

# Little Things Mean a Lot

BY RAYMOND BAILEY

Though called to care for God's good world, we are polluting the environment and killing our children. I was hesitant to undertake this subject because, I thought, I'm "preaching to the choir." Yet after a little personal survey I realized that for me to *know* better is not always for me to *act* better.

---

*The earth dries up and withers,  
the world languishes and withers;  
the heavens languish together with the earth.  
The earth lies polluted  
under its inhabitants;  
for they have transgressed laws,  
violated the statutes,  
broken the everlasting covenant.  
Therefore a curse devours the earth,  
and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;  
therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled,  
and few people are left.*

*Isaiah 24:4-6*

**S**ome Christians' resistance to dealing with the environment as a matter of their faith is difficult for me to understand. From Genesis to Revelation the Scripture speaks of creation as God's good gift and the arena in which the glory of God is revealed. The Scripture also portrays a history of God's direction and empowerment of human agents to be stewards to carry out the Divine will. It is remarkable, for instance, how often Jesus used paradigms of masters and stewards in his parables. Unfortu-

nately, however, the parables usually warn of stewards who have failed in their duties.

The Genesis 1 account of creation pictures all that exists—animal, plant, firmament, and human—as a good and purposeful work of God. The fundamental purpose of humanity is to care for creation. “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’” (Genesis 1:28). The meaning of humankind’s dominion over the earth is a source of much debate among Christians. Some argue that everything in the universe is intended for human satisfaction and pleasure. Their attitude is one of consumption with no regard for the needs of future generations. Other Christians believe that we are to participate with God’s spirit in the ongoing work of creation. We have to do our part to provide for the preservation and growth of God’s good world. Scripture suggests that the pillaging of the earth, if not sin, is the result of sin. Hosea’s assessment of the results of covenant breaking in his day seems apt for the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

*There is no faithfulness, no love,  
no acknowledgment of God in the land.*

*There is only cursing, lying and murder,  
stealing and adultery;  
they break all bounds,  
and bloodshed follows bloodshed.*

*Because of this the land mourns,  
and all who live in it waste away;  
the beasts of the field and the birds of the air  
and the fish of the sea are dying.*

*... my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.*

*Hosea 4:1a-3, 6 NIV<sup>r</sup>*

If “dominion” means that God trusts us to care for earth, sky, seas, and creatures, then we are not doing a very good job.

One problem in dealing with a subject like the environment is the difficulty of grasping scientific theory and philosophical abstractions. Yet we do not have to understand chemistry, biology, or ethical theory to see the results of pollution and land abuse on human beings. As believers in the incarnation, Christians are grasped by images of human suffering, including that of our savior impaled on a tree. Though some critics of social justice preaching say that we should preach only Christ and Him crucified, can we

talk about Jesus and the crucifixion without looking also at those for whom Christ suffered? Is not the cross ever present in the heart of God and in the heart of creation? What was the way for which Christ was willing to sacrifice his life? When I think about Jesus, I think about one who cared about the life and well-being of people, about them being fed and having their basic human needs met I think about one who was in the healing business and who wanted children to be healthy and happy.

---

We could not look at a *particular* child in danger of death and not be willing to make major sacrifices and suffer significant inconveniences to prevent that death. Yet children who are suffering and dying because of environmental degradation could be saved if enough of us would make minor sacrifices and endure a little discomfort.

---

What sacrifice would you be willing to make to save the life of a child? We could not look at a *particular* child in danger of death and not be willing to make major sacrifices and suffer significant inconveniences to prevent that death. Yet children who are suffering and dying because of environmental degradation could be saved if enough of us would make minor sacrifices and endure a little discomfort.

