

Emily Dickinson

Dr. Koster

CRTW 201

28 April 2009

Faith and the Environment

As Christians and faithful members of the South Carolina Southern Baptist Convention, we believe that the Bible is the true and infallible Word of God. Because we believe this, we put God's Word and our beliefs before the works and findings of man, such as those found through science. When confronted by people outside of the South Carolina Southern Baptist Convention about doing things that we have not been doing, we feel that we are being asked to compromise our strong Christian beliefs; in particular, environmentalists who try to convince us that we must put more emphasis on the environment seem to try to undermine our faith. The Bible tells us to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28) and warns against becoming "entangled in" this world (2 Peter 2:20). Therefore, we feel that we should be wary of environmentalism, which seems to promote becoming absorbed with the earth. However, many of us also worry about the declining state of the environment, and want to do our part without compromising faith. Therefore, in light of our beliefs and growing concerns about the environment, we must ask ourselves this question: how should we, as faithful members of the South Carolina Southern Baptist Convention, respond to the environment and its decline?

In order to answer this question, we must first examine the current state of the environment. In *The Future of Life*, acclaimed author and scientist Edward Wilson gives a very detailed account of the environment's current situation. In terms of extinction of species, he explains that the rate of extinction "is catastrophically high, somewhere between one thousand

and ten thousand times the rate before human beings began to exert a significant pressure on the environment” (99). He also explains the “the loss of forest during the past half-century is one of the most profound and rapid environmental changes in the history of the planet” (58) and that “the potential exists for a climatic downward spiral” (65). Quite clearly, there is a problem that exists in the environment’s current situation. Additionally, the state of the environment affects us. In his other book entitled *The Creation*, Wilson describes the impact that the environment’s downturn can have on us if things continue as they are now: “opportunity costs, which will be better understood by our descendants than by ourselves, will be staggering. Gone forever will be undiscovered medicines, crops, timber, fiber, soil-restoring vegetation, petroleum substitutes, and other products and amenities” (29-30). Not only is the state of the environment declining, but if it continues to do so, the impact will be heavily felt by us and our descendants.

In light of this information, we must now examine why we, as Southern Baptists, tend to respond to the environment in a less concerned way than others who are not of our faith. First and foremost, we must acknowledge that much of our problem with environmentalism stems from its connection with science; Christianity and science have rarely gotten along, and we have an understandable hesitation to support anything that can be related to it. In particular, a long-standing conflict exists between evolutionists and creationists like us. When Wilson states that “humanity originated here by evolution from lower forms over millions of years...our ancestors were ape-like animals” (*Creation* 4), we tend to respectfully disagree. As “literalist interpreters of Christian Holy Scripture” (*Creation* 3), as Wilson correctly deems us, we believe that God directly created man in His image. This and other such disagreements between religion and science greatly affect the way in which we view the environment.

In the analysis of our Southern Baptist views towards the environment, it is also important to examine the scriptural mandates on which we base our views of this world. In 1 John 2:15, we are told to “not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15); this is a very direct mandate to not put our love and cares on this earth. We are told not to put emphasis on this earth because “the world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:17). Unlike people who believe that life ends with death, we believe that Heaven and the life beyond this earth should be our focus. These scriptural mandates greatly influence how we as Southern Baptists examine the role we should take in the environment; based on these mandates, our role should be one of coexistence but not necessarily involvement with the things of this world.

However, there is another mandate given to humans in the Bible, which is the mandate that men should be stewards of the earth. God commands in Genesis that we “fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen. 1:28). Many Christians interpret this to mean that we, as humans, are given complete dominion over the earth and all of its creatures. However, Wilson notes that “it is more commonly interpreted to mean the stewardship of nature” (*Future* 158). It is also written in the Bible that “the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Gen. 2:15); while man has since then fallen and the world we live in is certainly no Garden of Eden anymore, this scriptural passage can easily be interpreted to mean that man was put on this earth to care for it. Laurel Kearns, professor of Sociology of Religion at Drew University, notes in her article entitled “Saving the Creation: Christian Environmentalism in the United States” that “stewardship is one of the first commandments given to humans by God” (58). When read with the biblical mandate that humans rule over the earth in mind, Genesis

2:15 indeed conveys a sense of stewardship and care that we, as humans, should show to the earth as we practice our dominion over it.

