

The Big Question

In our series examining frequently asked questions about the Christian faith, *Bob White* considers...

Why should Christians care for the planet?

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If the planet is one day – maybe quite soon – going to be burnt to a frazzle, why should we put effort into caring for it now? Isn't it more important to bring people to Christ while there is still time?

Similar thinking led DL Moody to say, "I look upon this world as a sinking ship, and the Lord has given me a lifeboat, and told me: 'Moody, save all you can.'" In this view, the only thing that can be retrieved from the wreckage of the world is individual souls; the earth itself is beyond redemption.

But such an attitude is hard to square with the overall message of Scripture. The Bible's view is that the earth is less like the Titanic, doomed to ultimate destruction, and more like the original Queen Mary, sailing into the distant sunrise where it will be rebuilt yet more gloriously.

Throughout much of the 20th century, the environmental flag was flown mainly by the Green movement. Christians have largely distanced themselves from environmental issues, partly because of a Titanic-style view of the earth and partly because Green agendas often had overtones either of pagan nature-worship or of New Age religious views.

Yet from a Scriptural perspective, Christians should have been leading the environmental agenda. The very existence of the universe is the result of God's creative activity. And its ultimate destination, redeemed by Christ's sacrifice on the cross, is to be renewed along with all believers to the eternal glory of God.

Reasons to care

The Bible gives three main reasons why we should care for the environment. First, God Himself says that His creation is very good. The material world matters to God; He sustains it all the time. Without Him it would fall apart into chaos. "He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (Colossians 1.16–17). So if we neglect, abuse and spoil the environment, we are damaging something that is

precious to God.

The second and even more important reason why we should care for the environment is that in Genesis 1.28 and 2.15, God specifically commanded humankind to do so. He told us to take care of both the living and the non-living creation. We are to work at ruling and ordering creation as good stewards without abusing it for our own selfish ends. By caring for the earth properly, we enable it to be fruitful and to play its intended role in giving glory to God. That is part of our proper worship of God.

The third reason is that one day the cosmos will be renewed and re-created as the "new heavens and new earth", to which both the Old and New Testaments look forward (Isaiah 65, Revelation 21). That will bring the fullness of life that God intended and purposed for His creation: a place where people will truly be at home, where God will dwell with His people, and both they and the whole of creation will worship Him and give Him glory.

So how we treat the environment now ought to be a preview – a practice run if you like – of what we will do in the new creation. The certain hope of a renewed future creation is not a licence to abandon care for this one. Rather, the opposite is the case: there is every incentive to foster and to use the innate goodness and fruitfulness of this material world to do what is pleasing to God in our time and place. As Luther is supposed to have remarked, "If I knew Jesus would return tomorrow, I would plant a tree today."

Practical things

It is increasingly clear that our use of oil and gas in the West is driving rapid climate change in the whole world. It may not have much effect on us in the short term, other than maybe giving us longer and hotter summers in the UK, but the effects of more extreme weather events will fall disproportionately on the very young and very old, on the poor and the marginalised in places such as sub-Saharan Africa.



Next Question:
Aren't Christians responsible for most of the wars?

One quarter of the planet's population lives in poverty and is extremely vulnerable to changes caused by drought or flooding, to the failure of agricultural crops or to rising sea levels. If we take caring for our global neighbour seriously, we need to consider the impact of our lifestyles on them.

Many of the practical things we can do are not difficult, and indeed are often personally beneficial. Walking to school or church is usually healthier than driving. Changing to low-energy light bulbs, switching the TV off stand-by and insulating our homes will all save us money. So why are they difficult for us?

Partly it is because we are prone to put to the back of our minds the impact of our actions on those we can't see, such as those in another part of the world or even future generations. But perhaps mainly it is because we are by nature sinful, self-centred in our thoughts and our actions.

Those of us who live in the high-income nations with standards of living purchased through profligate use of natural resources have a particular responsibility in our stewardship: an imperative to care for those elsewhere in the world marginalised by global climate change. Our decision to drive a big car, to fly to Paris for the weekend or to turn up the heating rather than put on a sweater will have a direct impact on someone already living on the edge. Once we are aware of that, how can we ignore it?

Of course Christians will want to do all they can to tell others the Good News of Christ. But woe betide us if in telling that Good News we don't also model it by caring for the world God has entrusted to us.

More information on this topic can be found at www.cis.org.uk (Christians in Science), www.faraday-institute.org (science-faith issues), www.jri.org.uk (John Ray Initiative connects environment, science and Christianity).

Read *Beyond Belief: Science, Faith and Ethical Challenges* by Denis Alexander & Robert S. White (Lion, 2004).

See also the Tearfund leaflet *For Tomorrow Too*, available free at www.tearfund.org