



Environmental Stewardship as a Pro-Life Issue

Why refuse to address or even consider our contributions to the destruction of the earth's health and fertility? If this is not a pro-life issue, what is?

The Covenant Church's Annual Meeting has consistently spoken out against abortion. The indifference to human life implied in the gratuitous use of abortion deeply concerns and distresses many. Some of us are attracted to the "consistent pro-life" position that includes capital punishment and war in the list of concerns. Oddly, I have seldom, if ever, heard anyone suggest that concern for the environment is a pro-life issue. And yet, human life itself depends on the proper stewardship of our beautiful, God-given creation. Without clean water, fertile soil, and clean air, life on earth is not possible.

Human beings continue to squander natural resources at an alarming rate. For a society entirely dependent on diminishing stocks of oil, we seem at times strangely indifferent to their eventual disappearance. Some estimate that we will run out of oil in forty years or so. What sort of devastation and suffering will this produce? So far we have put so many of our eggs in the basket of petroleum that we are unable to imagine another way of living. We not only fuel our industries with oil, we produce our food with oil. Declining soil fertility has forced us to use more and more oil-based fertilizer. In addition to all this, tons of fertile topsoil washes away every year because of poor, inattentive farming. And irrigation in arid areas has reduced ancient aquifers to perilous levels.

Global warming is an immensely controversial topic in the United States. Elsewhere people have accepted the scientific evidence that humans are contributing to the rising of sea levels, the scorching of once fertile countryside, and the changing of weather patterns. Recent reports that some researchers may have fiddled with the evidence does not change the big picture. Some believe this warming is part of the normal rise and fall of temperatures throughout the earth's existence and not a matter of human activity. But if there is a chance that our wasteful activity is producing the effect, why wouldn't we take steps to reduce our contribution to the destruction of life on earth?

Many evangelicals are hostile to environmental stewardship in general and the question of global warming in particular. I am frankly perplexed by this. We are justly concerned about our

culture's indifference to human life. So how can we be indifferent to the enormous suffering and death of millions or even billions? Why refuse to address or even consider our contributions to the destruction of the earth's health and fertility? If this is not a pro-life issue, what is? Among the virtues required to properly care for creation are frugality, self-discipline, generosity, compassion, and hope. Environmental stewardship requires harnessing our desires, addressing our greed, and "valuing others above ourselves" (Philippians 2:3). These are virtues and commitments embedded in our faith in Jesus Christ.

I raise these issues not because I do so well at addressing my own greed and wasteful living, but because I do so poorly. I am no paragon of environmental virtue, but I am concerned for my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. I am concerned that my profligate way of life produces suffering in the most desperate places of the world, and will produce even more suffering in the future. I am trying to change my way of living because I am pro-life. I am concerned about global warming because I am pro-life.

We can certainly argue about strategies for addressing our wastefulness, our indifference to the very sources of life, and the ways in which we are destroying God's creation. But I am skeptical about top-down solutions. We need—I need—a change of heart. We need a profound cultural revolution. We need to think first about preserving, conserving, and sharing, not destroying, ignoring, and hoarding. Otherwise we face the judgment of God. And it will be a judgment we have brought on ourselves.

In the Revelation of St. John many of the judgments are wrought upon the earth itself. In Revelation 8 a third of the earth is burned up, along with a third of the trees and a third of the green grass. The sea turns to blood and the living creatures and ships are destroyed. All this is because the people of the earth refuse to repent. This judgment, I believe is not something God will need to do directly. It is something that by our failure to live frugally and well, we are bringing upon ourselves. ■

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