

Special Report: Creation Care at the 2012 Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. By Keith Jagger, Blessed Earth's Anglo Correspondent.

PART I: SETTING THE SCENE

Creation Care. It appears on the surface to be an uncontroversial and noble cause, a potential rallying point of unity for peoples of many faiths. We can see the devastating effects of oilrig disasters with our naked eyes. Our intuitions tell us that there is something intrinsically wrong with billowing smoke stacks. Science is telling us about mass extinction of species and melting ice caps. We should all of us be alarmed. But not everyone thinks so. In fact, some see behind it all a conspiracy and a ploy for power. They disagree firmly with those who suggest that we should abide with the environmental policies of the global community. We are at a spiritual war with powers that seek to control global policy and want to force depopulation. Science has been co-opted, and Christians of all stripes should push back. Of course there are a range of Christian responses to the matter, but organizers of the recent annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society found four voices that represented some of the more opposing views, and at points, sparks flew.

This report narrates some of the action at ETS 2012. From it, I want to discern the points of contention that arose there, which seem to divide Evangelicals in America today. These points of conflict are not the easiest to name, since most everybody thinks that we should care for the earth, in one way or another. And when Evangelicals pull out the flagship biblical verses, as in the case of Genesis 1.27-28 at this year's ETS conference, everybody basically agrees that humans have been made to love and steward God's creation. But as the conversation went on, it became clear that not all contributors meant the same thing by Creation Care, even though they were using very similar language. What was different? It was the larger *worldview* behind their language where differences emerged, and it will do us all some good to tease out some elements of these worldviews.

What is "the biblical worldview" and how does it challenge us to face the contemporary environmental crisis? This seems to be the starting question, and different Evangelicals answer differently based on their understanding of the question, though the answer to the to it is not as easy as many might think.

Four plenary speakers were invited to address this main question: E. Calvin Beisner, Richard Bauckham, Russell D. Moore, and Douglas Moo. Each has earned their PhD, and they come from a variety of backgrounds associated with Evangelicalism. The most telling conflicts came between Bauckham and Beisner, who were ironically seated next to one another during the panel discussion, so I will mainly highlight their conversation here. Both had given a plenary address and said some similar things about Genesis 1.28,

"God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds of the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Beisner approached the verse with a basic concern for the intense poverty that we find in developing nations of the world. He suggested that there is growing today a pagan, anti-Christian worldview that gave birth to and organizes the contemporary environmental movement. This worldview inspires powerful people who are pushing policies that have little impact on the earth and big impact on people. He suggested that stewardship in Genesis means that we should use our God-given role to bring sustainable energy and advanced technologies to solve the plight of those trapped in the worst positions of poverty in the world today. Beisner presented a tidal wave of scientific information that pointed to one conclusion: the earth isn't really in that bad of a position. Studies on rapid extinction of species are corrupted because they have intentionally sought for the conclusion they wanted to find. Climate change is happening, but then again it has always happened; the world is warming because of the ways that growing carbon emissions bounce off the clouds rather than burning our ozone. More on Beisner's worldview below.

Bauckham took a different reading. He thought that Beisner's worldview, though clearly he was rightly concerned about world poverty, was corrupted by a modernistic interpretation of the true biblical worldview. Bauckham pointed out that the ideas of Francis Bacon from the sixteenth and seventeenth century, which led to a utilitarian view of creation, continue to influence our world today and press us to unlock the potential of creation itself. Bauckham suggested that Beisner's worldview was a variation of Bacon's and countered that stewardship in Genesis 1.28 was never meant to sanction an unlimited exploitation of creation for human benefits alone. Rather stewardship in Genesis was a call to grow in god-like love and delight for the created world. We are to become people who care about whole creation's need for sustenance. Bauckham and Moo suggested that theologians must not dabble in science or approach it with overly suspicious eyes. There are enough reputable Christians scientists who believe that human-created climate change is upon us, and we should listen to their warnings. Beisner firmly disagreed.

