
Reformed Theology and Ecological Ethics:

Part One

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Definitions

Reformed theology is both Theocentric and Christocentric in its understanding, systematisation and application of revealed, biblical truth; it relates and submits the entire universe and its history to the sovereign rule and care of the Triune God. The distinctive feature of this theology, therefore, is the centrality and sovereignty of God.

Surprisingly, most writers use the term *ecology* without attempting a definition¹ but one of the exceptions is Francis Schaeffer who, in his seminal POLLUTION AND THE DEATH OF MAN², defined ecology as 'the study of the balance of living things in nature'. For Edward P Echlin, the term means 'connectedness, shared dependence, relatedness. . .' and concerns the 'interconnection' of the entire community on earth³. It was the German biologist Haeckel who first coined the word *ecology* in 1866, based on the Greek word *oikos* (home). Haeckel used the word to refer to the habitats of plants and animals. Ecology is 'the study of relationships among organisms, and between organisms and their environment'. 'Man takes his place', writes N D Martin, 'among these relationships'⁴. The word *ecological* derives from scientific ecology and describes the way that plants, animals and humans are interconnected with their environment and are interdependent⁵. This is an 'holistic' rather than an 'atomistic' approach. According to the ethical use of the word ecological, for example, pollution by injection of wastes and biocides into the atmosphere, soils and ground water or the destruction of the ozone layer or rain-forests and the widespread extinction of animals and plant species are regarded as 'morally bad' and 'unecological'. In its popular usage, ecology refers particularly to the extensive damage and devastation inflicted by man upon nature and the environment as well as to attempts to remedy this problem; it is identified with such concerns as population growth, resource depletion, technology and the endangered atmosphere⁶.

Ecological Ethics is a complex term hiding numerous ambiguities and problems. One immediate ambiguity is the term *ethics*. Generally, it describes the activity of reflecting in an orderly, systematic way about behaviour. This involves analysing issues of right/wrong, good/bad and establishing criteria by which behaviour can be assessed. Ethical theories tend to be either relative or absolute. Norman Geisler claims there are 'only six major ethical systems', each designated by its answer as to whether moral laws are absolute or relative and subjective⁷. Where do we place 'ecological ethics'? There is no single, uniform ecological ethic although there are common concerns, fears, attitudes, values and motives among ecologists and 'greens'⁸. 'Greens', however, differ in their views. There are, for example, 'shallow' and 'deep' ecology groups. The former is anthropocentric while the latter is ecocentric, acknowledging that nature has its own intrinsic value. The latter aim to reform society by the application of a new set of radical, nature-oriented values and tend towards a mystical approach to nature. There is now a tendency for deep ecologists to refrain from describing man's misuse of nature as being

wrong or immoral. Instead, they prefer to conceive of man's response as lacking, but urgently demanding, kindness, love and understanding.

Base

A major question overshadows ecological concerns and environmental-friendly initiatives, namely, on what basis can human concerns for the environment be commended and even enforced in society? In his influential paper in 1967, historian Lyn White emphasised the need to establish an adequate 'base' for ecological involvement⁹. More recently, a scientist, Calvin Dewitt, claimed with justification that a 'missing element in addressing environmental problems has been ethics'¹⁰. Despite the development of a secular environmental ethic, Dewitt argued there is still a desperate need to 'find an ethic with the necessary power to constrain people from degrading the Earth'.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s when damage to the environment became more apparent, Western responses were mainly legal and technical in an attempt to channel science and technology in ways which would reduce ecological damage. However, as early as 1967 Lyn White warned that 'more science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis'¹¹. Subsequent history has justified White's warning. Perceiving the weakness of legal, technical and political responses, a secular based environmental ethic slowly emerged. This ethic was largely existential, devoid of categories and absolutes, secular, pragmatic, situational but tending towards pantheism and monism. Some wanted to take effective action to reduce and, ultimately, to prevent environmental degradation. The main philosophical base in the 70s and 80s, however, was still that of the 60s¹²: it was secular, relative and far removed from biblical theology.

Within this context, Christianity was blamed for contributing significantly to the ecological crisis by means, for example, of a faulty view of nature, some Platonic tendencies and also a misunderstanding of man's 'dominion' over nature. Over the past 25 years or more, 'Christianity' has been further discredited by its failure to respond competently to the contemporary environmental debate. Confusion also characterises much of the discussion among ecumenists and liberal theologians with regard to ecological ethics. Ruth E Lechte, Energy and Environment Director for the World YWCA, is not alone in suggesting that we may 'err in searching for environmental ethics' rather than an 'ecological consciousness'¹³. Professor Roger L Shinn acknowledges different criteria for making ethical judgements on the part of American churches. While such criteria are in a 'continuous process' of reflection and definition, he insists that somehow ethical activity must continue as a matter of urgency. Clearly the ethical 'base' is unclear and variable within many areas of Christendom, especially where submission to the authority of God's word is lacking. On the other hand, the rather nebulous base among environmentalists has led some to embrace in varying degrees New Age ideas and the Gaia hypothesis.

