

A DIFFERENT SHADE OF GREEN

*A Biblical Approach to Environmentalism
and the Dominion Mandate*

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FOREWORD:
A DIFFERENT SHADE OF UNCLE

UNCLE GORDON, GORDO, DR. WILSON ... my beloved uncle has worn all of these titles with pride. When I was young, he was the energetic, outdoorsy Wilson who would take me frog catching, bug collecting, nature-doc watching, and even on one disappointing but enlightening occasion, fossil digging. (I wanted dinosaurs where only leaves and the very rare fish had been trapped.)

His influence on me has been significant in ways that I cannot fully process. The way I relate to any old ant on my shoe has been fundamentally shaped by my uncle's deep, contagious affection for every single creeping and crawling thing God has created for us, with an especial love for the often overlooked underdogs, those common creatures he so fondly calls "little brown jobs." They,

despite not having a mating dance to match the birds of paradise, are just as miraculous, just as divinely crafted, and just as much part of the canon of natural revelation as the rare and the bizarre.

When I was choosing a graduate school, I headed across the continent to be close to my uncle and his family and reacquaint myself with his contagious sparkle in the great outdoors. When I was married and moved back to Idaho to raise my own children, I began a campaign to bring Uncle Gordon's clan back as well. Eventually, we talked the owner of the house next door into selling and landed ourselves some of the best neighbors money can't possibly buy. When my eldest was headed into kindergarten, his Great-Uncle Gordon took him tromping down some railroad tracks beside the Snake River where they captured a young gopher snake. That snake was promptly named Jack and became a member of our family for the next decade. One year in, when Jack was ill and dying, it was Uncle Gordon who sat on the porch with us and taught us how to force-feed the little guy tiny balls of raw hamburger, eventually nursing him back to full health. Jack now rests beneath a marked grave in our side yard, awaiting the resurrection. Dave, a robust black-headed python, carries the snake torch in our family these days.

Uncle Gordon's influence is even why two (now massive) tortoises have been grazing in my yard for ten years. My kids can tell you, I struggle to say no to reptiles.

1. FROM BROWN TO GREEN: A SPECTRUM OF ATTITUDES HELD BY CHRISTIANS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

*So fallen man has dominion over nature, but he uses it wrongly.
The Christian is called upon to exhibit this dominion, but to
exhibit it rightly: Treating the thing as having value in itself,
exercising dominion without being destructive.*

FRANCIS A. SCHAEFFER¹

AS THE OUTDOOR HUMORIST PATRICK McManus once wrote (very aptly, I might add), “Everyone now points firmly and with great authority in a different direction . . . The most forceful personality in the group gets his way . . . The most forceful personality usually

1. Francis A. Schaeffer and Udo W. Middelman, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (1970; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 72.

turns out to rank on intelligence scales somewhere between sage hens and bowling balls.”² This quote was referring to a group of people in the woods deciding which direction to look for the car and then getting lost. But it also applies remarkably well to many environmental policy-makers we see today. Environmental policies are often not formulated by thinkers. They are formulated by forceful personalities who have a knack for saying what itching ears want to hear in order to gain political influence. This is true regarding the environment or anything else. We Christians are too often tossed to and fro by winds of doctrine issuing from leaders in the secular green agenda and reactionaries against them. In this raging war for political influence it is of utmost importance to anchor ourselves in the Word of God so we can think and act biblically on this very important topic.

So why am I writing this book? First, mankind was commanded to take godly dominion (Gen. 1:28), and unfortunately secularists have taken up this global responsibility motivated by a number of godless world-views which have at best produced mixed results. They have been at the helm because Christians have largely abdicated in this area. Second, Christians aren’t like-minded and they’re supposed to be, particularly on this issue, since the Bible speaks to it so clearly. There is a wide

2. Patrick F. McManus, *A Fine and Pleasant Misery* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981), 16.

range of opinions among them on the environment, but very few are carefully thought out and use Scripture as their standard. Often people default to some opinion handed down to them by a very opinionated Christian friend or parent, and that opinion isn't necessarily biblical. Third, there is a huge amount of wonderful biodiversity God created that needs godly dominion. Unfortunately, many Christians are indifferent or apathetic towards nature and biological diversity and have a wrong-headed understanding of the dominion mandate. As a biologist, I have an M.S. in Entomology and a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and Public Policy in which I studied the reproductive ecology of the eastern box turtle. I've done lab research in molecular genetics of bacteria and field research in plant science. In short, I have worked in a variety of subdisciplines in biology and have taught a broad array of biology courses for about 30 years. In addition, as a Christian I have spent a lot of time studying what the Scripture teaches us on this very important matter. I don't want to follow green fads, but neither do I want to fall off the other side of the boat and reject everything that extreme environmentalists hold dear. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps. 24:1, κϒ). Environmentalists didn't create the earth or the life on it and they certainly don't own it. I want God's people to reflect on how He views His own creation and how the dominion mandate should be

carried out in these modern times where our technological power can be used for great good or great evil towards the living creation. This is a daunting task, but it can be accomplished if we are humble and eager to learn.

