

## I. INTRODUCTION: THE AMERICAN CHRISTIAN AND THE ENVIRONMENT<sup>1</sup>

Since the sixties environmentalism has been a public issue. Christians became interested primarily after Lynn White's 1967 paper in which he blamed Christianity for ecological damage.<sup>2</sup> Since then an ongoing conversation among a minority of evangelicals has generated a sizable literature on the issue. Meanwhile, the American church in general has followed the dominant culture or opposed environmental concerns. In the midst of all this, in the year 2002, what should serious followers of the Lord Jesus Christ do? If ecology is a concern, how should American Christians live? Is there a "Christian ecological" lifestyle? This paper seeks to address this issue: Christian lifestyle in relation to the nonhuman creation. For Jesus, one's personal ethics (actual behavior) issues directly from faith -- from the heart (Matt 6:21, Mk 12:33, Luke 6:45, Eph. 2:8-10, James 2:17). As followers of Christ, how now shall we live our faith with respect to the nonhuman world?<sup>3</sup>

Our ecological future seems uncertain. There are voices of optimism and pessimism. The August 26, 2002 issue of "Time" magazine was dedicated to "How to Save the Earth". It acknowledges ecological problems, but paints an upbeat picture, putting its faith in human ingenuity and technology to save us both from ecological disaster and having to lower our standard of living.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, among many there is a growing feeling that the current American consumer lifestyle cannot endure indefinitely in the limited biosphere of earth. "There is a question in the air, more sensed than seen, like the invisible approach of a distant storm, a question that I would hesitate to ask aloud did I not believe it existed unvoiced in the minds of many: 'Is there hope for man?'"<sup>5</sup> So we are ambivalent. Most realize

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<sup>1</sup>The word "environment" is implicitly anthropocentric. Nevertheless, it is widely used and most people understand what is meant by it. The word "ecology" connotes the more desirable notion of the earth as an "oikos" or an interdependent household of creatures of which humans are a part. For the purposes of this paper, the word "ecology" will be favored to denote the issue of our relationship with the nonhuman creation.

<sup>2</sup>Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967).

<sup>3</sup>The title of this paper was not selected with the intention of plagiarizing the title of Charles Colson's book, *How Now Shall We Live*, which deals with other issues.

<sup>4</sup>Adi Ignatius, "Help for a Planet Under Siege," *Time*, 26 August, 2002, 8.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Heilbroner, *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975): 13, quoted in Wilkinson, *Earthkeeping in the Nineties*, 10.

there is a problem, but few are willing to really face up to what it might cost to address it.

There is extensive discussion in the literature about structural and cultural factors that bear on ecology such as corporate behavior and government policy. These areas are important to be sure, but this paper seeks to address the issue on the individual level of the American Christian. Ultimately, these structural problems stem at least in part from individual human behavior, and finally from the human heart.

Christians claim to be saved from sin and to possess hearts in the process of being healed from its effects. They are redeemed humans bearing the image of God (Gen. 1:27, Rom. 6:1-4), “created in Christ Jesus to do good works...” (Eph. 2:10). Jesus, Paul, James and many good theologians seem to agree that there must be at least some congruence between our theology and our lifestyle.<sup>6</sup> If we are really saved, it ought to bear some fruit in our behavior (Gal. 6:22, James 2:18). Sallie McFague laments, “I realized that we middle-class North American Christians are destroying nature, not because we do not love it, but because of the way we live: our ordinary, taken-for-granted high-consumer lifestyle.”<sup>7</sup> If our hearts are transformed and our lifestyle should change, how should it? It is the thesis of this paper that American Christians who follow the Lord Jesus Christ do need to change their lifestyle. But this change should grow out of a deeper spirituality: through a deeper love in union with the Lord Jesus Christ, living in a creation graciously given to us by God, but damaged by human sin. This deeper spirituality should produce virtues that care for God’s creation in humble stewardship.

