

A Duty of Care: The Christian Foundations of Environmental Concern

The environment is the number one issue many young Europeans are concerned about and there is a perception in the wider culture that Christianity has nothing to say—or worse, is profoundly *unhelpful* when it comes to the issue. In this seminar, we'll show how creation care is actually a deeply Christian issue and, more than that, how only Christianity can offer any basis for a duty of care for the natural world.

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I. Introduction: The Bible and the Natural World?

A. Genesis 1:26-31

B. Psalm 24:1-6

C. The environment as an issue that has become central in our culture:

What signatures our species will leave in the strata! We remove whole mountain tops to plunder the coal they contain. The oceans dance with hundreds of thousands of tons of plastic waste, slowly settling into sea-floor sediments. Weaponry tests have dispersed artificial radionuclides globally. The burning of rainforests for monoculture production sends out smog-palls that settle into the soils of nations. A nitrogen spike, indicated in ice-cores and sediments, will be one of the key chemical insignias of the Anthropocene, caused by the mass global use of nitrogen-rich fertilizers and by fossil-fuel burning. Biodiversity levels are crashing worldwide as we hasten into the sixth great extinction event, while the soaring number of a small number of livestock species ensures the geological posterity in the fossil record of sheep, cows, and pigs. We have become titanic world-makers, our legacy legible for epochs to come.¹

II. Christians and the Natural World

A. Christians have a somewhat chequered reputation on this issue ...

¹ Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019) p76.

I was surprised to come upon a man in the depths of the woods. He had a shotgun cocked in the crook of his arm, and was wearing a deerstalker. He asked me if I had seen a big grey fox, and happily I was unable to help him. The 'pine marten lady' had warned me that many people locally had a relationship with wildlife that consisted almost exclusively of killing it it is a rather biblical outlook, to see the world solely as a resource placed there for our own benefit.²

B. Not helped by comments like this by well-known Christians ...

I know who made the environment and he's coming back and going to burn it all up. So, yes, I drive an SUV.³

C. A misunderstanding of "dominion" (Genesis 1:26).

III. Christians and the Natural World

A. Why all of this really matters:

1. If we claim to love God, we will love what he loves (John 3:16).
2. Taking creation seriously helps challenge our own consumerism and materialism.
You are God-made. We have forgotten that we have far more in common with a honeybee than we do with our SUV or DVD.⁴
3. Only the Christian faith can ultimately tell us *why* we should care about the environment, why we have a duty of care.

IV. Secular Attempts to Ground Environmentalism

A. Appeal to emotion

1. But what if you don't feel the emotion?

B. Appeal to how environmental care benefits us

1. But this is basically selfishness

² Neil Ansell, *The Last Wilderness: A Journey into Silence* (London: Tinder Press, 2018) 182-183.

³ Source: <https://religionnews.com/2013/05/13/is-mark-driscoll-this-generations-pat-robertson/>

⁴ Sleeth, J. Matthew, *Serve God, Save the Planet: A Christian Call to Action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007) p60.

C. Claim that “we owe it to future generations”

1. But why do we owe hypothetical future people anything?
2. What do we say to the selfish person who says “I don’t plan to have kids”?

D. Appeal to the fact we are closely related to the natural world (“We share 96% of our DNA in common with chimpanzees!”)

1. Why does having something in common mean we owe a duty of care?
 - a. We have carbon atoms in common with tables, and 60% of our DNA in common with bananas. Do we owe them anything?

E. Claim that the natural world has rights

1. But how can you show that a rainforest has “rights”? And why should I respect them, even if you managed to argue this?

V. A Christian Response

A. A response based on *gratitude*.

1. Gifts tell us about the *giver* and *what they think about us*.
 - a. When we forget that this is God’s world and is a gift, the result can be a deep sickness.

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.*

(Psalm 19:1-4)

Can you identify a greater number of trees or cars? If the Bible says God knows every flower and bird, why do we spend so much effort knowing the names of man-made items. Maybe we’re paying attention

*to the wrong things. Maybe this is why life seems so hard. If this is our Father's world, maybe we should pay more attention to it.*⁵

B. "This is My Father's World"⁶

*This is my Father's world,
And to my list'ning ears
All nature sings, and round me rings
The music of the spheres.
This is my Father's world:
I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas—
His hand the wonders wrought.*

*This is my Father's world:
The birds their carols raise,
The morning light, the lily white,
Declare their Maker's praise.
This is my Father's world:
He shines in all that's fair;
In the rustling grass I hear Him pass,
He speaks to me everywhere.*

*This is my Father's world:
Oh, let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father's world,
The battle is not done:
Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
And earth and Heav'n be one.*

C. Why is creation broken?

I used to think that the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that. — Gus Speth, Environmental Scientist and US Advisor on Climate Change

1. The natural world as a signpost, both to God's goodness and to our fallenness.

⁵ J. Matthew Sleeth, *Serve God, Save the Planet: A Christian Call to Action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007)61.

⁶ Written by Maltbie Davenport Babcock.

VI. Conclusion

A. If this is our Father's world, maybe we need to start taking it more seriously?

B. We need to celebrate what God has made with gratitude, repent for where we haven't taken the duty of care seriously, but at the same time gently point out to our secular friends that only Christianity offers any real basis for a duty of care in the first place. And then we need to wade into the environmental movement and engage with it, fully and wholeheartedly, passionately and generously, not leaving it to our non-Christian friends, for it is such a deeply Christian issue. For as the scripture says:

*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*⁷

⁷ Genesis 1:31.