

EMBRACING CREATION CARE: A THEOLOGICAL CALL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Chuck Baclagon

In the face of the environmental crisis that plagues our world today, it is essential to examine the role of the church in addressing this pressing issue. While discussions on environmental preservation frequently dominate the news, they often remain absent from the pulpit and the practices of our churches. However, a strong theological foundation for creation care can be found within Scripture and church history, revealing a profound connection between God, humans, and the natural world. This article aims to shed light on the theological basis for environmental stewardship, emphasizing the need for its integration into the life and ministry of our churches.

GOD AS CREATOR

The biblical narrative begins with the powerful statement, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). This verse serves as more than a simple introduction to the creation story; it reveals God's nature and will. As the Creator, God not only initiated the act of creation but also assumes ownership over everything that exists. The book of Deuteronomy emphasizes this ownership, stating that "To the LORD your God belongs the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it" (Deuteronomy 10:14). Similarly, Psalm 24:1-2 testifies that "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters." These passages emphasize the inseparable connection between God and His creation, highlighting the responsibility we have to care for what belongs to Him.

GOD'S LOVE FOR CREATION

Throughout the Scripture, God's love for His creation is evident. The Psalmist declares that "the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD" and reveals that God is "loving toward all he has made." This love extends beyond mere origination; it encompasses the ongoing sustenance and care for all living things. God's wisdom is reflected in the intricate balance of ecosystems, where water, gas, and material exchange sustain life. The enactment of God's love for creation is seen in the established order of cycles and relationships among creatures in the natural world. Furthermore, God's love is fully realized in Jesus Christ, who sustains "all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3). Understanding God's love for creation helps us recognize the interconnectedness of all things and our role as stewards of this precious gift.

THE COSMIC SCOPE OF REDEMPTION

The redemptive work of Jesus Christ extends far beyond humanity, encompassing the entirety of creation. John 3:16, often referred to as the Gospel in a nutshell, speaks to the cosmic scope of God's redemptive work. God's love is directed toward the world, the entire created order. In the letter to the Colossians, we see the cosmic aspect of Christ's work, celebrating the intimate relationship between Christ and all of creation. Romans 8 reveals that salvation extends to the entirety of creation, as even nature longs for liberation. The agents of the Spirit, transformed by Christ, are called to bring justice, peace, and restoration to all of creation. Recognizing God as the Savior of all creation allows us to grasp the significance of Jesus Christ in reconciling all things to God, restoring broken relationships throughout the cosmos.

THE CHURCH'S MORAL AND SPIRITUAL RESPONSIBILITY:

The environmental crisis cannot be solely addressed through implementing sustainable lifestyle changes, resource management and pollution reduction policies. It requires a moral and ethical response from the Christian church. As the body of Christ, the church has a unique mandate to face the ecological crisis in its moral and spiritual dimensions.

The connection between theology and spirituality is crucial. We must reflect personally and as a community on how our beliefs shape our spiritual lives. It is important to adopt a worldview that acknowledges God as the creator with a purpose for the universe. This purpose has been revealed through Jesus Christ, whose life, death, resurrection, and return encompass not only God's story but also the story of the whole world.

Recognizing the interconnection of God, creation, and humanity is vital. Christians should take the lead in addressing the ecological crisis by moving away from self-centered perspectives and embrace an interconnected view where God, humans, and creation are closely linked. This shift in perspective can empower us to work towards restoring harmony with creation.

DEVELOPING ECOLOGICAL MINISTRIES

By integrating creation care into the life and work of the church, churches have the opportunity to effectively witness Christ and positively impact their communities. This can be achieved through establishing an ecological ministry that upholds the

holistic mission of the gospel centered on Jesus Christ.

Here we will explore practical steps that local churches can take to address environmental problems. This includes incorporating environmental issues into their preaching, managing resources, waste disposal, energy consumption, and advocating for environmental justice based on biblical principles.

BEARING WITNESS IN TEACHING AND PREACHING

With a wealth of biblical resources on God's intimate relationship with creation, it is now crucial for churches to incorporate themes of creation care in our preaching and teaching.

