

April 27, 2008

“Caring for Creation – Part One”
Genesis 1:26-28

FCF: Questions concerning our care for creation – what/why/how

PROPOSITION: (anchor) This is our Father’s world which He made and cares for.

(magnet) He has put us here as caretakers. And that is what we are to be.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

This past week marked another observation of Earth Day, a day set aside to inspire awareness and appreciation for Earth’s environment and emphasize the need to conserve the world’s natural resources. It’s a major educational and media event.

And a source of major skepticism in certain circles – particularly the Church. Which raises a few questions. Can we find common ground, anything we can commend? Any aspects of this we can and should support? If so, what would they be? And why?

In your bulletin this morning, I’m sure no few of you have noticed and wondered about the insert laying out our church’s new partnership with Clarksville’s “Community Supported Agriculture.” Why are we doing this? Is it just to meet and to serve people in the community? Could there be more to it? Could it just be a good thing to do in itself?

SCRIPTURE READING: [Genesis 1:26-28](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

You need solid footing if you’re going to make a stand. For without such footing, you will not stand at all. There is a bell tower in Italy, begun in 1173 and finished in 1350, eight stories high – a magnificent example of Romanesque architecture and decoration. The construction was plagued by persistent structural problems. By the time the first three stories were completed, one side of the tower had already begun to sink into the soft soil, causing construction to be halted for nearly 100 years. Still today, it tilts about 16 feet from the vertical, the lean increasing about 1/25 of an inch per year. It’s now closed to the public. Perhaps you’ve heard of it – the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

You need solid footing if you’re going to make a stand. For without such footing, you will not stand at all. That’s true of towers. And it’s true of issues of such import as the care of the environment. Think with me here. It’s become a focus of massive business investment and public policy. It’s become a huge topic of conversation. So much concern but so little agreement. Which means it’s hotly debated – among scientists, in the press, and in the Church. Questions of justice and solidarity have been raised. Positions have been taken, sides have been drawn, statements have been drafted.

All of which is fine. But know this. The questions raised should be answered with care. And the world should know that the Scriptures speak to the issues. Indeed, the Church should know that the Scriptures speak to it. We claim to be people of the Book. What then does the Book say? Simply this. That this is our Father’s world which He made and cares for. That He has put us here as caretakers. And that is what we are to be.

That said, I want to set the main three approaches to this debate before you in the time we have – two that don’t work and the one that does. What are they?

I. THE PAGAN APPROACH

The first is what could be called the “pagan approach.” Now understand, that’s not meant to be a pejorative term; just historical reality. This is the approach of the pantheist, one who believes all is God, that nature is everything and so must be defended at all cost. The impulse here is “Something’s wrong with the trashing of the planet.”

A) *Explanation*

What lies behind this impulse? What are the governing assumptions?

1. Stressing the unity

A stress upon the unity of things – all being one.

2. Sacrificing the diversity

A stressing of the unity, sacrificing the individual things within the unity. Imagine a great chasm. Assuming God is on one side of the chasm, man, the animals, the plants, and everything else is on the other. It is a complete unity with no distinctions made.

B) Implications

Now, what are the implications of this view, of the pagan approach?

1. Why it's wrong

The chasm illustration may not go far enough. In this view, there is often no distinction made between the Creator and creation – no chasm at all. And yet, Genesis is clear that there are three distinct actors – God, man, and the rest of creation. Ignoring this bears bitter fruit in several ways. In considering problems facing the environment, the solution is said to be limiting the population. How? Abortion and euthanasia. But the problem is not “too many lives” on the planet but lifestyle choices and public policies regarding the planet. Another implication would be that the ideal is a natural world untouched by human beings. But the problem here is that God has clearly given it to us for our use.

2. The inevitable harm it causes

Going beyond this, a pagan polytheistic approach where all is one and everything is god inevitably means nothing is wrong. Nothing is abnormal. Which means you have no cause to resist, no evil or wrong to fight against. And we simply can't live that way.

Illustration:

Two illustrations of this point. First, the way this approach has impacted the economy of nations in the Far East such as India where rats and cows are allowed to eat from the same food supply of the people. And the people suffer terribly.

Second, a story told to me by a former MTW missionary to France, Marc Mailloux. Before he became a Christian, he spent some time backpacking through Asia and Europe and landed in L'Abri in Switzerland. In a conversation with Francis Schaeffer, he declared his belief in the oneness of all things and his desire to live “as one” with the world around him. In the course of this conversation, a bee landed on his arm and stung him. He immediately swatted and killed it. And he realized he had just demonstrated that he couldn't live according to his professed worldview. This then led to some further dialogue with Dr. Schaeffer and his conversion to Christianity.

Application:

Ultimately, the problem here is that creation, nature, the environment has been placed too high. Or, thinking back to what I said earlier, there's no footing here, no solid ground on which to make a stand. And the inevitable result is man is placed far too low.

II. THE PLATONIC APPROACH

The next view is the “Platonic approach.” Here an utter distinction is made between the spiritual and physical, salvation found in escaping the lower, the physical. The pagan approach says, “It's everything.” The Platonic approach says, “It's nothing.” The impulse being, “Hold on. Something's wrong with the worshipping of the planet.”

A) Explanation

What lies behind this impulse? What are its governing assumptions?

1. Stressing the diversity

The pagan view stresses the unity; the Platonic the diversity. Again, imagine a chasm. But this time the focus is on God and man together on one side with animals, plants, and everything else on the other. An utter and complete distinction is made us and creation.

2. Sacrificing the unity

A stress on the diversity sacrificing the unity.

B) *Implications*

What are the implications of this view? Where does it take us?

