

A Sacred Duty: The Christian Response To The Ecological Crisis

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Abstract

As the ecological crisis intensifies and the impacts of climate change become undeniable, faith communities worldwide are grappling with their role and responsibility. For Christianity, a global religion of over two billion adherents, this challenge has prompted a profound period of theological reflection, institutional realignment, and grassroots activism. The response is not monolithic; it is a complex tapestry of deep conviction, internal debate, and evolving action. This article explores the multifaceted Christian engagement with the environmental crisis, from its biblical foundations to the diverse and often conflicting approaches seen today.

Keywords: ecological crisis, climate change, Christianity, theology, biblical foundations

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Theological Foundations for Creation Care

The Christian call to care for the environment is not a modern invention but is rooted in core scriptural and theological doctrines. For centuries, these ideas were often secondary, but the current crisis has brought them to the forefront of Christian thought.

The Doctrine of Creation: An Intrinsically Good World

The foundational text, Genesis 1, repeatedly declares God's creation as "good" and, upon its completion, "very good." This establishes a crucial theological principle: the non-human world has inherent value in the eyes of its Creator, independent of its utility to humanity. It is not merely a stage for human salvation but a participant in a divine story. This perspective counters a purely utilitarian view of nature, reframing it as a sacred gift to be cherished and protected, a visible sign of God's invisible glory (Romans 1:20).

The Mandate of Stewardship: Reinterpreting "Dominion"

Perhaps the most debated passage is Genesis 1:28, where God commands humanity to "have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Historically, this verse was often interpreted as a license for unchecked exploitation. However, contemporary biblical scholarship and eco-theology have powerfully challenged this reading. The Hebrew verbs used, *radah* (dominion) and *kabash* (subdue), are now widely understood in the context of ancient Near Eastern kingship, where a good king ruled as a shepherd, caring for and protecting his subjects. Therefore, "dominion" is reinterpreted as "stewardship" or "servant-leadership"—a divine charge to manage, cultivate, and protect God's creation on His behalf, not to destroy it for selfish gain.

Covenant and Christology: A Cosmic Scope of Redemption

The biblical narrative extends God's concern beyond humanity. In Genesis 9, after the flood, God establishes a covenant not just with Noah and his descendants but "with every living creature," marking it with the sign of the rainbow. This "everlasting covenant" signifies a divine commitment to the entire created order.

Furthermore, New Testament theology, particularly in the writings of Paul, presents Christ's redemptive work as cosmic in scope. Colossians 1:19-20 states that God was pleased "through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven." This suggests that salvation is not just about human souls but about the healing and restoration of a broken creation. Environmental degradation is thus seen as a contravention of God's redemptive plan, and caring for creation becomes an act of participating in that divine restoration.

A Historical Trajectory: From Perceived Apathy to Awakening

The journey of Christian environmental thought has been one of slow awakening, often spurred by external critique and the undeniable reality of ecological decline.

The "Lynn White Thesis" and Its Aftermath

In 1967, historian Lynn White Jr. published a seminal and provocative essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." He argued that the Judeo-Christian tradition, by demystifying nature and promoting an intensely anthropocentric worldview, had paved the way for its exploitation. While many theologians have since contested his thesis, pointing to alternative traditions of stewardship within Christianity (e.g., St. Francis of Assisi), White's critique was a crucial catalyst. It forced the Christian world to confront its complicity, whether active or passive, in the unfolding crisis and spurred the development of modern eco-theology.

The Rise of Institutional Voices

From the 1970s onward, major Christian bodies began to formally address environmental issues.

- The World Council of Churches (WCC) was a pioneer, focusing on "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation" (JPIC) as an integrated theme since the 1980s.
- The Orthodox Church, under the leadership of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the "Green Patriarch," has been a powerful voice since the 1990s, framing environmental destruction as a sin and promoting September 1st as the World Day of Prayer for Creation.
- The Catholic Church's engagement culminated in Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, a landmark document that has had a profound global impact.
- Numerous Protestant denominations, including Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and Reformed churches, have issued official statements, developed theological resources, and established task forces on environmental stewardship.

The Spectrum of Contemporary Christian Responses

Today, the "Christian response" is a wide spectrum, ranging from high-level institutional directives to fervent grassroots activism and, conversely, pockets of skepticism and inaction.

Landmark Leadership: Pope Francis and *Laudato Si'*

Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* is arguably the single most influential Christian document on the environment. Its brilliance lies in its concept of "integral ecology," which masterfully connects environmental degradation with social and economic injustice.

