

God's Gospel will save the planet

April 19, 2009 - Deuteronomy 10:14, Ps. 115:16, Romans 8:20-21, Isaiah 65:17-25

“Global warming is well underway and will have wide-ranging consequences for our health and well-being. The primary cause of global warming is human activity, most significantly burning of fossil fuels to drive cars, generate electricity, and operate our homes and businesses. Clearing tropical forests contributes to about 20 percent of global warming emissions.”¹ So says a group called the Union of Concerned Scientists.

“MYTH - Even slight temperature rises are disastrous, ice caps will melt, people will die. FACT - Parts of ice caps are melting yet other parts are thickening but this isn't reported as much. Data from ice core samples shows that in the past, temperatures have risen by ten times the current rise, and fallen again, in the space of a human lifetime.”² So say Global warming myth busters on a website called “Green Myths.”

On former Vice President Al Gore's website you can read about this initiative.

“Take Action to Solve the Climate Crisis - **Join the Alliance for Climate Protection's WE Campaign.** WE is a growing number of people who believe we can solve this. Not just as individuals with strong beliefs but as part of a group where our strength makes governments and corporations change. WE can put our planet on a new path. Clean energy solutions are out there waiting. Solutions that will not only save our planet but help rebuild our economy. WE can lead.”³

Then the late Michael Crichton, author and creator of the film Jurassic Park had this to say:

Today, one of the most powerful religions in the Western World is environmentalism. It seems to be the religion of choice for

urban atheists. Why do I say it's a religion? Well, just look at the beliefs. If you look carefully, you see that environmentalism is in fact a perfect 21st century remapping of traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs and myths.

There's an initial Eden, a paradise, a state of grace and unity with nature, there's a fall from grace into a state of pollution as a result of eating from the tree of knowledge, and as a result of our actions there is a judgment day coming for us all. We are all energy sinners, doomed to die, unless we seek salvation, which is now called sustainability. Sustainability is salvation in the church of the environment. Just as organic food is its communion, that pesticide-free wafer that the right people with the right beliefs, eat.⁴

Very different views on climate change and saving the planet.

Who is right? Where are we supposed to turn with all these claims?

Is our planet in need of salvation? If so, what needs to happen? What can we do about it?

Well I'm no scientist. I don't claim to know or understand all the different angles of this topic. But I do think there is an answer to all that ails this planet. Here it is. God's Gospel saves the planet. God's Gospel will ultimately deliver the planet and a great many of its residents.

Now at first, this sounds ridiculous. Simply proclaiming the Gospel is not going to clean up dirty water. It will not stop pollution

¹ http://www.ucsusa.org/global_warming/global_warming_101/

² http://www.abd.org.uk/green_myths.htm

³ <http://www.algore.com/action.html>

⁴ Michael Crichton, Environmentalism as Religion. Speech to Commonwealth Club, San Francisco, CA, Sept. 15, 2003, <http://www.michaelcrichton.com/speech-environmentalism.html>.

or destructive strip mining. “God’s Gospel is meant for the spiritual realm after all.” We’re talking about the physical realm where we live.

But can we so quickly dismiss the Gospel as having relevance to saving the planet? Are we sure the Gospel doesn’t also touch the physical realm. We just remembered at Easter the physical suffering, death and resurrection of Christ’s physical body at a real moment in history in the physical world. So perhaps we need to reconsider an easy dismissal of this claim that “God’s Gospel will save the planet.” So I need you to examine the possibility of this claim.

Prior to Easter, we began a series on our God who provides salvation for us and the planet; Salvation – our own and the planet. We first looked at the fatal flaw in save the planet schemes which is the sinfulness of man. Though there are many noble attempts to deal with environmental challenges, they will all struggle against the sinfulness of people. But then we discovered that it’s not hopeless. In fact, Jesus Christ is saving the planet. In Romans 8 we discovered that creation was subjected to frustration. It groans because of its current bondage to decay. But when Christ comes back and the children of

God are revealed in their resurrection bodies, creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay.

Today, we continue with this series. We seek a balanced Biblical perspective to the many questions floating around about the planet and our place on it. I seek to prove the statement “God’s Gospel saves the planet.”

