Misunderstanding Creation

Biblical teaching on creation is clear enough. Yet, because of the distortions of sin which have worked their way into all human cultures, humanity persistently misunderstands creation.

This is true even in the church. Biblical teachings get distorted by philosophies, ideologies, and economic and political realities to the point that Christians miss the import of fundamental biblical teaching concerning creation. This makes it difficult for Jesus followers to grasp the biblical meaning of creation—and therefore of creation healed.

“Nature”: Four Distorted Views

The biblical view of “Nature”—that is, the created order—often suffers distortion in four ways:

1. Romanticism. Prominent in Western culture especially since the nineteenth century, Romanticism views nature as the primary source of beauty and truth. In our creative, imaginative engagement with nature we find meaning, truth, even transcendence. Nature lifts our thoughts and feelings to the sublime. Christianity has not been unaffected by this; many Christians have a more romantic than a biblical view of the created order.

Romanticism embodies both truth and error. Since all creation in some sense “images” God’s beauty and creativity, we do resonate with the beauty of nature. We revel in the colors of flowers and sunsets; we marvel at the intricacy and complexity of life forms and the vast structure of the universe. We hear “the music of the spheres.”
But this is only half the story. Nature is “red in
tooth and claw,” as Tennyson wrote. The animal king-
dom is full of violence, predation, death—billions
of creatures great and small devouring and being
devoured. Scripture is frank about this. The biblical
worldview is not romantic; it recognizes the fallen-
ness and transitoriness of nature. “The grass withers,
the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand
forever” (Isa. 40:8).

Yes, the created order is a source of beauty and
of truth—the beauty that comes from God’s profuse
creativity and the truth of creation’s beauty and sub-
limity—and also the truth of its violence, fallenness,
and bondage to death. We can enjoy and glory in
the beauties of nature and yet see that something is
deeper wrong in the created order—a creation-wide
disease only God can heal.

2. Commodification. In contemporary Western
culture, the romantic view of nature is largely over-
shadowed by another view: commodification. If poets
are romantics, capitalists are commodifiers. Nature
means “natural resources”; the created order is mere
raw material for profit-making.

As with romanticism, the view of nature as
commodity, as “raw material” and natural resource,
contains both truth and error. Yes, the earth is rich
and bountiful, though not limitless, in resources
to sustain human life. God has set this good earth
under our dominion and it is proper to use it pru-
dently. But the earth belongs to God, not to humans.
It does not belong to private individuals, to nations,
or to corporations, whether local or transnational.
“The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof; the
world, and they that dwell therein” (Ps. 24:1 KJV).
Dominion means that the earth is to be held in
trust for all humanity, including unborn generations.
Nowhere does Scripture grant the absolute right to
exploit creation for profit; to turn the whole earth
into a commodity. Since the universe belongs to God,
all humans are responsible to God for their use and
abuse of the earth (and all planets) and all humanity
must be held accountable to the common good. In
fact God holds us all accountable for our responsible,
sustainable stewardship of the created order. Com-
modification is not the biblical worldview; it is an
exploitive distortion and a dangerous delusion.

3. Worship. Some people worship nature.
The created order is divinized; becomes a god. The
Apostle Paul pronounces God’s judgment on those
who have “exchanged the truth about God for a lie
and worshiped and served the creature rather than
the Creator, who is blessed forever!” (Rom. 1:25).

This ancient view—nature and its forces as god,
or gods—is still common today. We find it in New
Age mysticism and in various forms of pantheism—
even in some strains of Christian theology. The key
biblical distinction between Creator and creation gets
lost or blurred; nature, God, and ourselves become
pretty much the same thing.

