



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT
Session 3

Faithful Citizenship: An Adult Lenten Study

Civic Engagement with the Earth

“I’ve Changed My Light Bulbs, Now What?”

This question captures some of the discouragement we may feel about environmental issues. “Go green” and “reduce your carbon footprint” are slogans for contemporary concern for the environment, but many will remember environmental concern during the late 1960s and early 1970s. So much about our modern world is environmentally unfriendly: the food we eat comes in packaging that turns into trash, our vehicles produce emissions, we need a lot of other kinds of energy (electricity, natural gas, etc.) for daily living, and we use products that are manufactured via still greater use of energy. How do we start embracing the environment within our vision of civic virtue and openness to others?

The Earth Is the Lord’s

You might already be thinking: What does ecology have to do with Christianity? Isn’t our faith all about salvation and heaven? After all, the world will pass away, but God’s Word stands forever, as the prophet spoke (Isa. 40:6–8). In the New Testament, we see an emphasis on “the next world” rather than this world. For instance, Paul himself longed to be with Christ, and although

he didn’t necessarily want to die, he knew that being with Christ forever would be something wonderful beyond imagining (Phil. 1:21–26). These kinds of verses also seem to teach that the physical world is secondary and rudimentary compared to the superior, permanent quality of God and the world beyond.

On the other hand, plenty of Bible passages teach the wonderful gift of the physical world and its value independent of our needs. “The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it,” says the psalmist (Ps. 24:1). In Genesis, God did not give the world to humans to use for their own selfish purposes but for responsible use, or “dominion” (Gen. 1:26). Psalms 19, 104, and 136 are wonderful texts that affirm God’s love and care of the natural world.

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

Psalm 19:1–4

We see God’s care expressed in Psalm 136:

O give thanks to the Lord of lords,

for his steadfast love endures forever;
who alone does great wonders,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
who by understanding made the heavens,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
who spread out the earth on the waters,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
who made the great lights

Psalm 136:3–7

Read Psalm 104 and you can see how the entire poem is praise for God and his creation and providential care. “[T]he poet who wrote Psalm 104 was an environmentalist. . . . The psalmist’s awareness was founded . . . not in a knowledge of physical sciences . . . Rather, the psalmist’s awareness was grounded in theology. The psalmist was convinced of the profound interdependence of air, soil, water, and all living things, because he or she believes that *everything* derived from and was ultimately dependent upon God.”¹

Yet another passage worth studying is God’s speech to Job (chapters 38–42), where God describes the divine sovereignty over the natural world, the order God imposes, and the power God exercises. God even praises “the first of the great acts of God” (40:19)—not the creation of human beings, but the strong and threatening hippopotamus (“Behemoth”). The verse implies an expression of relief: think how frightening a hippo would be if it were a carnivore! God wisely made this huge creature—still plenty dangerous—a vegetarian. God’s creative and providential authority far exceeds human comprehension.

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Some New Testament passages also affirm Jesus’ lordship not only over the church but over creation, notably Colossians 1:15–20. Romans 8:18–26 also affirms that creation itself waits for the redemption that Christ has brought; Christ brings salvation to creation as well! A view of Christianity focused on heaven misses the biblical concern for the world and its creatures.

Ecology

The word “ecology” comes from a Greek word *oikos*, which means house, household, or dwelling place. As we will see, this word is the root of two other important words in this lesson. Ecology—*oikos* and *logia* (study)—is the science of the earth as our dwelling place.

All of us probably have at least a passing acquaintance with environmentalism and ecology. Ecology is different from biology and zoology in that ecology is the study of the interrelationships between organisms and their habitats and environments. Those habitats include basic environments, like the fluid in which a very simple organism swims, to more complex environments like rivers and forests, to even more complex environments such as human settings. An “ecosystem” is the area in which populations of organisms live, and the balance between organisms and nonliving materials can be delicate. In a forest, the death of living things—leaves, plants, trees, birds, and animals—is followed by decomposition and eventually the production of soil from that decayed material, where in turn living plants grow and are consumed by animals, and so a cycle of life continues. If a forest is too heavily harvested for human use, the balance of the ecosystem is threatened. Since all animals and bird species rely so profoundly on an ecosystem for survival, many species face extinction. The famous passenger pigeons, the last of which died in 1914, lived in tremendously large numbers and required sizable areas to live in and breed. In addition to over-hunting, the birds went extinct because of deforestation that was a response to growing human communities; they needed more tree-covered land than they could find.

