
Reformed Theology and Ecological Ethics: Part Two

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In Part One, previously published in Issue 32, Spring 1994, some definitions were discussed, together with the challenge of ecological ethics for Reformed Theology. A five-fold structure as a basis for a reformed ecological ethic was suggested, namely, one that is a) revealed, b) relational, c) responsible, d) redemptive and e) restorative. Only the first, a) revealed, was covered in Part One.

b) Relational

Within the Holy Trinity of Divine Persons, there is 'an inherently necessary interior relationship'²² existing between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The focus here, however, is on the relationship between God and creation. Given the contemporary fascination in the West over Eastern forms of monism and pantheism, the growing popularity of the Gaia hypothesis is inevitable. The scientific presentation of the Gaia hypothesis was pioneered by scientists James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis. Lovelock claims that the 'biosphere is a self-regulating entity with the capacity to keep our planet healthy by controlling the chemical and physical environment'²³. Margulis maintains that the mechanisms of Earth surface control 'involve interactions between approximately thirty million species of organisms'²⁴. For many, Gaia is more than a scientific theory; it is also a religion which conceives of Gaia as the goddess of earth, a living, powerful creature who shares her divinity with the entire natural order.

By contrast, God's relationship to creation is revealed as being both intimate and distant. He remains transcendent, wholly other, yet immanent. Although we are not divine and are incapable of becoming a part of God yet the transcendent, infinite God is still near to us. Against this background, I want to detail two aspects of man's relationship with God which are relevant to ecological ethics.

Firstly, man is a created creature. Quoting a Western 'pop' song in the 1960's, Schaeffer referred to the earth as 'our first sister'²⁵ and thereby underlined the biblical fact of man's shared creatureliness. Concerning creation, all things, and man included, are equal in their origin. While not absorbed into or identified mystically with nature in any way, man is nevertheless an integral part of nature. One implication is that we should see ourselves not only as believers but also as creatures, dependent and having to relate to the whole created order. Our presence in creation needs to reflect our inter-relatedness with all other created things whether animate, inanimate or human. Perhaps our 'deepest danger is that we forget we are creatures, woven into the tapestry of creation...'²⁶. Again, it involves using and relating to other created things with the appropriate respect and integrity. There are implications, too, for the unity of nature and grace. Any Platonic dichotomy between nature/grace, heaven/earth in which the material is regarded as unimportant must be rejected. Important reasons for rejecting the dichotomy are that God has revealed Himself in His created world, God the Son also became incarnate and His body was raised from the dead. Nature and grace, therefore, constitute a unity, not a

dichotomy. The material world has considerable value.

Secondly, man is a creature created in the image of God. Although man has a shared creatureliness, he is also unique as God's image bearer. This concept of the image of God is 'the watershed in our understanding of the ecological issues of our time'²⁷. Ronald Sider expressed intense dismay when the WCC sponsored international conference on *Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* in Seoul rejected his one-sentence addition to the document insisting that humans alone are created in the image of God²⁸. The *Earth Summit* in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 preferred the idea of Gaia to that of man as God's image-bearer. Here is a crucial issue in contemporary ecological discussions. It is customary for theologians to describe this image as a 'relational image', that is, a relation between the Triune God and humans which is both corporate and moral. For man it means that he reflects God's likeness in possessing personality, self-consciousness, rationality, freedom, a moral nature and a spiritual dimension. Humans have priority within the created order. For John Drane, the image of God designates us as 'God's representatives' in the way we behave and relate to the world around²⁹. Man knows instinctively what is right and wrong because the divine law is written on his heart (Romans 2:12-15). Conscience give evidence of man's universal sense of obligation to conform to God's will; man cannot be a-moral. The relational foundation of Christian ethics, therefore, centres on God's will and involves absolute standards common to the whole of humanity. Cornelius Van Til describes this as 'the point of contact. Deep down in his mind, every man knows that he is the creature of God and responsible to God'³⁰. Ethics then has an objective basis. Nor are the laws of God arbitrary; rather, they express the holy, gracious character of God, who knows what is best for us and creation.

