

April 2023

What is the Difference Between Environmentalism and Creation Care?

DR JOHANNES J KNECHT

Introduction

I distinguish between the terms 'sustainability', 'environmentalism', and 'creation care.' *Sustainability* is used to indicate any practical way of living life which calculates with the effects of one's behaviour on the future availability of natural resources and on the wider natural world. *Environmentalism* and *creation care*, then, indicate the deeper motivations to behave in a sustainable way.

Sustainability has become a topic that presently can no longer be ignored by businesses, academics, artists, as well as the individual. People, especially in the Global North, have actively tried to reduce the amount of plastic they use, how they travel, the types and amounts of meat they eat, and how they spend their money. The push for more sustainable manners of living can be seen among people of faith and none alike.¹

Even though some people of faith seem to be engaged in this cultural and societal push for sustainability, the question I want to address here is: What should the main motivation for a professing Christian be to care for nature? What would the difference be between 'environmentalist' arguments for sustainability and ones grounded in a motivation for 'creation care'?

¹ Although one could argue that people of no faith have proven more active in this regard.

Simply looking at our society, we can observe a variety of environmentalist motivations for sustainability, all of which can be seen as 'good' or 'helpful'—at least, to a certain extent. Three of the prime environmentalist arguments to act sustainably I think are these:²

1. The first possible motivation is simply a deep love for nature: Anything that endangers nature's existence must therefore be fought. Nature is defended for its own sake, to defend its inherent beauty, wealth, or even divinity. Although not all would actually worship nature, an extreme example of this approach is seen in the town of Lachung in the Indian Himalayas.³ A less extreme but nonetheless much more widespread example is the use of terms like 'Mother Nature' or 'Earth Mother'. In line with this, people might work hard to avoid extinctions as these are a tangible indicator that we are going through some sort of loss with regard to biodiversity.

2. There are arguments for sustainability which are much more anthropocentric: taking better care of nature is in the best interest for humanity. Arguments might run along the lines of: "We do not want plastic to be dumped in the Ocean because it will affect human life." Or, "Microplastics eaten by fish will eventually end up in the food of human beings."⁴

3. Environmentalism might be a reaction against a feeling of uncertainty and fear of the future. We see that the future is unsure, that we cannot control what is happening around us in politics, in the climate, healthcare, or in our nations. Environmentalism might function as a way to aim to control our circumstances and fundamentally influence the direction of our societies for the better. "If politicians do not save our planet now, we have to carry the consequences, so please secure our future and do something about it." Or, in the words of Greta Thunberg at the Global Climate Strike in New York in September 2019: "We deserve a safe future. And we demand a safe future. Is that really too much to ask?"⁵

Without suggesting that this list of environmentalist motivations is exhaustive, these are at least some of the reasons that can be seen in a variety of playing fields where we find a

² For a helpful overview of what activities sustainability or environmentalism might look like, cf.: [Matthew Mason, "What is Sustainability and Why Is It Important?", in Environmental Science Education \[Accessed 07/04/2020:https://www.environmentalscience.org/sustainability.\]](https://www.environmentalscience.org/sustainability)

³ Vikas Pandey and Anshul Verma, "The Himalayan villages that confiscates single-use plastic", in BBC [Accessed 17/04/2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/science-environment-49897261/the-himalayan-village-that-confiscates-single-use-plastics>.]

⁴ Vikas Pandey and Anshul Verma, "The Himalayan villages that confiscates single-use plastic", in BBC [Accessed 17/04/2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/science-environment-49897261/the-himalayan-village-that-confiscates-single-use-plastics>.]

⁵ Quote recorded with the BBC: "Greta Thunberg Quotes: 10 Famous Lines From Teen Activist," in BBC [Accessed 10/04/2020:<https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/49812183>].

push for sustainability in our society.⁶ You may see them appear in isolation, but more often than not, you will find a combination of these defended by people. It would probably go too far to say that these motivations are, in any sense, 'wrong', but I will argue that, from position of faith, all of them may tend to idolatry to some degree.