Not all extinction is human caused. Scientists believe that up to 98 percent of all species that have lived have become extinct, including other species of genus *Homo*. But *Homo sapiens*—our numerical abundance, our use of natural resources, and our tendency to overuse resources and exploit species and environments—are major culprits in environmental damage.

Global ecology looks at ways our use of the environment has worldwide implications for our well-being. Global ecology is a branch of science that studies the interrelationships between environments worldwide.

Such environments (an ecological unit is a “biome”) include desert, grassland, coniferous forest, mountains, rain forests, savannas, coastal waters, coral reefs, fresh-water, oceans, and others.²

Human Overpopulation

One of our current ecological challenges resists simple answers: the earth has too many people in proportion to the earth’s capacity to sustain us, and our increasing population results in overconsumption and thus ecological damage. The Commoner-Ehrlich equation, $I = P \times A \times T$, expresses the problem. The human population (P), multiplied by the resources we consume and waste, (that is, our affluence, A), multiplied by the technology that we use (T), equals the impact to the environment (I). The notion of the ecological “footprint” is related to this: a “footprint” is the amount of land (with water) needed to sustain each person on earth, given the amount of space that exists on earth. Each person’s footprint is an average of about 2.6 global hectares (a hectare is about 2.5 acres). While it is not known how many humans the earth can support, excessive numbers of us can’t be sustained, especially when our higher standards of living necessitate more resource use.*

*“Optimum Population Size,” Population Matters, <https://www.populationmatters.org/the-issue/population/optimum-population-size/>.

Global Warming

Environmental issues are many: air pollution, impure and/or scarce water, deforestation, habitat destruction, species extinction, soil erosion, hydrofracking, and occasionally oil spills in coastal regions. Certain areas of the country, like eastern Kentucky, have been environmentally damaged (and the health of miners put at risk) because of coal mining. On the positive side, sustainability is a science and philosophy that aims at appropriate use of natural resources so that they are not eventually exhausted.

Arguably the greatest issue of our current time is global warming. The theory of the “greenhouse effect” is not new and was first predicted in 1827. Global

warming is caused when carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gasses collect in the earth’s atmosphere. Since this “blanket” of gasses trap the sun’s heat (instead of allowing some of that heat to leave the atmosphere), the result is a warming of the earth’s surface. This warming also changes weather patterns. Much of the CO₂ and other gases are produced by fossil fuel burning, whether by cars, gas- or coal-burning power plants, and other uses of oil and natural gas. Unfortunately, Americans’ fuel use accounts for 25 percent of global CO₂ pollution, although we’re a small population compared to the rest of the world. Weather patterns and climate do change naturally at different times in history. According to scientists, the difference now is that the average global temperature is rising more quickly than previous eras and that this change is likely due to human use of fossil fuels.³

Nearly every winter, many make jokes about global warming as they trudge through piles of snow. It’s fun to joke, but it’s also important to remember that weather is not the same thing as climate change. A snow storm in, for instance, a comparatively warm place like the Carolinas does not negate the findings of overall warming that scientists have found in, for instance, the Arctic Circle.

Still another challenge is low-oxygen zones in oceans, which scientists believe is related to global climate change. For instance, low-oxygen spots have appeared in the Pacific Northwest, the Indian Ocean, and the Atlantic Ocean. The reason seems to be that warmer surface water retards the natural water circulation that would allow deeper water to become more oxygenated. Off the coast of Oregon and Washington state, crabs, star fish, and sea anemones have died off as a result of these spots.

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Change was established to investigate climate change and make predictions. Although the scientific investigations have proceeded well, the predicted outcomes vary substantially, from a 1.1° C increase by 2100 to a very dangerous 6.4° C increase. Such differences between projected increases do not indicate bad science,

because all science works with data from observations and experiments, and at present, predictions about climate change are subject to several variables.⁴

The Kyoto Protocol, an amendment to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, is an international treaty concerning the deduction of global warming and the reduction of six “greenhouse gases.” The protocol was negotiated in the late 1990s and took effect in 2005. The United States declined to sign the treaty, with U.S. leaders concerned about the uneven commitment among world nations and the implications for the U.S. economy. President Bush proposed incentives to American businesses to voluntarily reduce emissions.

The Paris Agreement, or the Paris climate accord, is another international agreement dealing with the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. In 2015, the UNFCCC, noted above, adopted the agreement, a goal of which is to keep the global temperature from rising. In June 2017, President Trump declared that the United States would cease to participate in the agreement, citing that the accord would put the United States at an economic disadvantage. The earliest the United States can withdraw is November 2020.