Challenge

The challenge to Reformed theology is immense and at least two-fold. Firstly, we dare not be silent, for nothing less than the Godhood of God is at stake. His divine works of creation and providence are being denied, divine law is ignored while God's saving purposes are deemed irrelevant to *post-moderns* approaching the mythical age of Aquarius. And the earth, which is the Lord's, is in process of being degraded and endangered by humans. There is a second challenge. Attempts continue to be made at different levels by governments, international organisations, the United Nations and others to address

urgently the ecological crisis. Time is running out. Whether it is the Brandt Report, the World Conservation Strategy, The Brundtland Commission, the UN Commission on Environment and Development or the Economic Summit Nations, a deep concern has been expressed for the environment. Some are attempting to identify and articulate a universally accepted ecological ethic. For example, the Economic Summit Nations met in May 1983 to discuss 'Environmental Ethics'. In the opening address, the call was made for an environmental code of practice on the ground that 'the values which have been accepted up to now by all industrial societies. . . must be replaced by different values and a different approach to the environment'. A Working Party was then appointed to devise such a code and this was presented in May 1990. One of its principles was the setting out of an environmental ethic of stewardship of living and non-living systems of the earth in order to maintain sustainable development. Or consider the United Kingdom Government report, THIS COMMON INHERITANCE, also published in 1990, which assumed 'the ethical imperative of stewardship which must underlie all environmental problems', insisting that we have 'a moral duty to look after our planet. . .'.¹⁴

For Christians, the challenge is to develop further a biblical ecological ethic and, at the same time, to identify itself with, and support, those ethical principles being articulated by governments and others which may be consistent with Scripture. We must ensure that 'a biblical rather than a monist world-view shapes what will undoubtedly be one of the most central global problems of our lifetime' writes Ronald Sider. 'Modern folk will find some spiritual foundations to guide and shape their environmental concerns. If it is not biblical faith, then it will be something far less adequate'.¹⁵

Outline

I propose a **five-fold** structure as a basis for a Reformed ecological ethic, namely, one that is a) revealed b) relational, c) responsible, d) redemptive and e) restorative. This structure is biblical and God-centred; it provides biblical balance with regard to notoriously misunderstood and complex issues such nature/grace and divine sovereignty/human responsibility.

a) Revealed

'We cannot spy out the secrets of God by obtrusive curiosity', writes Carl Henry. 'Not even theologians of a technological era. . . have any special radar for penetrating the mysteries of God's being and purposes'.¹⁶ Without the divine initiative and self-revelation, therefore, humans would have no objective foundation for God-talk. Put it another way. If God had chosen to remain *incommunicado* then we would never know anything concerning Him because of the hiddenness and transcendence of the infinite God and our own creaturliness. The divine self-disclosure is by means of general and special revelation; this two-fold revelation is unified and complementary.

Radically different, often conflicting, assumptions and beliefs underlie the contemporary discussion of ethics. Aligning ourselves with Luther and Calvin, it is within the framework of revelation that we attempt to construct an ecological ethic. Other revealed truths will be referred to in this paper but foundational to our subject is the doctrine of creation. Briefly, its significance will now be illustrated in *four* ways.

CREATION

'The fact of God's sovereign creation ex nihilo. . .' affirms Oliver Barclay, 'is the clearest biblical teaching'.¹⁷ Creation is also a crucial doctrine and integral to the purposes of God. What significance does the fact of creation have for an ecological ethic? *Firstly*, it

establishes divine ownership of the world (Psalm 24:1). This is God's world. God remains the 'landlord'¹⁸ and we only lease the earth as 'tenants' and stewards under the Lord. A necessary corollary is human responsibility and also accountability.

Secondly, because God is the creator, nature has an intrinsic value. While a tree, for example, is not divine, Christians value it as having been created by God, similarly a river or ocean. Their proper value is not established by a utilitarian and anthropocentric usage. Rivers and oceans have real value in themselves, not as an extension of God but because God created them and created them purposely. This has major implications for the way in which we should use and regard water resources. I concur with Loren Wilkinson that it is 'God's good creation that is at risk - not "nature" or "resources" or even "the environment"',¹⁹.

Thirdly, the Creator-Lord has provided for creation and creatures in a multitude of necessary, effective ways. Among God's provisions are the regulation of earth's energy exchange with the sun, biogerchemical cycles and soil-building processes, ecosystems/processes, biological and ecological fruitfulness, water purification systems of the biosphere, global circulations of water and air, human ability to adapt to, and learn from, creation, etc.²⁰ However, human greed, exploitation, consumerism, pleonexia²¹ and even urbanisation are some of the factors contributing to the misuse and endangering of God's bountiful provision for creation.