I realize it is hard for many to jettison dearly held assumptions, but if we become convinced that they don't line up with Scripture, it is time to give them the boot. I also hope that this book will help you see the living creation through new eyes. Consider the terms "creation" and "the environment." It's funny how the name attached to our surroundings can change how we value it. Our environment is part of the creation, but using the word "environment" makes it sound like it is the realm and responsibility of secular environmentalists. However, since God made it and we are His heirs, we should be the ones who exercise our authority over it.

As a Christian biologist who is very keen about God's living creation, it's no wonder I've come across a range of opinions (or lack thereof) on environmental issues. So, before I delve into this thorny topic and attempt to lay out a biblically defensible position of how we should view and care for this immense gift from God, I want to first lay out a range of stereotypes held by Christians on the vast topic of the environment. None of these extremes appear to have arisen from careful, thoughtful Bible study. I don't hope to cover every possible view, but you'll get a notion of the broad spectrum of opinions

bandied about in Christian circles. This current state of affairs won't do. The universal Church is a far cry away from being like-minded on the environment and every other conceivable topic. Nevertheless, our Lord's command to be like-minded still stands (Phil. 2:2; 1 Pet. 3:8).

CHRISTIAN STEREOTYPES ON THE ENVIRONMENT

1. Anti-green Andy: His position is held primarily in his gut, not in his head. His beliefs are embedded in a deep personal conviction of mankind's dominion over creation, private property rights, and American individualism. He believes that God made us in His image and put us in charge over all creation. Therefore, we are to fill it up with *us*, using or discarding whatever is in our way. We should develop, consume, exploit the earth's resources with little to no concern for cultivating and beautifying them for future generations such that they thrive and become more glorious under our care. Let future generations figure out how to survive in the smoking crater we left them. Anyone who rejects man's dictatorship over creation due to the belief that we are no more important than animals will receive his palpable disdain. He is deathly afraid to be associated with anything an environmentalist may hold dear, so he defaults to a contrarian position on all environmental

- concerns. He sees their silly excesses, spin of the data, wrong-headed thinking, and ridiculous heavy-handed governmental regulations, but doesn't want to bother distinguishing baby from bathwater.
2. PreMill Pete: He thinks God only cares about our spiritual state. Getting people saved is all that really matters. He thinks our bodies are necessary to hand out Gospel tracts and our living environment is God's temporary provision to keep our earthly tents propped up while we evangelize during our fleeting tenure on earth. There is no need to concern ourselves with the state of the physical creation because in the end it's all gonna burn with fervent heat (2 Pet. 3:10), probably sooner rather than later. We just need to get people saved before the Rapture. Once we're off this rock we can live forever in our heavenly dwellings.
 3. Apathetic April: She hasn't really thought about it much. She just exists, eats, sleeps, works, Facebooks, watches movies, and goes to church. She has a vague notion that we are to be good stewards. Heck if she knows what that means . . . recycle?
 4. Green Greta: She claims that Christians are supposed to be good stewards. That means uber-green. Everything she eats is 100% organic and gluten-free. GMOs are from the pit of Hell. She recycles every conceivable thing. She's a global warming alarmist

and therefore is guilt-ridden about exhaling CO₂ and driving her car. She attempts to atone for her carbon footprint sins by acquiring eco-indulgences. They include driving a hybrid car, shopping at the co-op, walking to work (when she's not late), and taking quick lukewarm showers. She also plans to have 1.7 kids. She loves fair trade because it's fair and it's not nice to be unfair. She voted for Obama because he's green and that's cool. She gets more upset at the death of endangered animals than abortion because endangered animals are rare and people aren't.

There are many other positions that fall between these exaggerated stereotypes. Now, you might be saying to yourself, "Gordon, *you* might be wrong too!" I freely acknowledge that possibility. However, I have spent my career studying these issues as they relate to the Bible and to biology and to the environmental movement at large, so read what I have to say and evaluate my application of Scripture, like the Bereans (Acts 17:11).

In case you still think I'm stereotyping unfairly, let me mention just a few real-life examples. And rest assured that I've met people like this face-to-face. I'm sure you have too.