Man's Fall into sin is also relational for it concerns the spoiling of his relationship with God and, consequently, with humans and nature. The Fall was a disaster of cosmic proportions affecting the reproductive function (Genesis 3:16), crops, the balance of nature and human relationships; it also introduced physical, spiritual and eternal death. The image of God in man has been weakened and deliberately stifled but not eradicated. The voice of conscience still speaks to man even in the depths of sin; 'every man, at bottom, knows that he is a covenant-breaker'³¹. The ecological crisis cannot be divorced from the Fall and the fact of man's depraved nature. 'Of all the creatures on Earth', Pravin Kapur claims justifiably, 'man is the most destructive and the root of the ecological crisis is human economic greed'³². And this is not a lone voice. An environmental researcher, Loren Wilkinson, uncompromisingly affirms that 'our present woes are due rather to our sinful use of and relationship to the Earth than to any malfunction of the created order'³³ as a result of the Fall. Our environmental crisis is not in essence a material or educational problem but a moral, spiritual and relational one. Man in sin is the root problem of anthropocentrism, selfishness and exploitation.

How does a reformed ecological ethic respond? By an uncompromisingly biblical declaration of the Godhood of God, His divine law and works both within the church and society. If not in saving grace, then in common and restraining grace, people will be constrained to some extent to respect creation and to fear their Creator.

There is a further practical dimension to the relational aspect of ecological ethics. Urbanisation has had the effect of alienating people from the land and nature. There are now more people living in the city than in the countryside. Thirteen cities have populations of over 10 million and a minimum of twenty megacities are expected by 2000 AD. By this date, Seoul will have increased its population to 13 million, Tokyo to 28

million and Bombay to 18 million (13.3 million in 1992). City inhabitants gradually assume that food commodities like milk, flour, rice, fruit and meat originate in a supermarket without reference to the land. Urbanisation should be considered more seriously by Christians. There are city churches in Korea, for example, which encourage pastors and congregations to stay in the villages by providing practical support. This is good for the purpose of church growth and it also reduces the process of urbanization. Again, can city people be exposed in various ways to the countryside and learn of their dependence upon God and creation for the preservation of their lives? Here is an urgent relational problem. Ultimately, the major relational problem is man's broken relationship with God in which he justly incurs the divine wrath. While man's first sin implicated creation, man's continued sin and greed now degrade and endanger the created world.

c) Responsible

Man is responsible. The biblical doctrine of God and his works in creation and providence establish the fact. The divine revelation too, general and special, makes man inexcusable (Romans 1:19-21). Man is, therefore, under an obligation to glorify and obey God by caring for creation. But are key biblical texts like Genesis 1:26 and 28, texts 'of compound horror which will guarantee that the relationship of man to nature can only be destruction. ...?' And is 'God's affirmation about man's dominion a declaration of war on nature?'³⁴ Certainly not. However, these texts have been misused to encourage a ruthless approach to nature. What is the significance of these texts? Genesis 1:26, 28 have been called 'the charter',³⁵ a 'trust deed',³⁶ 'commission',³⁷ and a 'creation mandate'.³⁸ The verses have strategic significance, informing us that humans are 'endowed with a double uniqueness',³⁹ namely, as God's image bearer exercising dominion over the earth and its inhabitants. This is man's 'intermediate position between God and nature'.⁴⁰ Schaeffer justifiably called for a 'fresh understanding of man's dominion over nature',⁴¹ while others like Chris Wright insist the concept has been misunderstood.⁴²

The Hebrew words translated 'subdue' and 'dominion' can imply, etymologically, violence and power. Both liberal and evangelical scholars agree, however, that the governing hermeneutical principle here is the context, not etymology. Bruce Nicholls observes that 'dominion over nature is directly related to being created in the image of God'⁴³ and comes immediately after it. This means man does not have 'a free hand' with regard to nature; rather, he must honour the purposes of the Creator. 'God delegates to humankind', writes Nicholls, 'the responsibilities of God's providential care of nature. Thus to be truly human means to be accountable for the stewardship of creation'.⁴⁴ Man has a 'co-operative', 'delegated' dominion⁴⁵ involving competent stewardship of creation and all natural resources; his responsibility is to protect not pollute, to preserve not destroy or endanger creation. This is confirmed in Genesis 2:15 where an obligation to preserve the Garden is placed on man. He must 'till' (work, serve) and 'keep' (care, preserve) it as a duty. In other words, 'mankind is the keeper of the environment'.⁴⁶ Since the Fall, however, man has used his 'dominion' in a callous, selfish manner without regard to the wishes of the Creator. Schaeffer compares this to the way in which man's rule over the woman has often degenerated to one of abuse, selfishness and cruelty.⁴⁷ Interestingly, man's stewardship and trusteeship of nature is a principle which secular ethicists and *Greens* increasingly support. Chris Park estimates that stewardship is now 'one of the most common of shared interests',⁴⁸ amongst theologians, philosophers and