Much of the material I will use today comes from a book called *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* by Christopher J. H. Wright. He is an excellent Old Testament scholar who has thought long and written extensively on the impact of the Old Testament for today’s world. Now this message was advertized as 4 essentials to save the planet. But I had to add one more.

So we’re going to review 5 essentials to save the planet which are five pieces of the Gospel message. The Gospel must be put into the context of the whole history for it to make ultimate sense. So we’ll review each piece. Then we’ll consider what each piece has to do with saving the planet. Finally, we’ll consider how we must live in light of each piece. It’ll be up to you to decide if I’ve proved the claim God’s

Gospel will save the planet. You can follow along on the message insert and turn in your Bibles to Deuteronomy 10.

5 pieces of God's Gospel will ultimately save the planet.

Piece #1) God is creator and owner of everything. He owns the highest heavens and all the Earth.

Psalm 24:1 tells us “The earth is the Lords and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.” The Psalmist recognizes that the Lord universally owns the planet and everything on it. He also “owns” all who live on it. The Lord states in Job 41:11, “Everything under heaven belongs to me.”

In Deuteronomy 10:14, Moses states “To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it.” This last verse comes from a passage where Moses speaks to the Israelites before they will cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. He has reminded them of God's care, provision and salvation for them as a people over their history. In Deuteronomy 10:12-13, Moses reminds them of an appropriate response to all the Lord has done. “And now, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your

God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?” (D 10:12-13). To fear; to walk; to love; to serve; to observe; these are appropriate responses of God's people to all He has done.

To further emphasize how privileged they were to have God's favor, Moses compares God's vast ownership of the universe to their smallness as a nation. Verses 14 and 15 – “to the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it,” yet He set His affection on your forefathers. The phrase highest heavens is literally “heavens of heavens.” It is a superlative expression. It's like Moses is lifts their vision to the highest place they can comprehend. Then he says, “the Lord owns that and even higher than that.” There is absolutely nothing in creation up there or down here that does not belong to Him. Yet He set His heart on little ole' insignificant Israel. He set His heart on you and me. This is the first piece of the Gospel message. If we don't get that God owns everything because He created everything then there is no sense of accountability to a creator God. We become the highest authority. We no longer need God.

Notice what else this first piece of the Gospel clarifies. Wright points out that it reveals “Creation is distinct from, but dependent on God.” God is Creator and everything else is created. The being or essence of God is utterly distinct from the being or essence of the universe.

This goes contrary to many motivations to save the planet. Some believe that all is One; so we should save the planet because we are all united in oneness with God.

Others believe that altogether, everything is God. This is also known as pantheism common in New Age circles. So the earth becomes a goddess having power and intelligence. Mother Nature moves beyond fairy tales to an object of worship.

I'll never forget visiting a museum in Salem, Massachusetts that clearly proclaimed this. Salem is near Gordon-Conwell Seminary where I did some studies. Salem was once a major shipping center. It was also home to Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of the *Scarlett Letter*. But most of you probably associate Salem with the Witch Hysteria of the late 1600's. We visited a museum which told one version of the events. After the presentation, we walked past a display of witchcraft

today. Basically it affirmed worship of mother earth and the use of her natural herbs for the greater good of the culture.

But that view is that creation is somehow divine itself, fundamentally opposed to this piece of the Gospel. There's only one God. He created all and He owns it all. There's no mother Earth. The Bible portrays the universe as distinct from God yet dependent on Him.

We think that the ancients were pretty foolish to worship statues made of wood, stone and metal. Yet some in this world continue to worship the sun, or the moon or the earth. In a sense, there is not much difference between that type of worship and worshipping idols; worshipping the created rather than the Creator. It can happen when this first key piece is forgotten.

Now how do we live in light of this first piece of the Gospel? How does it help save the planet? Well you know that piece of paper which says you hold title to that land or you own that house or that car in the parking lot. God actually has first rights of ownership to everything we have. God owns our land and has allowed us the privilege of tending to it for a few years. God owns our houses and

cars and cherished possessions. Since they're ultimately his, we need to treat them in a way that honors Him. We need to use them in ways that give Him glory.

