

"True that ?!"

Scripture and science, ecology and theology



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1: Does God love the world? Should we?

As Christians look around us at our planet in crisis, we're not sure whether or not we should really care. We read our Bibles and, to be honest, it's confusing. On one hand God made the world and everything in it, and we're very grateful. On the other hand the Bible calls us to focus away from tangible things, on the eternal God who is spirit (John 4:24), and there seems plenty of evidence that this world is crumbling, 'dissolving' as 2 Peter 3:10 puts it.

It's a question of citizenship. Where is our home? In John's gospel Jesus says very clearly that we do not belong to the world (17:14), and 1 John 2:15 puts it very bluntly: "Do not love the world". As Paul puts it, we are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20). If this world we now live in is not really ours, if we don't really belong here, why should we care about the world? There is a sense, if mostly unspoken, among Christians that the environment is just not our problem. We're out of here, our hearts and home is elsewhere.

And yet the people of faith who most inspire us were people of mission, driven by a huge passion for the world, who lead movements to face problems in the world with courage and transformation. Jesus sent his followers into the world to be agents of the gospel. We too want to be on team with Jesus, empowered by his Spirit to be doing what Jesus wants to do in the world.

As the 21st century unfolds, it is becoming blantly obvious that the critical issue for all nations and all species is the state of our planet, the effects of human rubbish and burnt fuel changing the climate and placing every natural space under threat. Scientists predict mass extinctions, even potentially our own.

For Christians to respond with faith, from a biblical imperative, forces us to grapple with how we feel about the world we live in. Should we care about the world? Should we love it or hate it? Should we get our hands dirty in it or leave it to decay and invest ourselves in heaven?

The answer has to start and finish with Jesus. We believe that Jesus shared in the work of making the world in the first place, and we know that Jesus of Nazareth told all kinds of stories about the natural world. It's obvious reading the gospels that Jesus noticed and treasured his environment: pure flowing ("living") water, good soil that produces crops 100 fold, sheep and goats, each sparrow that falls. The church has super-spiritualised the metaphors of Jesus, but they draw the power of their meaning from the reality that Jesus knew and loved, in the world around him.

Jesus talked a lot about stewardship, our responsibility to look after the place, including the little ones, living things, and the land. His favourite metaphor for this was vintner work, tending the vines. He often said that we don't own the farm, God does, we're just hired staff.

Jesus promised to come again to judge and to restore, but he was clear that there's no pre-determined time frame for this; we need to be getting on with God's work while we wait.

Our ethics, our mission, our world-view as followers of Jesus Christ must be based on Jesus, what he taught and what he is doing in the world today. For us in 2019 this has to mean courage in the face of the vast threats to our global environment. It is not OK to opt out, to assume that it's all 'going to hell in a handcart' and not our problem. God needs us to keep one foot on earth, even as we step one foot into heaven. We have dual citizenship. The world needs us to care, and to act.

Questions for teachers

1. How do you feel about the world, especially given all you know about how it is changing?
2. Are there some natural places in particular which you love passionately? Where you feel most at home?
3. Does your faith sharpen or diminish your investment in the future here on planet earth?
4. Young people live increasingly in a digital virtual world, and their movies and games commonly depict destroyed or de-populated environments. How would you like to teach and inspire young people to connect with the natural world?

2: World, earth and the Bible

We have a problem when we read the Bible seeking a Christian understanding of the environment – the biblical words don't match modern vocabulary. There are no biblical words for 'environment' or 'universe', 'ecology', 'matter' or 'sustainability'. Like it or not we have to translate and interpret, to bridge the gap between what the Bible says and the questions we're asking now.

So how does the Bible talk about the world?

1) Earth. The word 'earth' has a similar meaning in both Hebrew (*'erets'*) and Greek (*'ge'*), specifically the land. Paired as 'heaven and earth' it means tangible matter, contrasted with the spiritual dimension of 'heaven'. So Genesis 1:1, 'God created the heavens and the earth', means that God formed everything you can touch and see ('the earth') and everything beyond that ('the heavens' – mostly plural in the Bible, including the sky and the spiritual dimension/s).

2) World. If 'the earth' means everything non-human, 'the world' means everything human. Psalm 33:8 calls both the natural and human worlds to worship: 'Let all the earth fear

the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.’ In Greek the world is ‘*kosmos*’, which does not mean ‘cosmos’ in English. ‘The world’ in scripture would be better translated ‘society’. Mostly it refers to the human web of culture and politics, economics and the stuff we buy. When you read ‘the world’ in your Bible, you have to mentally add in ‘the human’ world.

The thing is, the New Testament mostly has a negative take on ‘the (human) world’, especially when it’s ‘this world’, which means specifically ‘this materialistic human world’. The Bible starkly makes us choose between following Christ and our investment in the accumulation of stuff and fun experiences; John 12:25, ‘those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life’. And, turns out, it’s human materialism that is wrecking the environment. The ‘wisdom of this world’ (1 Cor 3:19) has got us into this mess, brought us to disaster. The Bible is not surprised.