There is, of course, a grain of truth here. Nature
is sublime in the sense that it can open our minds
and spirits to the spiritual, the transcendent, as
romanticism teaches. But nature is not God. We face
the constant temptation of idolatry here. Idolatry can
take the form of out and-out nature worship, but it
can take subtler forms of our worship of ourselves,
another person, our cars or houses or books, our
culture, our music, our land, our “right” to use and
abuse the earth solely for our own purposes. Worship
is a matter of one’s ultimate, dominating concern. If
our dominant concern is with our own rights, our
own stuff, our own land—even our own culture or
nation—we are worshiping the creation rather than
the Creator.

What do we worship? What are our idolatries?
Do we worship God alone, and treat his good cre-
aton as gift through which we can worship and serve
him more fully?

4. Spiritualizing. Christians can fall prey to
any of these distorted views of the created order. But
perhaps the greatest temptation is an unbiblical spiri-
tualizing of the material world.

Spiritualizing is the view that creation has no
value in itself, but only as it points us to spiritual
realities. When we spiritualize that which is physical
and material, we veer from the biblical understand-
ing and actually open ourselves up to the distortions
of romanticism and commodification. Romanti-
cism: We enjoy nature, but only because it “lifts” us
to “higher, loftier,” spiritual truths. And thus com-
modification: Since the material world has no value
intrinsically, we can do with it what we will, using
Spiritualizing the material world has become the dominant worldview of popular American Evangelicalism. Matter has value only to the degree that it (1) sustains our physical and economic life and (2) teaches us spiritual lessons, reminding us of what is really important.

But this is not the biblical view. God did not degrade himself in creating material things; rather God honored and dignified matter by bringing it into existence through his own power — and supremely by incarnating his own Son within the material creation.

So there is truth and error in spiritualization. The truth, biblically speaking, is that all creation is shot through with spirit, spiritual reality, spiritual significance. This is inevitable because its very existence comes from God’s energy. This is why biblical figures and metaphors and Jesus’ parables work. Material things do teach us spiritual lessons.

But this is only half the biblical teaching. The other half is that the created order has its own reality, its own integrity, its own purpose, dignity, destiny, and “right to exist” because it comes from God’s hand and is sustained by God. Jesus Christ “sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3).

Jesus-followers should renounce unbiblical distortions and see the created order as Scripture presents it. We must inhabit it as it truly is, viewed from the standpoint of God’s creation of, continuing involvement with, and ultimate plans for the universe. We will not romanticize nature, but recognize its beauty and its violence. We will not simply commodify the material world, exploiting it with disregard to God’s ownership and the common good. We will not worship nature, obscuring the line between Creator and creature. And we will not spiritualize the material world, forgetting that the earth in its materiality and physicality is good and integral to God’s whole plan of salvation — the healing of creation.

The Hole in the Evangelical Worldview

Reflecting on these four distortions helps us identify a major problem with popular Christianity today. Why don’t Evangelicals, in particular, take stewardship and creation care more seriously? Why are efforts to confront climate change, species depletion, and the protection of lakes, forests, and rivers often viewed as politically misguided or even ethically wrong? Concern about environmental stewardship is viewed as representing a subversive political agenda that is anti-God and probably anti-free enterprise.

This is a puzzle. Evangelicals claim to believe in the full authority of the Bible. Yet in the United States especially, Evangelicals for the most part read the Bible in such a way as either to positively exclude creation care, or to relegate it to such a low priority that it gets lost among other concerns. My impression from living most of my life in the Evangelical community is that most American Evangelicals simply do not believe that the Bible teaches creation care as an essential part of the Good News of Jesus Christ, or that it must be an indispensable part of faithful Christian witness.

This aversion to creation-care concern is caused by a gaping hole in the Evangelical theological ozone layer. Sub-biblical views of the environment rush in and the biblical perspective gets filtered out.

This hole in the Evangelical worldview comes into clear view when we trace the path Western Christianity has traveled. We can spot seven historical developments that have tended to distort contemporary Evangelical (and to a lesser extent Wesleyan) Christian worldviews. Together these seven developments largely explain the four distortions noted above.

