



SOUNDINGS **ABOUT THE** **ENVIRONMENT**

**Whose world is it? What is humanity's
responsibility?**

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About the Environment

FROM EDEN TO THORNS AND THISTLES

People who read the opening verses of Genesis learn that God created the world we live in. God declared it good. Humanity's first couple lived in a garden, described as a paradise of plenty. When they disregarded the rules, they were kicked out and daily life became a struggle. One indication of that struggle involved changes in the environment (Genesis 3:17–19).

Throughout history, humanity has had an ambivalent relationship with the environment. On one hand, the earth provided food, water, and shelter. Geography and landscapes became connected to the notion of home. Vistas offered beauty, and stirred feelings of wonder. But, on the other hand, nature had a tendency to run amok. It refused to cooperate. Wild and venomous creatures posed threats. Rains didn't come, or storms brought flooding. Earthquakes and volcanoes killed at random and destroyed what people had built.

Humanity's story embraces a quest to tame the unpredictable natural forces. People learned how to domesticate animals and control the growing of plants. They developed technologies to harness energy and deploy the earth's resources to suit the needs and desires of an ever-growing and increasingly mobile population. Even efforts to control weather met with some success—at least indoors through the ambience imparted by central heating and air conditioning to those with the means to afford it.

The Christian perspective on environmental issues is shaped primarily by two principles: (1) God created and owns the world. (2) Humans serve under God's appointment as overseers who have been given *dominion*, although some controversy exists surrounding what this *dominion* entails.

GOD'S WORLD

The familiar opening verses of Genesis describe a world created by God. Throughout scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments, multiple references affirm that the world belongs to God. Let's take a look at just a few (the quotations are taken from the English Standard Version, ESV¹):

“Behold, to the LORD your God belong the heaven and heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it” (Deuteronomy 10:14). In other words, everything God created belongs to God.

The psalmist affirms this. Quoting God, the text says, “For every beast in the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine” (Psalm 50:10-12).



And in case questions remain, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul reiterates: “For the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof” (1 Corinthians 10:26).

Here’s the bottom line: The world and all its resources do not belong to people. They do not belong to governments. They do not belong to corporations. They do not even belong to environmentalists or to the wild beasts. The world belongs to God.

DOMINION?

If the world belongs to God, what is humanity’s role? In Genesis 1:26 and again in verses 1:28–29, God gives humans dominion over many categories of created living things (fish, birds, livestock, creeping things, seed-bearing plants). The list provides examples of an authority that ultimately extends “over all the earth” (1:26) and to “every living thing that moves on the earth” (1:28).

The word *dominion* has been variously interpreted. Some view it as God’s intention to bestow absolute power on humanity, thereby granting society’s rulers the right to exploit the world’s resources in any manner they choose. This perspective assumes everything exists to benefit humankind. Others believe the term assigns caretaking responsibilities to humans, that it charges people with the responsibility of safeguarding the wellbeing of the earth and its resources.

This second interpretation aligns with initiatives in many Christian communities encouraging environmental awareness and action. Often described as creation care or environmental stewardship, these efforts seek to mobilize the universal Church (all believers around the globe) to stand against the misuse of resources and to encourage the love of God and neighbor by taking good care of God’s world, fostering healthy ecosystems, and promoting sustainable practices.

In contrast, the first interpretation sees humankind in the position of supreme rulers. Some may feel that this gives people the God-given right to exploit global resources for whatever purposes suit the current moment. But, even if the interpretation of the word *dominion* implies a right to rule rather than an obligation of stewardship, the practice of governing in a domineering manner is contrary to God’s view regarding such a job description. Scripture offers cautions regarding overbearing kings, and Jesus gave instructions about how authority should be used.

After the ancient Israelites settled in their land, they asked the prophet Samuel to appoint a king over them. God claimed that this request rejected the notion that God was king. Furthermore, God told Samuel to warn the people that a human king would misuse power by conscripting people into the army, pressing them into service as slaves, and seizing agricultural resources (1 Samuel 8:2–18). If these actions are given as examples of ways in which a ruler misuses power, God likely intended the *dominion* passages to be implemented with a greater wisdom.

Jesus talked to his disciples about what it meant to rule: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among

you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25–28).

Irrespective of how an individual interprets the word *dominion*, the resulting God-given mandate to humanity is the same: to serve creation as a steward. And, how should a steward serve? “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:1-2).