So the central question then is this: who has the right biblical worldview, which perhaps makes a few errors in judgment, and who has a foundationally corrupted understanding of the biblical worldview and yet holds to some correct biblical ideas? In this case, does Bauckham have a worldview corrupted by pagan anti-Christian views of reality? Or does Beisner have a worldview corrupted by modern views of the universe? The answer to this question is not at all easy to make; it is probably yes and no to both. Though if we can tease out some very divergent ways of seeing the world between Bauckham and Beisner, we might find a key that helps us discover a robustly Christian position towards our environment today. I think we can do so by looking at three questions: 1. Where is our bottom line; should we care ultimately for the welfare of humans or animals? 2. What is the gospel? 3. What does the Bible say about the nature of freedom and sufficiency? How we answer each question will reveal a lot about our basic worldview.

PART II: A BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW?

1. Where is our bottom line; should we care ultimately for the welfare of humans or animals? 2. What is the gospel? 3. What does the Bible say about the nature of human freedom and sufficiency? As you can imagine, libraries of books have been written on these three questions. I lack the expertise to address them in detail in such a short report. I simply want to report on these three points from ETS for our further reflection.

What is our Bottom Line: Should We Care Ultimately for the Welfare of Humans or Animals?

Of course, the answer is both. But the realities of our day often times seem to force us one way or the other. Beisner seems clear in his approach. The bottom line is humanity. The pagan worldview of the environmental movement and its contraceptive (against further population) stance, attacks the basic worth of human dignity. Attempts to control the world's population stand on the faulty assumption that the earth can handle no more of us. The solution to our current problem of widespread poverty is to use our ingenuity to bring sustainable energy and clean water, for example, to the world's population. Human technology has enhanced the state of living in the "developed" world. Before the modern era, everyone except the wildly wealthy lived in "abject poverty." Half of the babies survived birth, people did not live as long, and we had no way of purifying water. Nature was not subdued. We should continue our advancements for the good of humanity everywhere, and if this comes at the cost the extinction of habitats and their species, then the cost is worth the risk, though extinction has always been around, and it is bad science anyway that convinces us that more species are dying today than ever before.

The other way of answering this question is simply: no. We should not make advancements in technology if it means the extinction of species. If we had to choose between developing a plot of land that contained the only substance that would keep a million people alive, and we knew at the same time that we might wipe out a species of frog in the process, the answer is clear. We'll find another way. And in response to Beisner, others wondered this: was the pre-modern world as bad as you make it out to be? Have we really evolved? Yes technologies have improved the quantity of life, but has it improved the quality? Yes we didn't have ways to purify water, but did the water need purifying then? And shouldn't the people in the most abject levels of poverty today have a say in what kind of technologies should be developed at the cost of their way of life? Are we, the scientific moderns, the heroes destined to rid the world of evil?

You can see that the answer to this question is not easy. It basically comes down to how we answer this question: What is wrong with the world, and what is the solution?

- Biblical Worldview Questions: The realities of our world force us sometimes to choose between human life and animal life. How does the gospel redefine reality? How could the cross-shaped life of God's people teach us to

approach our environmental problems today? What does the Bible say is wrong with the world? And what is its solution?

What is the Gospel?

Can you feel the weight of this question? For centuries, Protestants have answered it along with the great reformers: the gospel is justification by grace through faith. Beisner held this definition of the gospel, and you can see how he might take issue with groups that “implicitly change the gospel.” This was his charge directly against Blessed Earth, the only time that the Sleeths were mentioned in the sessions that I attended. Beisner lumped “Serve God, Save the Planet” and “The Gospel According to the Earth” and their suggestions about the practicalities of the gospel among that group of “law based” religions. He quoted Colossians 2.20-23, “Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world; why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules.” As a participant in the Blessed Earth community, I was not completely offended. His point actually clarified the point where a major difference exists. Of course Blessed Earth holds to the saving work of Jesus as a central focus. But Beisner may be defining gospel in a more narrow way than Blessed Earth, where for them the gospel is more about the announcement that Jesus is king over all the earth and has come to save, justify, and redeem all of creation for God’s full intentions. Is this larger perspective of the gospel more or less faithful to the biblical witness? This is obviously a much bigger discussion than we have time here to address.

This point is this, though: part of the Evangelical division about the meaning of creation care falls down upon theological party lines, especially where definitions of the gospel itself are contested.

- Biblical Worldview Question: What is “the gospel” according to the biblical writers, and how is creation care a part of it?