The first motivation, pushing for sustainability out of a love of creation might go so far as to elevate creation so strongly that it turns into a kind of nature-religion: nature in and of itself is a goal that goes beyond the protection of humanity. A good example of this tendency is the idea that creation would be better off if humanity were not there, a thought entertained by Prof Todd May in an NY Times *Opinion*, "Would Human Extinction Be a Tragedy?"⁷ It tends to idolatry because the object of love, and in some instances even worship, is creation itself: it fundamentally misconceived the relationship between creation and humanity.

As for the second motivation: there is nothing wrong with aiming to defend a healthy production of food. However, approaching nature as merely being a place where our food comes from (as if it is simply there to sustain our human existence broadly considered) is a rather simplistic understanding of creation. In a way, this motivation can also become quite anthropocentric since it pushes for environmentalism in order for creation to continue to uphold and sustain humanity's existence. It may tend to idolatry as it conceives of humanity as the be-all and end-all, and thus primarily conceives of creation as sustaining human life.

The third motivation can run into the trap of thinking humanity is in charge of its own future, that we are our own bosses and the keepers of our own final ends. It might become idolatrous in thinking we, as human beings, can control it all. It suggests that the certainty of humanity's continued existence lies in maintaining a healthy environment to live in and that humanity has the power to ascertain that future.

That all being said, one must agree that, even when the motivations to live sustainably might not find their ground in a Christian world-view, environmentalism understands that nature is something that needs protecting and defending. It furthermore sees that nature is heavily dependent on the ways in which humans act in the world (that humanity has a

⁶ See: Rinkesh, "35 Reasons Why We Need to be Environmentally Conscious," in Conserve Energy Future [Accessed 10/04/2020: <https://www.conserve-energy-future.com/reasons-why-we-need-to-be-environmentally-conscious.php>]. This popular list of 35 motivations for sustainable behaviour would fit in one of these three categories, except the claim that "humans have a moral obligation to preserve nature and its features." The reason given, however, is that sustainable behaviour is in line with an essential human 'compulsion.'

⁷ Todd May, "Opinion: Would Human Extinction Be a Tragedy?" in The New York Times [Accessed 09/04/2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/17/opinion/human-extinction-climate-change.html>]. For some thoughtful responses to this, cf: "In Theory: Would the Earth be better off without us?" in Burbank Leader [Accessed 05/04/2020: <https://www.latimes.com/socal/burbank-leader/opinion/tn-blr-me-intheory-20190204-story.html>].

certain power over nature). Environmentalists understand the value of nature and, importantly, are willing to change their life-styles and even bring sacrifices to defend and maintain biodiversity and a clean and properly functioning environment. All these things demand praise.

However, the question remains: why, if those are the prevalent narratives surrounding the current discourse on environmentalism, should Christians be at the forefront of this modern push for sustainability? Would we not be affirming the environmentalist arguments if we were to push for sustainability? On what should a Christian approach to sustainability be built if it is to avoid the pitfalls of idolatry? In other words, how can those of Christian faith participate and maybe even lead a push for sustainability without having to affirm the prevalent, cultural motivations to do so?

Well, in my view, the thing that makes environmentalism distinct from creation care is the fundamental Christian conviction that I) creation is, in essence, a gift from the Creator God and II) that humanity was created by that God as an indispensable part of that originally good world. Having this crucial belief as a starting point for sustainability is the fundamental distinction between mere environmentalism and creation care and gives those of Christian ample reason to also act sustainably. So, in the remainder, I want to present a way in which Christians can think about creation care theologically. How can we think well about the care of nature without falling into traps of idolatry, self-indulgence, or arrogance? I argue that a proper theological consideration of creation care, grounded in the belief that God is Creator, challenges us to become even more active in our efforts to conserve our earth and would guard against misplaced and disordered motivations.⁸

Therefore, in what follows, I will proceed along two lines. First, we will take some time to reflect on some of Scripture to show that God is the gracious Creator of all that exists. Second, we will consider some theological ramifications of these Scriptures with regards to creation care.