## II. THE CURRENT STATE OF THE EARTH

Environmentalists have sometimes predicted catastrophes which have not proven to be true.<sup>8</sup> This has eroded their credibility and provided polemical ammunition for their opponents. Predictions are very difficult to make, and it behooves us to exercise careful thought, humility, and care in discussing our ecological future. This is important because the Christian, in directing her lifestyle needs to know what

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<sup>6</sup>Alister E. McGrath, “Recovering the ‘Creation’: A Response to Hugh Montefiore.” *Transformation* 16 no. 3 (July/September, 1999): 78.

<sup>7</sup>McFague, Sallie. *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), xi.

<sup>8</sup>John B. Cobb, *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology, and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 1. Cobb notes that Paul Ehrlich’s book, *The Population Bomb*, written in 1969 predicted major disasters by the end of the century. For various reasons these did not occur.

the consequences of her choices and behavior might be. Following are a few issues among many which seem to be supported by scientific evidence and reasonable arguments.

**Population and Carrying Capacity:** The world population currently stands at about six billion. After exponentially increasing growth rates in the last 150 years, there has recently been slowing of growth in many areas of the world. Still the world population is expected to reach ten to twelve billion in this century.<sup>9</sup> The earth's carrying capacity is difficult to calculate. How many people can the earth sustain and at what standard of living? How is carrying capacity to be conceived: locally, regionally, nationally, globally? Whatever our understandings may be, clearly the earth is limited and will not sustain indefinite growth.

**Maldistribution:** Arguably more serious than overall population totals is the maldistribution of benefits in the world. It is estimated that 1.2 billion people are currently undernourished. At the same time, segments of the population in developed countries are overfed. Currently about 55% of people in the U.S. are overweight or obese.<sup>10</sup> The people of the United States who represent 5% of the global population, produce 60% of the global carbon output.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. which makes up six percent of the world population consumes forty percent of its energy and resources.<sup>12</sup> Ball wisely points out that while the issue of population has been well developed, the problem of overconsumption and maldistribution are not well developed. In assessing lifestyle alternatives, Christians in more developed countries need to evaluate their consumption patterns.<sup>13</sup> It seems clear that we who live in the more affluent cultures have no right to say anything to peoples in poorer countries about ecological issues, or to discourage them from their headlong rush to emulate us. In point of fact, we should consider asking our third world Christian brothers and sisters to evaluate and advise us on our American Christian lifestyle.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2001), 41.

<sup>10</sup>F. Xavier Pi-Sunyer, "Obesity," in Goldman, Lee and J. Claude Bennett. *Cecil Textbook of Medicine* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 2000), v.2, 1155. Note: Criticism or condemnation of obese people is not intended. May God help them and may all of us be accepting, affirming, and supportive of them in their personal struggle.

<sup>11</sup>Michael S. Northcott, "Christians, Environment and Society," *Transformation* 16 no.3 (1999): 103.

<sup>12</sup>Wilkinson, 351.

<sup>13</sup>Jim Ball, "Evangelicals, Population, and the Ecological Crisis." *Christian Scholar's Review* 28 no.2 (Winter, 1998): 233-34.

<sup>14</sup>"An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle," in *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement, 1974-89*, ed. John R.W. Stott (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1996), 178.

**Global Warming:** There is no question that the world is warming up. There is increasing evidence that this warming trend is at least partly related to human activity -- namely, the emission of greenhouse gases from the burning of fossil fuels. During the past 150 years CO<sub>2</sub> levels have risen from about 270 ppm to about 360 ppm today: the highest in 260,000 years according to ice core studies done in Antarctica and elsewhere. Carbon emissions resulting from human burning of fossil fuels reached 8.0 gigatons per year by the late 1980s and continue to rise.<sup>15</sup> Ecological research has shown that we live in an interconnected world where delicate balances may be very important. We do not know what the effects of this warming will be. There could be no significant effects for some time, or there could be catastrophic changes such as melting of the polar ice caps with rising sea levels and coastal flooding. At the very least, it would seem prudent to attend to this issue and consider what effects our individual lifestyles may have.