Fourthly, God's covenant of creation secures the regularities of nature and evidences His faithfulness. He pledges Himself to preserve and actively uphold the created order (Gen 8:22, 9:16; Jer 33:20-21). In contrast, humans contribute to the spoiling of God's faithful upholding of creation. Consider, for example, the ozone layer. God maintains the earth's atmosphere at a level conducive to life as sunlight is filtered by stratospheric ozone. In this way there is vital protection from the lethal ultraviolet radiation from the sun. Today, this process is being altered significantly by adding substances to the atmosphere that destroy large areas of the protective shield of stratospheric ozone. Depletion of the ozone is largely due to the decomposition of chemicals known as chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) which are mostly used by developed countries. It is estimated that a ten per cent decrease in stratospheric ozone could result in a forty per cent increase in the number of skin cancers. Crops are also susceptible to stratospheric ozone decreases. This divine provision for creation is being spoilt by man.

Allow me to summarise some implications of creation for our subject. God's creation and ownership of the world gives worth to all He created and renders humans responsible and accountable to Him as stewards of His creation. His covenant care in continually providing for creation challenges man to review attitudes of selfish indulgence which endanger both nature and humanity. Dare we remain indifferent to these concerns? Admittedly, evangelism and personal salvation are priorities we dare not neglect. The word of God, however, does not stop here and nor must we. We are called to declare and apply the whole counsel of God as it relates to creation well as soteriology. Are we doing this?

(to be continued)

References

1. See, for example, Norman Geisler's CHRISTIAN ETHICS, pp 293-310; it is not even defined in his *Glossary* on pp 311f; Apollos, 1990. Other examples include ECOLOGY AND HUMAN LIBERATION, T S Derr, WSCF, Vol 3, No 1, 1973. No definition of the term was given by H W Beck in his *The Ecological Crisis and*

- the Christian Doctrine of Creation* pp 281ff in CHRISTIANITY FACING THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY, Soong Sil University Press, Seoul.
2. p 9. The new edition is published by Crossway Books.
 3. THEOLOGY IS GREEN, p 30, Issue No 1, January 1992
 4. ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF BIBLICAL AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS, p 124; R K Harrison (general editor), Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987
 5. THEOLOGY IS GREEN, p 32, Issue No 1
 6. See, for example, John Stott, ISSUES FACING CHRISTIANS TODAY, pp 116-117, Marshall Pickering, 1990
 7. CHRISTIAN ETHICS: OPTIONS AND ISSUES, p 25, Apollos, 1990. He identifies the six major ethical systems as (1) antinomianism, no moral laws (2) situationism, one absolute law (3) generalism, some general laws but no absolute ones (4) unqualified absolutism, many absolute laws which never conflict (5) conflicting absolutism, many absolute laws conflict but obligation to do the lesser evil (6) graded absolutism, absolute laws sometimes conflict but we need to obey the higher law.
 8. *Green* refers to individuals who are environment-friendly or environmentally aware and adjust their lifestyle accordingly. Criteria for being 'green' are provided by Jonathan Porritt in his SEEING GREEN, p 267, Fontana/Collins, 1984.
 9. *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*, SCIENCE, vol 155 (March 10, 1967), 1203-1207. This article has been reprinted many times; see, for example, Schaeffer's POLLUTION AND THE DEATH OF MAN, pp 121-144.
 10. *A Scientist's Theological Reflection on Creation*, p 13, TRANSFORMATION, vol 10 No 2, April/June 1993
 11. op cit
 12. This is confirmed, for example, by Schaeffer; op cit, pp 11-12.
 13. *Partnerships for Ecological Well-being* p 158, THE ECUMENICAL REVIEW, vol 42, No 2, April 1990
 14. p 8
 15. *Redeeming the Environmentalists*, Ronald Sider, p 28, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, vol 37, No 7, June 1993
 16. GOD, REVELATION AND AUTHORITY: *God Who Speaks and Shows*. Vol 2, p 8, Word Books, 1976
 17. NEW DICTIONARY OF THEOLOGY, p 177, IVP, 1988
 18. ISSUES FACING CHRISTIANS TODAY, p 117. Collins/Marshall Pickering. Second Edition, 1990
 19. *How Christian is the Green Agenda?* p 19, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, Vol 37, No 1, January 11, 1993
 20. See, eg, Calvin Dewitt, *A Scientist's Theological Reflection on Creation*, TRANSFORMATION, Vol 10, No 2, pp 12-13, April/June 1993. Also quoted in EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY, Vol 17, No 2, April 1993, p 137.
 21. Coined by Schwartz in 1974, it describes the obsession of accumulating goods and material possessions.
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