Wright says "Creation is not neutral stuff that we can commodify and commercialize, use and abuse solely for our own ends. If the greatest commandment implies that we love the Lord God with all heart, soul, mind and strength, then we should treat what belongs to God with honor, care and respect. To contribute to, collude in, abuse, pollute or destroy the natural order is to trample on the goodness of God reflected in creation. It is to devalue what God values and mute God's praise.

But does God's ownership mean we're nothing more than slaves? Gospel Piece #2 clarifies that.

Piece # 2) God commissioned humankind to rule over creation like a servant king.

Genesis 1:28 states "God blessed them (Adam and Eve) and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'"

Ps. 115:16 says "The highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to man." Unlike the heavens, the earth is the place of human and non-human habitation. Yet the earth is never said to be given to the other creatures in quite the same way as it is given to humanity. Now, this does not mean we can be arrogant. We have much in common with the rest of creation. We are one species among the rest of the animals. (G 1:29-30).

There are only two things said about human beings that are not said about any other creature: God chose to make us in God's own image; God instructed us to rule over the rest of creation.

Gen. 1:26 – "Then God said, "let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

By making us in the image and likeness of God, He equipped us to rule over the rest of creation. Image bearers signify God's sovereignty over that territory. When Roman soldiers conquered a land, they would display the image of the emperor of Rome over this conquered territory. The sovereign now rules here! But we are not to

be like brutal conquerors who instill a reign of terror over the earth.

We must rule with a righteous benevolence like servant kings.

According to the Bible, A king exists for the benefit of his people.

Kings were supposed to shepherd their people. Shepherds care for the sheep, not exploit or abuse them. Certainly Kings had power of life and death over their subjects according to justice and mercy; but they also had the parallel duty to love and protect.

Jesus ruled this way. He came as a Servant King. He ruled over His subjects by serving them and ultimately dying for them. He generously gave of Himself for their benefit. Yet He was still the king as we just celebrated over Easter.

God determined from the beginning that humans would exercise His reign on earth over creation. Did you notice the command God gave to man in Genesis 1:28. “Fill the earth and subdue it.” I used to think that Garden of Eden dominated the whole planet. But the earth needed filling and subduing. As the earth was filled, the wildness was supposed to be subdued. The land would be used for good purposes. Man was supposed to rule over the other

creatures. God commissioned His image bearers to exercise His loving rule over the earth. (use the earth and it’s resources).

So how can this second piece fulfill their help save the planet? God’s people can mandate as God’s image bearer by lovingly ruling over that He’s entrusted to us. That means our bodies and minds need to be ruled. Just as we can damage the environment or pollute it, we can damage or pollute our bodies, minds and others.

He has also given us other people to work with, hire or supervise. People are part of His creation. He has given us work opportunities. Each day He gives is a gift of His creation. Therefore, when we rule in a way that reflects God’s original purpose, the planet and other creatures will be blessed.

So we’ve seen the first 2 pieces of God’s gospel include God’s ownership of the planet and God entrusting the planet to mankind to rule over it like a servant king. But we all know this idyllic relationship between God-man and creation didn’t last long.

Piece #3) Man’s rebellion against God fractured man’s relationship with God and ground.

When Adam and Eve sinned they broke their relationship with God. He cast them out of the garden and though He still loved them, their sin would have to be paid for. But Adam and Eve not only damaged their relationship with God. Look at what happens to creation. Genesis 3:17-19- “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” Adam and Eve’s rebellion damaged their relationship with creation and damaged creation itself.

We saw this confirmed a few weeks ago in Romans 8:19, 20, 22 - “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it. . . . We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” Romans 8:19,20,22.

When humans chose to rebel against their Creator, their disobedience affected the whole physical environment. The fall

disturbed humanity’s harmonious relationship with nature, alienating us from nature. So that we now experience it as hostile, with elements of struggle and violence.

Michael Crichton criticizes those who think that man and nature can peacefully coexist. He stated: And if you, even now, put yourself in nature even for a matter of days, you will quickly be disabused of all your romantic fantasies. Take a trek through the jungles of Borneo, and in short order you will have festering sores on your skin, you'll have bugs all over your body, biting in your hair, crawling up your nose and into your ears, you'll have infections and sickness and if you're not with somebody who knows what they're doing, you'll quickly starve to death.⁵

Since we are sinner kings instead of servant kings, we have a twisted rule over creation.

