

“Is God Green?”

John Ortberg

It must be the time change. We're going to talk about, "What does Christianity have to say about the earth?" and I'll start here: About 1967, a Princeton professor named Lynn White wrote an article. It was published in *Science* magazine, and it was called *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*. In a nutshell his thesis was the real problem...the real danger to the environment...actually comes from the Christian faith.

He went back to Genesis 1:28 where it says God gave to man dominion and to rule over the earth. White said along with Christianity came this idea that nature is not sacred it is just disposable, and came the idea human beings are not really a part of nature, they are above it, so nature exists just kind of as a thing for people to use and exploit. He called this *selfish anthropocentrism*. He said that is what characterizes Christianity. He said it's this system of thought that is the real problem for people who are concerned about the wellbeing of the planet and this way of thinking has become so dominant even for people who are opposed to Christians have been kind of infected by it.

Now this article...again *Science* magazine, 1967...became a watershed piece. If you read much about this topic, you come into it real fast. It's been cited hundreds of times and a lot of people in the environmental movement, who may not know much about Christianity, were very influenced by this article and they came to see Christianity as an obstacle to caring about nature.

Now on the other hand, Tim Keller, in a wonderful talk that I am indebted to this weekend, mentions a man named Stuart Pimm. Stuart Pimm is a Professor of Conservation Ecology at Duke, and he won the Heineken Prize, which is kind of like the Nobel Prize for earth sciences. Pimm is not just a teacher he is actually kind of a champion of endangered species.

In Brazil there is a species of primates called the golden lion tamarin, and it's on the verge of extinction. You see one with a little baby right there. Pimm has been very involved in acquiring land in Brazil so that species can flourish. Here is what is interesting: He was interviewed by the *New York Times* not long ago about his work, and at the end of the interview...kind of a throw away question...they asked him, are you religious? And this is his response. He said, "I'm actually a believing Christian and Christians have an obligation to care for the planet because it was made by God and does not actually belong to us. So we cannot simply fail to care for oceans, or forests, or creatures. That would be to fail to fulfill our obligations to God."

This was kind of cool. Pimm is at Duke and so on a long shot I emailed him this week, and he sent me some stuff he had co-written about faith and his work with another guy who is also an environmental scholar, an activist, and a passionate Christian whose name is Kyle Van Houtan. Kyle is working with endangered sea turtles in Hawaii (and you notice those guys usually don't end up working in the North

Pole with something, like in Hawaii with sea turtles.)

He is not only a passionate Christian, he got one of his graduate degrees from Stanford, and then he took off a year and interned at a church. Guess what church he interned at? Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. You all helped to shape this guy's life and thought. One of his best friends is Scotty Scruggs, and it turns out Kyle will be speaking at sanctuary this weekend, like tonight.

Now this is the opposite of what Lynn White was predicting. People like Kyle and Stuart Pimm say their concern for the earth was not blocked by their faith; it actually was like produced, triggered by their faith.

People in our congregation are involved in all kinds of ways. A business guy whose firm has won multiple awards for engineering projects that enhance the earth, another one who is starting to write a book on energy consumption, people involved in every big and small way you can imagine.

I believe Christianity...rightly understood...actually offers the single best perspective from which to view and care for the earth available to the human race. I think it is important for us to know and understand this so we can be faithful and biblical as we follow Jesus. I also think we need to be clear on what we talk about this weekend because this is a topic that matters to a lot of people around us. If they think being a Christian means you don't care for the environment, it will be a barrier for their receiving the gospel and coming to Jesus, and they need Jesus. So we need to be able to articulate this.

I also think it is important because in the Bible, there is a vision about creation and how creation is a part of the glory of God, and this vision will take your breath away, and help you to love God more. It is a vision that badly needs to be heard by our world, and the church has to articulate it. I think we have often not done this well. So that is what we are going to talk in this talk. We're not talking about the environment, environmentalism, ecology, human or political agendas, we're talking about creation.

Now very interesting...in the Old Testament, there is no word for *nature*, there is just the word *creation*... because the word *creation* carries a certain theological significance to it; it's a Bible word, it makes a statement. If there is a creation, then there is a Creator, and the Creator isn't us. And then another important Bible word is *creature* or if you are from the South, *critter*. *Critter* is a Bible word: Beings that are given the gift of life by their Creator in order to reflect and participate in something glorious. There are old hymns that have this language. "All creatures of our God and King, lift up your voice and with us sing, Halleluiah!" Creatures are somehow meant to reflect, to praise, the glory of God.

