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# Becoming More Mindful of Creation

BY R. WESLEY SMITH

**Christian organizations like A Rocha and Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies lead congregations to be more involved in earth-keeping by reading theology, exploring the place where they live, educating themselves and others about environmental concerns, and building communities of earth-keeping.**

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**W**hile the Church through every era has answered the call “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8), its discernment of the most pressing needs of God’s creatures to address has varied. In late antiquity Christians founded hospitals to offer hospitality to the sick and various sorts of schools to train the clergy or to provide religious and moral training for children who were no longer receiving it at home. In the high middle ages they started universities with specialized faculty to teach theology, law, medicine, and philosophy. Beginning in the seventeenth century believers like Anthony Benezet and William Wilberforce helped abolish the modern slave trade. More recently Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin pioneered “worker houses,” intentional communities to address the needs of immigrants living in American slums.

As each era has had its own pressing concerns to address, discerning believers have interpreted Christ’s commission to his disciples – “Go into the all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15) – in various ways that address those concerns and glorify God.

During the last few decades of the twentieth century environmental concerns have swelled. Countless reports and studies show the effects of global warming, the increasing speed at which species are becoming extinct, the

increasing rate of desertification, the pollution of water sources and the air we breathe, and so on.<sup>1</sup> Many individuals and groups are active in raising awareness and are working to reverse the negative environmental effects. How will the Church respond to these environmental concerns?

Authors like Michael S. Northcott, Christopher J. H. Wright, Wendell Berry, and Steven Bouma-Prediger are challenging and guiding believers to engage in creation care.<sup>2</sup> Christian organizations such as A Rocha and Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies are working to educate Christians about the degradation of the environment and to organize their response to its needs. I will refer often to the work of these two organizations as I discuss how congregations can become more involved in earth-keeping through theology, place, education, and community.<sup>3</sup>



The first thing that the Church must do in response to the environmental concerns of our age is to think through its theology carefully. An apologia of earth-care must be worked out and a theology of ecology must be developed.

Sometimes when we do environmental theology we are tempted to dwell only in the realm of ideas, critiquing competing systems of thought and articulating our own ideal. Or we may be tempted to swing the other direction and become totally immersed in practical actions – such as recycling our newspaper, buying a more fuel efficient car, or ‘consuming’ less stuff – while we sniff at those who do not monitor their personal habits so closely. However, an exclusive focus on either ideals or actions will make us look pretty foolish. Neither our lofty ideas nor particular practices are the panacea we sometimes think they are. Both are important, but we should never look to either one as the sole way that we care for creation.

Time spent in theological and practical reflection on the environment is of immeasurable value. Just as a fish moves and lives in water, humans move and live in creation without giving it much thought. Engagement in the arena of creation-care begins by identifying our context, answering questions about where we are and how we can glorify God through what we do in the place where we are.

Careful theological reflection is necessary to articulate what we know about God, ourselves, and the rest of the created order, and how we know it. For instance, it reminds us that humanity is both *part of* creation and is *distinctive within* it. Today there are powerful, competing ideologies about the relationship of humanity to creation that neglect one of these truths. On the one hand, Christopher Wright explains, the Church must resist “destructive global capitalism” that is an expression of human exceptionalism, seeing all the world as our resource for more and more “minerals and oil,... land to graze cattle for meat,...exotic animals and birds, to meet obscene human fashions in clothes, toys, ornaments, and aphrodisiacs,...commercial or tourist exploitation of fragile and irreplaceable habitats,...[and] market

domination through practices” that exploit resource countries and their people. On the other hand the Church must resist the “pantheistic, neo-pagan and New Age philosophies...[that] are passionate about the natural order [which includes humans], but from a very different perspective”; they ascribe to nature an “independent potency” and worship it as if it were a deity.<sup>4</sup> Both of these ideologies are idolatrous, placing human greed or nature itself in place of the Triune God. If the Church is to live out its mission to “all the world,” then it must remain attentive to her head, Christ, and avoid the temptation to confer its allegiance to anything else.