One way to do this is by celebrating Creation Sunday, which can be integrated into the annual preaching cycles and liturgical calendars of churches. Creation Sunday aims to cultivate an understanding among churches and individuals of the Christian joy and responsibility to care for Christ's creation.

Regarding teaching and other programs, we can learn valuable lessons from the Quaker concept of "bearing witness."

For Quakers, bearing witness means embodying the gospel through personal experience. It involves taking action according to one's conscience, whether it is to stop something wrong, expose it, or offer alternative solutions. Bearing witness can also be positive, showcasing the beauty of nature to inspire conviction and promote its protection.

Incorporating nature trips, educational excursions, and participating in environmental activities like cleanups can be utilized in ministry to foster a sense of conviction for creation care among believers. These experiences also offer glimpses of God's purpose for creation.

Traditionally, the church has used the environment for retreats, camps, and inspirational settings without truly seeing its significance. By bearing witness to creation, the church can rediscover God's work of renewal in Christ and catch a glimpse of the Shalom of God's renewed creation.

PRAYER AND DEVOTION

Non-Christians often notice a self-centered focus in Christian prayers and devotion, where God is seen as a mere fulfiller of our desires. This spirituality, disconnected from God's story in the Bible, tends to be legalistic, intellectually oriented, overly therapeutic, and rejects the world, making it inadequate for today's challenges like climate change.

To begin addressing this, let's revisit the congregational doxology known as Thomas Ken's "Praise God, from Whom all Blessings Flow."

"Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow..." First, we acknowledge that God is the source of all blessings. Our praise is directed towards Him, recognizing that we can never fully comprehend the true meaning of blessings.

"Praise Him, all creatures here below..." Next, we expand the scope of praise to include all creatures. It highlights that all creation should join in praising God as the Creator, as discussed earlier.

"Praise Him above, ye heavenly host..." Furthermore, we remember that even the heavenly beings participate in praising God. It emphasizes that God is not only the Creator and Sustainer of the Earth but of the entire cosmos.

"Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." Lastly, we direct our praise to the revealed identity of God – the Blessed Trinity, consisting of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a loving unity.

Karl Barth once said, "To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world," suggesting that if we want to address the overwhelming issues of injustice, oppression, and the ecological crisis, our efforts alone will be ineffective unless we invite God into the situation. Before engaging with the world, we need to prioritize seeking victory through prayer. Similarly, we can shift our prayers from self-centeredness to recognizing God's magnificent work in creation, *Allowing Us To Become Aware Of His Transformative Power Amidst The Crises We Face*.

CONSUMPTION, WASTE, ENERGY AND MOBILITY

Ethical Consumption

Living simply as a church and as individuals can guide consumption choices. Rather than pursuing unnecessary consumption, simplicity is about focusing on what truly matters and seeking God's kingdom and righteousness.

In simple terms, ethical consumption emphasizes the role of consumers in preventing the exploitation of people and the environment. This framework can be embraced by the church, considering that it is also part of the consumer market. The church should be aware of ethical brands and make informed decisions about the business practices of the companies whose products it consumes.

Practically speaking, the church can integrate ethical consumption by:

- a) Avoiding single-use materials and packaging, as they generate more waste and cost more in the long run.
- b) Opting for recycled or reusable materials to reduce waste, energy consumption, air and water pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions by adopting reusable alternatives, such as cloth napkins, dishes, and utensils, instead of disposable options.
- c) Encouraging sustainable lifestyles among church members, particularly addressing consumerism among youth and fostering lifestyle distinctions that reflect the gospel message.

As a starting point these practical steps can be

integrated into the procurement policies of the church therefore institutionalizing the practice into the communal life of the church.

Aiming For Zero-Waste

Integrating zero-waste practices in the church is an opportunity to demonstrate stewardship of the environment and align with principles of sustainability.

The church can start by raising awareness about the concept of zero-waste and its importance within the congregation, through workshops, or small group discussions. Providing information on the environmental impact of waste and the benefits of zero-waste living can inspire individuals to make changes in their own lives. Sharing practical tips, such as reducing single-use items, composting, and recycling properly, can empower church members to take action.