Then there are human beings, and the Bible says human beings are part of creation, but are a special part that reflect in an unique way the image of God in a way no other part of creation quite does. We are creatures gifted by our Creator with the capacity to reason, choose, communicate, invent. Man is a critter that can Twitter.

The Bible has a truth to declare that transcends politics or legislation about who the world belongs to. Let's read this together out loud from Psalm 24: "***The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.***" This idea gets expressed a lot in the Bible. This is from Psalm 50, verse 10: God says, "***...every animal in the forest is Mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills.***" Or this from the prophet Haggai, "***The silver is Mine and the gold is Mine,' declares the LORD Almighty.***" The Bible is real clear on this. Who does the earth belong to? It belongs to God. Therefore, whom does the earth not belong to? It doesn't belong to us. It is not ours and our world needs to hear this. The earth belongs to God. Christianity teaches this.

I'll give you one more verse. We are at Jesus' church, Jesus is the head of our church, we seek to follow Him. Paul makes a staggering claim about Jesus and creation. This is from his letter to the church at Colossae. ***"For by Him [that is, Jesus] all things were created: things in heaven and things on earth, visible and invisible...all things were created by Him and for Him."***

There is a great statement by a Dutch...remarkable guy, theologian, scholar, government official... Abraham Kuyper. He said one time, "There is not one square inch in all creation over which Jesus Christ does not cry out, 'This is Mine.'" This is a fabulous thought. Not one square inch in all the cosmos over which Jesus doesn't cry out, "That's Mine, that's Mine, that's Mine. I made it, I care about it."

Paul says, "Every bird you hear, every tree you see, every sunset you enjoy, every carpet of grass you walk on, every blossom from every tree that enhances your experience, every lung full of air you suck into your body, was made by Jesus and for Jesus." Now this says something about creation's value. Matter... physical existence...is not inferior as Plato said. Plato used to say, "The body is the tomb of the soul." That is not what the Bible teaches.

Matter is not an accidental event like secularism says. There is this refrain in the book of Genesis: "And God spoke...and it was so...and God saw that it was good." Then at the climax of all of that, at the end of Genesis the first chapter, ***"God saw all that He had made, and it was very good."*** There is a reason why we love our world. I mean, anybody here not love mountains, and oceans, and sunsets, and trees?

I mentioned last week we just hired a directional leader, his name is Blues Baker, and he visited us this last Monday. I was telling him what a great place, of all the places in the world I have my favorite place... just geographically and weather wise...right here where we live. On Monday when he was in, clouds gathered, and it poured hail. Did you all see the hail last Monday? It was just so striking and then the rain came down.

We got in a car, Blues and I, we drove over to Half Moon Bay to have dinner, and it was one of those unbelievable moments. We took 92 over and right when we got over the crest of the foothills, the clouds parted, and the sun came out. You could see the ocean down there, and the sun was just shimmering on it. We get down to the ocean, and we can hear the roar of the surf coming in. We got out of the car, and a rainbow formed while we're standing there in the parking lot, from one end of the foothills...oh, you could see the whole thing all the way to the other part of the earth. Then a whale hopped up out of the water onto the beach and said, "Welcome Blues!" No, that part didn't happen, but everything else did.

You want to know who loves whales? I just can't get enough of whales...a chance to see a whale...I just love that. You want to know who loves them? ***"How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom You made them all; the earth is full of Your creatures. There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number... [and then I love this] ...the leviathan, which You made to frolic there."***

When whales frolic in the sea, when they spout out of the water, when they jump up, when you see their tails, it makes God happy. God made them to frolic. We love little aquariums where we can see fish for a few moments. God has vast seas full of them and He never grows tired of watching them swim and frolic; that is our God. It's not just that He enjoys them, there is a deeper connection.

I mentioned a rainbow a minute ago. Some of you will know, in the Old Testament a rainbow is a sign of the covenant God makes. A covenant is a binding promise of care. It is a relationship. It's God saying to

somebody else, "I am going to redeem. I will care and watch over you." Some of you know about this. Who did God make a covenant with that the rainbow is a sign of? Well it was Noah, but it wasn't *just* Noah.

Now look at what it says. Genesis, chapter 9. God says, ***"I will now make a covenant with you..."*** He says this to Noah, ***"...and with every living creature that was with you."*** This is an extraordinary statement from God. The birds.... ***"I will make a covenant with the birds, and the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth."*** This is remarkable. God makes a covenant, a relationship with a promise not just with human beings, with all of His creatures.