**Loss of Biodiversity:** Each year, as many as one thousand species of plants and animals become extinct and about twenty-five million acres of tropical forest is lost.<sup>16</sup> Given the wondrous array of plants and animals created by God, “after their kind,” (Gen 1:11, etc.), biodiversity seems clearly to be desired by him. Thus, the individual Christian should be concerned about this. Furthermore, we do not know what effect these losses will have on this biosphere on which human life depends?

**The Earth Is Limited:** Many other issues can be debated regarding the ecological future of earth and humans, but in the end the overriding fact of limits imposes itself on us. Clearly Americans are consuming nonrenewable resources at an accelerating rate with an economic system dependent on that consumption. In a limited system such as earth, simple logic shows that this system based on the principle of “limitlessness” cannot continue indefinitely. There are reasons to believe that we may reach the end of certain resources (fossil fuels) before the end of this century.<sup>17</sup> Optimists acknowledge this, but expect that technological innovation, human ingenuity, and the free market will save us from these limits

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<sup>15</sup>Johansen, xiv,3,33.

<sup>16</sup>Bouma-prediger, 45,47.

<sup>17</sup>James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville:Abingdon Press, 1991), 41.

by developing new energy sources, recycling materials, and so on.<sup>18</sup> It seems more moderate and rational to recognize that sooner or later we will have to learn to live within limits. Our system of consumer capitalism cannot expand forever. In addition, we must ask where and when will we set those limits? How much land, resources, habitat, and species will be consumed before we reach that point?

**High Blood Pressure:** Humanity's ecological problem might be compared to the human disease of hypertension or high blood pressure. A person can have hypertension and be completely asymptomatic for many years. He may not even know he has the disease until it is too late, when its cumulative effects can bring catastrophe, such as a stroke or even death. Moreover, a major component of the treatment of hypertension is lifestyle change: weight reduction, exercise, balanced diet, smoking cessation, reduced stress.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, ecological "disease" may remain "asymptomatic" and we may not know we have it until it is too late for the human species. (It is already too late for many other species.) Moreover, the "treatment" for our ecological problems is, like that of hypertension, at least in part, a change in lifestyle for the affluent -- including affluent American Christians.

### III. THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES OF AN ECOLOGICAL LIFESTYLE ETHIC

Living a Christian lifestyle in the current ecological milieu should be based on theological principles. The following are a few principles which are of primary importance.

**Theocentrism:** It is fundamental to understand that God is the center of all creation, including humans. All things exist by God, for God, and to God (Col. 1:15-23). He is the owner of all (Ps. 24:1). Christian humans are, or should be, redeemed stewards of this small part of his universe which he has graciously placed in our care (Gen 1:26). Just as our social lives should be centered on Jesus Christ as we turn from self to serve and worship him, so also, in a wholistic fashion, should our ecological and economic lives be centered on him, in harmony with the rest of creation. For the Christian, there is no

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<sup>18</sup>E. Calvin Beisner, *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate* (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty and Eerdmans, 1997), 25.

<sup>19</sup>Suzanne Oparil, "Arterial Hypertension," in Goldman, Lee and J. Claude Bennett, eds. *Cecil Textbook of Medicine* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 2000), v.2, 262-65.

true “private property.”<sup>20</sup> The earth is his, and we are accountable to him for the way in which we manage it for him.<sup>21</sup> Humans are not the reference point by which the value of creatures and things is determined. God is.

**Biodiversity:** “And God said, ‘Let the water teem with living creatures’ .... And God said, ‘let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds, livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind...’ (Gen. 1:20,24). Biodiversity is an inherent intended characteristic of creation included by God in his creative act.<sup>22</sup> Certainly our observations of the wondrous diversity in the biological world confirm this. Since Scripture shows this was God’s intention, it is imperative as part of our stewardship to seek to preserve this diversity.