Being found faithful with respect to the environment requires that Christians become acquainted with the issues. Individuals may play different roles in developing and implementing solutions to complex, multifaceted concerns. People may disagree about the best course of action and the consequences of steps to be taken or to be avoided. By engaging in respectful conversation that considers various viewpoints, people may discover that they have different roles to play and different priorities for the tasks to be done. These differences should make the Christian response to environmental issues stronger; they must not cause division that leads to inaction or apathy.

It is our Father’s world, and we have a job to do.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES FACING TODAY’S BELIEVERS

Some areas of controversy regarding important environmental issues stem from problems with terminology. Two phrases linked with confusion are “global warming” and “climate change.”

Global warming became an often-heard label during the last decades of the twentieth century. Within the scientific community, people used it to talk about changes in average worldwide atmospheric and sea surface temperatures. They adopted it as a catch phrase to communicate to the general population regarding concerns related to the impact of these changes. To many ears,



however, warming sounded like a good thing. Warming conjured up visions of spring’s arrival or chicks hatching from incubated eggs. Furthermore, daily temperature records in many areas, especially in North America winters, revealed plenty of cold days.

The phrase *climate change* gained prominence in an attempt to overcome this misunderstanding, but it also ran into problems. After all, people said, records suggest that climates around the earth and across the centuries have been continually changing. Adults remembered their childhood geology textbooks with information about past ice ages. Some remembered discussions of plate tectonics that depicted the continents moving from the poles to the equator and back again. Teaching about the solar system described the precession of the equinoxes and solar cycles, processes with known impacts on earth’s climate. Today, communicators still searching for

terminology to help discuss contemporary issues that go beyond such natural occurrences, have suggested alternate phrases such as *climate crisis* or *climate emergency*.

But, there's no need to debate which catchy phrase is the most suitable. Instead, let's discuss areas where human impact causes disruptions in the natural environment.

We'll start with the air. The earth's diameter measures nearly 8,000 miles at the equator. The planet's atmosphere is only about 60 miles thick. If you took a medium-sized exercise ball with a diameter of 26 inches to represent the earth, the atmosphere would be only 0.195 inches thick (just barely more than 1/8"). Furthermore, most people can breathe comfortably within only the first mile or two of those 60 miles, and the upper limit of human endurance is about five miles.

The thin slice of atmosphere surrounding our planet is comprised primarily of nitrogen and oxygen. Combined, these two elements account for 99% of its gases. The remaining 1% includes argon and carbon dioxide, along with trace amounts of other gases such as nitrous oxide, methane, and ozone.



Since the emergence of the industrial age and its reliance on fossil fuels, humans have put increasing amounts of carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide into the atmosphere. These chemical compounds are among a group known as greenhouse gases. If you think of a greenhouse, you may envision a protected place where growth is nurtured. In cold environments, greenhouses trap heat so that plants can get an early start on seasonal growth or thrive in regions with natural climates ill-suited to their needs.

In the planetary atmosphere, however, increasing the amount of greenhouse gases changes how sunshine is absorbed and how earth's internally generated heat is radiated into space. Increasing the greenhouse effect promotes melting of polar icecaps, disrupts global weather patterns, and raises sea levels. In addition, increasing the proportions of these chemicals in the air contributes to acid rain and the acidification of the oceans.

Other industrial pollutants are also pumped into the atmosphere. These include soot, smoke, ground-level ozone, carbon monoxide, and particulates (microscopic pieces of solids or liquids and aerosols). These reduce overall air quality. The American Lung Association claims that 40% of Americans live in areas with compromised air quality, and that air pollution puts millions of people at risk for lung cancer, asthma, cardiovascular damage, and even death.² The World Health Organization estimates that more than 90% of the world's population lives in places where air quality levels fail to meet standards and that air pollution caused 4.2 million premature deaths in 2016.³

Water-related concerns present a challenge. Some of the excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is absorbed by earth's oceans. This is changing the water chemistry, making seawater more acidic. These changes, known as ocean acidification, interfere with marine organisms and affect respiration, photosynthesis, shell creation, skeletal integrity, and reproduction. The marine food web plays an important role in human and terrestrial animal diets, and marine plants produce 70% of the oxygen in our planet's atmosphere.

Human activities have other impacts on the world's oceans. Decades of dumping trash into the ocean (including industrial and pharmaceutical wastes, heavy metals, plastics, sewage sludge, radioactive byproducts, and other debris) have caused long-lasting harm. International treaties and U.S. legislation, such as the Marine Protection, Research and Sanctuaries Act (MPRSA) seek to mitigate the damage, but problems persist.