3) Creation. We often use this word to refer to the natural, i.e. non-human, universe, the result of God’s creativity. Paul uses it, mainly in Romans 8, but it’s not a common Bible word.

4) All things. Far more common is ‘all things’ which can refer to ‘the universe’ as we understand it (John 1:3), but can also mean ‘every option’.

5) Paradise. Did you know that ‘paradise’ actually means a garden? A key part of a biblical understanding of the world is the original garden, Eden (translated as ‘paradise’ into Greek). A deep biblical longing for natural places of beauty and harmony motivates us for our own work in ecology, both in our own yards and in wild places.

Questions for teachers

1. What tools help you to read and understand the Bible and relate it to your work as a teacher?
2. Are we teaching ‘the wisdom of this world’ at school?
3. How do you see the pressures of ‘the (human, materialistic) world’ impacting on young people?
4. What are the benefits of getting young people gardening and caring for natural wild places?

3. Sin

Why don’t Christians care about the environment? Part of the answer lies in how we talk about sin and salvation. The church in the West got obsessed with sex, and sexual sin got a lot of air time. The Bible has a lot more to say about the love of money as the root of evil (1 Timothy 6:10) but we conveniently ignored this and got on with making as much of it as we could (money, that is). The earth has paid the price.

Sin is our fallen human nature, our tendency to stuff things up. Sin is broken relationship – with each other, with God, with ourselves & our bodies, and with the earth. Sin is a state of slavery, with death, violence and destruction trailing in its wake. Sin is breaking the Law, the covenant between God and his people lived out in practice. ‘Transgression’ is breaking rules, ‘iniquity’ is about attitude ... there are over a dozen biblical words for sin. We assume it’s all very personal and individual, but actually the Bible sees sin as very much a collective problem.

I am fascinated that the word ‘transgression’ has emerged in the work around ‘planetary boundaries’: “transgressing one or more planetary boundaries may be deleterious or even catastrophic due to the risk of crossing thresholds that will trigger non-linear, abrupt

environmental change within continental-to-planetary-scale systems." (*Rockström, et al. 2009 article in Ecology and Science*). That's big picture sin!

Sin persists because often the motivation seems harmless. Sin is sexy because our society values the quick fix, the 'now' rush.

At my church we have a 'no confetti' rule; but one wedding party last year threw that cut up coloured shiny plastic stuff over the couple as they left the church. It got into the soil, into the compost, into our garden. Hundreds of years from now it'll still be there, no longer pretty but still plastic. Sure the couple got a cute photo, but I got to sweep up their mess, and the consequences will be long-lasting. That is sin.

Writ large, human sin has polluted and destroyed much of the earth's surface, air, water, even deep into the earth. Every species facing extinction is paying the price for human sin. The problem is, it does not feel like a sin for me to buy a plane ticket to Auckland to see my son. Is it sinful to buy a cheap shirt from the mall? I know that those actions are contributing to global warming, microplastic and air pollution, and unjust work practices around the world. So, yes, it is sin, but it does not feel bad at the time.

More deeply, at the 'iniquity' level, perhaps the biggest barrier to saving our planet is that we humans don't want to think about it. Our instincts are to deny reality, turn off bad news, protect ourselves from what we don't want to hear. We know that avoiding climate change catastrophe will demand real change from us, all of us, but instead we go shopping.

As people of faith we should not be slaves of sin. We are forgiven, we are set free, not to keep on sinning (Romans 6) but to live for Christ with our priorities and way of life re-oriented around God. We should be living the gospel for all to see. In 2019 this has to include reducing our carbon footprint, reducing our impact on the earth, using less plastic and fuel. If only it was easy to do.

Questions for teachers

1. How do you feel about your lifestyle? Do you identify your carbon footprint as 'sin'?
2. As we aim to inspire moral courage in young people, how does this relate to pollution and climate change?
3. How do you respond to the statement that a major 'iniquity' is our reluctance to face up to bad news about our planet?

4. Ecosystems

At the A Rocha base in Raglan teams of researchers, ecologists, kids and volunteers have been working to protect the seabirds who nest on Karioi mountain. They've got rid of predators, helped birds hatch, cared for chicks and seen heartening progress. As bird numbers have increased, so the forest itself has become healthier. They have discovered that the birds need the trees for habitat, but also the trees need the birds in order to thrive.

21st century science is ecosystem science. Once upon a time science looked for causality, identified 'dependent and independent variables', one thing leading to another thing. What's happening in our world now breaks this open. Environmental changes are "non-linear" (*Rockström, above*). That's because our whole planet is an ecosystem, made up of countless other ecosystems, each inter-dependent.