**Intrinsic Value of Nonhuman Creation:** Bouma-Prediger observes, “A central question -- perhaps the central question -- in the discussion of ecological responsibility is this: Do nonhuman creatures have value irrespective of their usefulness to humans?”<sup>23</sup> The Bible seems to answer in the affirmative. Numerous Scriptures confirm the inherent value of nonhuman creation (Gen. 1:4,10,12,18,25,31, Ps. 104, Matt. 10:29). “The creatures of the natural world are not there for the sake of human beings. Human beings are there for the sake of the glory of God, which the whole community of creation extols.”<sup>24</sup> We should note that value inheres not only in individual creatures, but also in the system as a whole. The ensemble of interdependent creatures and things which make up ecosystems and ultimately the biosphere -- clouds, rivers, trees, rocks, birds, humans, worms, bacteria, air -- all existing together, is good and valuable (Ps. 148). Both Biblical creation theology and natural science confirm that the biosphere consists of a giant “oikos” or household of many diverse creatures living together in interdependence. This “oikos” and all that is in it, although it is affected by sin, remains, as God said,

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<sup>20</sup>“An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle,” 177.

<sup>21</sup>Wilkinson, 317.

<sup>22</sup>Bouma-Prediger, 141.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 171.

<sup>24</sup>Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*. San Francisco:Harper and Row, 1985, quoted in Bouma-Prediger, 139.



very good.

This notion of the inherent value of nonhuman creation is radically counter-cultural. Humans have generally been self-interested and see the value of the nonhuman world only economically -- in terms of its usefulness to them. Some decisions have been made for the sake of creatures, such as devoting a La Jolla Cove Beach in San Diego to seals, but Christians have generally had little to do with such decisions except to oppose them. To be sure, nonhuman creatures do have value for humans and their needs, but that value is secondary and derivative. Nonhuman creatures have inherent value and moral standing, and this should be considered in all decisions regarding their management and use.<sup>25</sup> Bouma-Prediger makes the audacious statement:

We need to use plants and animals to survive and maintain our own existence, and as with all creatures, we affect our surroundings in part by consuming other organisms. However, we have an obligation to provide not only for our own generations but also for the generations of those nonhuman creatures whose goods and services we use.<sup>26</sup>

This flies in the face of the dominant cultural paradigm, not only in the United States, but around the world. We are all in the end anthropocentric, and we tend to act in our own self-interest. But as our union with Christ deepens and our hearts are transformed, a sense of the inherent value of his creatures should grow in our hearts, and this principle of the inherent value of created things should be manifested in our personal behavior and life patterns.

**Our Embeddedness in Creation and Interdependence with Other Creatures:** A little noticed biblical fact is that the Noahic Covenant was made not just with humans, but with all life on earth (Gen. 9:8-17).<sup>27</sup> This covenant, other Scriptures (Psalm 104), and nature itself show that we are utterly dependent and interconnected with other creatures and the rest of creation. As Aldo Leopold said, “All ethics rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, ecological ethics should contain a principle of community or common good with other

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<sup>25</sup>Bouma-Prediger, 142.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 151.

<sup>27</sup>Chris Wright, “Theology and Ethics of the Land.” *Transformation* 16 no. 3 (July/September, 1999) : 82.

<sup>28</sup> Aldo Leopold, *The Sand County Almanac*. NY: Ballantine, 1952,1970, 203, quoted in Bouma-Prediger, 173.

creatures.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Bouma-Prediger, 173.