The key elements in this sevenfold barrier are:

1. the theological inheritance from Greek philosophy, (2) the impact of the Enlightenment, (3) laissez-faire capitalism, (4) American individualism, (5) uncritical patriotism, (6) a general neglect of the biblical doctrine of creation, and (7) premillennial dispensationalism. Let’s examine each briefly.

1. The inheritance from Greek philosophy. In the second and third centuries, the Christian Church had to come to terms with the Greek philosophical tradition which was intellectually dominant in the Roman Empire. Early Christian apologists did a masterful job of showing the coherence of the Christian Faith even when understood through Greek philosophical categories. The fruit of this interaction
included such breakthroughs as the Nicene and other early creeds which established an essential theological consensus on Christology and the Trinity.

A price was paid, however, for these achievements. In a step away from biblical teachings, Christian theology came to view the material world as separate from and strictly inferior to the spirit world. Since it participates in change and decay, matter was seen as imperfect, tainted, and therefore something to be escaped. Human changeability, including physical passions, was to be overcome or transcended. In what became classic Christian theism, God, as pure spirit, was seen as unchangeable and impassive. The Christian ideal was to deny or escape from the material world into the world of the pure spiritual contemplation of God.

In Western theology, this unbiblical “spirit is perfect, matter is imperfect” view became deeply imbedded through the writings of Augustine of Hippo (354–430), whose theology was strongly shaped by neo-Platonic thought. Augustine so emphasized original sin as to in a measure eclipse the original goodness of creation—the affirmation of the image of God in humankind and the secondary imaging of God’s glory in nature. Though Augustine did see creation as displaying God’s glory, he did not seem to value the very materiality of creation as God’s good gift.

The ideal Christian life in medieval Christendom—though it was not the actual lived life of the great majority of Christians—was escape from the world with its changeability and its passions. The natural world was a mere symbol, a metaphor pointing towards a higher eternal spiritual reality. It had little value in itself. For many the ideal, even if unattainable by most, was the saint who left the world and all material possessions and lived in the contemplation of God.

This tradition offers much that is good and true. It produced great devotional writings that still nurture us. But it upset the biblical balance, with disastrous consequences for the environment. The holistic biblical understanding was replaced by a split-level and hierarchical worldview in which pure, immaterial spirit was at the top and changeable, decaying matter was at the bottom. Spiritual growth was therefore, self-evidently, a journey of ascent from the material to the spiritual.

Much of this inheritance is still with us, especially in our hymns and devotional writing. But this split-level view is fundamentally unbiblical.

2. Enlightenment rationalism. Orthodox Christian theology rejected many of the central claims of the Enlightenment, with its over-reliance on reason. But Christian thinking has been leavened by it, all the same. In endorsing science and the scientific method, Protestant Christians largely accepted the subject-object split. Human beings were subjects examining “objective” nature. The natural world was increasingly objectified—something to be studied, subjected to technique, and used for human purposes.

This legacy has been positive in manifold ways. It has yielded the scientific, technological, and material advances that we enjoy today. But again, a price was paid theologically. Since the material world was already viewed as secondary and transitory, there was no ethical problem in dominating and using it—exploiting it—for human purposes. Nature was “here” objectively to serve us. It was the God-given natural resource for human higher purposes, with virtually no ethical limitations on the human manipulation of the earth. Air and water pollution created by industrialization, which disproportionately poisons the poor, were minor annoyances compared with the benefits of new technologies and inventions. Environmental issues were not moral questions unless they directly threatened human health. Rather they were merely technological challenges to be conquered. The legacy of this view is both an over-confidence in reason and technology and an undervaluing of the earth.

3. Laissez-faire Capitalism. Capitalism is also part of our inheritance from European history. As an economic system, its roots go back before the Enlightenment. It grew out of the rise of cities in late-medieval Europe (also the lucrative trade in Crusades-acquired Christian relics and heirlooms!) and later was greatly fueled by the rise of the Industrial Revolution in England in the eighteenth century. Adam Smith published his Wealth of Nations, the Bible (almost literally) of capitalism, in 1776.