Unless anybody should miss this, you read this passage, the text repeats this idea..."I'm making a covenant with all living creatures"...not once, not twice, not three times, *four* times in this text. And we'll see what this promise involves. But meanwhile if I care for creation see, I honor God's covenant. God has made a covenant freely out of His love with not just Noah, not just people, every living creature. It's amazing teaching.

And then creation reflects God's glory. Psalm 19: ***"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech..."*** Now what does it mean to say, "Creation declares the glory of God?" You know, it's not just a pretty saying. I want to say a word about how this is true and then what it means for our spiritual life.

Anybody know what parents of little children put on their refrigerators? Art...their children's drawings. When our kids arrived, and our first kid came, those little fingers would grasp a crayon and labor over artwork, and hand me a piece of scribbling, and it would go on the refrigerator. Now objectively speaking, was it great art? No, it wasn't. Would I sell it for a thousand dollars? Well yes, of course I would. She could draw another one for crying out loud. But I loved it because it was an expression of her. That's the way it works. If you love the artist, you love their art.

Now imagine a child who grows up to be a Rembrandt or a van Gogh. Then you love the art for its own sake. Then maybe you start by loving the art, and that actually leads you to loving the artist. *What kind of a being would create art like this?* And then you begin to get a little echo of what is going on in Genesis 1 and Psalm 19. God creates and it is good...not accidentally. God wasn't like wondering if it would be good. It is good because it is an expression of God and God is good all the way down in every respect. Therefore...here is the therefore for you and me...allow creation to point you to the Creator by connecting the dots and having creation lead you to wonder, and gratitude, and joy, and thanksgiving.

A tree, see, glorifies God just by being a tree because a tree is a wonderful thing. Did you ever wonder... *What does God think of trees?* There is a verse in the Bible...I'll bet you have never thought about before...this is Deuteronomy, chapter 20. God is giving instructions to people when warfare is going on: ***"When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them... Do not cut them down. Are the trees of the field people, that you should besiege them?"*** It's like God is saying, "I know you are a violent people, we'll get to turn the other cheek one day when Jesus comes, in the meantime, be careful of My trees. Keep your hands off My trees." This is quite a remarkable verse.

Kyle says, "Creation can lead us to wonder, and patience, and gratitude, and humility." Can anybody here use any of that stuff? Jesus would very often go when He wanted...with particular intensity to experience

the presence of His Father...He would go into creation to the mountains, or to the side of the lake, or to the wilderness, or right to the end of His life, to the garden. An interesting theme in the Bible of the garden way back in Eden, and then Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, we'll see the garden again.

You see, a garden is a picture of creation that then human beings can help to flourish. You cannot go into creation without seeing the expression of the Creator; it's Jesus' handiwork, it's God's refrigerator. That is why people can't help but be moved by it. The medieval church said there are two great books of God. There is the Book of the Scripture and then the Book of Creation. If you look at Psalm 19, ***"The heavens declare the glory of God,"*** the first half praises the Book of Creation and then the second half praises the Book of Scripture: ***"The law of the Lord is perfect...the commands of the Lord are radiant."*** Those belong together.

You were made for the earth. So sometimes go to the mountains, go to the oceans, sit in the garden, walk in Muir woods, climb up Half Dome at Yosemite, look at Pfeiffer Falls in Big Sur, and take the Bible with you, and read the little Book while you sit in the big book. "This is my Father's world. He shines in all that is fair." Let the book of His creation lead you to the Writer.

When you study creation, you study the mind of God. When you protect creation, you protect the work of God. When you admire creation, you admire the goodness of God. And when you love creation, maybe, maybe somebody begins the journey of loving the Creator. Our world needs to hear this. This is God's creation; it's not just nature, it's creation.

And then Christianity teaches we are stewards. We're not owners, we're not just users, we're not just consumers, we are stewards. Genesis...very interesting passage...Genesis, chapter 2 actually says, ***"The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to work it and take care of it."*** Now that verb *work* can be translated, *to serve*. That little phrase *take care of* actually means *to keep*. It's translated *in the great blessing* in the book of Numbers: ***"The Lord bless you and keep you."*** That is the same word: *take care of you*. What God is going to do for us in this great blessing, we are to do for God's creation.

See, I believe Lynn White got it wrong. Adam's job was not to exploit the garden, certainly not to destroy the garden, it was to make the garden flourish, and then human beings occupy a unique place in creation. ***"When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers..."*** the psalmist says, ***"...what is man that you are mindful of him?"*** And if you just look...if there is just nature, that question is going to come up. ***"What is the son of man that you take care of him? [Yet] You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have made him ruler over the works of Your hands...all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the fields..."***

Human beings uniquely reflect God's image. Now some of you know about this. There are certain voices in the ecological movement that call for what is sometimes known as *biological egalitarianism*: The idea that no species, including the human species, is worth any more than any other species, and the life of no creature, including a human being, is worth more than the life of any other creature. That is not what the Bible teaches.