Both A Rocha and Au Sable offer the Church good examples of being mindful about the theology that forms the basis for earth-keeping. A Rocha states their theological foundation: “Underlying all we do is our biblical faith in the living God, who made the world, loves it and entrusts it to the care of human society.”<sup>5</sup> Au Sable has done the same: “We are a Christian institute of environmental studies with the mission of bringing both the Christian community and the public at large to a fuller, deeper, and better understanding of the stewardship of God’s creation.”<sup>6</sup> Both organizations express mindfulness of theology.



Even as we are theorizing about a theology of earth-keeping, taking practical actions to care for the earth is also essential—for what good are our ideas about the environment if they are not worked out with our hands? The second task for Christians responding to the environmental concerns of our age is to know, love, and care for the particular places where we live. Once again, A Rocha and Au Sable can show us the way, for they are intimately connected to specific locales where participants can learn to care for creation.

A Rocha operates field centers in over nineteen countries on six continents;

seven of its project locations are in the United States. The education and work being done at each center is specific for the location. For example, A Rocha France is at work helping farmers restore the original wetlands of the Vallée des Baux. Their theology insists that God’s creation has intrinsic value because it is his creation, and their desire to care for what God cares about has motivated them to mindful action.<sup>7</sup>

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Au Sable's home base is located near the town of Mancelona in north-west Lower Michigan, but it also operates campuses on Whidbey Island, Washington, in Costa Rica, and in southern India. Students and adults of all ages do research and take courses in environmental science specific to these locations. Currently sixty-seven Christian colleges and universities in the United States support the Institute's research and give academic credit for its coursework.<sup>8</sup>

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To know and act with love in a particular location is not easy. There is often a troubling disconnect between ourselves and the places we inhabit. To make us more aware of our dislocation from our places and to help us reconnect to them, Loren and Mary-Ruth Wilkinson at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, recommend that we do some thought experi-

ments. We might trace the water we drink from precipitation to tap; calculate how many days it will be until the Moon is full; describe the soil around our home; list the primary subsistence techniques of the culture(s) that lived in our area before recent years; name five native edible plants in our area and their season(s) of availability; note the direction that winter storms generally come from; investigate where our garbage goes; find out how long is the growing season for various plants where we live; identify five trees in our area, and find out which of them are native; identify five resident birds and any migratory birds in our area; learn how humans used the local lands during in the nineteenth century; discover the primary geological event or process that shaped the land; point north from where one is sitting right now; list the wildflowers that are the first to bloom where we live; identify the rocks and minerals found nearby; note how many people live next to us, and their names; notice how much gasoline we use each week on average; list the developed and potential energy resources in our region; describe the plans for large development in our area; and identify the largest wild region nearby.<sup>9</sup>

The relevance of such thought experiments may not be apparent at first because, most likely, they produce frustration or embarrassment rather than action. However, we must realize that knowledge of God's creation informs us about God. As we begin to understand creation as one of God's great gifts to us—a means not only of food and shelter, but of knowing God—we realize our lives are directly connected to our environments and we begin to take more responsibility for the world, especially the local ecosystem in

which we live. Of course, such thought experiments are not the best way to know where we live; as Bouma-Prediger notes, the richest awareness of place comes from direct experience.<sup>10</sup> We never really know a particular ecological zone by merely reading about it in a textbook or online. Earth-care requires that we closely observe our places and the various interactions therein, and recognize the effects of our own actions on them.

Admittedly, most congregations are more comfortable theorizing about earth-keeping in general than acting to keep their particular regions healthy. But we should recognize this as a theological mistake. It is traceable to the spirit-matter dichotomy that is so difficult for Christians to shake: the tendency to value spirit much more than the physical world God has made and of which we are fundamentally a part. Here is where a holistic theology undergirding the Church's work in the world is essential. We must remind ourselves of our belief that "through [Christ] God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven" (Colossians 1:20). We should take a hard, honest look at what we are preaching and teaching, verbally and non-verbally. Where are the inconsistencies? How can we worship and glorify God in all that we do, including the areas of ecology and the environment?



In addition to the areas of mindfulness we have discussed – doing better theology of creation care and practicing earth-keeping in the particular places where we live – two more areas are crucial. These are sharing what we learn with others and building communities of people who support one another in their caring for the earth.