Capitalism has been the main engine of economic growth and prosperity in the Western world. It has brought tremendous material, economic, and
in some cases political benefits. Combined with science, technology, and industrialization, it led to today’s globalized economy. It is a key reason for the high standard of living in so-called “advanced” societies.

But here again, a price was paid. From the beginning, critics of capitalism warned of two major negatives: Its power to enslave and exploit the poor (especially laborers) who had no capital and therefore little economic power, and the power of wealth to enslave the wealthy. Although historically speaking the most revolutionary critique of capitalism was Marxism, many Christian voices have been raised over the centuries in criticism of the moral dangers of capitalism. In our day one of the most prophetic voices has been Pope John Paul II.

From a biblical standpoint, the primary critique of capitalism should be obvious. Human beings are corrupted by sin and will therefore use the freedom and power they possess to selfish ends and to exploit others. Capitalism is an effective way to “store up treasures on earth”—the very thing Jesus warned against. Yet Jesus’ warnings and prohibitions regarding wealth are seldom heard in our churches. Preachers denounce sins of personal and sexual behavior but often ignore greed and laying up earthly wealth.

Surprising numbers of Christians have bought the central myth of capitalism: that the self-centered pursuit of profit inexorably works for the common good. It is very difficult to defend this biblically. Most Christian critique of capitalism has argued that this myth is true only if there are effective mechanisms, through government and/or the church, to limit the subversiveness of greed and the worst effects of capitalism.

Partly because of the factors mentioned above (Greek philosophy, Enlightenment rationalism), Evangelicals have tended to view economics as a realm unto itself, operating with its own morality, walled off from and independent of normal considerations of Christian ethics. Economic growth is by definition good, and the pursuit of wealth can never be questioned, for it is the engine that drives the economy. The “invisible hand” of the marketplace is viewed practically as sacred, not to be slapped or fettered.

This is not biblical morality. It contradicts Jesus’ teachings and does violence to the biblical worldview. Biblically speaking, nothing operates outside God’s sovereignty or the ethics of God’s moral law and the Sermon on the Mount. All economic systems, capitalism as well as communism and socialism, must be subject to thoroughgoing Christian critique. As with the prophets of old, Christians should be particularly outspoken in exposing the forms of exploitation that are most dominant in our age.

This is a key issue for environmental stewardship for a very basic reason. Capitalism depends upon the exploitation of natural resources. This was true of early industrialism, which relied heavily on coal and steel, but it is just as true today. All the key ingredients of the information age—plastics, silicon, copper, uranium, petroleum—come from the earth. Here most North Americans apply a simple moral equation. Since economic growth is by definition good, the exploitation of natural resources is morally necessary and not fundamentally to be questioned. This moral equation is compounded by the fact that most corporations simply do not take into account the depletion of natural resources as a real economic cost, even though in fact it is. Quite the opposite: in the United States the tax system works such that many industries are actually given tax credits for the depletion of natural resources rather than being expected to pay for the depletion.

Many Evangelicals thus oppose the protection of the environment because they see environmental regulations as an unfair burden on economic growth. And since spiritual, not material, things are what really matter; and since the material world has no real value in itself (points one and two, above) there is no theological principle to be invoked here in defense of the earth.

Biblically speaking, something is wrong with this picture. Responsible, humane capitalism can be a great blessing, but unfettered capitalism becomes inhumane and can destroy us and destroy the earth. North American society has long recognized this in some areas, protecting the public through interstate commerce regulations, pure food and drug laws, limitations on the exploitation of labor (especially child labor), and some minimal regulation of air and water
pollution. Exploitation of God’s good earth, however, has been largely overlooked (Snyder and Runyon 2002:143–46, 175–78).