"We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature." - *Laudato Si'*, 139

The encyclical critiques the "technocratic paradigm" and unrestrained consumerism, calling for a profound "ecological conversion." It explicitly accepts the scientific consensus on climate change and links its devastating effects to the "cry of the earth and the cry of the poor," as those in the Global South are least responsible yet most vulnerable.

Evangelical and Protestant Movements: A Divided Landscape

The Protestant world, particularly in the United States, presents a more divided picture.

- **The Creation Care Movement:** A vibrant movement has emerged within evangelicalism, led by organizations like the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) and A Rocha. These groups root their work in a high view of scripture, arguing that being "pro-life" must consistently include protecting the environment that sustains life. They focus on educating pastors, mobilizing congregations, and advocating for climate solutions from a biblically conservative standpoint.
- **Climate Skepticism:** In contrast, a significant segment of white American evangelicalism remains skeptical of or hostile to climate action. This position is often fueled by a confluence of factors: political polarization (aligning climate concern with the political left), economic anxieties tied to the fossil fuel industry, and certain eschatological (end-times) beliefs that view worldly concerns as a distraction from evangelism or see environmental catastrophe as a sign of the imminent return of Christ.

On-the-Ground Action: From Church Roofs to Climate Marches

Beyond theological statements, many churches are translating belief into action. This grassroots response is diverse and practical.

Case Study: Congregational Greening

Churches across denominations are implementing "greening" initiatives. This includes conducting energy audits of their often-old buildings, installing solar panels on church roofs, planting community gardens to provide fresh produce and sequester carbon, eliminating single-use plastics from church events, and promoting recycling and composting programs among their members. These actions serve a dual purpose: reducing the church's carbon footprint and serving as a visible witness to the community.

Case Study: Advocacy and Prophetic Witness

A growing number of Christians are engaging in public advocacy. Groups like Christian Climate Action (prominent in the UK) participate in non-violent direct action and civil disobedience to pressure governments and corporations. Other Christians engage in shareholder activism, using church pension funds and endowments to influence corporate policy on environmental issues. They participate in climate marches, write to their elected officials, and frame climate action as a fundamental issue of justice and love for one's neighbor.

Challenges and Internal Debates

The path to a unified and effective Christian response is fraught with significant challenges and deep-seated internal debates.

The Stumbling Block of Political Polarization

In countries like the United States, climate change has become a toxic, partisan issue. For many pastors, addressing the topic from the pulpit risks alienating congregants and being accused of "getting political." This fear of division often leads to a cautious silence, even among clergy who are personally convinced of the urgency of the crisis. Overcoming this polarization requires reframing the issue not as a left-vs-right debate, but as a core matter of faith, stewardship, and justice.

Theological Hurdles: Eschatology and Mission

Differing theological priorities create friction. The debate over the "primary mission" of the church is central. Some argue that focusing on environmental issues distracts from the essential task of evangelism and saving souls. Proponents of creation care counter that a gospel that ignores the physical suffering of people and the groaning of creation is an incomplete one. Furthermore, as mentioned, dispensationalist eschatology can foster apathy, with some believing that the world is destined for destruction and human efforts to save it are futile. This stands in stark contrast to theologies that emphasize building the "Kingdom of God" on Earth as it is in heaven.

The Path Forward: Towards a More Faithful Witness

As we approach the critical decade of 2030, the Christian response to the ecological crisis is at a crossroads. The path forward requires a deeper integration of faith, science, and courageous action.

Integrating Science, Faith, and Action

A credible Christian response must fully embrace and engage with the scientific consensus. Faith leaders are increasingly called to be "bilingual," speaking the language of both theology and science to guide their communities. This involves not just accepting the data but interpreting it through a lens of faith that inspires hope and motivates action, rather than despair.

Ecumenical and Interfaith Collaboration

The scale of the climate crisis dwarfs the capacity of any single denomination or even any single religion. The most effective Christian responses are emerging from ecumenical partnerships and interfaith dialogues. By working together with other Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Indigenous leaders, and secular groups, the Christian community can amplify its impact and contribute to a truly global movement for our common home.

A Prophetic Call for Systemic Change

Ultimately, individual actions like recycling, while important, are insufficient. The Christian tradition holds a powerful legacy of prophetic witness that speaks truth to power and challenges unjust systems. A truly Christian response to the ecological crisis must move beyond personal piety to a courageous, prophetic call for systemic change. This means advocating for policies that dismantle the fossil fuel economy, promote a just transition for workers, and create economic models that prioritize the well-being of people and the planet over

limitless profit—a modern-day expression of the biblical call for justice and righteousness to "roll on like a river" (Amos 5:24).

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