

CHAPTER ONE

Rediscovering Environmental Stewardship

The power of God is present at all places, even in the tiniest leaf ... God is currently and personally present in the wilderness, in the garden, and in the field.

MARTIN LUTHER

When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers – the moon and the stars you have set in place – what are mortals that you should think of us, mere humans that you should care for us?

PSALM 8 : 3 - 4

I was an Ecology major at the end of the 1960s during the height of the environmental movement, but eventually began a career as a school teacher. My wife Nancy and I spent the first 14 years of our marriage without electricity because we lived in an older home on our family ranch in southern California. We truly lived off the land; we grew some of our own food and always valued the natural balance of our surroundings. Because of that lifestyle, our two kids grew to know the worth of nature. But later in life when I became a Christian and entered into the ministry, somehow I disconnected from all of these values and affections. I never stopped loving nature, but it was somehow set aside because there was no real value for environmental stewardship in the church. The evangelical church in the 1970s was rife with a theology known as Dispensationalism, which implied—if not explicitly stated at times—that “Jesus is returning and the earth is going to burn up anyway, so go ahead and use it up.” During that time, a lot of Christians—people who had once seen the value in cherishing and protecting the environment—lost their ideals and didn’t see them as a value in the church, myself included.

Since 1989, I have pastored and led a church in Boise, Idaho, a place where God’s beautiful creation surrounds you on every side. Outdoor recreation is a high value here. People hike, ski downhill and cross-country, mountain bike, fish, and hunt. But for years, I was always afraid to use the word “environment” because I didn’t want to be labeled a “liberal.” In the political landscape of the United States, environmentalism has always connected with a liberal perspective on the world. If you were a liberal, you were also supposedly for many other things that I simply could not accept or attach myself to. And while I shared

many of the ideals of “conservatives,” I viewed the environment as one issue that I could let slide. But that began to change when I realized I couldn’t let political affiliation dissuade my higher allegiance to God’s Kingdom, and from my charge as a Christian to be a good steward of all God’s creation.

In recent election years, this issue struck close to home when we had political discussions with our grown children. As a result of the way they were raised by us, they have a strong love for nature. While I found choosing a political candidate to vote for relatively simple, they were conflicted. On one hand, they sided with candidates who stood for human rights and the right for all people to live, including the unborn. But on the other hand, they also strongly agreed with those who were dedicated to protecting the environment from destruction for the purpose of economic gain. And while most Christians in the United States today make the value judgment that human life is more important than plant and animal life (and rightly so), God still values both people and nature. This tension was keenly felt by both of our children and raised the question: “Why do you we have to choose? Why can’t the Body of Christ be for both?” After all, God is for both.

Both predominant political parties in the United States stand at odds over this issue, yet it simply remains an issue. Liberals are unable to gather the necessary support in the court of public opinion and through social action to actually make a difference. Conservatives and the evangelical church have, for the most part, avoided supporting the issue altogether. In taking a strong leadership role on this issue, the church must grow thick skin and help provide a solution rather than be frozen in fear over people’s perceptions from either side of the political aisle.

A few years ago during a wedding reception at our church, I was cornered by a woman who asked me, “Are you the pastor of this church?” The tone with which she asked the question made me think maybe I didn’t want to be at that moment! However, I confessed that I was and braced for whatever criticism she was going to hurl in my direction. “This wedding reception should be a crime,” she stated matter-of-factly. “I’ve never seen so many items going to waste instead of going into recycling bins.” I was embarrassed and tweaked by the stinging truth: I had not led our church in this area, thus we had no church-wide recycling program.

God had already been at work in my heart about the issue of environmental stewardship, but this incident began to push me toward taking action. While the pressing question was, “How can I make caring for the environment a value in my church?” the more troubling question for me personally was, “How did this once strong value in my life all but disappear?”

WHY GOD VALUES CREATION

All of God’s creation is important to him, down to the last sparrow and blade of grass. The story of mankind in the Bible begins in a garden and ends in a restored garden. The first commission to God’s people is found in the opening chapters of Genesis, which exhorts us to be caretakers of the gift of creation. But why?

The first chapter of the book of Romans tells us that all of humanity knows there is a God because God has revealed Himself, and His very nature, through creation. God directed this assurance, this undeniable proof, to people who are struggling with the most basic spiritual issue: The very existence of a loving Creator.

