

Dick Van Dyke

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Dr. Koster

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Go Forth

Ever since the creation of Adam and Eve, humans have fulfilled their God-given responsibility to “be fruitful and increase in number” (Gen. 1:28 NIV). According to the CIA World Fact Book, humanity has succeeded in answering this command: “our world’s population has risen from 1 billion in 1820, to 2 billion in 1930, 3 billion in 1960, 4 billion in 1974, 5 billion in 1988, and 6 billion in 2000.” This fulfillment, however, has led to an increasingly negative impact on the world around us. We are not surprised by this for Jesus told us, “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come” (Matt. 24:6 NIV). With “this world in its present form...passing away” it seems that all we can do is look to Christ and his heavenly kingdom (1 Cor. 7:31). But not all peoples on earth have our hope and share our eternal perspective: they love this world for it is all they know. It is no wonder that the liberal trend of environmentalism is growing so quickly in the media and political circles. Although secular people are concerned about the earth and its protection, Protestants have remained mysteriously silent on the entire issue. Yet God calls each generation of his people to be light and salt to the world: failing to take a stance an issue so important to the world around us would be unacceptable. As Christ’s body on earth, we must follow Him as the head by obeying His word. The book of Genesis describes the relationship God desired His people to have with His creation: “So God created man in his own image, in the

image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; 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. 1:27-28). The question of our age is this: how can we, as faithful Presbyterians, reconcile God’s Word with the call of environmentalism?

To obey God’s will we must first understand His commands. One of His commands is to “*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). We have been given the authority of rulers over this earth. To understand the implications of such a position, it is beneficial to look at the expectations for rulers when these words were written. According to the *Word Biblical Commentary*, “Ancient oriental kings were expected to be devoted to the welfare of their subjects, especially the poorest and weakest members of society.” Just like Christ, ancient rulers were expected to serve the least. A great example of such an expectation can be found in Psalm 72:

¹ “Endow the king with your justice, O God,
the royal son with your righteousness.

² He will judge your people in righteousness,
your afflicted ones with justice.

³ The mountains will bring prosperity to the people,
the hills the fruit of righteousness.

- ⁴ He will defend the afflicted among the people
and save the children of the needy;
he will crush the oppressor.
- ⁶ He will be like rain falling on a mown field,
like showers watering the earth.
- ⁷ In his days the righteous will flourish;
prosperity will abound till the moon is no more.
- ⁸ He will rule from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth...
- ¹¹ All kings will bow down to him
and all nations will serve him.
- ¹² For he will deliver the needy who cry out,
the afflicted who have no one to help.
- ¹³ He will take pity on the weak and the needy
and save the needy from death.
- ¹⁴ He will rescue them from oppression and violence,
for precious is their blood in his sight...
- ¹⁶ Let grain abound throughout the land;
on the tops of the hills may it sway.

Let its fruit flourish like Lebanon;
let it thrive like the grass of the field.”

This Psalm describes a king protecting the lowest and most helpless beings of the land; his work is compared to a rain shower over the earth – enabling it to grow and prosper. *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* explains the significance of this passage in understanding the responsibility of the king and ruler:

“The king was regarded as God’s surrogate on earth. He acted as the intermediary between God and the people and ruled on behalf of God. The kingship of the king was a commission from God. Although the king of Israel was not deified as were the kings of some of the peoples of the ancient Near East, he was nevertheless regarded as the adopted son of the LORD. In Psalm 72 the emphasis falls on the way in which the king carries out his basic task and the consequences of his reign. As an intermediary between God and his people and as the representative of God, the king is the source of abundant ‘peace.’” (34)

The king’s purpose on earth was not to please himself, but to be a source of peace on the land – representing God to those below him. The *Word Biblical Commentary* goes one step further: “Because man is created in God’s image, he is *king* over nature. He *rules* the world on God’s behalf” (24). So our understanding of “rule” has changed: to be “kings over nature” means that we are to “take pity on the weak [in nature]...and save the needy from death” (Ps. 72). So it appears that we should rule nature by protecting it. But the other half of the verse says to “subdue” the natural world. This command seems to completely contradict the image of a ruler we have seen. A better understanding of “subdue” clears up this difficulty. According to the

Harper's Dictionary the Hebrew word for “subdue” is “*raw-daw*” and means “Rule or lordship, referring to political authority exercised by human beings or the realm in which such authority is exercised” (678). So this word really means the same as the word for ruling over nature – again, God calls us to take care of nature as a king is called to take care of his weakest subjects. *The New Interpreter's Bible* offers even more insight:

“A study of the verb *have dominion* reveals that it must be understood in terms of caregiving, even nurturing not exploitation. As the image of God, human beings should relate to the nonhuman as God relates to them. This idea belongs to the world of the ideal conceptions of royal responsibility (Ezek 34:1-4) and centers on the animals.” (152)

This morality certainly accounts for passages of the Bible like Genesis 5 in which Noah is commanded to build an ark to save his family and all animal life on earth from the impending flood. In this story, God reveals his desire to protect nature through the use of his most faithful servants; he wishes to let the species continue to populate in the future and calls Noah to save them along with his family. It is also interesting to notice that God calls Noah to save the animals rather than to try and persuade other humans to join him in the ark.