Around the A Rocha field centers and Au Sable campuses, education takes a variety of forms and covers a plethora of creation-care topics, both scientific and theological. These organizations realize how important it is to share with others what they have been learning in their research. Both are mindful about educating the local communities about their watersheds, food sources, and ecosystems. To this end they welcome many school children, congregations, and local environmental groups to their sites for opportunities to learn something new or practice the earth caregiving skills they have gained.

These forms of education engender mindfulness about creation not only within these outreach groups, but also in their teachers. For this reason Au Sable Institute runs an Environmental Education Internship Program that trains college graduates, who have enjoyed their own immersive college-level courses at Au Sable, to teach and lead younger students in these outreach groups.<sup>11</sup>

Au Sable and A Rocha emphasize learning about caring for the earth in groups. The mastery of information and skills of caregiving, which can seem so overwhelming to an individual, is more easily accomplished among the supportive relationships in a community that is concerned for the environment. These organizations recognize that congregations can be such com-

munities for earth-keeping. Thus, each year A Rocha UK creates an environmental-themed resource pack for churches that include sermon helps, worship materials, and Bible-study lessons for adults and children.<sup>12</sup> Au Sable offers year-round weekend retreats for churches at their Michigan campus. In addition to various outdoor recreational activities, participants enjoy “guided nature hikes and devotionals focused on stewardship” that provide “an opportunity to meet God in a personal way through experiencing the beauty of His creation,...learn more about the earth, nature and all that God has created,...[and] achieve a greater awareness of everyone’s responsibility as caretakers of this world.”<sup>13</sup>



Many people worry about where to start in becoming more mindful of creation. Should they start by reading theology, exploring the place where they live, educating themselves and others about environmental concerns, or building communities of earth-keeping? It seems like too much to consider at one time. To make creation-care more a delightful challenge than an overwhelming task, Loren and Mary-Ruth Wilkinson begin their book with the following sound advice.

1. Don’t try to do everything at once.
2. Avoid over-simplifying complex issues: don’t become an “environmental fundamentalist.”
3. Doing will win others over more than talking.
4. Laugh at yourself.
5. Prioritize: people and their feelings always come before projects, favorite problems.
6. Don’t despair at the magnitude of the problem; the earth is the Lord’s.
7. Don’t make an environmental ideology the center of your faith.
8. Don’t leave the Christian mind behind in approaching environmental problems.
9. Wherever you are, and whatever stage of life, you can always do *something*.
10. Don’t become so occupied with problems that you fail to see the glory of the creation and the Creator.<sup>14</sup>

For congregations the first step might be to “get on the same page” by taking the time to develop a theology of ecology. Church study groups will find a number of useful resources to point them toward a Christian perspective on the environment that is theocentric, biblically inspired, and scientifically informed.<sup>15</sup> In this stage, and the ones that follow, it is important to remember that God is at work in the world and the Holy Spirit will guide the Church. Ask that God’s Spirit would guide your thinking as new ideas are developed. And spend time listening.

Build a community of members committed to earth-keeping. Do not try to take this cause on alone. Most likely some members are already interested in ecological issues: get to know who they are and how they are engaged in creation-care. Perhaps a committee should be formed or a deacon or elder appointed to earth-keeping. Locate organizations like A Rocha or Au Sable that are involved in creation-care and partner with them. They will provide resources to support the congregations that join them.

Form action groups and recruit team members with like-minded interests. Start small with something like recycling waste paper products at the church, replacing Styrofoam plates and plastic silverware at church dinners with an eco-friendly option, turning down the heat or air-conditioning when a building is not in use, or creating a community garden on the church grounds to grow food for the hungry in the neighborhood. The options are endless, but the key thing is to succeed at small achievable goals before adding more.

Above all, do not sell your congregation short. Who knows, among your members may be another activist like Saint Francis, who after reading the Gospel of Matthew chose a life of simplicity. Or another gifted writer like John Calvin who taught others about earth-keeping when he wrote (on Genesis 2:15), “let every one regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses. Then he will neither conduct himself dissolutely, nor corrupt by abuse those things which God requires to be preserved.”<sup>16</sup> Or another poet like Maltbie Babcock who taught us to sing:

This is my Father’s world,  
and to my listening ears  
all nature sings, and round me rings  
the music of the spheres.