Circular ocean currents, called gyres, collect marine debris. Gyres exist in all the world's oceans, but the one in the north Pacific is perhaps the most infamous; it is called the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. It consists of areas where small particles from nonbiodegradable substances (such as plastics) accumulate. Although these tiny pieces often cannot be seen by the unaided eye, they block sunlight and thwart photosynthetic processes that form the basis of the marine food web. Marine organisms consume the particles, and they are passed up the food chain in increasing concentrations. In addition, larger pieces of trash (such as fishing nets and plastic bags) directly harm animals such as sea turtles, birds, and seals.

Earth's freshwater supplies are also at risk. Only about three percent of earth's water resources are in the form of fresh water, and much of that is inaccessible for drinking and watering crops. The tiny portion that is available represents a valuable resource that is vital for life. Yet, the planetary supply of fresh water is threatened by overuse and by discharges and runoff that release industrial chemicals, fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, improperly treated sewage, agricultural waste products, oil, bacteria, and other harmful materials. Furthermore, available water is sometimes used unwisely, such as by dripping faucets or leaky pipes, inefficient toilets and showers, and lawn maintenance.

Environmental issues also impact the land. Many land-use issues impact the health of the natural environment. Unsuitable agricultural techniques can contribute to erosion, soil depletion, and deforestation. Urban sprawl leads to habitat degradation, fragmentation, and loss, limiting the places where wildlife can survive and resulting in species loss and less biodiversity. Landfills can lead to soil and water contamination. Pesticides and weed killers destroy beneficial plants and pollinators along with their targets. Plastics in the landscape end up in animal digestive

systems. Mining can compromise land stability and release dangerous chemicals. Fracking can destabilize earth structures. The list goes on and on.

WHAT CHRISTIANS CAN DO ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

No one person can solve all the environmental problems that confront planet earth. Different groups advocate diverse actions and offer various perspectives on how best to tackle issues. Individual steps may be small, but when efforts complement the steps taken by others, great works can be achieved. Here are just a few suggestions for where to begin.

- Learn about the issues. Listen to people with diverse opinions. Investigate the ways environmental concerns impact human health. Look into research describing what scientists have learned about how human activities impact the stability of ecosystems.
- Reuse, repurpose, and recycle whenever possible. Make your water bottle a reusable one.
- Waste less. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says food waste is the largest component of municipal waste. Leftovers that wind up in a landfill rot and produce methane. Wasting food wastes the resources that were used to produce and transport it.
- Save energy. Switch to compact fluorescent or LED light bulbs. Set your thermostat lower in the winter and higher in the summer. Prefer appliances that use less energy, and unplug electronic equipment that isn't being used. Walk or ride a bike when possible.
- Consider resource use when planning meals. Avoid types of seafood threatened by overfishing, consider the amount of water used by various agricultural products, and take advantage of locally sourced products.
- Plant a garden; plant a tree. Prefer native plants.
- Practice these 3Vs: Voice your concerns. Volunteer for projects you support (actions really do speak louder than words). Vote for politicians who share your commitment to environmental stewardship.



WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

For some people, concerns about the natural world center around how environmental damage impacts humanity. The alarms they sound highlight genuine issues. A rising sea level threatens shoreline and low-lying communities, putting highly valued property at risk. Loss of mangrove forests makes coastal regions vulnerable to storms and erosion. Overfishing leads to food scarcity and job loss. Air and water pollution make people sick. Loss of biodiversity destabilizes the ecosystems that support agriculture.

In all these areas, and in many more, caring for the environment yields a positive return. A healthy environment lets people sustain preferred lifestyles, have more satisfying experiences, and reap health benefits. These self-serving goals and hopes for long-term profits may motivate some to take positive steps, and all positive steps—irrespective of what motivated them—are needed. But in the end, Christians should be concerned about the environment for a different, and much more important, reason.

The task of tending this marvelous garden we call earth, was given to humanity. Accepting the divine mandate to serve as caretakers of God’s creation, means looking out for the interests of all the creatures that live within it. Christians should work to protect the environment because it’s the right thing to do.

Notes:

1. Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®) copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
2. American Lung Association. [State of the Air](#), 2018.
3. World Health Organization. [Ambient \(outdoor\) air pollution](#), 2018.

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Page 5: This highly oblique image shot over northwestern part of the African continent captures the curvature of the Earth and shows its atmosphere as seen by NASA’s Space Station EarthKAM. NASA ID: PIA11066, NASA/JPL/UCSD/JSC, 2008-09-05; courtesy NASA.

Page 6: Garbage in the water, Delhi. Photo by Yogendra Singh from Pexels, via Canva.

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