Jesus says human beings have a unique worth because they are made in God's image. This is a very interesting statement from Jesus: ***"Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"*** Human life is more valuable than the life of a bird...and we all know this...but that is not bad news for the bird. According to Jesus, who is feeding the birds? ***"Your heavenly Father feeds them."***

When you put out a bird feeder, in some strange way you can join the work of God. And here is where it gets really interesting in the Bible. When you look at the Old Testament, God kind of lays out for people what ruling over creation is supposed to look like, and it is quite fascinating. I'll bet everybody here knows about the Sabbath. Here is part of the Sabbath you may have never thought about. God says, ***"Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work..."*** Why? ***"...so that your ox and donkey may rest."*** In other words, if you're a donkey, you hope your owner gets converted. Good news...here's the point...good news for human beings becomes good news for creation, becomes even good news for donkeys.

God tells Israel every seven years they are to leave the ground unplowed. The ground is to have a Sabbatical. Why? Exodus 23, verse 11: ***"Then the poor among you may get food from it..."*** and again I'll bet you've never read this or thought about it before, ***"...and the wild animals may eat what they leave."*** Good news becomes good news for the poor, good news for the soil, good news for the wild animals.

Deuteronomy 24, a very interesting chapter, is just a bunch of commands about judicial procedures and marriage, but then in the middle of it Moses just throws this one in. Deuteronomy 25, verse 4: ***"Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain."*** Now some of you are thinking...*I've kept that commandment my whole life long and I didn't even know it. I've never muzzled an ox!* I'm thrilled to hear it!

Well the idea here is, you know farmers knew they would be able to squeeze out a little more profit if they would put a muzzle on the ox while it's helping to thresh the grain because grain was more expensive. Just let the ox eat grass later on. God says, "No. Give the ox a break. Be generous with the ox. Let the ox have a little grain and you'll be kind of entering into generosity for the whole earth that reflects Me and I'll take care of you." If you are an ox, you hope you are sold to an owner who loves God.

One part of loving God is caring for the earth because it's His. Richard Foster writes, "We plant evergreens and compost garbage, we clean a room and put coasters under glasses, and in these ways we help to tidy up Eden." Love that phrase *we help to tidy up Eden*. These are little things, but with God little things can be used by God in other ways. It is possible...when you save energy, turn out a light, or insulate something, or recycle something, or save a little water, or figure ways you know, to create energy...it can be a little act of worship that cares for creation and blesses the Creator.

Then Christianity teaches...another a real important part of nature that doesn't get taught elsewhere... creation is under a curse. It's real good, but it's not the way it is supposed to be. Francis Schaeffer wrote a book...kind of in response to Lynn White's article...about 40 years ago called, *Pollution and the Death of Man*. Here is a part of what Schaeffer wrote, "If you say that there is no God at all, nature is all there is, or if you make nature God and worship it..." that kind of thing tends to go on sometimes in our world "... there is a problem. And the problem is, there is beauty in nature, but there are horrible things in nature. There is death and suffering in nature."

We had a long history of pets in our family that did not go well. We would buy fish, and it didn't turn out well with fish. One of the first times I came up to Menlo Park it was from southern California, and we had just gotten our first goldfish, and fish don't travel well...goldfish don't travel well...that goldfish gave its life for this church. A little later we got a little bird for our daughter Mallory and she called it Jo-Jo.

We were on vacation one time. Nancy and I came back early, our kids were still with the grandparents, and neighbors had watched Jo-Jo for us. They gave it back to us, and we had it for a day or so, and Nancy kept looking at it funny. Finally Nancy said to me, "I don't think that's Jo-Jo." I said Nancy, "You think our neighbors killed our bird, got a replacement, gave us the fake, and then lied to cover it up? You really think that is what happened?" That's actually what happened.

Our bird died on their watch and they felt terrible, so they went out and got another bird. You know, it didn't look enough like Jo-Jo to fool Nancy. So then we had to tell Mallory that Jo-Jo was dead, and you know she was devastated, and insisted on a burial, but the ground was frozen. This was Chicago. We had to wait until the ground thaws (in August) and so for like 6 months...this is true...for 6 months we had to put Jo-Jo in the freezer and every time we would open the freezer, there would be this dead bird lying in there.