As the Bible opens, the author of Genesis chronicles God's magnificent creations—man, woman, plants, trees, animals, sun, moon, stars, land, sky. With the creation of Adam, the scene shifts to the new garden, where the fall of humanity eventually occurs and introduces sin into the world. Suddenly, the garden was defiled. But as we read ahead—all the way to the end in the last book in Scripture, Revelation—we see the way God brings us back to a restored garden. The Bible begins in a garden and concludes in a restored garden. (See Genesis 2 & Revelation 22) Shouldn't this make us sit up and take note that there's something important about a garden, something that tells us God values the relationship between His people and the rest of His creation? If one of the ways God reveals Himself to people is through His creation, doesn't it stand to reason that we should share in His high value of caring for the environment?

Not only is creation an assurance, but its loving care is the biblical responsibility of God's people. One of God's first commands to mankind was to "tend His garden." And then, after the great flood, God made a covenant, not just with Noah, but between Himself, the earth and humanity. We refer to it as the Covenant of the Rainbow, an idea we'll explore more in-depth later.

DEFINING ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

As we seek to become good stewards of the environment, we have to define environmental stewardship. Environmental stewardship is the idea that we should care for, manage, and nurture what we have been given. In our desire to take a biblical perspective on environmental stewardship, we find four major areas that require our attention. Unfortunately, many people

have become disillusioned by the way some environmentalists express their support for the earth, resulting in disdain toward any group or movement that cares for the earth. However, behavior such as spiking trees, eco-terrorism, or burning down houses in unwanted developments is not true environmentalism. That is a destructive brand of activism that leads to nothing but confusion and division about the true purpose and intention of their cause. In our desire to take a biblical perspective on environmental stewardship, we find four major areas that require our attention.

Resource and provision. The first thing we must understand is that environmental stewardship views nature as a resource and provision. More extreme environmentalists tend to contradict this idea because they don't have a biblical worldview. God has given us His creation not to abuse but to use.

God has given us his creation as a way of providing for people. Plants and trees produce fruits, vegetables, and herbs which are all healthy sources of nourishment for people and animals. Properly managed land is what sustains these plants to grow. Then the fruit of the land sustains human existence. It's a way God shows care for us through what He has created. Our day-to-day choices—how we manage the land with our crops, how we treat animals, and how we take care of our natural resources such as water and air is important because they are part of God's great plan for resourcing and providing for his creation.

Accountability. Secondly, there must be a balance between the use and protection of the creation. God has given us the responsibility for life on all sides. One thing that stands out to

me while reading through the Old Testament, especially during when the children of Israel were in the wilderness, is that God called Moses to be a game warden of sorts and protect the balance of creation. (See Deuteronomy 22:6-7) God calls people to be responsible in terms of game loss and make sure harvesting animals is done in a responsible way. An animal that becomes endangered because of human abuse is unacceptable. We must be accountable for the way we handle the delicate balance of nature.

Blessing. A third element of environmental stewardship is that of blessing. Environmental stewardship must look at God's creation as a blessing—something sacred. Whenever we see the splendor of God's creation, we stand in awe, slack-jawed at the beauty in a sunset or the creativity in a mountain range or the pure serenity surrounding a pond hidden away in the woods. It's in these moments that we realize how sacred these places are. It's a sanctuary for God's creation—a place where plants, animals, and people should be able to live together in harmony. And we should treat creation with such regard, showing reverence toward the One who created it by making sure others have the opportunity to experience the unspoiled wonders as we have.

Passing it down. A fourth aspect of environmental stewardship is its intergenerational nature. Stewardship is a value to be passed from generation to generation, emphasizing the great importance of caring for God's creation. Most of the values we adopt from our parents are “caught,” actions and behavior we observe and absorb. What our parents say to us is important, but what they do leaves an indelible mark on who we are as we grow up and mature.

At our church, heritage is an important element in our ministry philosophy. We want people to understand that following Jesus isn't something you simply do—it's part of who you are. And when it becomes part of who you are, it's something you naturally desire to pass down to the generation behind you. As our church began to weave heritage into the fabric of our faith, realizing that this value was of great importance to walking out what it means to be a follower of Jesus, we presented many opportunities for people to get involved. And one of the ways that enabled parents to pass stewardship values down to their kids was through organized camping trips, where many parents took their children into the woods with other families for wilderness cleanup and restoration projects. Kids were seeing first-hand ecological values being lived out by their parents. When we model how to steward what God has given us, our children will catch the lifestyle and it will become part of who they are.