green thinkers. There is growing agreement that man must use the earth more responsibly and leave it in a better condition for future generations. Sadly, believers tend to shy away from environmental initiatives or imagine they themselves have an exclusive concern for creation. In common grace, unbelievers can also have integrity, wisdom, an appreciation of creation and a strong sense of justice. In Luther's social ethic the three offices of the family, government and church express the rule of God in society. The foundational order is the family which Luther describes as 'a school for character'; it is here the child learns to respect authority, people and creation, where he learns how to make decisions and integrate into society, etc. This is where the outworking of an ecological ethic begins, with the personal life-style of family members. Honouring biblical principles yet avoiding legalism, the parents opt for lead-free petrol, recycling of materials, conserving energy, greater use of public transport, animal-care, organically grown food and a moderate rather than excessive life-style. There will be concern also for 1.3 billion people who face a serious shortage of safe drinking water and the same number who are permanently hungry. In small but significant ways, steps are taken by the family to adjust their values and life-styles in order to contribute positively to the preserving of God's creation. Here is responsible stewardship, incumbent upon us all.

With Luther we must view earthly government as 'a glorious ordinance of God and a splendid gift of God'⁴⁹. Most governments can be influenced by public opinion. They must be informed of our ecological concerns then encouraged to take effective action. Pollution control, greater recycling resources, investment in public transport, environmental research, preservation of endangered species, maximum investment in overseas aid and development are areas where we can support effective forms of government action. Developing countries are frequently under pressure to generate foreign exchange to repay loans and to finance development. Frequently there is no choice but to increase production of timber, minerals and agricultural exports beyond sustainable levels. Governments urgently need to encourage debt reduction schemes and reduce the pressure on resources in debt-laden countries. A world treaty on climate, with firm commitments by governments to reduce extensively carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, is also desperately needed. Legitimate democratic measures can be taken by us to influence governments in these areas of concern.

An important aspect of stewardship now recognised within political, social circles is that of *sustainable development*. For the UK Government, this involves 'a moral duty to look after our planet and to hand it on in good order to future generations. . . not sacrificing tomorrow's prospects for a largely illusory gain today'⁵⁰. Reputable organisations like the World Conservation Union, the UN Environment Programme and the World Wide Fund for Nature call for 'a new ethic, the ethic of sustainable living' to be implemented and embraced with a 'deeply-held commitment'⁵¹. An excellent ethical analysis of the principle is provided by Neil W Summerton⁵². There are normative sub-principles which are ways of achieving sustainable development. These include the precautionary, preventionary principles and the principle that the polluter/user pays. Interestingly, these sub-principles, including extensive democratic participation, free exchange of information, integration of the environmental dimension into policy making, international co-operation and the avoidance of war because of its environmental impact, are included in the 1991 Maastricht treaty and warrant reflection and support from Christians.

There are, too, wider questions about environmental disasters. Who is responsible for the nitrogen gases poured into the atmosphere from factories? What of pollutants blown

by the wind into other countries? Have we contributed to the extensive desertification of Africa over the past two decades? Is the international community prepared to assume responsibility for caring unselfishly for the environment? These questions require a commitment from all nations to preserve and improve the environment.

d) Redemptive

‘Though creation is a foundation truth, it is not the crown of the Christian faith’⁵³. Although foundational, creation is only one of the divine works. Providence, too, is a divine work but the ‘crown’ is redemption. The Creator-God chose to redeem in Christ a vast number of human beings from the power, punishment and pollution of sin. Devised in eternity, this was accomplished at Calvary in the substitutionary sacrifice of the incarnate Son of God. This redemption is applied personally and irresistibly to the elect by the Holy Spirit. Regeneration is a supernatural work, effecting a radical change in sinners who are brought to faith in, and union with, the Lord Jesus Christ. An on-going work of sanctification in believers is guaranteed by divine omnipotence/resources thus ensuring that they live as new persons in society according to His revealed will. Gradually, they are transformed into the likeness of Christ.

