



A Christian Environmental Manifesto

Environmental policy is one of the areas where the "religious right" (to use a lazy bit of shorthand often borrowed by Canadian journalists from their cousins in the American media) has badly let Christians down. Because many Christians have, understandably, a conservative social orientation, Christian political voices often also adopt a fiscally conservative (or worse, Libertarian) posture in issues that relate to the economy.

The economy and the environment are both aspects of the Cultural Mandate, and they are interrelated. We are, of course, (as Maas Schilder and Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer both wrote) mandated by God to develop the resources of the earth for the benefit of our families and our fellow man; but we were also mandated, in the Garden, to tend the earth and to care for it.

God's judgment will ultimately be upon those who damage the earth, as we see in Revelation 11:16-18:

"And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshipped God saying, 'We give thanks to thee, Lord God Almighty, who art and who wast, that thou hast taken thy great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but thy wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, for rewarding thy servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear thy name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth!'"

Our ultimate policy in environmental matters (as in all things) begins with taking God at His word; we must believe Him, rather than what human wisdom seems to show us. For He is able to perform what He says, and if we are obedient, we can safely trust our future to Him.

Population control

One of the most deleterious of "environmental" issues — one not often thought of as "environmental" — is population control; most contemporary thinking has been driven by a kind of neo-Malthusian ethic which worries that we may not be able to support a growing population. Not only does this neo-Malthusian philosophy, in effect, call God a liar; we can already see that it is false. For example, India, which in the 1950s and 1960s had repeated famines in spite of importing millions of tons of food, has now become a net exporter of food.

Meanwhile, the United Nations population agency is suddenly warning that after the first two decades of the 21st century, the world will experience a sharp reversal of past population trends: birth-rates are falling below replacement level almost all around the world. The coming population decline, the UN says, will be at a much faster rate than the population growth during the last half of the 20th century. The population crisis resulting from this "birth dearth" could cause a collapse in the world's economy worse than the Great Depression, the UN demographers warn. (It is ironic in the extreme that, in the face of their own warning, the UN Population agency continues to promote abortion and contraception!)

Neo-Malthusian predictions of dire shortages always overlook the providence of God, which can come to us in very natural-seeming ways: we have seen a remarkable increase in food production through "the Green Revolution" that has outstripped population growth. Indeed, no one need go hungry today; starvation is a political, not an agricultural matter. It is the failure of political will to overcome problems of distribution and poverty that results in pockets of starvation.

Computer chips

What is more, neo-Malthusians do not take into account the phenomenon of innovation. They warn that "the earth cannot sustain ever-increasing production," and on the face of it, that seems to make sense. But the Information Revolution now taking place around us obtains equal or greater outputs from reduced inputs. In that mode, the earth actually can sustain increasing production — at least to the point where God says, "Stop!"

An American economist, Paul Zane Pilzer, has provided a striking example: in the early 1960s, the Club of Rome warned that the earth would run out of oil before the end of the 20th century; yet here we are in the 21st century, with oil-producing nations worrying about a glut of oil. (There are rising fuel prices but suffice it to say that the price is manipulated.) How come we have more oil than ever?

The short answer is, computer chips. Computers have not only enabled us to find more oil than we thought possible, and to extract oil from wells we thought were exhausted, but computer chips also make possible fuel injection systems that are far more efficient than old-fashioned carburetors. We get twice as many miles from a gallon of gas as we used to. Computers reversed the fuel equation and we make them out of dirt! (Computer chips are made from silicon, the most abundant mineral on earth.)

Genetically Modified Organism (GMO)

Innovation, however, also has a dark side, a face that has serious implications for environmental policy. Genetic modification of living organisms brings us into conflict with biblical criteria, for God commands that we should not "mix kinds" — which is exactly what genetic engineering does, and how GMOs differ from traditional farm husbandry. Selective breeding has always been done within "kinds"; different breeds of cattle are mated, for example, to enhance weather resistance or milk or beef production, but both parents are still the same species.