4. American individualism. This also contributes to Evangelical dis-ease with environmental issues. The “rugged individualism” of North American culture tends to work against a sense of mutual responsibility and interdependence with the common good and for earth stewardship. Nature is something to be conquered, subdued, fought against, overcome, not something to be nurtured or cared for.

Here also there is a positive and a negative pole. The strength of American society traces in large measure to the freedom for individual initiative. U.S. society provides space for the entrepreneur, the innovator, the “self-made man.” But as many studies have shown —more recently, Robert Bellah, et al., in Habits of the Heart (1985) and Robert Putnam in Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (2000)—the downside to such individualism is the lack of a sense of social solidarity and mutual responsibility. Anyone who has spent much time in Europe must be struck with the fact that American society is considerably more individualistic even than is European society.

Today individualism is further compounded by consumerism and materialism. Much of society is dedicated to the promotion, purchase, and then speedy replacement of brand name products whose prices bear little relationship to the actual cost of manufacture. We live in a branded society that in multiple ways daily contradicts Jesus words that a person’s life “does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Lk. 12:15).

Individualism compounded by consumerism undermines creation care in several ways. Although the heritage of American individualism often celebrates the values of living simply with nature (Thoreau, for example), in its contemporary form it insulates human experience from the natural environment so that people have little feel for our actual dependence on the welfare of the environment. And since material prosperity in its present form depends on the unfettered production of goods, Evangelicals like other Americans resist any environmental restrictions that would (hypothetically) put a brake on or add cost to such production. This is a myth, of course; more and more businesses are discovering that environmental stewardship results in cost savings.

A biblical theology of creation and the environment must address squarely the problem of individualism if it is to be persuasive. The Bible teaches the mutual interdependence of the human family and its dependence on the well-being of the earth.

5. Uncritical patriotism. A fifth ingredient in the mix that undermines a sense of environmental stewardship is unreflective patriotism. Nationalistic patriotism leading to arrogance, empire-building, and an exploitive attitude toward other nations and peoples seems to be a constant of history. When nations become enamored of their own greatness, however, they lose sight of God’s concern for all earth’s peoples and the welfare of creation and fall under God’s judgment (Ezek. 31).

Understandably, the United States has seen a great upsurge in patriotic fervor since September 11, 2001. But unreflective patriotism is a long-standing dynamic in American history—as well as elsewhere in the world.

Love of country is good and proper, but when it leads to disregard for the well-being of other lands and peoples, it becomes a plague. When patriotism or nationalism turns into ideology, and when criticism of one’s government becomes unpatriotic, we are in grave danger. Nationalism can be idolatry.

Christians should see uncritical patriotism as a theological problem. The Bible teaches that Christians are part of a new humanity, citizens of a new nation: the kingdom of God. The New Testament is very explicit about this. Christians are “citizens” and “members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19). “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pt. 2:9). Christian identity thus transcends national or political identity. Biblical Christians understand that they are first of all citizens and patriots of the kingdom of God. Allegiance to one’s own nation is necessarily secondary to kingdom allegiance. True Jesus-followers understand that Christians in other lands—including Iraqis, Iranians, and North Koreans—are
their own brothers and sisters in Christ, nearer and dearer to them than their fellow Americans who do not acknowledge Jesus. They are therefore as concerned for the welfare of people in these lands as they are for the welfare of the United States. Naturally, therefore, Christians will see creation care in global, not just national, perspective.

6. **Neglect of the biblical doctrine of creation.**

In their understandable focus on personal new creation—salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ—Evangelicals often neglect the prior biblical doctrine of creation itself. Yet any doctrine of redemption will be deficient if it is not based on what the Bible teaches about God's acts in creating the world.

Evangelical theology often lacks a robust biblical theology of creation. Evangelicals have rightly emphasized God as the source of the created order but have not reflected deeply on the nature of the created order and the mutual interdependence it implies between humanity and the physical environment. Nor have they reflected deeply enough on what creation tells us about new creation—God's plan of redemption. Biblically speaking, the doctrine of new creation depends upon a right understanding of the original creation.