"Nature," the saying goes, "is red in tooth and claw." There is beauty in nature but there is horrible stuff in nature and there is no use romanticizing nature. See, if nature is all there is, and it's governed by the survival of the fittest, then what's wrong with the extinction of species? That is how you got here. It's just species against species; that's nature. You don't blame the mongoose for killing off all the snakes; that's what they do, it's their nature. If human beings are just a part of nature, you don't blame one part of nature for killing off another part. You know there may be some people may not like it or they may like it, but it's just nature.

But the Bible says human beings are fallen, we're sinful and creation itself has been affected by that fall. Again...way back to the story in Genesis...God says, "***Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.***" There is something wrong now in our relationship with nature, with creation. It will produce thorns and thistles. It's not the way it is supposed to be. I just think this is profoundly true and our world needs to hear this. It's beautiful but it is under a curse. It's not working right.

Paul says in remarkable words, "***Creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.***" We know the whole creation has been groaning in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. We see creation groaning. The Christian story is the right one. Creation is beautiful and we love it, but it's not God, and it's not the way it is supposed to be. It's not working right. Schaeffer said as Christians, we should look for substantial healing in every area affected by the fall. Part of our job is to help nature flourish as God intends it to flourish. We are to honor what God made in the right way.

I love this quote from Schaeffer: "We have the right to rid our houses of ants, but what we have no right to do is to forget to honor the ant as God made it out in the place where God made the ant to be. When we meet the ant on the sidewalk, we step over him." What if Paul is right? What if in some way ants, and oxen, and donkeys, and trees are waiting for the sons and daughters of God to be revealed...for redeemed humanity to work the garden so God's creation can flourish?

For Christianity teaches...and our world needs to hear this articulated in thoughtful and winsome ways... Christianity teaches creation is going to be redeemed. Now you just live in these words. This is also from Paul. "***The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.***" See if you believe there is no God, that nature, physical matter is all that is, then you believe it's temporary. It's going to get discarded.

When the sun has converted enough hydrogen into helium so the earth will be destroyed (and it's about

half way there now), or when entropy finally prevails in the universe as it already does at the Department of Motor Vehicles, then the timer goes off and the story is over. But the Bible says God has set eternity in the hearts of human beings. God has made a covenant with all of His creatures. Creation is not going to be destroyed. Creation is going to be redeemed. What will that look like?

Well Isaiah gives us this picture. You see this in many places in the Bible. *"You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace..."* now look at creation, *"...and the mountains and the hills [that we love so much will be liberated from their bondage into decay] will burst into song before you and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thorn bush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow... This will be for an everlasting sign, which will not be destroyed."*

For the Bible is the story of three trees. In the beginning, there was a tree of life and we are reminded of that. That is the tree back there that you look at; that is the tree of life. Once there was a garden and it was full of trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food...no curse yet. In fact, the very first sin was human disobedience with one of God's trees.

Then in the last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22, the tree of life returns and you see those little clusters of fruit on it. We're told the tree will produce a crop every month...12 crops each month. That is a picture of creation working right...abundance, flourishing. And it says in Revelation 22, *"And the leaves of the tree will be for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse."* Creation will stop groaning.

But in between the first tree and the last tree stands one more tree. A Man hung on it once. His name is Jesus. The Bible says, *"Cursed is everyone who hung on a tree."* He will redeem you, give you forgiveness right now as you confess, and repent, and trust Him, He will start making a new you. You can do that right now today, and not just you.

See when He died on that tree, the curse began to die with Him, and when He rose from the grave, the new creation began in Him. After the resurrection when Mary Magdalene saw Him, she thought He was the gardener because He kind of was. For the Creator is the Redeemer and the creation will one day be redeemed, not destroyed. This is the story the world hopes for even when it does not know it, and we know it. We can sing it. We can live it.

Heavenly Father, thank You that You have given us this gift of a creation that did not need to be so beautiful, so wonderful. God, for everybody who needs that new creation, we are going on in then. Right now...people weighted down by guilt, regret, depression, sadness, lost, aloneness, brokenness...God would You begin to bring that healing from the curse, that new creation of life? And then God, we don't want to just take for granted as we leave this place the wonder of bodies, and faces, and soil, and grass, and birds, and trees, and skies, and oceans, and mountains.

As our great Creator, as the One who spoke all that is into existence, we give You our wonder, and our gratitude, and our praise. Thank You, God. We don't want to take it for granted. Thank You for the goodness of this earth on which we live. Redeem it from its groaning. Make us a part of it. We love You, our Creator and Redeemer. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.