PASSING IT DOWN IN BOISE

Before I first started teaching on the importance of environmental stewardship in my church, one of the things I did was gather a group of specialists into a “secret” task force. People in our community love the outdoors and care for it passionately. I knew that there were men and women in our church who worked with the U.S. Forest Department and the Fish and Game Department as well as various other areas of outdoor recreation. While I hadn't really heard them express this to me, I knew they were people working in the area of conservation who identified themselves with the call and mission of Jesus.

As we began to explore what it means to be good stewards of the environment, two men from the Parks Department brought me a shocking statistic: They said in the past 10 years in the state of Idaho, there was one-third less exploration of the state's wilderness area. At the same time, there was a one-third increase in the state's population. This puzzled me. How could Idaho, which has the largest wilderness areas in the continental United States, experience such a decline with an inverse boom in the population? It didn't make sense. Then, the reality hit me that fathers have quit taking their children hunting, fishing and hiking. More kids were sitting in front of the television playing video games on the weekend. And the families who were getting out weren't doing so in the traditional sense—they were going in vehicles or machines where they couldn't possibly hear nature and were probably going too fast to appreciate it. I know that what people don't see, they can't appreciate. And what they don't appreciate they won't value. People weren't getting into the mountains.

One of our strategies was to get the people in our church outside the city limits where they could see the stars at night and the beauty of their surroundings. Many of them had not seen it because of their lifestyle. I realized in order for the environment to become a value in the church, it had to be experienced individually and passed on generationally.

While the components of environmental stewardship seem simple enough and make good sense as we shall soon see, why has the church in the Western world today refused to embrace these simple values?

MISLED BY FEAR

I believe many Christian leaders, myself included, have been fearful of what might happen if we actually advocate something that has been decisively tagged as a value that belongs to those who oppose many Christian values. In our fear, we have been unfaithful to our responsibility to be good stewards of God's creation. Because of my desire to stay bipartisan I stayed away from the issue altogether for many years, viewing environmental conservation as a political hot button. But apathy toward the environment doesn't mean we have avoided getting involved in the issue—it simply means we have decided its value is not worth fighting for. And this is where many evangelical Christians in the United States have gone awry.

In one sense, it's hard to blame Christians who experienced the environmental movement of the 1960s. We saw hypocrisy in the "earth first" approach and it seemed meaningless. The whole "mother earth" theology took no one to God—and this had the effect of polarizing us from our neighbors who expressed any kind of ecological concern, blinding us from theologically sound and practically balanced approaches. However, it's getting more and more difficult to ignore the signs that the earth is under siege by gross human mismanagement.

Over and over again, evil has a way of stealing things out of God's camp, values that the church is called to champion. As a result of the Western church's apathy toward the environment, much of the world perceives the church as championing a way of life that is destructive to the planet. And in the United States many people perceive the church as conservative and therefore intimately allied with the Republican Party, which is more interested in capitalistic strength than environmental stewardship when it comes to managing our

beautiful country. One environmentalist remarked in obvious irony: "It's interesting that conservatives are the least likely to support conservation." I believe it's time Christians begin to rediscover the values we have lost and be on the leading edge of promoting environmental stewardship with practical instruction on how to implement these ideals in our daily lives.

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OUR FUTURE IN MIND

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In implementing the value of environmental stewardship into our lives, we will make a necessary shift from thinking about the here and now to thinking about the future. As a member of the Baby Boomer generation, I have seen first-hand how people in my generation have made shifts from short-sighted thinking to serious reflection on the future with the addition of each generation to their own families. When people have their first child, this tends to initiate a sudden transformation in the way they view the world around them. New parents begin to ask some challenging questions: Will the world be safe for my kids? Will my children have all the same opportunities that I did? Will they be able to succeed? Will they have all the same freedoms I have? Will they be able to enjoy life the way I did?

As we have seen the earth abused and misused, those same questions are being asked about the environment, sometimes with much regret by the same people who unknowingly failed to think about the future of the earth. It's why Jesus did what

He did; he came to earth to live and die for the sake of mankind—and indeed, the entire cosmos—for eternity. Failure to adopt this future-driven element in our thinking—and subsequently, our actions—may result in a missed opportunity to experience a revolution in our own hearts as well as in the world around us.

