6 Approaches to Christian Environmental Ethics - Part 3

In 1967, Lynn White proposed that the roots of our contemporary ecological crisis lay with the concept of dominion found in Genesis, and that Western technological development and approach to nature has been based on a concept that humans are separate from nature, with absolute autonomy over it.

He proposed an alternative Christian approach, based on Franciscan humility toward nature.

White’s thesis has been refuted many times.

Some have used a more accurate exegesis of Genesis 1-2; others have pointed to the Enlightenment, secularism and the desacralizing of nature. Still others have highlighted the potential of humans of all cultures and religions to act selfishly toward the environment.

More precise biblical exegesis has been foundational in shaping environmental theology since the 1960s, but the reception history of passages such as Genesis 1:28 has also been acknowledged as a source of dismissive Christian views toward the environment.

Paul Santmire proposed two contrasting environmental theologies in Christian history: a spiritual motif, with a predominately Greek, platonic concept of transcendence; and an ecological motif with a greater emphasis on God’s immanence in creation and the interrelationship between God, humans and wider creation.

Additionally, tension frequently emerges between an anthropocentric understanding, giving primacy to the concept that humans are created in God’s image, and a more theocentric and ecocentric understanding of the value of creation where God as Creator is given greater emphasis.

These tensions can be seen in the development of different approaches to Christian environmental ethics.

1. Stewardship ethic is the most popular approach to creation care by Christians.
It affirms the intrinsic value of God’s good creation but combines it with recognition that humans have a special place, acknowledged in Genesis 1:28. The command to “rule” (have dominion) means that humans should give responsible leadership in creation.

Calvin B. DeWitt identifies three biblical principles for environmental stewardship: earthkeeping, Sabbath and fruitfulness.

An ethic promoting sustainable management of nature, while enabling a balance between human and environmental concerns, has significant appeal but it has had considerable critique.

It is vulnerable to validating an overly dominant approach to nature, and some feel that it encourages the view of God as an absentee landlord and should more overtly rest on the person and work of Christ.

Chris Wright proposes a stewardship ethic resting on the Lordship of Christ for all creation, which is developed as a mission ethic in the Lausanne Cape Town Commitment.

Pope Francis’ encyclical, “Laudato Si, On Care for Our Common Home,” uses stewardship combined with interconnectedness and a call to follow the humility and simplicity of Christ.

2. Christocentric ethics.

Philippians 2:6-11 affirms Christ’s authority over creation and his creative, self-giving presence in his world.

In Romans 8:18-24, creation is described as groaning and waiting for liberation. If redemption for nature means an end to its “groaning,” then it is a Christian imperative to stand against people and organizations that damage nature and support causes and lifestyles promoting well-being for the natural world.

Colossians 1:15-20 describes Christ’s relationship with the cosmos, leading to an ethic that combines egocentrism and Christocentrism: If Christ holds creation and we are his body, surely the church should “hold creation” with Christ?

3. Community of Creation.
Richard Bauckham draws on Aldo Leopold’s concept of Land Community to propose a theocentric community of creatures. Human responsibility is to rule in creation and not over it.

He looks toward the renewal of creation prophesied in Isaiah, longed for in Romans 8 and portrayed in Revelation 21-22. This renewal will only come when human sin finishes at the end of time.

Therefore, environmental action today cannot fulfill Romans 8, but it can point toward it as we live in the community of creation within the will of God.

4. Virtues Ethics.

Celia Deane-Drummond takes the virtue of “sophia” or wisdom to link creation, incarnation and redemption for the whole of the material universe. Ruth Valerio uses “simplicity” to build an ethic of sustainable living in a consumerist world.

We took part in research on environment and hope. We considered the tension between proximate hope, which, in the face of contemporary environmental crisis, seems to be failing, and eschatological hope, which gives a wonderful vision for the future but could lead to inaction if not adequately interpreted within the present.

Christological hope makes ultimate hope a tool for hopeful perseverance within our present reality (Romans 5:1-5).

5. Eco-justice approaches frequently see an intrinsic link between environmental justice and social justice. They often draw on liberation theology and tend toward rights ethic.

6. Eschatological approaches argue that there will be a future renewal of this creation based on Revelation 21 and affirmed by the bodily resurrection of Christ.

If 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Revelation 21 are compared, new creation is not only a renewal at the end of the age but also occurs when a person comes to Christ.

This again gives an ethic for Christian action: Coming to Christ is an eschatological event, and we find ourselves experiencing a new creation transformation as we live in Christ.
Christian discipleship should point toward resurrection hope and the renewal of creation to come, both in our actions toward people and the rest of creation.

We conclude that Christian environmental ethics has developed into a fruitful area of study, challenging some theological assumptions, particularly concerning creation, redemption and discipleship.

It is a powerful motivator toward Christian action for creation care.

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Editor's note: This article is an adaptation of the more detailed Grove booklet, “An Introduction to Environmental Ethics” E184, by Martin J. Hodson and Margot R. Hodson. It is available in PDF format at Grove Books and is used with permission. It is the third of a series of articles drawn from the booklet. Part one is available here, part two here, and part four here.