**Grace and Gratitude:** The motive for ecological ethics ought to be gratitude. “Gratitude is the grammar of grace that fosters respectful care of God’s creation.”<sup>30</sup> Our care for creation ought to be out of love for God and humble gratitude to him for all that he has so graciously entrusted to us. This gratitude engenders unselfishness and a humble openness on the part of the redeemed image-bearer, which should bear fruit in lifestyle behavior.<sup>31</sup>

**Cosmic Redemption:** In the fullness of time God plans to bring all things together under Christ (Ephesians 1:3-10). Our lack of concern about environmental issues suggests that we fail to acknowledge the interrelatedness of creation and redemption. All too often our concern is for the eternal life of the soul apart from the resurrection of the body and the redemption of the nonhuman world. American evangelicals tend toward a “physical-spiritual” dualism in this respect. The wounds of sin track over not only our souls but also our bodies, and the nonhuman world (Gen.3:17b). A cosmic creation implies a cosmic redemption (Rom. 8:19-27). Creation, damaged by the fall, groans awaiting the completion of its redemption in Christ, when God will make “all things new.” (Rev. 21:5).<sup>32</sup> Thus, as redemption, healing from sin, and a deeper spirituality develop in the life of the Christian, her lifestyle should demonstrate this healing in behavior that reifies a grateful redemption of the nonhuman creation.

#### IV. ECOLOGICAL VIRTUE AND THE IMITATIO CHRISTI

**Ecological Virtues:** Based on the above principles, one might expect to then develop a list of prescriptions: the do’s and don’ts of a Christian ecological lifestyle.<sup>33</sup> Bouma-Prediger suggests a different approach, namely that of “virtue ecoethics.”<sup>34</sup> He asks the question not what we should do, but

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid, 178.

<sup>31</sup>Calvin B. DeWitt, “God’s Love for the World and Creation’s Environmental Challenge to Evangelical Christianity.” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17 no.2 (April, 1993): 146.

<sup>32</sup>Bruce J. Nicholls, “Responding Biblically to Creation: A Creator-Centered Response to the Earth.” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17 no.2 (April, 1993): 219. Ball, 233, “An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation.” *Perspectives on Science and the Christian Faith* 47 no. 2 (June, 1994) : 111.

<sup>33</sup>A few practical ideas are presented in the appendix.

<sup>34</sup>Bouma-Prediger, 15.

who we should be. “Character is central to the care of the earth.”<sup>35</sup> He then lists a number of virtues which should characterize the lifestyle of a Christian: respect, receptivity, self-restraint, frugality, humility, patience, serenity, and others.<sup>36</sup> Thus, for Bouma-Prediger we must be virtuous persons and our lifestyle should reflect those virtues. But our Lord is Jesus Christ. If there are such things as “ecovirtues,” Jesus must have had them, for he embodied all the virtues to which we should aspire in our lives as his followers.

**The Imitatio Christi:** As disciples of the One through whom all things were made and to whom all things belong, what kind of life should we lead in obedience to and love for him?<sup>37</sup> Jesus was a servant of those over whom he had sovereign power. God, who has dominion and power over us, manifested himself to us in this way (John 1:14, Phil. 2:5-11). We have been given power and dominion over nonhuman creatures, but since they have value in themselves, should we not exercise our power and dominion as servants of them in some sense, in imitation of God? Ball speaks of a “servanthood-stewardship” approach to “ecoethics.”<sup>38</sup> Following Christ in servanthood should, in fact, characterize the Christian’s attitude and behavior toward not only other humans, but toward everything -- including the nonhuman creation. As redeemed image-bearers of God and stewards of what belongs to him and exists for him, we should order our individual lifestyles to be “Christ-like,” to reflect this paradigm of humble servanthood. It follows that this would motivate us to address distributional injustice among people on earth and use our powers, not to serve our own ends, but those of others. It would also motivate us to make room for other creatures, even to the point of making some personal sacrifices for their sake.

Jesus lived very simply. By modern American standards, he lived in extreme poverty. In the history of the church some have lived lives of poverty in imitation of this aspect of his life. On the face of it, we could argue that by imitating Christ’s poverty we would all live ecological lifestyles. Certainly, for Americans, our ecological “footprint” on the world would be vastly smaller than it is now. But perhaps

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 160.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 141-151.