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One powerful example of a leader in the Bible who failed to think about the future was King Hezekiah. In Second Kings chapter 20, we find him confronted by the prophet Isaiah, who informs the king that some of his descendants are going to be exiled to Babylon. And Hezekiah's short-sighted reaction was this: "At least there will be peace and security during my lifetime" (vs. 19). He was more concerned about his current popularity than his eventual legacy.

The moment is right for the church to reverse its wrongs in the area of environmental stewardship. By abandoning our short-sighted thinking and returning long-term vision to the church, Christians have an opportunity to change things. It won't be easy. Many people from both liberal and conservative camps alike are likely to cast a suspicious eye on such a sudden reversal of position. But if the statistics are true and one-third of the world is comprised of Christians, what would happen if one-third of the world became serious about upholding the

value of environmental stewardship? This would make a difference. This would change the world.

Dennis Mansfield: A Passion Reignited

In the 1980s, being a Christian and an environmentalist didn't seem like a conflict in values for Dennis Mansfield. He owned a hydro-seeding, hydro-mulching company that covered millions of square feet with its reforestation projects. Being located near a forest that was burned, Mansfield worked hard to restore the environment. "As a conservative, I found that being environmentally sound was actually good business," Mansfield said.

But that was before he went to work for a Christian ministry. Over the ensuing 15 years, Mansfield learned that it was best not to share his views on the environment lest he draw the ire of his fellow co-workers. "Whenever I would speak to those in the evangelical community about environmental issues, I always got this long and leery-eyed look from people and they would ask, 'Oh, are you one of them?'" Mansfield said. "I used to think, 'Well, what am I?' I am one of 'them' in terms of making sure that environmental stewardship ought to occur. But I learned to be very quiet for years and just did my job."

But something happened to Mansfield when he began hearing that his church might begin starting a ministry that focused on caring for the environment. "I had just let my passion for caring for the environment lie dormant for so long," Mansfield said. "But then I had it really re-awakened when some people of faith challenged me. That began to awaken my heart again for this passion that was all but lost.

"When my pastor brought out his heart's desire that we could bring people together with an environmental background and do something about it ... I realized it wasn't the next step in some plan to make the church look good in the community, but it was really at the heart of the

church's values. Though everybody who was involved in the initial stages of this ministry had cared for the environment individually, we had never been given the opportunity to discover it corporately."

While Mansfield has been on both sides of the fence, he now wonders why there are two sides of the fence at all when it comes to caring for the environment in a responsible way. "It's always been perceived somehow, in some way that the church and those who care for the environment were at odds with each other," he said. "I'm an evangelical and thankful for my faith in Christ—and I care about the environment. But at the same time, I felt like I was on the fringe."

But Mansfield believes that the church has the opportunity to change people's thinking about the environment and take the kind of action necessary to result in lasting change. "I think the church really is the missing link between government agencies that are out there and those who receive full-time compensation to do it," he said. "Government agencies do a good job, but it's surprising how much more help they need. Care for the environment, by in large, has been stirred through emotions. Many people say, 'I just feel good about caring for the environment.' Well, that's great, but this is where the church can challenge people to say, 'Well, why don't you come on out and pick up a shovel and help us?' It's that change in thinking about the environment that will challenge both liberals and conservatives, people of faith and people without faith."

And if the church were to really warm to this concept of environmental stewardship, Mansfield thinks the planet as we know it would change for the better. "If the entire church across North America were to embrace this, it would be a huge paradigm shift. We believe that cre-

ation is vital and we've been given the stewardship right to be involved in it—and we're obviously starting to cultivate it in a direction that honors God.

"I think if Christ was here today as a carpenter, he would be caring where the wood came from. Let's care about the environment. We need to be those people who follow in Christ's steps. It's not a weirdo-religion thing; it's a wonderful relationship thing where churches across the U.S. can care for their own section of the environment and do it together."

While the topic may still be sensitive in many Christian circles and stir heated debate, Mansfield encourages believers to put aside preconceived ideas and think about what God is truly calling people to do. "To the Christian who is conflicted about the issue of the environment and is afraid to rock the boat but really does understand there's something in his heart that says, 'I really want to go for this,' I say, 'Rock the boat!' Be Peter. Get out of the boat. But do it humbly, in a way that says, 'I'm not going to let anyone dictate what I believe outside of the word of God.' He made this earth and it's good. It's really good."