Two years ago, my wife and I bought some strawberries grown in Québec in August, and the farmer told us he would have them in production right into mid-October! These were not the tasteless "ever-bearing" strawberries I have encountered in the past. A week later I read in *l'Actualité*, the French-language equivalent of *Maclean's* magazine, that strawberries resistant to chilly autumn nights have been genetically engineered by splicing in a gene from the Arctic Char: a fish gene inserted into a berry!

That kind of manipulation is not only disobedient, it is disrespectful; in effect, it says that God didn't get it right, and He needs our help!

But if God warns against mixing kinds, I believe He knows best, and we should obey Him, for our own safety, as well as because He fully merits our obedience.

What are the dangers of GMOs? There are three principle risks:

1. Unintended consequences: What happens if a person with an allergic reaction to fish eats a strawberry with an Arctic Char gene spliced in? Will a fish protein trigger an anaphylactic reaction that could be fatal?
2. Genetic "drift": If we breed canola or soybeans or corn to resist herbicides, what happens when the pollen from those crops is wind-borne to reproduce with wild relative species that are considered weeds? Will we wind up fighting "superweeds" for farmland?
3. Resistant pests: when we breed crops that defend themselves against insects or bacteriological pests, most of those pests will be eradicated. But the few that survive will selectively breed for resistance to the very genetic characteristics that we bred into our crops. Will we find ourselves fighting "superbugs"?

The term "genetic engineering" sounds so precise and neat; in fact, the procedures are more akin to throwing mud at a wall to see what sticks, than to engineering. Cocktails of DNA, mixed with

antibiotic-resistant "marker genes," are injected into the germ material of seeds. The resultant mix is then exposed to a bacterium that will kill any seed that doesn't have the marker gene; only the "marked" seed survives, carrying the desired gene — and the antibiotic resistance. But a side effect of this procedure is the development of more and more antibiotic resistance in our environment, and as every hospital worker knows today we already have too much antibiotic-resistance, and it's producing super-bacteria that we cannot kill, but which may kill us.

Other power sources

There are many environmentally friendly farm policies that we could and should be considering. I'm indebted to Elbert Van Donkersgoed of the Christian Farmers' Federation of Ontario for providing careful — and biblical — research into waste and nutrient management; his group has produced plans that would enable agriculture to continue to intensify food productivity while protecting water quality, and also preserving the quality of soil and air.

Energy policies also have a huge potential for impact on the environment. Our reliance on non-renewable fossil fuels, coal and oil, is foolish. There is a place for them, but it should be as part of a mix that works towards transition, leading to a primary role for renewable energy sources. We do not live in a closed environment, there is continuous energy input from the sun, and we should be tapping it. Two means of doing this are photovoltaics and wind-power. But a vastly more important one (especially for Canada) is a conversion to ethanol and soy diesel as our primary fuels for transportation. Both are much cleaner-burning than petroleum-based fuels; in fact, the very crops from which they are made will consume the CO₂ that their combustion produces. That conversion would help clean up the air, and would at the same time provide a steady income for about 25,000 new family-size farms across Canada. There are also new forms of environmentally-friendly water power: Alexander Gorloy, a professor of mechanical engineering at Northeastern University in Boston, has adapted the "egg-beater" windmill design that came from Canada's National Research Council in the 70s, and developed a medium-size waterwheel that can be dropped into any running river. Rivers like the Amazon, Fraser, MacKenzie and St. Lawrence and many, many smaller rivers could become massive producers of power, without any of the environmental harm associated with dam-building. Tidal bores can also produce clean power.

And, of course, methane generation from biomass can be a source of clean power from what is now a source of dirty water. In addition, there is geothermal power. One day, we may be able to tap fusion power.

The basic keys to sound environmental policy are:

1. to resolve to be obedient to the Creator's instructions, and
2. to think creatively about how we use, and recycle and re-use, the resources He has given us. Our over-arching purpose, in obedience, should be to leave the world in at least as good a condition as we received it.

If that sounds more "green" than "conservative," it is simply because so-called "conservatives" have focused too much on making money, more than on obeying their Creator, who commanded us to conserve (but not worship!) His creation.

The free market is a useful tool, but we must not make it a god; that's idolatry. And we sin when we are willing to sacrifice others to it. That's violating what Jesus said is the second-greatest commandment: "*Love thy neighbor.*"

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