<sup>37</sup>DeWitt, 141.

we should look deeper than this. What was it about Christ's character that resulted in this behavior? Although he did show sensible concern for his own needs (Matt. 8:20), his life was peculiarly lacking in personal self-interest and concern for comfort, safety, or the accumulation of wealth (precisely the values of the dominant American culture). Perhaps we could go beyond Bouma-Prediger's virtues and seek to understand the character and spirituality of Christ which produced this behavior. Perhaps a deeper Christian understanding of ecology lies in a deeper Christology. This may lead to a better understanding of who we are in Christ, and thus what we should do within this "bio-oikos" in which he has placed us. While it may be debatable how much and in what ways we should imitate Christ, it is not debatable that we should imitate him, or that we should seek a deeper union with him. Jesus was radically counter-cultural. If we truly seek oneness with him, live and act in him, would we not be also? May God help us to see with our eyes and hear with our ears, and turn and be healed (Is. 6:10). "For the Christian, the role model must be Christ."<sup>39</sup>

## V. THE AMERICAN CHRISTIAN AND "CONSUMER CAPITALISM"

A grindingly difficult problem for the American Christian is the American economic system. Capitalism as it exists in America, and globally, is based on growth and consumption. This creates "an inherent tension between the economic growth understandably desired by almost all peoples in the world, and the imperative of environmental conservation."<sup>40</sup> This brand of capitalism has caused and is causing environmental degradation due to its ever growing demand for energy and raw materials. It also has tended to promote distributive inequalities. There is, then, a fundamental tension between Christianity and consumer capitalism. Durning observes:

We may be, therefore, in a conundrum -- a problem admitting no satisfactory solution. Limiting the consumer lifestyle to those who have already attained it is not politically possible, morally defensible, or ecologically sufficient. And extending that lifestyle to all

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<sup>38</sup>Ball, 233.

<sup>39</sup>Williams, 146.

<sup>40</sup>Neil W. Summerton, "Principles for Environmental Policy." *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17 no.2 (April, 1993): 227.

would simply hasten the ruin of the biosphere. The global environment cannot support 1.1 billion of us living like American consumers, much less 5.5 billion people, or a future population of at least 8 billion. On the other hand, reducing consumption levels of the consumer society, and tempering material aspirations elsewhere, though morally acceptable, is a quixotic proposal. It bucks the trend of centuries. Yet it may be the only option.<sup>41</sup>

To date it seems to be an expectation of Americans to have an ever rising standard of living -- more comfort, convenience, luxury, safety, freedom, power, and fun, year by year. But is this what Christians should be about? Is it biblical and Christ-like to seek an ever more abundant, comfortable, safer, and more powerful lifestyle? Capitalism as an economic system seems to be a reasonable way to allocate burdens and resources. But consumer capitalism as it exists in the U.S. is clearly not sustainable. If it is true that our economic system requires unlimited growth and that the earth is limited, then, obviously, we are headed for trouble. The prevailing paradigm of the culture is one of self-interest and individualism. Sallie McFague again returns to Christ. "Life as it should be, for Christians, is Christomorphic.... Following Jesus is not principally a moral imperative, but a statement of who we are.... The focus of salvation, then, becomes living in a new way, the way of God's abundance." For McFague "abundance" is not comfort and material abundance, but is "a cruciform life of sacrifice and sharing of burdens."<sup>42</sup>

## VI. CONCLUSION: SO WHAT?

It has been said that ecology may become the most important ethical issue of the 21st century.<sup>43</sup> If that happens, it will not be due to widespread acceptance of high-minded principles such as the inherent value of nonhuman creation, but it will be because ecological damage will come around to directly affect humans, namely Northern American white humans. Human self-interest which governs so much of what we do will perhaps finally lead to some of the vast changes that seem to be needed -- if it is not too late.