This is the fundamental cause of strife between humans & creation.

Thankfully, the rest of the Bible assures us that this will not remain in this state forever.

⁵ Michael Crichton, Environmentalism as Religion. Speech to Commonwealth Club, San Francisco, CA, Sept. 15, 2003, <http://www.michaelcrichton.com/speech-environmentalismasreligion.html>,

Piece #4) God provided for restoration of relationship with man and creation through the cross.

When the earth became cursed because of the fall, we all lost fellowship with God. We all experienced a fracture in relationship. In fact, we somehow mysteriously yet spiritually participated in that first sin. “Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned, according to Romans 5:12.”

If you have not trusted Jesus Christ as your savior, you remain separated from God. Yet God provided THE way to reconciliation with Him through His Son. Jesus went to the cross to pay the price for your sin. If you put your trust fully upon Christ, God will rain His Gospel down heavily into your life. You’re sins will be forgiven. You will be released from slavery to sin. You will become an adopted child of God and begin the journey towards Christlikeness. You will be protected upon your death from the sentence of Hell and go into Christ’s presence. You will one day receive a resurrection body. You will join millions who enter God’s new creation and renewed Earth to

live with Him forever. But most importantly, you will be in joyful close and intimate fellowship with your Creator, our God.

That all starts by confessing Jesus Christ as Lord, turning away from sin and placing your trust in Him not your own works. If you do not know Christ, will you trust Him as your Savior right now?

Once we enjoy that restored relationship with God, we must act and think like God’s image bearers. Wright describes it as building bridges to the coming restored creation or giving others a glimpse of heaven on earth. So even though creation remains under a curse and we’re still sinners, we can by God’s strength strive to lovingly rule over creation. One way to show this is in the way we treat animals. Do we show loving concern or nasty cruelty? And for all you hunters out there, I’m not saying you’ve got to give up hunting ☺ and go pet a deer to atone for all your wilderness murders. Ruler-ship includes using plants and animals for food and industry and subduing. But if we torture animals or treat them cruelly, then something’s wrong. But isn’t there something special when you see a person ruling over an animal with gentleness and kind control? That’s like a glimpse of life in God’s restored creation.

But the crowning piece to the Gospel comes in piece # 5.

Piece #5) Man can look forward to the day when God will completely restore creation.

The good news of the message a few weeks ago was found in Romans 8:21 - “creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.” When Christ returns, the curse will be lifted. Creation will be completely renewed and God’s people will receive their resurrection bodies. Together we will reign over the earth as Christ’s servant kings and queens.

Just as God restores lives through Christ, He will restore creation through Christ. This is how God’s Gospel will ultimately save the planet. It is really a summary of the entire Bible. Genesis 1-2 gives us pieces 1 & 2 of the Gospel. Genesis 3-11 tells us about the Fall of man, piece # 3. Genesis 12-Revelation 20 piece # 4 tells us about God’s save the planet and save the people plan. Revelation 21-22 piece # 5 describes the completion of the plan, a renewed heaven and the renewed earth. The cross is at the center of it all. Because of the cross, people can be made right with God, creation will be made right

with us when Christ returns. So the planet will be saved because of God’s Gospel.

In the meantime, we must live in light of each piece of the Gospel. Recognize that God owns everything so don’t clutch possession too tightly. Accept the responsibility to loving rule over that which God has entrusted you. Repent from sin and receive that restoring in relationship with God. Continue to give glimpses of that renewed creation today through your loving servant kingship on earth. Then one day, what we currently experience imperfectly in this fellowship will be experienced perfectly on the new earth. I’ll conclude by letting God describe what that will be like through Isaiah 65.

Isaiah 65:17-25 NIV

New Heavens and a New Earth

¹⁷ "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.

¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.

¹⁹ I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people;

the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.

²⁰ "Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years;
he who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere youth;
he who fails to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed.

²¹ They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

²² No longer will they build houses and others live in them,
or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the works of their hands.

²³ They will not toil in vain
or bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the LORD,
they and their descendants with them.

²⁴ Before they call I will answer;
while they are still speaking I will hear.

²⁵ The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
but dust will be the serpent's food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,"
says the LORD.