

An End-Times Environmental Ethic

By Steven Muir

Introduction

Many Christians have a passionate belief in the end-times, when the Anti-Christ shall rise, great tribulations shall occur, and environmental disasters will happen, such as a third of the trees being burned up, a third of the seas turning to blood, and a third of the rivers turning bitter (Rev 8:7-12). Somewhere in the midst of all this, (and just when exactly is open to great debate) Jesus shall rapture the Christians away off to heaven, to live happily ever after, while the naughty people suffer horrifically before the second coming of Jesus.

The result of this very firm belief is, at best, one of ambivalence towards environmental disasters that are caused by human activity. If it's been prophesied, God has decreed it will happen, so what can we mere mortals do about it? At worst it results in a celebration of environmental destruction because it means that Jesus will return sooner (after he has checked off his 'to do' list of tribulations listed in Revelation).

I would like to either convince the reader that this view of the end-times is wrong, or if you are unwilling to relinquish your belief in that version of the end-times, convince you that it is still worthwhile caring for the environment despite common attitudes that might discourage you from doing it.

40 million people are blatantly wrong

Novels describing the events of the end-times have sold tens of millions of copies worldwide and the theology it presents has become core beliefs for many Christians. This theology is all based on interpreting Revelation as a literal description of events that have not yet occurred. It seems to me that anyone who thinks seriously about how to read the Bible, rejects this theology as being blatantly wrong and tends towards the well accepted evangelical position called amillennialism. First and foremost the book of Revelation is not a list of events that will happen in the future. It is an apocryphal writing that uses allegory and metaphors to describe the events of the day in which it is written (suffering persecution under the Roman empire), as well as symbolize the evils of this life, that are common to all generations. It also shows a vision of God who will ultimately triumph over this evil and reward those who have struggled against the evil. This view of Revelation has given hope to all those who struggle through similar evil, and against hundreds of anti-Christ, in all ages including our day. If you are not convinced then read *The End Times Made Simple: How Could Everybody Be So Wrong about Biblical Prophecy*, by Samuel E. Waldron¹. As an example of some typical metaphorical writing take a look at Revelation 21:1 "I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and there was no longer any sea". The sea in Jewish writing is used to symbolize chaos and disorder, and so the verse is saying that chaos and disorder will not be present in God's renewed world. This is much better news for "surfers for Jesus" who could have a very boring afterlife if they took a literal interpretation of this verse. The environmental disasters in Revelation are not literal events yet to happen, they are metaphors for other things.

I still believe in the Rapture

I haven't spent long trying to convince you that most rapture theology is rubbish (note you can discard the rapture quite biblically and just believe in the second coming). This is because I anticipate that many readers will be unwilling to relinquish their view of Revelation as a history of the future, no matter what I say. The question then remains: can you care for the environment and believe in the rapture at the same time? I'd like to give several compelling reasons why you should.

1. There is a 99% certainty that Jesus will not return in your generation.

Ever since Jesus ascended to heaven, people have been convinced that he is about to return any day, certainly within their generation. There were particular times (e.g. around millenniums) where this fervour became even more intense. These were spirit-filled, Bible believing, faithful Christians, but they were all wrong. Jesus did not return in their generation. So if you are a spirit-filled, bible believing, faithful-as-you-can-be Christian, convinced that the global 'signs' are saying that Jesus is about to return, then you too are probably wrong. If generations are 20 years or so apart, then there have been 100 wrong generations since Jesus ascended to heaven, and only one chance in a hundred that you will be right when they were all wrong. This means that you will almost certainly need to leave a legacy to your children. Do you want to leave them with a huge rubbish tip that they will curse you for, or a beautiful planet that can reveal something of the Creator's glory (Rom 1:20)?

2. God will destroy those who destroy the Earth

A big mistake when reading Revelation is to think that God expects us to be innocent bystanders while the angels and demons slug it out. Revelation is a message to engage in the struggle against the evil that is occurring, not to tune it out. Revelation 11:18 records the following: "The time has come for judging the dead and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great – and for destroying those who destroy the earth." If you are part of the destruction of the environment (and we are by virtue of living in a destructive culture) and do not work to care more for the environment, then God will judge you for it. The environmental disasters today are human-caused, not the result of angelic beings, and therefore humans will be held accountable. On the other hand if you show reverence for God's name by caring for the world he has made, then you will be rewarded for it.

