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CRTW 201

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### A Green Sermon

To my dear family of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Happy Earth Day! Whether you celebrate by shutting down your computer for the day, keeping the light in the hall off, or re-organizing your trash into recyclables, I hope you enjoy it. As you do I'd ask, much in the style of our pastor, that you keep in mind the true spirit of the occasion. Think about what makes Earth Day important and what caring about the environment really entails. Are you really concerned with the future of the planet, or is the hemp jewelry just for show? Are you aware of the impact you have on the environment or was the organic milk on sale this week? As with anything else we as Christians do, it is important to think about the significance our actions so that they remain genuine. We learn that faith without action and action without faith are useless in the service of the Lord, a concept that is as relevant in our interaction with people as it is in our interaction with the whole natural world.

As many of you know, I am a student at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC—just south of Charlotte, for those who are unfamiliar. I just finished my sophomore year there and this past semester I took a class called: CRTW—that is; Critical Reading, Thinking, and Writing. The class is designed to help students think more “critically” about their lives, and one of the big parts of the curriculum is to read a book as a class and break down the subject matter and analyze the process of the author's thinking. What our professor chose was a book by a scientist named Edward Wilson, called The Future of Life. In The Future of Life, Dr. Wilson goes into great

detail about many factors that are affecting the state of our environment, both here in America and in the world. What's unique about his book is that he not only talks about what we as humans are doing that harms the rest of the planet—polluting, living wasteful lifestyles and making decisions that are harmful, etc—but he also attempts to explain why we act the way we do, and offers arguments and solutions as to how we should attempt to live in a way that is beneficial to the environment.

In the final chapter of his book—aptly named, *Solution*—Wilson sheds light on what I believe to be the center of all his other proposed solutions; a change of heart in human kind. In the chapter, he says:

If two hundred years of history of environmentalism have taught us anything, it is that a change of heart occurs when people look beyond themselves to others, and then to the rest of life. It is strengthened when they also expand their view of landscape, from parish to nation and beyond, and their sweep of time from their own life spans to multiple generations and finally to the extended future history of humankind. (155)

Let's think about that a minute. He wants us to “look beyond [our]selves to others...” (155). Well what kind of Christians are we if we can't do that? Our faith is based on finding our purpose in the context of a relationship with the Lord—we are who we are because we are acting in His will. And once we achieve that, or as we're finding it out, we should be helping others find the same kind of relationship so they can find their purpose in His will. We find ourselves through God, and when we do, we can start to look to the things that Wilsons says are necessary to preserve what has been given to us. Some of you may be asking “How is this important to me?”, or more specifically: “What does being a Christian have to do with the environment?” The

answer to that is sadly contradictory. What I mean is that being a Christian should heavily influence the way you look at nature and how you interact with it, but often times it doesn't. For example, a recent study was done to determine the connections between Christian theology and deep ecology—a secular, environmental belief system—that, in the process of polling and interviewing both Christians and non-Christians, it found that "...Christians, of any denomination, do not exhibit any more or less environmental concern than the general population." (Marangudakis 246) I was a bit surprised and a little ashamed at finding this; I mean, we're supposed to be sensitive and compassionate people, light to an uncaring world, why is it that we don't have any more concern than we do? I believe it is because we do not truly understand the role we, as people of faith, play in the caretaking of the earth.

Indeed, in my research I've found that many scientists and ecologists are familiar with a stereotype of an uncaring Christian view toward the environment. In the studies I found, the common factor in those that had little concern for the earth also are more steeped in literalism and conservatism as far as their interpretation of the Bible, especially in the case of God's charge of "dominion" over the earth (Wolokmir, et.al). Is this so surprising? Christians are a people with their eyes on the prize in the sky. We are taught to live by faith, to please the Lord and build up our treasures in heaven, so why wouldn't it follow that we care less about what's down here on Earth. We are charged with saving the souls of mankind; we're on fire for God so others will see our light and catch a spark for Him too. Does this mean that to be ecologically concerned, we have to back off in our pursuit of the spirit? The very same, and similar, studies say we don't. Statistics show that while there is a definite link between environmental apathy and the extent to which you believe in "dominion," there is no negative correlation between environmental concern and religious salience when dominion belief is taken out of the equation (Wolokmir,

et.al). That is to say, that the more devoted you are to the Lord, the more likely you are to engage in environmentally beneficial activities, and the more concerned you are likely to be about the environment (Tarakeshwar 401). What this suggests to me is that we, as a Church, need a new outlook on what our place is as rulers over the beasts of the field.