But even with such a story in the Old Testament, some may ask if this could be a command for people only at the beginning of time? After all, we are living in the end times – Christ is going to come back soon to create a *new earth* (2 Peter 3:14). Since this is the case, they may ask, why not let the old earth pass away as it inevitably will? This is the same logic Paul had to dispel in his letter to the Romans concerning grace and sin: “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” (Rom. 6:1) In this situation, people were claiming that it was not

wrong to sin since Christ would forgive them. Likewise, it is just as foolish to claim that it is not wrong to disobey God's commandment to take care of the earth since a new one is coming.

But is this priority really one to invest our lives in rather than missions work? By learning from other denominations, we can see why this is not a problem. Southern Baptists have recently taken a public stand for environmentalism. Beginning with a critical reading of the Bible and God's commands to His people in Genesis, they have realized that it is their moral responsibility as Christians to take care of God's creation as good stewards. On their website devoted to this issue, "baptistcreationcare.org", they have admitted that "Our cautious response to these issues in the face of mounting evidence may be seen by the world as uncaring, reckless and ill-informed. We can do better. To abandon these issues to the secular world is to shirk from our responsibility to be salt and light. The time for timidity regarding God's creation is no more." Not only have Baptists and Presbyterians alike ignored God's mandate to humanity, but we have given Christians a poor name to the secular world. By choosing to care for the environment, we would not be choosing to refrain from evangelism; in fact, it is quite the opposite: by caring for the environment, we would be evangelizing. We cannot act too soon to stand up for what we believe in. In fact, while the Protestant denominations are just beginning to establish a stance on climate change and environmentalism, Catholics have been discussing necessary changes for years. According to an article written by Kevin Sack for the *New York Times*, "By 1993, the United States Catholic Conference had begun an environmental justice program that encouraged local action by Catholics to protect the environment, with a special eye toward helping the poor." Although, we differ in many of our views, Catholics and Protestants both live in God's creation and are both responsible for caring for it. There is no reason for Presbyterians to fall behind Catholics and Baptists in obeying God's commandment to us.

We are to be the light of the world – ambassadors of heaven to earth. This is a call to leadership. But we have reason to be ashamed – we are already late to the scene. Scientists and ecologists have been struggling for years to preserve the natural world, while Christians stood by the side and condemned them for their liberal policies. We have already made a bad name for ourselves among the secular world. But it is not too late to obey the call of God. There are definite steps which we must take to move forward.

Firstly, we must realize that environmentalism is an ethical issue and not just a political issue. For many years, Christians have ignored environmentalism due to the impression that it was nothing more than a liberal issue – something conservatives should be against. Writer James Guth of the “American Journal of Political Science” explains this problem in his essay *Faith and the Environment: Religious Beliefs and Attitudes on Environmental Policy*: “Not surprisingly, environmentalism is strongly associated with political-identity variables. In every sample, political liberalism and Democratic identification...are strongly correlated with pro-environment attitudes. Indeed, among both elites and the mass public, environmentalism has been assimilated into ideological and partisan preferences...” (373). This type of black and white thinking simplifies God’s will to the level of a secular political party. It is only arrogant to believe one party or another is completely correct in every way. If we are motivated by morals rather than by politics, we are far less likely to miss out on the specific calls of God.

Secondly, each of us must fulfill our moral responsibility to live a lifestyle which the earth can sustain. Websites such as “carbonfootprint.com” offer tools to help the individual monitor his or her life for the good of the earth and its people. This will require sacrifice in the way we house ourselves, transport ourselves, feed ourselves, and entertain ourselves – but there

is no cost too high for following Christ. By doing this we will be actively loving and caring for the world around us.

Thirdly, we must band together at the level of the church – moving as Christ’s body on earth. Responsibility will fall primarily on those in the role of leadership to apportion time, money, and energy towards conservationist efforts. They have the task of making their congregations aware of the task at hand, aware of how each of their individual actions affects the earth God has given us. With such leadership, the church has the potential to be a key player in the environmentalist movement.

Finally, we as Presbyterians must band together with our fellow humans outside of the church. They have been the leaders thus far and it is our time to join them in the pursuit of conserving nature. Biologist and bestselling author George Wilson suggests an outline for the conservation of the environment in his book *The Future of Life*; he calls on the church to take its place in assisting the environmental groups already in existence, such as the World Wildlife Fund, The Nature Conservancy, The National Wildlife Federation, the Sierra Club, the National parks Conservation Association, and the National Audubon Society (169). By supporting such groups, the body of Christ will be investing in God’s creation, evangelizing to those peoples who already see the beauty and splendor of God’s handiwork, and obeying our heavenly Father who knows what is best for this world.

Although the world we live in is fragile, we must do our best to handle it with wisdom; we are responsible for it and should rule over it as we would have God rule over us. Just as we are to live as if our souls were perfected, so we should strive to maintain the earth as if it were to be the new earth. In doing so we will both fulfill God’s mandate to rule the earth and

reach the lost of the world through a righteous example of love towards nature. By teaming with conservationists, we may both create opportunities for relationships and exemplify Christ's character – in our dealings with both mankind and nature. So what is the great calling of our time and how will we respond to it? Simply this: to love one another and love God's creation.

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