Ruling the Gift

Everyone who would think about 'creation care' in a theological manner, will probably have to start with an account of creation itself: what is it, how does it relate to God himself, and

⁸ For those wanting to study the Christian Doctrine of creation more, I would suggest starting with reading the eminent scholar John Webster: "Omnia... Pettractantur in Sacra Doctrina sub Ratione Dei: On the Matter of Christian Theology," in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, volume 1 (London, et al: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016).

what is the place of human beings in creation? In Acts, we encounter Paul elaborating on God's act of creation:

Acts 17:24-26 (NIV): The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made by human hands. Nor is He served by human hands, as if He needed anything, because He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man He made every nation of men, to inhabit the whole earth; and He determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands.

Darrell Bock reflects on this passage, suggesting Paul claims that “[h]uman hands do not serve God, since God needs nothing from humanity and gives to humanity life, breath, and all the things needed for life. God’s grace in creation on behalf of all people is the point.”⁹ Truly, all that exists finds its origin in and goes back to the “creational activity of the God Paul proclaims.”¹⁰ Creation relates to God in a manner of complete dependency: it does not constitute or uphold the existence and being of God (meaning, God is not dependent on the existence of creation). Rather, creation is wholly dependent, for all that it is, on the gratuitous act of God to ‘give life’ (in this sense, the dependence is a one-way street: we are completely dependent on God, but God is not dependent for his existence on us).

Therefore, the first and most important aspect of creation is that it must be thought of as a gratuitous gift. Creation is not a necessary existence. That is, it did not need to exist. ‘Before’ God decided to create, there was nothing that we would call a ‘creature.’¹¹ There was no matter out of which God decided to create (God is not merely a shaper of matter) nor did he decide to turn towards a creation that already existed. Creation—understood as the calling into being of all that is not God—goes solely and completely back to the decision of God to create. This is where the Church doctrine of the *creatio ex nihilo* goes back to: God created totally and completely ‘out of nothing, *ex nihilo*’, for nothing creaturely existed before God’s Creative act. Hence, creation is a gift, a gift from God. A gift, because God himself did not need to create—he fully and completely is who he is, even without creation. But, God wanted to create, freely and graciously.¹²

⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts, ECNT* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 565-6. Craig Keener reflects further on Paul’s claim here in the context of the wider Greek philosophical tradition: Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, volume 3: 15:1-23:35 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 2636-9.

¹⁰ Eckhard J Schnabel, *Acts, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 731.

¹¹ Temporal terminology in this sense is not meant to suggest that ‘time’ existed eternally with God.

¹² John Webster, “Trinity and Creation,” in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, volume 1 (London, et al: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 83: “The task of the Christian doctrine of creation is rational

An issue tightly associated with this question of creation, in many parts of the Christian world, is the question of six-day creation versus the theory of evolution. I will not go into this, but one thing must be seen in relation to our question today, whatever position one takes: we must maintain that creation was intentional. Creation has a purpose; it has a goal; it was made with an end in mind. And that end is for the whole of creation to recognise its dependence on God and worship its Creator.¹³

The whole of creation was made by God, for God himself. Everything that exists has no other goal but to declare God, the Creator, as Lord. It is in that place of gracious reception of God's life-giving grace and faithful submission to his Lordship that creation was supposed to exist. God's acts of creation did not intend to call into being a world which, from that moment onwards, is supposed to follow its own devices but rather exist and recognise its utter dependence on him.

So, what does that practically mean for our existence within God's world? Even though humanity is meant to recognise its fundamental dependency on God, the call on humanity in Genesis 1:28 to 'subdue' and 'rule over' must be taken seriously. How can this call to be fruitful, multiply, rule, and subdue be kept alongside the picture of creation I previously suggested? Let us read the relevant section in Genesis 1:

Genesis 1:26; 28 (NIV): Then God said: "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all creatures that move along the ground." [...] God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creature that crawls upon the earth."

So how do we keep those two things together? How do we, on the one hand, acknowledge that creation is a gift, that it is God's, and that the whole of creation is for the glory of God

contemplation of the Holy Trinity in the outward work of love by which God established and ordered creaturely reality, a work issuing from the infinite uncreated and wholly realized movement of God's life in himself."