Environmental questions are controversial; for instance, is our economic well-being threatened when too many regulations are imposed on the use of natural resources? How many regulations are “too many”? (One example is the proposed phasing-out of incandescent light bulbs and their replacement with more energy-efficient bulbs. In many countries, the phasing-out has been both welcomed and reviled.) Of course, we would decry the loss of electricity, petroleum products, and other sources of energy that provide our quality of life. But if we suffer from environmental crises, our economic well-being becomes moot. Think of the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, oil spills like the British Petroleum spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, and other similar disasters.

Environmental questions go hand in hand with economic and social issues. For instance, a lack of water through drought has been creating migrations of Africans from rural areas to cities, but the resulting increase in population leads to tensions among ethnic groups, crime, unemployment, and other problems. The UN World Food Program writers have pointed out that

social instability in Africa (and, by extension, elsewhere in the world) nearly always have hunger as a critical component.

Ecology and Audacious Openness

Following the insights of ethicist Eric Mount that we’ve studied so far, we can learn to appreciate how the themes of covenant, community, and common good are relevant to ecological issues because in recognizing our shared responsibility for one another, we involve the health of the environment as a “good” to be protected.

What is the role of audacious openness when we talk about the environment? We must embrace the needs and problems of persons who suffer from both economic and environmental challenges; but such openness is especially audacious because it embraces the nonhuman world! Creation is the “other” that we dare not disdain in our efforts toward individual fulfillment and success. Openness is audacious when we strive to shift our identities, moving from careless users and stewards of natural resources to becoming persons and communities that seek both to protect people’s liberties *and* to protect the earth. This is how we can be faithful citizens.

Our theme of “covenant” has another connection to the environment: the Sabbath. In discussions about religion and evolutionary science, Genesis 1 is a hot-button text, but, ironically, we fail to notice the climax of Genesis 1, the Sabbath (though not referred to by name here). Later in the Scriptures, God gives the Sabbath to God’s people as a “perpetual covenant,” connected both with God’s creation and with God’s salvation of the Israelites from Egypt (Exod. 31:16–17).

Many Jews and Christians keep the Sabbath as a rejuvenating day of rest, as commanded by God. In the New Testament, Jesus declared that the Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath (Mark 2:23–28), but misinterpreting Jesus, we overlook the biblical purposes of Sabbath: rest, freedom, trust in God, and a cessation from frantic work (and frantic leisure). We end up making a day for ourselves while overlooking aspects of community, the earth, and God that are focuses of Sabbath blessing.

The word *oikos* is also the source of another Greek word, *oikumenê*, which means “the inhabited world.” That word, in turn, gives us our English word “ecumenical.” In a way, both ecologically sensitive and

ecumenically concerned, several Christian denominations have been faithful to the biblical witness and have made important statements about the environment, which can be found online. Individual churches have tried to address environmental challenges by being careful with use of paper, limiting the use of plastic bags and Styrofoam, recycling, using energy-efficient lights and appliances, and even installing solar panels.

Like economics, ecology is an issue that frustrates anyone hoping to make a “big difference.” The challenges are many, and the possibility of making an individual difference seems very slight. But we don’t have to think about the matter individualistically. God is the creator of the world, and God’s providential care continues!

When John the Baptist (certainly a man who lived simply in the natural world) preached to crowds, he gave people responsibilities that they could do within their own spheres of influence (Luke 3:10–14). So it is with us. Responding to the environment entails several things: changing personal behavior, being aware of the consequences of our economic choices, making changes in our consumerism if possible, becoming aware of denominational statements and efforts, urging our elected representatives to support legislation and policy changes, and giving our support to global efforts. In our worship, we have a weekly reminder of God’s love of creation and God’s call to order our lives in solidarity with the earth, its people, and all its creatures.

Notes

1. J. Clinton McCann Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 1099 (emphasis added). I first used these psalms and McCann’s reflections in my book: Paul Stroble, *What about Religion and Science: A Study of Reason and Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 109–11.
2. See, for example, the article “Global Ecology,” The Global Education Project, <http://www.theglobaleducationproject.org/earth/global-ecology.php>.
3. Keepers of the Earth, “ELCA Global Warming Fact Sheet,” <https://www.scribd.com/document/48430595/ELCA-Global-Warming-Fact-Sheet>.
4. “Spin, Science, and Climate Change,” *The Economist*, March 20–26, 2010, <https://www.economist.com/node/15720419>.

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