Other denominations have already acted upon this particular mandate. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, for example, has already taken steps to confront concerns about the environment based on the concept of stewardship. In an article entitled “Catholics Organize Against Climate Change,” which appeared in the *New York Times*, Bishop William S. Skylstad states that the Catholic Climate Coalition, a coalition of catholic groups intent on working on environmental issues including climate change, works on the basis of “two fundamental principles and two religious obligations: to care for God’s creation and to do so in ways that care for the poor and vulnerable” (“Catholics”). The Catholics, who also believe that men should not put more emphasis on this world than the next world, are acting upon God’s mandate for stewardship.

Even other Southern Baptist Conventions have taken steps to care for the earth. In an article entitled “Southern Baptist Groups Shift Position on Climate” that appeared in *Christian Century*, it is cited that “a group of Southern Baptist leaders has launched a new initiative on the environment...which was released March 10.” The initiative states that “the lack of scientific unanimity should not prevent ‘prudent action’ through changed habits and ‘responsible policies’ (“Southern Baptist” 18). The view of these particular Southern Baptists is that we must change our policies in order to care for God’s creation despite the disagreement between Christians who rely on the Word of God, and scientists who rely on the work of man. These Christian groups have chosen to promote environmentalism based on the call to stewardship given by God. While the initiatives of these particular Christians in response to the environment may seem like a logical course of action, we must ask ourselves if this is the course of action that the South

Carolina Southern Baptist Convention should take. In order to determine what response would coincide best with our faith and beliefs, we must first examine all of the possible options.

Some environmentalists may say that one course of action we could take is to put some of our beliefs aside for the sake of the environment. Kearns states that “emphasis on individual redemption and the other-worldliness of conservative Christians...has often led to a disdain for the physical world and a mastery-over-nature stance” (60). We can conclude that, in her opinion, religious beliefs are a stumbling block that gets in the way of saving the environment. However, acclaimed author Garret Keizer contends in his article entitled “Faith, hope, and ecology,” that someone who believes in such a course of action is one of “those environmentalists who regard her Christian faith as irrelevant” (16). As Southern Baptists, we certainly do not regard our faith as irrelevant, and I doubt that any of you think that we should just cast aside or even compromise our faith and beliefs for the sake of this world, not matter what the state of the environment happens to be. Therefore, this course of action is simply not an option for us; our beliefs are a fundamental aspect of our lives and religion, and putting them aside for the sake of anything is out of the question.

Another course of action would be to completely deny the environment altogether, and focus solely on Heaven and life after death. After all, the Bible tells us “do not love the world or anything in it” (1 John 2:15), and therefore denying the environment would be in keeping with our faith. However, while in theory this may seem appealing to many of my fellow Southern Baptists, it is also not the right option for us. In *The Future of Life*, Wilson cites “Patriarch Bartholomew I, spiritual leader of the world’s 250 million Orthodox Christians” as saying:

For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy
the biological diversity of God’s creation, for humans to degrade

the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands, for humans to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air and its life with poisonous substances, these are sins (158).

This statement, if nothing else, should at least instill a conviction in us to do *something* about the environment and its decline. While we do have faith that we are unwilling to compromise, it is also unsafe and unnecessary to sacrifice the environment in exchange for our beliefs. Kyle Childress, a Southern Baptist pastor of Austin Heights Baptist church in Texas, points out in his article entitled "Creation Conversation" that "mountaintops are being removed and poisons are being poured into our air and water and soil, all in the name of what my Southern Baptist grandfather called big business and my 'tribal deity' [God] calls greed" (35). His statement points at something very key in our examination of environmentalism: if things that Christians are against, such as "greed," help to cause the environment's destruction, then is it possible that values that Christians uphold may help to improve the environment's condition?

