

The Deeper Problem

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Date: 20.08.2010

Category: Creation Care

A Response to Scott Sabin's 'Whole Earth Evangelism'?

While I don't disagree with Scott Sabin's thoughts, I am uncomfortable with 'piling on more doom and gloom.' True, the average North American is disconnected from the environment, and that disconnect has cost us dearly. But we must remember that North Americans have made great strides in minimizing and mitigating the negative effects on their environment. In fact, many facets of the modern environmental movement began in North America. (I think of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as an example.) As a result, air quality in urban areas in Canada, while still in need of vigilance and monitoring, has improved over the last 30 years. Industrial practices have improved the quality of effluents that are returned to natural water bodies, and forest management and agricultural practices have made steady improvement, minimizing and in some cases eliminating their negative effects on environmental indicators.

Problems do persist. Dire predictions about the earth's climate bring us back to face the reality that things are not as they should be, and God's Creation remains broken. The greatest problem, however, is how global problems affect the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters who are ill equipped to adjust. While we in the West have gradually learned to manage the world's bounty to our advantage, we have not been willing to share our bounty or our knowledge with those who need it most.

Every day our culture reminds us that we need the next shiny gadget to fit into our lives of excess, despite how little the latest mp3 player or expensive car has done to truly benefit us. Meanwhile, the gap between the poor and the wealthy continues to grow. James' admonition that, 'Pure religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world,' continues to ring in our deaf ears (James 1:27).

I would suggest that the parable of the rich fool is lost on many of us (Luke 12:13-21). We continue to store up more and more for ourselves, and think less and less of those around us. And let's not forget that we live in a global community, and our neighbours are those suffering in other parts of the world along with our disenfranchised neighbours. It is, in fact, our greed that makes us unclean (Mark 7:21-23), and so causes many of the environmental problems we face.

What is the alternative? While I would never suggest that we should not care for our environment, it seems to me that environmental activism can serve to conceal the true causes of our environmental problems. Our materialistic society, once it has eroded our environment, offers us materialistic solutions to the problems. Planting a tree is admirable, and God's ability to use us to restore his creation is amazing. But it is the nature of our hearts that is at the root of our problem, not the nature of our world. 'Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life' (Proverbs 4:23). A spiritual, inside-out transformation is what is needed.

If more of the West's riches were available to the world's poor, if the first world's educational and development opportunities were available to the third, would Etienne's wife still be travelling over a mile for water with a sick infant on her back? Would slash-and-burn farming continue to erode the Amazon?

The environmental cries have long been raised of 'Save the whales!' and 'Save Mother Earth!' Why not save your fellow man? Start by saving yourself. Start at home by consuming less, living simpler, more reasonable lives, and making the excess available to those who need it so desperately.

God spoke to Solomon about environmental disaster. ?When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land? (2 Chronicles 7:13?14). He might have suggested they learn alternative pest control methods, or climate control measures, but instead he focused on their hearts. Why should we look elsewhere? Care for creation must be allied with sacrificial concern for fellow human beings. ?For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also? (Luke 12:34).

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