For this reason, the Bible divides humanity into two groups, namely, believers and unbelievers; those who, by God’s grace, endeavour to obey and honour God and those who continue as unbelievers to rebel against the Creator-God. In this sense, while there is only one human race, it is legitimate to speak of two humanities, the one a new, redeemed God-centred humanity, the other a humanity which remains alienated from God and opposed to His authority. This distinction is unpopular in our post-modern society. There is now an exclusive emphasis on the unity of mankind before God in order to encourage religious pluralism⁵⁴.

How does this relate to an ecological ethic? Firstly, we must not distance the Redeemer from the Creator. The One who redeems also created and now actively sustains and cares for His creation. Redemption, too, was accomplished in God’s created world. Secondly, redemption deals with the long-standing problem of humanity since the Fall, namely, man’s sin and depraved nature. Ultimately, the environmental crisis is spiritual in nature, not merely political, economic or educational. Man, in his selfish greed and disregard of the Creator’s purpose, needs to be transformed by regeneration and reconciled to God through Christ. Goals like ‘sustainable development’, ‘global sustainability’ and ‘harmony’ with humanity or between humanity and nature will only be partly achieved by a redeemed humanity and then only under the powerful blessing of God. Society will not be reformed until individuals are re-made in Christ.

Thirdly, believers have the opportunity to demonstrate practically new values and attitudes by caring for creation as good stewards. Calvin Dewitt exhorts Christians to make their homes as well as churches ‘Creation Awareness Centres’⁵⁵ while Rowland Moss claims the local church should be a ‘colony of heaven’⁵⁶. For Schaeffer, the church ought to be a ‘pilot plant’; ‘through individual attitudes and the Christian community’s attitude, to exhibit that in this present life man can exercise dominion over nature without being destructive’⁵⁷. Underlying this ethic for Christians is the constraining love of Christ, the dynamism of the Holy Spirit and the sanctifying influences of the Word which enable them to deny self, to love their neighbour and to care unselfishly for God’s world.

e) Restorative

'God has much more in mind and at stake in nature than a backdrop for man's comfort and convenience', writes Carl Henry, 'or even a stage for the drama of human salvation'⁵⁸. God's ultimate purpose involves redemption of the cosmos which man implicated in the Fall. There is hope for the future. Notice, however, that until the parousia of Christ, Christians can actively involve themselves in a 'substantial'⁵⁹, but not yet perfect, healing process of the environment. 'God's calling to the Christian now, and to the Christian community, in the area of nature', . . . Schaeffer affirms, 'is that we should exhibit a substantial healing here and now, between man and nature and nature and itself, as far as Christians can bring it to pass'⁶⁰. One aspect of this substantial healing is extremely relevant to our subject. In a penetrating study, William Dyrness considers the relationship between environmental ethics and the covenant of Hosea 2⁶¹. There is, he claims, an important link between our care for the earth and our worship of whatever God or gods we serve. Dyrness argues that contemporary holistic (Gaia) religious ideas/environmental ethics reiterate major themes of Canaanite religion against which Hosea spoke. Israel was attracted to syncretism and worship of the Canaanite Baal cult; she thus became unfaithful to the Lord despite a covenant relationship and the Lord's earlier blessings of fertility etc. God then promised judgment (2:9) because Israel failed to recognise the true source of the gifts of the earth and even used the gifts to serve Baal. These gifts would then be removed as signs of His judgment. Dyrness sees the answer provided exclusively in 2:16-20, namely, the new covenant God proposes to make with the created order. This new covenant focuses on a more intimate relationship with God in which He is no longer called 'my Baal' but *ISHI*, that is, 'my husband'. Arising from this new relationship to God, there will be a new and fruitful relationship with the created order (vs 18,21-23). God's power over creation is highlighted here and also contrasted with the weakness and capriciousness of Baal's lordship. In his conclusion, Dyrness acknowledges that both Canaanite and contemporary Gaia views sense that the environmental problem is a religious one, yet 'neither understands how completely ecological disaster focuses on human rebellion against the Creator'⁶². Here is part of the significance of the appeal in 2:2; when the church turns to God in repentance and obedience there are enormous benefits resulting for the created order. An estranged humanity, and even a backslidden church, will find itself increasingly alienated from its environment.

Conclusion

These two articles have been introductory and exploratory rather than exhaustive or definitive as some aspects of the subject need to be developed and some questions need to be addressed. I have concentrated on providing a biblical, practical structure for reformed ecological ethics. Ecology comes within the sphere of the universal lordship of Christ. Christian ecological ethics must conform to the revealed will of the Lord and build upon as well as complement personal, family and church ethics.

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