Anti-green Andy: You couldn't ask for a better Anti-green Andy than Ann Coulter. As she said on live TV, "God gave us the earth. We have dominion over the

plants, the animals, the trees. God said, ‘Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It’s yours.’”³

The PreMill Pete approach is perfectly summarized by the folks at the Rapture Ready website. “I can only ask where the Bible even hints that saving the whales and fighting global warming are part of the Great Commission. Dealing with environmental problems needs to be left to the politicians . . . If the world is going to be ‘dissolved,’ there is no need for us to become too attached to it.”⁴

It’s harder to find published examples of Apathetic April because she hasn’t thought about environmental issues long enough to put two words together. But apathy about the environment has reached record highs in the past few years, according to Gallup. You can confirm this by asking your cubicle neighbor how often he thinks about stewarding the environment.⁵

Green Gretas are everywhere as well, because it’s the cool (and funded) opinion to have. The very progressive “religion and culture writer” Jonathan Merritt is a perfect example, as he got a book deal out of his opinions:

3. Anne Coulter, guest appearance on *Hannity and Colmes*, June 20, 2001.

4. Todd Strandberg, “Bible Prophecy and Environmentalism,” *Rapture Ready*, February 8, 2018, <http://www.raptureready.us/rre-environmental.html>.

5. Jeffrey M. Jones, “In U.S., Concern About Environmental Threats Eases,” Gallup, March 25, 2015, http://news.gallup.com/poll/182105/concern-environmental-threats-eases.aspx?utm_source=Politics&utm_medium=newsfeed&utm_campaign=tiles.

“God is green. The idea seems bizarre, almost trivial. Yet, I’m as sure of that statement as I am that two plus two is four and the mixing of red and yellow makes orange.”⁶

I don’t want to guilt trip anyone; I want to encourage each of us to see where we fall on this spectrum and then ask ourselves honestly whether our opinion is formed from a mishmash of opinions handed down from folks, friends, and foes, or whether it is a position solidly grounded in Scripture and good science. This requires careful thought and a love for the truth. Ideas that conform to Scripture should be kept and fine-tuned according to the Bible, and ideas that don’t measure up to Scripture or scientific scrutiny must be discarded regardless of how near and dear they are to us. Much of what scientists say isn’t factual at all; often it is their opinions based on highly tenuous assumptions riding on the ethos of their scientific credentials. Being a part of the scientific community for so long, I have developed a knack for seeing a hidden (or not so hidden) agenda and knowing when scientists are really on thin ice. When this is the case, I trust them about as far as I can throw their hybrid car. Proverbs 18:17 says, “The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.” There may be environmental policies that seem to be good at face value, but we should

6. Jonathan Merritt, *Green Like God* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2010), 1.

2. THE FOUNDATION FOR CONSERVATION

*In dire necessity somebody might write another 'Iliad,' or paint
an 'Angelus,' but fashion a goose? 'I, the Lord, will answer
them. The hand of the Lord hath done this, and the Holy One
of Israel created it.'*

ALDO LEOPOLD⁷

IN THIS CHAPTER I WANT TO ESTABLISH that the dominion mandate (Gen. 1:28) is the foundational command behind conservation, and that the underlying reason for this imperative is God's own evaluation of His work. As is the case on almost every topic, the answers start in Genesis. Genesis 1:31 says, "And

7. Aldo Leopold and Charles Walsh Schwartz, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: OUP, 1968), 229-230.

God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.”

We see earlier in chapter 1 that God created the plants (day 3), swimming and flying animals (day 5), beasts of the earth, livestock, creeping things and man (day 6). In verse 31 He clearly states that all life, along with everything else, “was very good.” This verse is extremely important because it’s foundational to shaping our opinion of all creation. In order for us to have a good and proper assessment of all of life in all of its diversity, we need to know what value God places on His own work. If God painted a picture on a canvas it would be prudent of us to first see what He thinks of it before we go shooting off our mouth about it.

Many Christians are eager to make judgments on God’s artwork, as if they know better about what He should or shouldn’t have created. I realize that many people aren’t keen on a variety of plants and animals for various reasons, e.g. thistles, stinging nettles, poison ivy, yellow jackets, spiders, slugs, snakes, mosquitoes, etc. We say they’re dangerous, scary, damaging to our property, a health hazard, a nuisance, etc. I grant that many of them are a problem and need to be dealt with as a threat or hazard, but we must keep in mind that many were twisted after the Fall in a variety of ways. His statement, “It was very good,” was pronounced *before*