3. Jesus died on a tree for a tree

The gospel, the good news of Jesus death and resurrection, is not just for humans. Jesus came to set right that which went wrong at the fall, which included a distorted relationship between humans and the earth. Gen 3:17 says "Cursed is the ground because of you (Adam and Eve), through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life". Just as Jesus death and resurrection reconciles us to God and 'undoes' the distorted relationship with God that occurred at the fall, it also calls us to reconcile the relationships between humans and the earth. We need to rediscover our original mandate to care for the earth as God intended us to from the beginning (Gen 2:15). Romans 8:19-21 says that "creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed, for the creation was subject to frustration not by its own choice but by the will of the one who subjected it, in the hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" i.e. all of creation shares in the redemptive work of Jesus. John 3:16 says that "God so loved the world..." (**cosmos** = whole world including non-human aspects) "...that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life". Jesus wants to redeem and bring wholeness to every single bit of creation, not just a few humans.

4. Caring for the Earth has eternal consequences

Another big mistake made by many, is the belief that the Earth will be destroyed and we spend eternity in some cloudy spiritual state completely quite unlike our present 'worldly' life. This is not surprising as 2Peter 3:10-13 states that "The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar and the elements shall be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.... (v13) But in keeping with his promise are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness." Note that we will live on a new earth in our 'next life', not in some spiritual unworldly dimension. The new earth will be similar, yet different to our current physical world, in the same way as Jesus resurrection-body was similar, yet different to his former body. It bore the scars of his previous body even though it had been 'renewed'. Fire in the bible is

mostly used as a symbol of a refining/cleansing process e.g. Malachi 3:2-3 “But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiners fire or a launderers soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver”. Therefore a better way of understanding the verse in 2Peter, is as a refining process rather than an annihilation of the earth. It is possible the renewed earth will bear the scars of our over-consumption in the same way that Jesus resurrection body bore scars. It is also possible that any efforts we make to preserve the earth’s beauty will have eternal consequences.

5. It destroys the witness of the church.

Many people see Christians as being out of touch with reality, with no source of spiritual wisdom to tackle the problems of the world we live in. Many people are concerned about environmental issues, and are hungry for spiritual truth that can address these issues. The Bible is the most powerful mandate for caring for the environment I am aware of, but sadly many of those who believe in parts of the Bible, are not being faithful to it’s ethic of caring for the environment, maybe they even work against it. If the church wants to be an effective witness we must be strong leaders in caring for God’s creation or we destroy our credibility. Let the church be visionary for a change rather than lagging twenty years behind the rest of society like we normally do on important societal issues.

Conclusion

If you do not actively care for the environment as part of your Christian faith, you are being unbiblical, you are risking some extremely embarrassing moments on Judgment Day, and you are missing out on a large chunk of the life that God has intended for you to live. Caring for God’s world is not a liberal, secular or new-age conspiracy but core conservative, Biblical, evangelical truth. Even the National Association of Evangelicals have an excellent web page dedicated to protecting God’s creation². There are many other good resources available to help you understand more about what the Bible says. A good place to start is www.creationcare.org.nz. You can sign up there to become part of A Rocha Aotearoa New Zealand and join other Christians in working to care for the environment (also see www.arocha.org which is supported by John Stott and other notable evangelicals). Don’t be part of the Babylon mentioned in Revelation 18, who was judged for her excessive consumption and luxury. Be part of God’s people, rejoicing with God in the wonder and diversity of his creation (Psalm 104, Job 38-39), and working to prevent it being vandalized and exterminated.

Further reading.

1. The End Times Made Simple: How Could Everybody Be So Wrong about Biblical Prophecy, by Samuel E. Waldron, ISBN 1879737507. Available from Manna Bookshops.

2. National Association of Evangelicals webpage <http://revision.org/content.asp?contentid=482> or visit www.revision.org and click the “Protecting Creation” link at the top of the page.

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