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<sup>41</sup> Alan Thein Durning, "Consumption: The Neglected Variable in the Population and Environment Equation." *Sojourner* 23 no.7 (August, 1994): 21.

<sup>42</sup> McFague, 182,210.

<sup>43</sup> Glenn G. Scorgie, personal communication, Bethel Seminary San Diego, March, 2002 .

But what should the lifestyle of the individual American Christian be like now?



**Christianity and Culture:** In the twentieth century the American church has largely followed its culture rather than vice versa. For example, the women's movement arose in the larger society, and the church has been obligated to respond as best it can. To date, with a few exceptions, the church has not seriously addressed ecological problems. The lifestyles of Christians are for the most part indistinguishable from other Americans. But Christians hold the key. "The Christian faith, despite the historical ambiguities in its ecological credentials, has the impressive potential to become an indestructibly firm foundation for ecological integrity. Indeed, nothing short of that integrity is compatible, in my view, with authentic representations of the Christian faith."<sup>44</sup> The issue of ecology presents the church then, at the beginning of this century, with a crucial opportunity to lead culture rather than to follow it.

Lifestyle is a function of culture. Some American Christians may see themselves as ecologically sensitive when in fact they continue to consume large amounts of energy and resources. "Wants are manufactured in a manner that creates an insatiable hunger for more.... Our wants are conditioned by the kind of society in which we live."<sup>45</sup> "Wealth and possessions no doubt comprise an area where many North American evangelicals not only live in the world, but follow the values of the world."<sup>46</sup> Certainly all humans as a result of the fall are affected by self-interest. But in America we have institutionalized it. Our perception of lifestyle and what kind of people we should be is largely determined by our cultural heritage. This should humble us. But true humility does not come easily to Americans. America, in a material sense, is unquestionably the most fantastically successful country in all of world history. Yet in spite of our enormous "success" and power we remain culturally handicapped. Those very cultural traits which we have so carefully cultivated and which have made us so successful are, perhaps, the very traits

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<sup>44</sup>Nash, 93.

<sup>45</sup>Bhagat, Shantilal P. "Imperative for Survival: Ecology and Justice." *Church and Society* 86 no.6 (July/August, 1996): 57.

<sup>46</sup>David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw, *Readings in Christian Ethics: Volume 2: Issues and Applications* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 344.

which hamper our capacity to see the world as God sees it, and which may lead us to ecological disaster.

So whatever conclusions we come to must be tentative at best. We must admit that as Americans we are indeed severely handicapped. We must open our hearts to the Spirit. We can set down rules or guidelines about what we should or shouldn't do, but what is needed is transformation. The Christian should ask, "What kind of person does God want me to be?" "We need, perhaps more urgently than anything else, a restoration of proper scale. We need to see ourselves realistically again, with our real powers, in our real limits."<sup>47</sup>

**A Deeper Spirituality of Hope:** Whether or not ecological disaster lies in our future we must be people of hope. We must be and live a deeper spirituality which transcends culture and which points to God. People (and God's creatures) must have hope, and it is our job as Christ-followers to live and speak of hope - the hope that is Christ within us (Col.1:27). Thus, if ecological disaster, which exists now in the nonhuman world and affects some humans, becomes an immediate threat to American white humans, we will be prepared. We must show to the world that life is more than food and the body is more than clothing -- that life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions or our power over others (people and things).

In the final analysis, it may be said, that our ecological savior will not be a politician, a business executive, or a scientist. It will be Jesus -- or one like him, a spiritual person who is willing to take only a little for himself; who joyfully makes room for God's creatures; who finds wholeness and fulfillment in giving rather than taking; who is willing to swim against the current; who is willing to be called a fool and a masochist; who is persecuted for righteousness' sake; who finds happiness not in things but in the origin of all things. The principles are there and have been known for centuries. Jesus is there. An ecological lifestyle must come from the heart.