What Does the Bible Say about Freedom and Excess?

Bauckham made an emphatic point that we must be very careful to know what the bible says about freedom and excess. He made a challenge against what he called the “Modern American” understanding of liberty, that mostly opposes regulations of any sort. One of Beisner’s main oppositions to the worldwide environmental movement is its inherent desire for global governance and policies that will attempt to rule us, electrical grids that would decide when we could use our appliances, for example. But “what is the biblical understanding of freedom,” asked Bauckham. Americans tend to think that our way of life is sacrosanct, he said. We tend to think that the real problems of our world, the problems of poverty and malnutrition are epidemics of the “third world”. But what about petroleum spills? What about mountain top removal? The real problem, he suggested, is that we are addicted to consumption. “We’ve lost the notion of sufficiency”, Bauckham claimed, “that’s why we are devastating the earth.” We are not demigods with limitless

freedom to do to the earth whatever we imagine for the sake of our own flourishing. We are part of a community of creation with a very specific role. And as of right now, our addiction to unneeded material things feeds the machine that is exploiting the earth and its people. What way is worse? This question hung in the air at ETS, a worldview that errs on the side of paganism, or one that is primarily governed by a modernistic and materialist craving?

- Biblical Worldview Question: What does the bible say about the nature of human freedom and excess? Can we chart a biblical response that challenges materialism and avoids the diminishing of human need and worth?

PART III: SO WHAT

The conversation at ETS sometimes became heated, a reflection of the reality that we as Christians, and especially American Evangelicals, have something to say about the raging environmental cultural war, which sometimes itself forgets to listen to other voices, from the global south, for example. When we enter that war, are we equipped with a biblical worldview? Will we succumb to the demands of worldviews that are not our own? Will we have the type of self-awareness that can humbly admit that our worldviews have been compromised by pagan or modern ways of thinking? Or is the matter even more complex than simply pitting one worldview against the other? Maybe the moment that we are in, for Christian mission today, is one where the task is to slow down and reabsorb our foundations again.

How can we develop a robustly Christian position that responds well to a groaning creation and the cries of those impoverished today, a position that is fueled by biblical thinking at its deepest?

Basically our challenge begins at the training ground of the scriptures. We must think carefully through the worldviews offered therein. What does the Bible say about creation and the place of God and humanity within it? What is wrong with the world, and what is the solution? What kind of time do we see ourselves in? Our easy answers to these questions, which reflect little awareness of what the Bible actually says, reveals to us that modern and pagan ways of thinking have greatly shaped the lenses through which we read the Bible and experience the world.

We must reclaim our own narrative in order to address this modern environmental epidemic. We have to chart a vision of a sacred earth based upon the limits of creation order that also avoids the objectification of creation. When we do so, many of our actions will follow suit. Our church will agree that each congregation needs a creation care group, as Bauckham suggested, that the whole church supports, which keeps us consistently thinking about creation care. We will develop a localism, as Moo suggested, that fosters a perspective of affinity for land but never loses sight of our responsibility in a global community. We will see afresh, as Moore suggested, that one of the biggest

gifts we can give our children in an age of materialism and excess is to bring them out of our doors and into the wild places of our land where they can begin again to experience the beauty of creation and survive its harshness as well. Or we will get busy with highway cleanups or insulating the houses of our poorest neighbors, as Beisner suggested.

I'll finish here with a challenge from Douglas Moo: "We must never simply use the bible to fight our cultural wars." When we do so, it will always bend it to do our own will. We must continually form a Christian worldview with in the Body. And when we do so together, we will be able to join in with the worldwide environmental movement while at the same time challenging it at its very real points of error. We must stand up against every attack against human worth, while resisting the tsunami wave of materialism that drowns our people today. To prepare for such a challenge, this might just force us to change everything about the way we live our lives. We might have to give over our shortsighted lifestyles to a limitless God, and enter fully into his story. But let's make sure as we do so, that it is the right story.

*You can find the podcasts of these presentations and the panel discussion at Zondervan's live-stream website. The panel discussion can be found half way through this linked video, which starts with Dr. Moo's presentation:

http://www.livestream.com/zondervanacademic/video?clipId=pla_774a632a-ddc6-4c67-8cf2-62137c6d7d42