¹³ Deuteronomy 10:14 Behold, to the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, and the earth and everything in it. 15 Yet the LORD has set His affection on your fathers and loved them. And He has chosen you, their descendants after them, above all the peoples, even to this day. Colossians 1:16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. Revelation 5:13 And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

and, on the other, duly acknowledge Genesis 1:28? The key lies in the way we understand both the imperatives to 'rule' and 'subdue' in this context.¹⁴

More widely considered, the word 'subdue' (כבש) in the Old Testament is often used in the context of battles, conquering a power standing over against you.¹⁵ However, as Terrence E. Fretheim observes, "While the verb may involve coercive aspects in inter-human relationships (see Num 32:22, 29), no enemies are in view here." For Fretheim, the meaning of the call to 'subdue' should be understood along the lines of Genesis 2:5 and 2:15: it is a call for "particular cultivation" and "bring the world along to its fullest creational potential."¹⁶ John Day, following J. Barr, further suggests that humanity should only subdue the earth and rule the animals.¹⁷

Similarly, 'rule' is used in a rather straightforward manner, meaning 'to stand over' and 'lead'. Even though God is described as the sole Creator of all that exists, the idea that humanity is created in the Image of God (*Imago Dei*) is connected to the call on Adam and Eve to rule over that which God had made. Amazingly, God deputises the rule over creation to humanity: with regards to the ruling of creation, we are God's deputies. However, the content of that rule cannot under any circumstances be thought of as one of exploitation or abuse. Fretheim, again, suggests that "A study of the word *have dominion* (רדה) reveals that it must be understood in terms of care-giving, even nurturing, not exploitation. As the Image of God, human beings should relate to the non-human as God relates to them."¹⁸

Furthermore, but more as an aside, the call to subdue and rule takes place in the garden, in which, as we read in Gen. 1: 29-30, Adam and Eve were only permitted to eat vegetation: "Behold, I have given you every seed-bearing plant on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit contains seed. They will be yours for food." From this text we can deduce quite easily that Adam and Eve most probably did not eat meat in the Garden. However, as Stephen M. Vantassel suggests, this observation must not be overextended to saying humanity ought not to eat meat.¹⁹ Whatever the case, I hope it has become clear that, whenever applying the terminology of "rule and subdue" to describe humanity's God-ordained relationship with creation, one needs to be careful not to jump over the proper context of the creation-account given in Genesis when giving an explanation of that ruling

¹⁴ Lynn White suggests it is the Christian idea that humanity is called to rule and subdue lies at the heart of the current crisis: Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-7.

¹⁵ Cf. Numeri 32:29, Isaiah 45:1, 1 Chronicles. 17:10, Psalm 81:14, Micah 7:19.

¹⁶ Terrence E Fretheim, "Genesis," in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 1: General & Old Testament Articles, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus* (Nashville, KY: Abingdon Press, 1994), 345-6.

¹⁷ John Day, *From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1-11* (London et al: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 15-6.

¹⁸ Fretheim, "Genesis," 346.

¹⁹ Stephen M. Vantassel, *Dominion Over Wildlife? An Environmental Theology of Human-Wildlife Relations* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2009), 46-9.

and subduing. Yes, we are called to rule and subdue, but, to speak with the words of Walter Brueggemann, “the task of ‘dominion’ does not have to do with exploitation and abuse.”²⁰

To once again underline the fundamental task for Adam and Eve in the garden, we read in Genesis 2:5 and 2:15 that creation’s growth and multiplication (the whole of creation, not just that of humanity), which God had called for in Gen. 1, is made contingent, by God, on the cultivating activity of humanity. The call in Gen. 2 to ‘cultivate’ or ‘keep’ is meant to further flesh out the concepts of ‘rule’ and ‘subdue’ in Gen. 1. Adam and Eve were placed in the garden to continue the creation of order, initiated by God, and to stand over creation so that it might flourish, multiply, and grow, as God had instructed.

With regards to us being creatures who are wholly dependent on the grace of God to uphold and sustain us, we are simply one among the rest of creation. This image is beautifully painted in Psalm 148, where the Psalmist calls the whole of creation to praise and worship of the Lord God. Here, Kings and Peoples, the young and the old, are mentioned right next to all the other creatures God has made. However, although humanity is called to worship the Lord alongside the rest of creation, Gen. 1 and 2 clearly indicate that there is a particular task for humanity, as opposed to all other creatures: humanity is called to rule and subdue, to cultivate and tend as to allow and help the whole of God’s world to fulfil its fundamental task—to flourish, grow, and glorify the Lord. After that, we can only join Nehemiah in exclaiming:

Nehemiah 9:6 (ESV): “You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.”