The world will be a long time recovering from the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center in New York City. The shock of the deaths of thousands of people will linger for a long time for those who saw the horrific scene played over and over on television. If we could go back and *do something* to save those lives, rather than digging through the rubble and providing for the survivors, we would not hesitate as individuals, as a nation, or as a church. But there are large numbers of people dying whom we could save. The truth of the matter is that 31,000 people died on September 10, and 31,000 people died on September 12, but because those were daily occurrences on the world scene, the media did not report their deaths on the front page of the newspaper or on the television evening news. Outside of the United States one child out of every five dies before the age of five and an overwhelming number of these deaths are related to environmental problems. Does God care? Should Christians be concerned? Should we hide our faces in our hymnbooks and Bibles and leave these matters to the economists and politicians? These thousands die because of problems of earth and air abuse, gluttony and waste in the industrial world, and poor distribution of the world's resources. For instance, between 40 and 300 million poor people who live in tropical regions are at risk for hunger and

starvation because of reduced agricultural output due to global warming.

We are polluting the air and killing our own children. Infectious disease is no longer the most common cause for illness among children in the United States. Today they are not in great danger of small pox, but they are universally threatened by respiratory dysfunctions like asthma. The number of affected children between the ages of five and fourteen has increased 74% since 1980. The incidence among children from birth to age four has increased 124%. Asthma death rates for African-Americans are three times that of whites. One in three Americans lives in an area with unhealthy air. We can immunize our children against measles, mumps, whooping cough and those other diseases once fatal to millions around the world. But only gas masks could protect them from the exhaust of our engines of comfort. Masks cannot protect vegetation and animals.

The second leading cause of children's deaths is cancer. In the United States alone, one out of four children lives within a mile of a toxic dump. What can we do about it? Certain forms of cancer have risen sharply in recent years. Testicular cancer is up 60%, brain tumors are up 30% and leukemia has increased by 10%.

In a democracy we can use our voices and votes to change policies that ignore scientific realities with fatal human implications. Yet a recent Gallup poll indicates that only 27% of Americans think that environmental issues are important. 57% of those polled rank environmental issues above economic ones, but that is a drop of 10% from the previous two years.

We can inform ourselves about environmental policies and encourage courageous elected officials who put people over politics and profit. The Evangelical Environmental Network suggests that

Christians should urge their Senators to endorse the Kyoto Protocol to control global warming. This action could reverse the current trends of air pollution. National leaders should encourage research to develop energy sources other than fossil fuels that increase carbon dioxide and greenhouse gas in the atmosphere.

At home and church, we can practice these three R's: reduce, reuse, and

---

Little efforts in conserving fossil fuels can go a long way. What difference would it make if Christians gave up their sport utility vehicles and drove smaller ones? What if we were a bit warmer in summer or colder in winter to conserve energy? What if we chose our home chemicals, from hairsprays to pesticides, more carefully?

---

recycle. Little actions practiced by many people can make a major difference in our stewardship of natural resources.

Little efforts in conserving fossil fuels can go a long way. Simply by lowering the temperatures in our homes by six degrees in the winter, we would save 570,000 barrels of oil a year. By raising temperatures in our homes in the summer by six degrees, we could save an additional 170,000 barrels of oil. What if we were willing to be a bit warmer in summer or colder in winter to preserve energy for our grandchildren? Experts say that more energy escapes through the windows and doors in our homes than flows through the Alaskan pipeline every year. What difference would it make if Christians gave up their sport utility vehicles and drove smaller vehicles? What if we chose our home chemicals, from hairsprays to pesticides, more carefully?

Genesis says that our Lord created step by step the world in which we live. At each step of the way God said, “that’s good.” It’s good, the separation of land from sea, the separation of darkness and light, the stars in the sky, the vegetation, the cattle and the creeping things, and humankind. All of creation being good, how do we keep it good?

I was hesitant to undertake the subject of a Christian response to environmental degradation, not because it doesn’t need to be addressed, but because, I thought, I’m “preaching to the choir.” You are people who believe that the environment is being abused and who care about creation; you know the facts and care about the facts. However, then I did a little survey of my own actions and realized that for me to *know* better is not always for me to *act* better. It’s easier to say the right thing than to do the right thing. We sing, “This is My Father’s World.” Is it our Father’s world? And if it is, what claim does God have on us and the way we treat it?

#### NOTE

† Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

---



**RAYMOND BAILEY**

is Pastor of Seventh and James Baptist Church in Waco, Texas.