

# God's Delight and Covenant

BY EDWIN BAGLEY

Anyone seeking a standard of righteousness that takes the created order seriously will discover rich advice and practical examples in these books from an engaging pastor, a group of theologians, and four practicing scientists. Together they lead us to share God's delight in the creation and appreciate our covenantal duties.

---

**W**hy is it that books about creation-evolution debates become bestsellers, but books about caring for creation or celebrating its beauty never do? Why do people flock to lectures about ancient fossil records but avoid programs about endangered species? Are evangelical Christians apathetic about the environment?

Scott Hoezee puzzles about the oddness of these behavior patterns, and his book *Remember Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998; 115 pp., \$14.00 paperback) may be precisely the cure for some congregations. Inspired by the experiences of the church he pastors in Michigan, and by several works of C. S. Lewis, Hoezee provides a lively and engaging text suitably subtitled *God's World of Wonder and Delight*. Scripture, theology, and hymns intermingle with his personal adventures and witty reflections on our collective shortcomings.

Theology should begin, he says, where the Bible begins: with creation. If we begin instead with the cross and the empty tomb, we risk having a narrow, individualistic view of redemption. Not even the books of the New Testament begin that way. God is known first as Creator, and in creation we find the expression of God's image and God's delight.

The relationship between a wife and her husband recurs as a parable for our relation to God. If a spouse creates a work of art, a caring person will show interest and treat it with care. To do otherwise would offend

and hurt. If a person loves God and believes that this world is a creation of God, how could a careless or destructive lifestyle be an option? For instance, if God has planned and created a distinctive species of fish, what kind of person would declare such a creation to be unimportant and expendable?

What about our hymns? The hymn that commends a faith in which “the things of earth will grow strangely dim” takes on a different meaning to those who read Hoezee’s critique of religious music. Psalms and hymns that celebrate creation are recommended to fill out a liturgy that too often reflects our indoor culture rather than directing our attention outside. Sermons can allude to nature rather than TV shows or movies, and transparent windows can let worshipers see the world that is so often shut out. Solomon’s temple was decorated with plants and animals. Why not our sanctuaries?

Have you ever thought of quizzing your fellow church members about their vacations? Some of them have found the nurturing power of spending time in forests or swimming around coral reefs. “Re-creation” takes on new meaning in such places. Even Sunday afternoons can be enriched by seeking contact with the wonders of nature as an expression of delight and a source of awareness appropriate to the day. Hoezee’s book is sprinkled with tales of those surprising, redemptive moments beyond the urban and suburban settings in which most of us work and live. He is clever and suggestive when he spotlights the habitual ways in which we avoid nature or devalue it in theory and practice.

Like the authors of the other two books discussed below, Hoezee reacts sharply to criticisms that Christians have more im-

portant matters to attend to than learning about creation and seeking a standard of righteousness that takes the created order seriously. Some of his favorite biblical images are those describing how plants and animals express praise to God. When he reads New Testament accounts of divine redemption, he notices that the whole creation is pictured as being redeemed and restored. There is much passion here for such a slim volume, and it is accessible to a wide range of readers.

What happens when evangelicals attending a meeting of the World

---

Psalms and hymns that celebrate creation are recommended to fill out a liturgy that too often reflects our indoor culture. Sermons can allude to nature rather than TV shows or movies, and transparent windows can let worshipers see the world that is so often shut out.

---

Council of Churches find themselves voted down on the issue of whether humans have a distinctive role in the created order? If they were insightful, concerned, and resourceful Christians, they might get together and compose a clear statement of their views that would be helpful to people of similar interests. They were, and they did. *An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation* began capturing attention when it was issued in 1994. The *Declaration* only fills about four pages at the beginning of the book edited by R. J. Berry, but it is a precise, thorough statement of theological concerns and specific problems that believers should address. Taken alone, it is a rich resource for illustrating how biblical concepts and contemporary problems can be linked.

*The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000; 192 pp., \$17.99 paperback) is a set of articles related to the *Declaration*, with five articles that describe the context from which it emerged and fourteen articles that offer commentary on the *Declaration*. The book opens with the famous essay by Lynn White, Jr. that blames “Christian arrogance toward nature” for many environmental problems we see now. From the creation story in Genesis 1, he extracts the statement about human domination over the other animals. The interpretation he gives to that passage and to historic Christianity is that the creation has no purpose except human use.<sup>1</sup> For that reason, he says, Christianity has been “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” and has been unable to provide moral guidelines in environmental issues. White’s article has influenced a generation of people with ecological interests, and some of them respond in this book.

Who wrote the *Declaration*? Loren Wilkinson talks about the original draft he produced and lists some of the people who met to make revisions. Ron Sider was there, and his essay applies biblical models to environmental problems, just as he has been doing for years with problems of poverty and hunger. Calvin DeWitt explains some of the scientific observations he added. His memorable analogy about how absurd it would be for an art critic to praise Rembrandt but trample his paintings captures the reader’s attention. His top ten list of Christians’ reasons for not getting involved in creation care ought to spark vigorous discussion in any group.

Alister McGrath opens the commentary section of the book with an overview of recent work and a description of the important theological issues. From the thirteen remaining articles, five are emphasized here to illustrate the scope of the book.