In practice, Evangelical theology often begins with Genesis 3 rather than Genesis 1. All are sinners in need of God's saving grace. But biblical theology does not begin with sin; it begins with creation. Human beings—man and woman together—are created in the image of God and placed in a garden which also reflects God's nature. If man and woman embody the image of God in a primary sense, the created order images God in a secondary sense. The beauty, order, coherence, and intricate design of the universe reveal something true and essential about God's himself (Rom. 1:20).

Scripture consistently grounds God's glorious work through Jesus Christ by the Spirit in both creation and redemption. Jesus Christ is both “the firstborn of all creation” and “the firstborn from the dead”—affirmations that unite creation and redemption (Col. 1:15, 1:18). In the Book of Revelation, God is praised in hymns celebrating both creation (Rev. 4:11) and redemption through the blood of Christ (Rev. 5:9). In the Old Testament, the Sabbath, so full of eschatological portent, is grounded both in creation (Ex. 20:11) and redemption from Egyptian slavery (Deut. 5:15). It is remarkable the way Scripture consistently holds together the themes of creation and redemption. The biblical doctrine of redemption through the cross presupposes the doctrine of creation, and redemption can never be understood in a fully biblical way unless the full story of creation, and not just human creation, is kept in view.

7. **Premillennial Dispensationalism.**

In the 1800s a new theory arrived on the scene: Premillennial dispensationalism. This innovation, despite little biblical or historical basis, has become immensely influential in popular American Christianity, in part through such books as *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Peretti’s *This Present Darkness*, and the “Left Behind” series. Ironically, many American Evangelicals today believe that premillennial dispensationalism is what the Bible teaches!

Premillennial dispensationalism undermines creation care by locating the renewal of creation exclusively after the return of Jesus Christ. The present world is headed for inevitable destruction and any concern with saving it is a distraction from rescuing souls before Jesus returns. A striking example of this view is Frank Peretti’s novel *This Present Darkness*, where it turns out that anyone concerned with social justice or creation care is in league with the devil.

With premillennial dispensationalism, the belief that the earth and all the material creation is going to be destroyed has come into vogue. If destruction is sure and imminent, it is pointless to be concerned about creation care. This view is based on the King James Version of 2 Peter 3:10: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.” The NRSV translates, “the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.”

Interpreting this passage in the context of the whole of Scripture, we should understand the heat and fire here in terms of refining, revealing, and cleansing, not of destruction or annihilation. “Creation will be cleansed and transformed, yet this
new creation will stand in continuity with the old” (Field:6). Calvin commented, “[H]eaven and earth will be cleansed by fire so that they may be fit for the kingdom of Christ” (Commentary on 1 Pt. 3:10). Wesley wrote, “Destruction is not deliverance; . . . whatsoever is destroyed, or ceases to be, is not delivered at all,” and in fact no “part of the creation” will be destroyed (Wesley, ENNT, on Rom. 8:21). God is not in the destroying business; he is in the refining, recycling, and recreating business.

The pattern here is Jesus’ own death and resurrection. As Jesus died, the created order will be judged and refined. As Jesus rose again, the created order will be transformed through the power of Jesus’ resurrection by the Spirit. We don’t understand the mystery (1 Cor. 15:50–51), but we trust in new creation after the pattern of what happened to Jesus.

Many contemporary Christians fail to see 2 Peter 3:10 in light of the broader sweep of Scripture and so misunderstand both the meaning of new creation and its present ethical and missional implications.

In sum, these seven factors combine to undermine Evangelical concern for the environment. They make it difficult for Christians to understand and feel their responsibility for creation care. Combined, these developments have produced a narrowing of the full biblical meaning of salvation and of the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross has come to mean individual salvation to eternal life in the next world rather than the restoring of a fallen creation. The theological agenda for creation care certainly must include affirming the biblical doctrine of creation and exploring the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection for the healing and restoration of God’s own created order.