly, the incarnation seems to reaffirm that God is presently sustaining creation, albeit in a form that is not fully ordered. Indeed, Christ’s death illustrates the incompatibility of God’s order with the world’s order. This difference in ordering is also seen in human attempts at ordering the world; for example, note the human and non-human misery and suffering caused by the failures of our political and social organizations. The continuing presence of human and non-human suffering manifests the fact that the Kingdom of God has not yet fully come. The clear implication, however, is that the resurrection is a sign and promise of the time in which God’s ordering of the world will be fully restored.

Despite these rich environmental resources in the Christian tradition, many Christians have been less than sympathetic to the “environmental movement.” They have rightly sensed that much of what passes for environmental ethics is deeply antithetical to Christian values and beliefs. However, this should not deter us from promoting a proper Christian ethic and taking account of the ecological sensitive aspects of such an ethic. The church must engage in moral reflection on the difficult ethical questions of our day. The church must realize that in addition to preaching humanity’s salvation, it must also tell the story of the redemption of all creation. Holmes Rolston III writes, “The Bible is a religion for people, directing them how to live together in justice and love, under God and within a nature with which they have an entwined destiny.”

The theological themes mentioned here point the way toward the formulation of an ecologically sensitive Christian ethic. Starting from God valuing of creation we can derive a principle of respect for the value of all things that has its source in the love of God that sustains all creation. This principle implies universal moral considerability. No longer can we concern ourselves solely with narrow human utilitarian concerns. Instead, we must take into account as fully as possible the proper ordering of relationships among humans, between humans and the non-human natural world and between the various elements the non-human natural world itself. Furthermore, while recognizing a hierarchy of consideration derivative of the gift of

life given by God to all living things and the high status of humanity in this order of creation, this principle recognizes a mutual dependency between the human and the nonhuman natural world that not only allows us to use the resources of the natural world for our needs and preferences, but requires us to take into account the needs and preferences of the non-human natural world as well. Such an ethic would challenge the Church and the surrounding culture to think and live quite differently than it has in the past. Being rooted in the radical demands of Christian love, it would not be fully realized in this world. Rather, it would seek to continually transform the surrounding culture by offering a reminder of that time when God will fully restore divine order to the creation, a glimpse of what that order looks like, and a challenge to live in this world in anxious expectation of that time when the redemption of the world will be completed.

Clearly, there can be no one-to-one correspondence between the NT texts and the modern ecological crisis. Adequate response to these issues requires a creative, but careful, application of biblical principles and themes to new situations. We must search for Christian virtues, along with corresponding norms and principles, that can illuminate the proper Christian response despite hearts that remain, at least partially, darkened by sin. This is the church’s duty as God’s ambassadors of His reconciliation of Himself to the world. John Howard Yoder writes in *Politics of Jesus*, “The distinctiveness [of the community of disciples] is not a cultic or ritual separation, but rather a nonconformed quality of (‘secular’) involvement in the life of the world. It thereby constitutes an unavoidable challenge to the powers that be and the beginning of a new set of social alternatives.”

Simply put by Stanley Hauerwas, “The world needs the church to show it what it means to be the world.” In may also be true that, as both human and non-human nature struggle under the burden of sin and continually fall short of the proper divine ordering, creation needs the church to show it what it means to be creation.

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