Stewardship is a popular topic among environmentalists even though the Bible does not use the term in connection with creation-care issues. Richard Bauckham explains several different perspectives about stewardship. One old view was that we should learn nature’s laws to increase human control. Another was that nature itself is chaotic and it is humanity’s re-

sponsibility to control and improve the natural world. Other perspectives say our role is to be co-creators with God, guardians, or servants. Since “stewardship” has a “chastened and humble” meaning in recent evangelical thought, Bauckham enumerates pros and cons of continuing that usage.

Jürgen Moltmann affirms the *Declaration's* emphasis on divine healing. He develops that emphasis in terms of God's Trinitarian nature and puts special focus on the presence of Christ throughout creation. He proposes that Christians who are serious about protecting the environment should press their governments to establish protective laws; he even recommends the wording for a short amendment to national constitutions.

Anyone who has struggled with the difficult task of doing theology without merely listing favorite Bible verses on some topic will find Peter Harris' article worthy of note. Begin by asking “Who is God?” he says, and the clear answer emerges that God is Creator. Rather than moving immediately to human needs that God is expected to meet, Harris would give priority to worship and prayer in order to acknowledge the character of God. Then, as the *Declaration* says, “offer creation and civilization back in praise to the Creator,” in order to recognize the lordship of Christ. He suspects that many evangelicals would find that the patterns of their worship fall short of these standards.

In a change of pace, Susan Drake Emmerich reflects on her “missionary Earth-keeping” in a fishing community on Tangier Island, Virginia. Isolated from many cultural influences, the residents have been affected significantly by pollution in Chesapeake Bay. How do you gather together and unite a community over an environmental problem, and then how do you organize and direct them in suitable forms of political action?

---

Justice and righteousness can grow within a community that keeps true worship practices at the center of its life, for such worship will unmask the connections between injustice and ecological crisis.

---

The high points of her thoughtful account are proclamation, confession, and development of local covenants.

The final piece in the book is a plea from Michael Northcott for a stronger focus on worship. If consumerism is a kind of idolatry, three of the Ten Commandments provide a contrast by pointing to the foundations of authentic worship: having no other gods, not misusing the name of the LORD, and keeping the Sabbath. Justice and righteousness can grow within a community that keeps such worship practices at the center of its life, for true worship will unmask the connections between injustice and ecological crisis.

The four authors of *Redeeming Creation: The Biblical Basis for Environmental Stewardship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996; 214 pp., \$16.99 paperback) call their book a story. Fred Van Dyke, David C. Mahan, Joseph K. Sheldon, and Raymond H. Brand are practicing scientists and teachers, and their stories recount their experiences of taking students to forests, marshes, farms, and seashores, and affirming their Christian faith as they learn together. As they mingle the Christian story with their stories, these

---

One chapter tracks teacher and students across a field and into the forest as they take measurements to assess the long-term impact of removing trees to grow crops. The first lesson this day is about linkage between the sun, plants, animals, and soil. The second lesson is about reading the Bible differently.

---

scientists convey some of the tension of finding just the right way to synthesize our ancient traditions and our current observations.

One of the chapters, "Out of the Dust," tracks teacher and students across a field and into the forest as they take measurements to assess the long-term impact of removing trees to grow crops. In the forest the rotting logs and rich soil yield abundant life forms that are not visible to those passing by too

quickly. The first lesson this day is about linkage between the sun, plants, animals, and soil. The second lesson is about reading the Bible differently. This created order is visible because it is physical, but not any less wondrous or valuable than things that are spiritual or invisible. Basic biblical concepts, not only creation, but shalom, sin, judgment, and Sabbath, are seen to be about the physical world.

Covenants are an important part of biblical faith. An initial definition of "covenant" offered in chapter five focuses on undeserved grace from God and a secure relationship with God. The covenant with Noah is so full of natural features that the authors suggest calling it the Creation Covenant. It is unconditional and universal in encompassing all creation, but it is dependent only on God. The obvious question arises whether a person of faith can rightly exclude from her or his concern what God has bound into the covenant. An even more profound dimension arises when the covenant of Christ is considered. God's plan in Christ "to reconcile to himself all things" indicates that redemption is not merely personal or individual, but broad in scope and linking humans with all of creation.

The chapter on today's world offers a catalog of evidence for environmental problems. All the usual suspects are listed. Central to many of the

issues are the human activities on earth and rapid population growth. In light of the mandate in Genesis to fill the earth, the sort of sensible questions we expect from concerned scientists emerge: "How will we know when it is full? What is the carrying capacity of creation?"

Where can students go for an education that will include these kinds of questions and answers? Toward the end of the book, the authors recommend the Au Sable Institute in Michigan as a place for students from Christian colleges to prepare for careers as professional ecologists and be shaped by a focus on Christian faith, not just secular notions of resource management.<sup>2</sup> They make a passionate plea for regarding higher education as part of the church's mission and a significant way to combat structural evil in society.

## NOTES

1 Richard Butkus gives a contrasting reading of Genesis 1:28 in "The Stewardship of Creation" on pp. 17-23 in this issue.

2 For more information about Au Sable Institute, see the Web site [www.ausable.org](http://www.ausable.org).



**EDWIN BAGLEY**

is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Wingate University in Wingate, North Carolina.