1. Why it's wrong

Nature becomes merely an academic proof of the existence of a Creator. It's not seen as something valued by the Creator. And therefore it has no value to itself. But the reality is that God cares for it. Read the psalms, especially Psalm 104. The fact is that God cared enough to make it and He cares enough even now to sustain it. So it has value.

2. The inevitable harm it causes

But when we fail to see this, we do inevitable harm to it. And that harm comes in one of two ways – either outright destroying it or just simply callously using it for our whims.

Either way, it does harm not only to creation but, in the end, to us as well.

Illustration:

What do I mean by this? Think with me. In business, when we treat people merely as consumers of products from whom we desire to profit, we do harm to them and to ourselves. In romance, when we treat another person as a sex object with whom we desire to satisfy our lust, we do harm to them and to ourselves. The same happens here. When we treat what God values as a thing to be used, it is harmed and so are we.

Application:

The Platonic approach puts creation too low and pulls us down with it. Again, like the pagan pantheistic view, there is no footing, no solid ground on which to stand. No, we certainly shouldn't worship this world. But we should certainly care for it.

III. THE CHRISTIAN APPROACH

So where are we so far? With two views that have no middle ground and little point of agreement, each often just reacting to the other. Which brings us to a third way, the Christian approach. This world is not everything. And it is not nothing. So what is it? It's our Father's. And He has placed us here as caretakers (**READ Genesis 1:26-28**).

A) *Explanation*

What do we learn here? Really some dramatically fundamental things.

1. God's work in creation

First, God's work in creation. He created all things and He has claims upon it all (**READ Psalm 24:1**). He created all things. And, with that, He cares and maintains all things.

2. Man's place in creation

Such is God's work in creation. Then there is man's place in creation. We have a unique place. On the one hand, we are one with nature. The pagan has a point. We do breathe, eat, and reproduce like any other living thing, made to depend upon our Creator. But, on the other hand, we have been given dominion and are clearly called to exercise it. Here the Platonic view has a point. There is something fundamentally distinct about us.

We are stewards and caretakers. But not owners. Which is to say we are to set ourselves towards caring for, improving, discovering and developing the riches God placed here.

B) *Implications*

What are the implications of this? Where does it take us?

1. God's position towards creation

To a totally different understanding of God's position towards creation. Go back and read the refrain of Genesis 1 – "It is good." This is His handiwork in which He takes joy and delight – both in His work of creating and then in His continual sustaining.

2. Man's position towards creation

Such is God's position towards creation. Which should give us a clue towards ours. We bear His image. Why? To serve His purpose, to imitate His governance. We should let His attitude inform ours. We should take His lead. He delights in it and so should we.

Which means to our friend, the pantheist pagan, we have to say, "Not adoration but awe, not worship but wonder." And to our other friend, the Platonic utilitarian, we have to say, "Not destruction but dominion, not callousness but care." It's a whole different way. It's not everything. It's not nothing. This is my Father's world.

Application:

Let me go further. To the watching world, we have to say, "Yes, you are right. The Church has often done a poor job of teaching, living, and standing for these things. But poor applications do not negate the reality of the truth." The Fall is real. Selfish desires have led to selfish gratification. Money and greed, time and impatience have dictated our choices. And we need to openly own up to that. None of us lives completely consistently with what we say we believe. But what I'm saying is that it is the Christian approach alone that gives the position worth holding, the footing on which to stand.

That's the first thing. But there's another. The unbiblical views of those around us – whether they be pagan or Platonic – do not excuse our irresponsibility. If anything, it ratchets up our responsibility. The Scriptures speak to it. So then should we. We claim to be people of the Book. What then does the Book say? What does it tell us?

The beauty of this position is that it's true to how things are. And being true to how things are, it brings beauty to our lives. It tells us that there is a place for research and resourcefulness, for development of tools and technology, for farming the land, digging for minerals, extracting fuels, damming rivers, harnessing atomic energy. Why? Because we've been given dominion. But all carried out with humility, an appreciation and a whole new grid through which to see. This is our Father's world which He made and cares for. He has put us here as caretakers. And that is what we are to be.

CONCLUSION:

Let me tell you a story, "The Tale of the Caretaker." Once upon a time, there was a king – a good king who ruled with kindness and justice over His grateful subjects. This king was a creator – an architect, a builder, a carpenter, a mason, the greatest craftsman the world had ever seen. He loved to make things simply for the pleasure of making them and for His people to enjoy. Even beyond that, he was a botanist, a gardener, a farmer. He loved to plant things and watch them grow. He was a biologist. He raised animals, breeding and caring for them. He was also an artist – a sculptor, a painter, a musician, an author, even a thespian. All of these things had begun in his kingdom and he exulted in the things themselves, in giving them to his people, and watching his people learn the crafts and ways themselves. It was a beautiful, flourishing land in which to live.

I should add that the king was a loving father. He had a son, a boy who depended upon his father and rested in his good care. One day, the king said he had to go away. He packed his things and placed his son in charge. "It's all yours, my son. Remember what I've taught you and take care of it while I'm gone." The boy could hardly believe

the task and responsibility that had been given him. And the possibilities as well. But what sort of possibilities? Would he live and do things with his father's kingdom as he saw fit? Or would he live as a steward, a caretaker, a son? The possibilities were huge.

We live in just such a world before just such a God – Creator, Sustainer, Lord, and King. We have the joyful task and responsibility of stewards, caretakers, sons. Which brings us back full circle. We have firm footing, a place to stand. There is common ground to be found with environmentalists – not complete agreement but common ground. Truth be told, we should be leading the charge in the environmental movement – leading, not following, making clear not only what should be done and how but why. May God give us eyes with which to see our calling, our unique place in this world. And may He move us forward in creative joyful ways.

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