It would be well for American Christians to remember the words of Mary regarding the incarnation of the Messiah whom we claim to follow, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the humble" (Luke 1:52, author's translation). American Christians, citizens of the

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<sup>47</sup>Lionel Basney, *An Earth-careful Way of Life: Christian Stewardship and the Environmental Crisis*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 161.

most powerful and wealthy nation on earth and in all of history, should remember that God may see things from a perspective different than their own. The key to an American (and world) Christian lifestyle lies in a deeper more vital oneness with the Savior. American Christians through joining with Christ in a humble, open, deeper spirituality should live out ecological virtue from their hearts, as they love and enjoy the Lord Jesus Christ, living in hope, in a creation graciously given to us by God. “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.” (Rev. 4:11)



## PPENDIX: PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

The following suggestions are not offered as prescriptions. They are offered as ideas for those who through a deeper oneness with Christ and gratitude to God seek to serve him as good stewards of his creation. The organizations and resources listed below can provide an abundance of excellent ideas for a variety of contexts.

1. In Appendix A of his book, *Earthkeeping in the Nineties: Stewardship of Creation*, on pages 361-68, Wilkinson offers some excellent ideas for an ecological lifestyle. He comments:

Why, then, do we include this appendix on what you can do? For two reasons: first, because of the need to show how theory can lead directly into practice; and second, to show that there are good theoretical reasons for many commonly advised actions (such as insulating your home)... Responsible stewardship means that Christians may not be unconcerned or inactive in regard to their care of creation.... Yet the call to stewardship which is responsible to God and obedient to his Word entails a tremendously broad range of freedom. As specific as we would like to be, therefore, the possibilities of stewardship listed below cannot be understood to be binding in all cases or for each Christian. What is binding is responsible stewardship; how that stewardship might be worked out varies from situation to situation.<sup>48</sup>

What makes implementing ecological concern in evangelical churches today difficult is that it is so radically counter-cultural in asking for self-limitation and self-sacrifice in a situation where it is not evident that it is in our self-interest. People must do these things, not because of laws, or because an authority said they must do them, or even because they are “right.” They should do them because they want to -- motivated from the heart because of a deeper oneness with Christ. Thus, Wilkinson, EEN, and others are correct in emphasizing spirituality as the key to Christian creation care.

2. The Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) has headquarters at 10 Lancaster Avenue, Wynnewood, PA, 19096, [www.creationcare.org](http://www.creationcare.org), 1-800-650-6600. EEN, established in 1993 under the auspices of the Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA), works to promote ecological awareness and

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<sup>48</sup>Wilkinson, 361-2.

creation stewardship. They offer a variety of materials, helps, and ideas for individuals and churches for spiritual development and the living out of creation care ethics.

3. Other organizations supporting ecological concerns and providing resources are: The Au Sable Institute for Environmental Studies, Mancelona, MI, currently under the direction of Calvin B. DeWitt, of the University of Wisconsin; World Vision; Christian College Coalition; Sojourners Fellowship, Washington, DC; Christian Society of the Green Cross, a ministry of ESA; Christian Environmental Council, sponsored by EEN and Au Sable; Christian Environmental Association; and Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, Calvin College.

4. Some ideas:

1. Sell your house and move to a small apartment.

2. Permanently turn off your heater/air conditioner. They are not really needed in San Diego anyway. In other locations, their use could be reduced considerably. It is cheaper and conserves energy to put on extra clothes in the house than turn on the heater.

3. Sell your car and use public transportation, or, at least, buy a small fuel efficient car.

4. Recycle.

5. Avoid taking long trips or traveling by airplane, a very energy costly means of travel.

6. Slow down and enjoy life, and resist being caught up in the rush and hustle of American life, driven by a desire for ever greater wealth, comfort, safety, convenience, and power. Jesus calls us to serenity and peace.

7. Stop watering your yard and let it revert to its natural state -- if the neighbors will allow it.

8. Plant a food garden in your yard. It is a good use of the small plot of earth God has given you and it gets you closer to his good earth and his creatures.





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