We know about this, theologically. Central to the Christian faith are ideas around communion, fellowship, and divine presence. God in Christian theology is Three in One –

the ultimate ecosystem! Three beings co-existing, co-eternal, co-relating, within and through each other; together, and only together, One Almighty God.

Modern science is only just catching up with what the Bible taught all along, that diversity is fundamental to life. Our scriptures about creation carefully emphasise that all things are created by God. Nothing is irrelevant or bad. Every living thing on earth and every element in the universe is formed from non-existence by an ultimate reality, and blessed as good. It's only us people who figure that some forms of rock or plant or animal are valuable and some are pests to be killed. Clever us, designing more and more and bigger and better strategies for getting money from the earth and getting rid of stuff we don't want. Except, now, we are realising that was not so clever after all, because, turns out, not honouring the diversity of ecosystems can cause the whole thing to collapse. Bummer. Problem is, it's not the people with the money who pay the price. It's people without resources who suffer the effects of environmental degradation. And it's other living creatures that die out.

What does our theology teach us about extinctions? How does God feel about each and every creature he has made, no matter how small? I can only begin to guess at God's grief and suffering. I have no time for those old ideas of God as immutable, impassive, distant. You can't tell me God doesn't care passionately about the universe, especially this particular fabulous planet!

We are an ecosystem. Every change affects every other part. We're a body, we can't lop off a limb and expect to rock on. We're a vine, connected, not just as people but as all of creation through God the 3-in-1.

Questions for teachers

1. What do you think of the idea that God as Trinity is the ultimate ecosystem? How does this fit with your understanding of God?
2. Do extinctions matter? Why?
What is a Christian faith perspective on extinctions and biodiversity loss?
3. How do you see ideas about ecosystems, inter-causality and inter-dependence coming through across a range of disciplines and curriculum areas?
4. What do young people instinctively understand about the complexity of relationships between things? Do they 'get it'?

5. The knowability of things

I would like to finish by discussing epistemology, faith and the scientific method. How do we know what we know?

Let's face it, there is a deal of suspicion in the church about science. Christians are afraid that science will disprove the Bible. Some Christians teach, despite all evidence to the contrary, that the earth is only 4,000 years old, based on a calculation of biblical geneology. This breeds confusion about how we know things to be true, and a mistrust of scientific method.

Never before in history has it been more urgent and critical to know what is happening in our world. Science matters now more than ever before. This is no time for pious reluctance to face facts.

The Bible values learning based on the evidence of our senses; 'taste and see' (Psalm 34:8). Jesus often encouraged people to look and listen: "Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear." (Matthew 13:15). I read in scripture a trusting of lived experience and the practice of evidence-based learning. When the Israelites faced strategic and military decisions they sent out scouts to check out the lie of the land. Proverbs ring over and over with a call to prioritise wisdom, insight, knowledge and understanding.

Truth is a high value in scripture, and the Spirit of Jesus is the Spirit of truth. Truth is not always objective or obvious; it requires searching, seeking, uncovering. The Spirit "searches everything", the human heart and the depths of God (1 Corinthians 2:10).

There are always political ideologies trying to take over the church. They tell people to think and act this way or that way because someone in authority says so. But the Bible never insists that we believe anything just because we're told to. Scripture keeps coming back to the Holy Spirit, available to each and every follower of Jesus, who teaches the truth of God to us directly. Revelation is not only in the past; it is a living reality. Scripture was not just inspired by the Spirit at the time of writing, but inspires us as we read.

Revelation is both personal and corporate, both past and present.

I disagree with 'young earth Creationism' not because I doubt the Bible, not at all, but because it is not biblical enough. It takes one single word, "day", from Genesis 1 & 2, and constructs on this an entire world view. It denies other interpretations, and the biblical principle that God's timing is not our timing. It denies the importance of the changes affecting our planet. It denies the inspiration of the Holy Spirit given to those who study the earth, and the evidence of our own eyes as we see the age of rocks and mountains. As such it is a form of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. In my opinion it is wrong, dangerously wrong, and should not be promoted in our churches or schools.

I want to uphold the importance of science, and affirm the biblical mandate for seeking what is true, bringing our best game to learning about our world. Christians have a higher authority and deeper truth than science can define, but this must not belittle or demean the vital task of science in revealing what is happening around us.

The most important point about revelation, however, is that God chooses to be known. This must be the last word, that anything we know about anything comes from God, from God's heart for us. God's own self-revealing is an outpouring of truth, grace and love, known in creation, known in the Word made flesh, known through the Spirit of truth. We can and should seek the truth, but it's at God's initiative. So we find our place in the vast trajectory of the universe from the beginning to the end of time. We stand with minds, eyes and ears open, to understand more, so that we might more faithfully follow Christ in our time.

Questions for teachers

1. What are your convictions about the process and principles of science?
2. How do these relate to your faith in Christ?
3. How do you respond to those who mistrust science?
4. What are the questions young people have about what is true?