The church can lead by example through the implementation of zero-waste practices within its facilities and events by providing recycling and composting bins throughout the premises and ensuring proper waste segregation.

Practical measures for implementing zero-waste include setting up rotating dishwashing teams to clean reusable cups, mugs, and utensils after gatherings, as well as organizing regular drives to collect and sell recyclable materials like newspapers and water bottles to support church ministries.

Engaging with the wider community is essential in promoting zero-waste practices. The church can collaborate with local organizations, such as environmental groups or recycling centers, to organize zero-waste initiatives and events. This could involve hosting zero-waste workshops, organizing community clean-ups, or even starting a community garden to encourage composting and local food production.

By actively participating in environmental initiatives, the church can inspire others to embrace zero-waste living and foster a sense of collective responsibility for the planet.

Energy Efficiency And Renewable Energy

To reduce our contribution to climate change, we can take simple steps to minimize energy consumption, especially since the energy we use is often derived from non-renewable sources like coal. In the Philippines, where coal-fired power plants are the main source of electricity and a significant emitter of greenhouse gasses, consuming less energy means releasing less carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

Here are three practical actions individuals and churches can take:

- a) Switch off appliances completely when they are not in use, as they continue to consume electricity even in standby mode.
- b) Unplug devices that consume unnecessary energy even when switched off.
- c) Opt for energy-efficient lighting options like

compact fluorescent bulbs (CFL) or light emitting diodes (LED), which not only reduce power consumption but also have longer lifespans compared to traditional incandescent bulbs. Additionally, remember to turn off lights in unoccupied rooms to further conserve energy.

If your church has the resources, integrating renewable energy is a step-up that can minimize your church's carbon footprint.

The Philippine Renewable Energy Law promotes the development and utilization of renewable energy sources in the country, providing incentives and support to different institutions including churches to adopt sustainable energy solutions, reduce dependence on fossil fuels, and contribute to environmental sustainability.

One option is called net-metering which allows consumers who generate their own electricity from renewable energy sources, such as solar panels, to offset their electricity consumption by exporting excess power back to the grid. The excess electricity generated is credited to the consumer's account, reducing their overall electricity bill.

Another option that has a lesser capital outlay is the Green Energy Option (GEOP) that allows electricity consumers to choose renewable energy sources for their energy needs. It enables consumers to directly contract with renewable energy generators or suppliers. The minimum consumption required under the Philippine Renewable Energy Law to opt for the GEOP is 100 kilowatt-hours (kWh) per month.

It is recommended of course to research and explore these options, consult with relevant financial institutions, and engage with government agencies or industry associations specialized in renewable energy to find the most suitable scheme solution for your church's specific energy requirement.

Transportation And Mobility

Churches can promote walking, cycling, and the use of public transportation by providing information on routes, schedules, and available facilities. They can organize events like bike rides or walking groups to encourage active transportation and reduce car dependency.

A good place to start is to put in place basic infrastructure like bike racks or dedicate spaces for people to park their bicycles at the church compound.

Churches can help their members carpool by organizing programs that encourage sharing rides to reduce the number of vehicles on the road. Additionally, they can provide shuttle services to accommodate those with limited transportation options, ensuring that everyone can actively participate in church activities regardless of their mobility constraints.

They can also engage with local authorities and transportation agencies to advocate for better infrastructure, such as bike lanes, sidewalks, and accessible public transportation options.

By taking these actions, churches can play a vital role in promoting sustainable transportation practices and creating a more inclusive and accessible environment for all members of their community.

A CALL TO ACTION

This is a clarion call to urgently address the environmental problems we face as a witness to churches to be aware of the broken world, engage in the struggle for a new way of living, and reject ecological exploitation and greed.

In the face of such an impending ecological catastrophe, we are reminded that creation is the theater of God's grace, and as part of creation, we must likewise play our part in the exhibiting of this grace in our care for people and the planet.

Churches should integrate ecology in their ministries to fulfill their stewardship role, promote responsible care for God's creation, and address pressing environmental challenges.

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