So what is our role? How are we supposed to think about the earth? The answer is that there are a number of views. One particularly interesting take I've found is in an essay by Dave Bookless—who heads an international, ecological, Christian initiative to save different species of birds. In the essay, he talks about hardships and skepticism that the initiative faced and about the success they have now, but he goes on to talk about the role of the Christian with a mission, and how ecology and the creation fit into that mission. Most of us can agree that one of the most, if not *the* most grounding principle of Evangelism is based on “Great Commission,” given by the Lord to his disciples to go and make “fishers of men.” What Bookless suggests, is that there is an even more primary, and often overlooked commission in God’s charge of “dominion” to Adam. He explains that our job to reflect God is also inclusive of nature: “To put it simply, to be in God’s image is to care for creation in a godly way... when humanity fails to reflect God’s character in how we care for the earth, we fail to be the image of God.” (42).

Historically speaking, the change I am proposing is not so unprecedented. It is not hard to see a pattern in how the views and opinions about the role we play in caring for the earth have shifted in our Judeo-Christian belief system. If you start at just before the twentieth century, there is a quite noticeable ebb and flow, rise and fall, of how much regard people of faith have for creation. In an article describing the historical relationship between Judaism and ecology, eco-feminist and scholar Hava Samuelson describes how Judaism experienced one of the first shifts in favor of creation. This shift came in the form of Zionism, which some of you may know

helped to lead to the establishment of Israel. She details the change in Jewish ideals with the movement, explaining that “Zionism was committed to the creation of a new Jew who would be physically strong, fearless, proud, and non-bookish, a Jew who would till the land rather than study sacred texts.” (385). If you know anything about the Zionist movement, you know that this makes sense because it is a way of returning to one’s roots. They felt that they had gotten away from what God wanted for them as a people (Samuelson), and going back to the land when they had isolated themselves from it before can be seen as a way for them to find their values again.

Just a few short decades after this shift in Judaism, a very similar change took place in the Catholic faith that spanned from about 1930 to 1960 (Marlett). The movement was coined “biodynamic farming,” and had much the same view of what the new ideal Christian should be; a person who farmed and took care of God’s creation to survive (Marlett). But not only were the Catholics following this belief to farm the land, they were to do so organically, that is, without the help of chemical fertilizers and the giant machines that were then beginning to be used to plant and harvest giant one-crop fields (Marlett 55). This demand for simplicity was to ensure that people were truly living off God through his creation, and came in response to the increasing idolization of city life, which was then regarded as an “artificial existence” (Marlett 57). The binary, or opposing forces we can see here are very telling about how our faith’s views were changing even then; from what began as a simple return to values for Jews, to a way of standing out and against what we, as Christians felt was a form of “moral corruption” (Marlett 53). We see Christians taking action for what they feel they need to do in order to be closer to God, and in the face of a society that was often cynical (Marlett 58).

Changes have been taking place in more recent history as well. There was an article written by a Dr Laurel Kearns—a professor in the Theology School of Drew University in NJ—

which examines one of the most prominent spiritual “ethics” or viewpoints on nature in the time that it was written (1994). It is known as the “Christian stewardship” ethic, and is centered on the changing of individual hearts and minds, using a very moderate reconciliation of conservative and modern beliefs. Kearns describes them as being “leery” of both the “conservative...d disdain for nature” and “what they see as the new-age worship of creation...” (60). “Stewards” also strive for reconciliation with negative feelings and opinions toward science, seeing “the overcoming of conservative religious bias against science as the key to the success of Christian ecology.” (60). What this means for us is to try and look past what might be too quick a judgment on scientific explanations for what is going on in the world, as well as any proposed scientific means to help solve it. One particular issue that I think “stewards” understand is that the long-standing, controversial argument between creationists and most of the scientific community could have the potential to “harden the heart” so to speak, of the average Christian to science, but that a joining of the powers of science and religion is necessary to help make a change for the better.