This is my Father’s world:  
he shines in all that’s fair;  
in the rustling grass I hear him pass,  
he speaks to me ev’rywhere.<sup>17</sup>

The Church, as the Body of Christ, is made up of many members who are wonderfully diverse in their gifts to address the issues of creation-care.

## NOTES

1 For a more extensive catalogue of environmental woes, see E. G. Nisbet, *Leaving Eden: To Protect and Manage the Earth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 109–139; Nick Spencer, Robert White, and Virginia Vroblecky, *Christianity, Climate Change, and Sustainable Living* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, 2009), 11–46; and Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, second edition (Baker Academic, 2010), 23–56.

2 See, for instance, Michael S. Northcott’s *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996), *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming* (Marynoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), and *Climate Change and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). Christopher J. H. Wright describes creation

care as essential to missional living in *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 2006). For a good introduction to Wendell Berry's writings, see *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, edited by Norman Wirzba (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2003). Steven Bouma-Prediger's classic *For the Beauty of the Earth* (2010 [2001]) is reviewed by David McDuffie in "Christian Vision of Creation Care" on pp. 89-93 of this issue.

3 A Rocha ([www.arocha.org](http://www.arocha.org)) and Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies ([ausable.org](http://ausable.org)) are just two of many fine ways that Christians are responding to pressing environmental concerns. I offer them as examples of how believers might collectively care for creation. There are many other people and groups who are working in this area that deserve the support and encouragement of mindful Christians.

4 Wright, *The Mission of God*, 417-418.

5 "About A Rocha," (accessed March 1, 2012), [www.arocha.org/int-en/who.html](http://www.arocha.org/int-en/who.html).

6 "About – Au Sable," (accessed March 1, 2012), [ausable.org/about/](http://ausable.org/about/).

7 "Where We Work," (accessed May 18, 2012), [www.arocha.org/int-en/work/world.html](http://www.arocha.org/int-en/work/world.html), and "The vallée des Baux," (accessed May 18, 2012), [www.arocha.org/fr-en/work/conservation/baux.html](http://www.arocha.org/fr-en/work/conservation/baux.html).

8 "From Nature Camp to Environmental Institute: The Story of Au Sable," (accessed May 18, 2012), [ausable.org/about/history/](http://ausable.org/about/history/), and "Sustaining Partners and Participating Colleges," (accessed May 18, 2012), [ausable.org/about/participating\\_institutions/](http://ausable.org/about/participating_institutions/).

9 Loren Wilkinson and Mary Ruth Wilkinson, *Caring for Creation in Your Own Backyard* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing 2001 [1992]), 214. Their list is adapted from Bill Duvall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as If Nature Mattered* (Layton, UT: Peregrine Smith, 1985).

10 Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 37.

11 "Church and Community: Environmental Education Program Overview," (accessed June 1, 2012), [ausable.org/church\\_and\\_community/community\\_schools\\_program/](http://ausable.org/church_and_community/community_schools_program/).

12 "Resources," (accessed June 1, 2012), [www.arocha.org/gb-en/resources.html](http://www.arocha.org/gb-en/resources.html).

13 "Church and Community: Retreats at Au Sable—Great Lakes Campus," (accessed June 1, 2012), [ausable.org/church\\_and\\_community/conferences\\_and\\_retreats/](http://ausable.org/church_and_community/conferences_and_retreats/).

14 Wilkinson and Wilkinson, *Caring for Creation in Your Own Backyard*, 8.

15 See, for instance, the books reviewed by David C. McDuffie in "Christian Vision for Creation Care" and by Presian Burroughs in "Reading Scripture Greenly" in this issue on pp. 84-93.

16 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis, Volume 1*, translated by John King (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), (accessed April 5, 2012), [www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.viii.i.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.viii.i.html).

17 Maltbie D. Babcock, "This Is My Father's World," verses 1a and 2b, (accessed April 15, 2012), [www.hymnary.org/text/this\\_is\\_my\\_fathers\\_world\\_and\\_to\\_my](http://www.hymnary.org/text/this_is_my_fathers_world_and_to_my).



**R. WESLEY SMITH**

is a freelance writer and recent intern at the World Hunger Relief Farm in Waco, TX.