

Ecology

Christian Eco-Theology: First Steps

Noel Moules

SCM

Christian Eco-Theology: First Steps

The global ecological crisis is first and foremost a spiritual crisis. We will not see the deep long-term transformations which are necessary unless we see spirituality as foundational. Spirituality is the essence of every expression of life- giving shape and significance to each relationship. It is expressed in love, justice, beauty, and all other life-giving values. For many (not all) it is sourced in the divine. This is certainly true for Christians, who see it uniquely incarnated in the person of Jesus.

Ecology is central to our mission and our Christian discipleship. Jesus instructed us to “Proclaim the good news to the whole of creation”. Ours should be a distinctive voice at the centre of the global conversation on eco-spirituality. Eco-Theology puts forward a biblical understanding of what a Jesus-centered response to the environment ought to be. Ecological issues are of course numerous, but an initial Christian theological response can focus on just two.

Dualism is the concept of dividing an understanding of the world into two opposed or contrasting aspects, e.g. spirit and matter; humans and nature; body and soul; heaven and earth. It has no real biblical basis, yet has influenced Christian thinking (especially eco- thinking) for more than 1500 years. Christian dualism argues that: heaven is the sole dwelling place of God; our ultimate destiny is heaven; this earth and cosmos will be destroyed by fire; and there will be a new heaven and earth. Interest in this environment is therefore meaningless: the earth is to be exploited.

Challenging this, the central biblical concept of reality is summed up in a single word: shalom. Usually translated as ‘peace’, but more accurately, ‘wholeness, integration, completeness, everything moving together in dynamic harmony’, shalom is the message of Jesus (identical to the ‘kingdom of God’); and it should be our message too. Shalom is about all relationships, and proclaims creation’s destiny. We will all be part of a renewed creation, not somewhere else but here.[6] Shalom works for the physical wellbeing of all things without exception, challenging injustice in all its forms. Shalom is the Christian’s ecological mandate.

The single most eco-destructive biblical idea has been the belief

the belief that God gave humans 'dominion over the earth'. The traditional interpretation is wrong. The Hebrew phrase v'yirdu can mean 'dominion with', but never 'over'. We are meant to 'image God' by 'living with creation in shalom'. We are called to companionship with creation. Here the word 'with' is one of the most significant words, from an ecological viewpoint, in the whole of scripture.

Jesus interprets dominion using the concept of meekness ('strength under perfect control'). He says, "The meek shall inherit the earth'. A biblical understanding of meekness holds together in a single concept, three seemingly incompatible ideas: selfless anger and rage against injustice; serene poise of deep and strong self-control; and simple gentleness energised by love and compassion.

Jesus continually demonstrates these: by stilling the storm; riding a wild donkey-foal into Jerusalem; and using flowers and birds as examples of God's character and love. So, beginning with two foundational ideas, Christian eco-theology enables us to focus our thinking and understanding, setting the faith in action agenda with regard to ecology and the environment.

Noel is a teacher, author, and activist for peace and ecology.