Many Christians who care about the environment have found ways to reconcile faith and environmentalism in order to help the environment without compromising faith. They have done this by applying Christian values to the environment. Asceticism, for instance, is a value that lends itself very well to an environment-friendly lifestyle. Larry Rasmussen, a Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, states in his article entitled "Earth-Honoring Asceticism and Consumption" that Christian asceticism "has always been about living lightly, gently, and equitably upon the earth. It 'requires...a voluntary restraint' and 'offers practical examples of conservation'" (505). Since materialism and overindulgence are some of the main problems facing the environment, asceticism is a value that can actually help the

environment if applied to environmental issues. Asceticism is also the value and idea behind Lent; although Southern Baptists do not necessarily observe Lent by that name, we do promote and admire the idea behind the tradition. In a Newsweek article called “God Save the Earth,” reporter Daniel Stone describes Laila Thomson, a girl who uses her Christian values and beliefs in order to limit her carbon footprint. He explains that “for the 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter, she's doing without plastic bags, wasted electricity and excess driving,” and describes her endeavor as “the newest display of green thinking that connects environmental vigilance with religious salvation” (Stone). By applying her Christian values to her concern for the environment, Laila found a way to reduce her carbon footprint without having to struggle with her religious beliefs.

In an interview entitled “Low Carbon Life,” Chris Goodall, a graduate from the Harvard Business School who works with churches to decrease their carbon footprint, describes another Christian value that should motivate us to help the environment: the commandment to “love you neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). He explains that what we do to the environment directly affects others; in particular, it affects the poor and the sick, who are the very people that we as Christians should be especially caring for. The environmental programs he implements do not undermine our faith or ask for a compromise of faith; instead, he suggests simple and small changes such as car-pooling to church or cutting down on heating in order to reduce the church’s carbon footprint (“Low Carbon” 27). Slight changes such as these do not only coincide with our religious beliefs, but allow for us to help the poor and sick as we are called to do. In Goodall’s view, “it is a failure of Christian duty not to take action” against environmental problems (“Low Carbon” 28). His opinion is that environmentalism is a Christian duty, not something that a Christian should feel the need to fight against.

I am of this same opinion; the South Carolina Southern Baptist Convention should do *something* in response to the growing environmental concern. However, let me first say that I am in agreement with my fellow Southern Baptists that life after death is more important than this world, and that our beliefs tell us to put the written Word of God before the findings of men achieved through science; therefore, if any of us feel that a certain environmental program undermines or asks us to compromise our faith by going against the mandate that we “do not love the world or anything in the world,” (1 John 2:15) more than we love God, I would recommend that we not get involved. Environmentalism, although necessary to save the earth, should in no way force us to compromise our faith and beliefs; in my opinion, there is absolutely no need for it to do so.

There are very few environmental programs that actually do undermine our faith. Therefore, there is no reason why we cannot somehow become involved with the environmentalist initiative. Simple changes such as the ones Chris Goodall implemented in British churches can easily be made in our Southern Baptist churches in South Carolina. For example, cutting down on heating and electricity, or replacing ordinary light bulbs with compact fluorescents, which are more energy efficient, could greatly help the environment and would not ask us to compromise any aspect of our faith. In fact, some environmental programs could even enhance Christian values that we already uphold; for example, car-pooling would promote a greater sense of community and fellowship within the church. Also, caring for the environment indirectly helps the poor and sick who are most affected by pollution and climate change, and answers the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). The environment does not only have to be about putting animals before humans or putting the environment before God. Southern Baptists should respond positively to helping the environment in areas that do not

conflict with our beliefs; the best way to do this is to implement small changes in our lifestyle and church. It is very possible to reconcile our faith and our concern for the environment in order to make our churches more environment-friendly; in light of the earth's current situation, it seems very important that we find ways to do so soon.

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