Now I know I’ve been going on for a while now about changing certain ways of thinking and restructuring the ways we act, both as individuals and as a Church. And by now you may be thinking to yourself “Yeah, that’s great for the environment and nature and all that, but what’s it doing for the Church, is it worth it to take on an issue like environmentalism?” My response to this question would be a resounding “Yes!” There are a number of benefits to addressing the issue of the environment both within and without the church structure. In an article by Keith Warner—a Franciscan monk—examines what he calls the “greening of American Catholicism” and its effects on local structures of religion. He describes the church’s evaluation of environmentalism as “...an opportunity to analyze how religious leaders come to conceptualize

new knowledge (about environmental problems) as having moral significance.” (113). Basically, he’s saying that it affords the people in the community, especially in the church, to see how the minds of their religious leaders work, making them more relatable, and I would think, often garnering respect. On the church family’s part, he says that it provides the rest of the community with “...insights for understanding the cultural processes of incorporating new responsibilities into a group’s collective religious ethical vision.” (113). Greening our church is a chance to strut our stuff, to show outsiders that we, as Christians are sensitive to the aches and pains of the world, and can adapt to help heal them. Such a flexibility and display of strength would surely garner the respect of onlookers, and who knows, the Lord might even use our actions to draw people to Him.

We needn’t be bashful either, the stand for current environmental issues has already begun. An article that was picked up in the New York Times the day before Earth Day (April 21<sup>st</sup>), describes how America’s Catholics are beginning to take official, united stand on different problems. While the article tells of the Church encouraging fairly general practices in response to environmental issues—reflection on stewardship, lobbying, reducing individual ecological impact, etc—it suggested that the numbers are what made the unification of these views significant (Dean). Catholics are a large and influential demographic, and their official stand could make a great deal of difference in the creation of policies to come. In researching for this paper, I was sent a link (by my professor, she knew I needed all the help I could get) that took me to something that replaced the shame I felt when I first found out about the ecological Christian stereotype. It took me to a website dedicated to uniting Southern Baptists in their stance on the role of environmentalism in our church. The website has a list of signatories, a declaration of views—complete with a preamble and plan of action—links to books and

resources so that other members of the church can get informed on the issue, and to top it off, a link to the message of the gospel, for those who are uninformed upon visiting the site. This made my heart glad—and all God’s children said Amen! Finally something that we can identify with, something we can get behind and call our own. In his declaration, Jonathan Merrit—a graduate of Liberty University and featured writer in “Time” and “Newsweek”—reasons are given as to why Southern Baptists are to take a stand in environmentalism as well as a rough guide to being “light and salt,” and using our influence to promote advocacy for biblical stewardship in all the places where change can be made (Merrit). While this is a wonderful resource for us as a church—I will provide the link and how to sign up after service—I do feel like more explicit methods of Christian advocacy could be developed, and I mean to propose a few.

Firstly, I think it wise that everyone develop habits of conservation as best each of us can. I mean specifically separating trash from recyclables and disposing of each properly. Or, we could have a system where each family brings in its own, and possibly other peoples’ recyclables each week, to be disposed of by volunteers in the church. Another important conservational habit the church family could adopt is purchasing ecologically friendly products, food and otherwise. I understand that often times it is hard to tell if what you’re buying is the right thing, and so I suggest that the church do a bit of research and provide information on different products that are both good, and detrimental to the environment, in order to help families make informed decisions. Eating habits in general are a good way to conserve. For example, after leaving service every Sunday, instead of driving across town to buy food that is more than likely being made with food and processes which could be harmful to the environment, why not enjoy a nice lunch at home every so often, with food you know is made right, and with earth-friendly ingredients.



Lastly, I'm sure that there are many more ways to make a more environmentally friendly minded church. I myself am adamant to find ways in which to involve the community in such efforts. And so in the spirit of progress, I am in favor of putting together a committee dedicated to overseeing different environmental activities and programs that the church can take part in. I hope to talk with the pastor and the leaders of the church in the coming weeks to see how this can be done. I will do my best to help enact some of the solutions discussed earlier, and if you are interested in taking part or have any ideas, please feel free to talk with me after service. I will provide you with any contact information or source material I used in the sermon today you might want as well. With your help, we can get some conservation in this congregation. God Bless.

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