Theological Considerations

Proper consideration of the doctrine of creation must first and foremost recognise the indispensable and irreducible distinction between Creator and creatures. As we already hinted at before, creation does not constitute God: the Creator God was under no obligation to create, nor does the Lord’s decision to create add anything to his being. God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is wholly and completely self-sufficient in his own being. Therefore, God’s loving act of creation can only be conceived as a gratuitous and free (non-necessary)

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 1982), 32.

movement *ad extra* (from God towards what is not God). Thus, creation is a voluntary expression in time of who God eternally is, the loving Triune God.

God's redemptive activity does not only reorder humanity's relationship with himself—from a state of self-centred rebellion to a proper recognition of his Lordship and obedience to his will. He similarly reorders humanity in relation to all non-human creatures. To draw from the theologian John Webster once again: "The Holy Spirit is Lord and giver of life, creation's perfecting cause. Creation is distinctly assigned to the Spirit in that he is the divine person by whom created things are brought to their proper end. By the Spirit's motion, creatures fulfil their natures, and their particular mode of being – their *esse-ad21* – reaches its term." Webster does not neglect the proper place of Father and Son in the act of creation, but, on Webster's telling, particularly in the Person of the Spirit, God regenerates humanity in such a way that it is brought back to its *telos*, its intended end. This *telos* of humanity cannot only be conceived as the reordering of the God-human relationship but, following Gen. 1 and 2, must also include humanity's place, under God, as the keeper, ruler, and cultivator of creation. *Sanctificatio*, the process in which God sanctifies his creatures evermore into the likeness of the Son of God, must therefore also include the human relationship with the rest of creation, both human and non-human.

Hence, a Christian call for creation care cannot be grounded in the three environmentalist motivations I mentioned earlier: the inherent goodness of creation (though it was created as such), nor as an aim to keep creation healthy simply so it can supply humanity with all that it needs, nor in a wish to secure humanity's future. Rather, a Christian motivation for creation care should be grounded and approached from the redemptive activity of God towards his people. It is only in the context of this divine work of redemption that both humanity itself as well as humanity in relation to the rest of creation is properly ordered: under God, acting in humility and gratitude towards all he has given to us for our existence. This redeemed ordering of God-humanity-creation should be the sole motivation to act towards creation in a sustainable manner, honouring God's call to "rule" and "subdue" creation, so that it too may grow, multiply, and flourish.

From this perspective we can love creation for the gift that it is to us. We may relish its beauty, recognise the ways in which it supports our life, and thus enjoy all that it is to us. In enjoying creation well, relating to it properly, and giving it the attention and care that it needs, we give glory to the one who gave creation into our care. Our acting in support of sustainability can thus be seen to be 'for the glory of God.'

So, Christians motivated to live sustainably do not have to agree with all the arguments environmentalists present. When you stop buying plastic, limit your meat consumption, and use more public transportation (to name just the big hitters), you can view this as an expected—and arguably necessary—result of the work of God in you, acting redemptively in us, and restoring our broken relationship with God's creation around us. Sustainability

should be acknowledged, not for its own sake, but as an integral part of God's redeeming activity in us.

In conclusion, we must exhibit humility and self-restraint when dealing with creation. We should honour creation, not motivated out of the idea that creation is somehow a divine entity that is worthy of praise and protection for its own sake, but because we want to deal with creation as a gift, God-given. A gift in which we are invited to live, to find sustenance, a gift which we ought to tend and to steward. This gift of immense and immeasurable value has been entrusted to our care. May we appreciate this gift as our God-given home. May we tend to it faithfully. May we be good stewards of creation. May God look at our interaction with creation and say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant!' (Matthew 25:23).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr Johannes J Knecht completed his BA in Theology and Biblical Studies at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit (Belgium). He completed his MPhil and PhD in Systematic and Historical Theology at the University of St Andrews (UK). Besides his work with the Quo Vadis Institute, Jasper also teaches Christian doctrine.