

On Christian Environmentalism

Mike Frank

"The New Puritan is not a Christian. Nor is he a Marxist. He is, instead, a secular environmentalist. But like the Marxist he is rootless, colorless, and humorless."

It is not only accurate, but it is also important for a husband to think of his wife as a gift from God. Likewise the husband can be understood by the wife as a gift from God. What remains is the description of this concept in a way that is faithful to scripture, and, therefore, helpful to the marriage relationship.

What I want to suggest in this paper is that the concept of gift is also central to the portrayal of the relationship of the created world to mankind. What I would like to do then, is describe this concept in a way that is faithful to scripture, and, therefore, helpful to us as we consider our relationship to the natural environment about us.

This task is important for several reasons. One is quite simply that we have badly damaged the created world about us already, and now find it placed in a precarious situation because of societal, corporate, and individual decisions that simply do not reflect a Christian understanding of the natural world about us.

Of course, the destructive result of many of these decisions has created an entirely understandable response. But much of the ideology of the environmentalist's response is muddleheaded, wrongheaded, and certainly Christless.

And the problem is that the mainline Protestant Church has shown, as she has shown so often, a tendency to be seduced by these voluptuous new notions. This tendency, as well as the tendency of conservative Protestantism to ignore the need for a real and appropriate response, provides us with the second reason for the paper.

The Church is to be salt to this society, light in the midst of the darkness. And she cannot do this either with her head planted firmly in the sand, or by clutching a whoring ideology to her bosom.

In the Gospel story we see that everything that pertains to our relationship to God is a gift. It is based, as Paul has told us, on God's gift of grace (that is, His gift of and work in Jesus Christ), and not on the law. Indeed, even that life which is lived in such a way as to suggest obedience to

the law, that life which demonstrates both the love of God and the love of neighbor, is a matter of grace, a matter of mercy, a matter of being a gift. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2:20)

Man's relationship to God depends on his being a New Creation, and we have become that through Jesus who is the New Adam, the New Man, the New Creation. Thus, being a New Creation is God's gift to us through the gift of His Son. Matthew and Luke indicate that from the very beginning Jesus was God's gift. For He comes to us through Mary, who received Him into her body, not by the work of Joseph, but by faith, by the power of the Holy Spirit. God sent his Son into the world, by His mercy and love, as a gift.

In the words and works of Jesus we see this notion of gift work itself out. For instance, Jesus commends the Publican, who obtains forgiveness by receiving it as an undeserved gift. He commends the Canaanite woman who receives healing for her daughter as a gift to which she has no right, but for which she begs. He describes the service of God by the story of the talents, which we understand as gifts of God.

Elsewhere in the New Testament Paul speaks of the gifts of the Spirits, talents given to Christians to use in the building up of the Church. He speaks of good works and says that we were "created in Christ Jesus" (Ephes. 2:10) for them, etc.

Even in the book of Revelation we find this notion at work. There we see described the giving of crowns by God to His faithful servants. Later in the book we see these crowns removed by the servants and cast before the throne. In this act they confess that all things come from Him, even a faithful life which begets reward from Heaven. Indeed, one cannot read the New Testament without this idea of gift coming to the center and coloring everything else.

The Old Testament itself, which prefigures and points to the coming of Christ, is also fraught with this notion of gift. Life is seen as a gift. "It is he that made us" (Psalm 100:3) The promised land is a gift from God given to his people in virtue of His kindness, a kindness which led to the call of Abraham and the promise to Abraham. ("Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land; but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." Deut 9:5)

In the book of Job we see that all of the good things of this life must be received as a gift from God, not as a reward for virtue. Indeed, Satan accuses Job of obeying God for the sake of goodies, not for the sake of God. The rest of the book is a kind of wrestling in which Job finally allows God to place him once again in that place where He can give him gifts, as gifts. ("Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth; that he may confirm his covenant which he swore to your fathers, as at this day." Deut 8:17-18).

It should not surprise us that this notion of God as a giver of gifts to mankind is also found in the creation story of Genesis. There we discover that the whole physical world is also quite simply a gift from God to man. Fruit for the eating; the lights of the heavens for days and nights, signs and seasons, even the animals and the sea creatures. Man has dominion over all of earthly creation, as a gift from God. The created world then, is what it is: a gift from God. It is for us and our children and our children's children. And it is our responsibility to take care of it, even as a child is expected to take of his birthday gift.

II.

Creation is not just any gift. It is first and foremost a good gift. How else could we understand it? Creation comes to us from God. It is from the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is through the very One who humbled Himself and became a man and bore the sins of the whole world for our sake. It is from Him who sent His only Son to pour out His life for our sake. It is by Him who seeks us, abides with us, loves us, nurtures us, and prepares us for eternal joy. How could this One give to us a bad gift?

The goodness of this gift is underscored many times in Scripture. It is marked by God in the first chapter of Genesis when He pauses again and again in the Creation story to tell us that each part and parcel of Creation is good. It is underlined by the Psalmist who looks with awe at the heavens and says, "When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?" (Psalm 8:3-4)

Again, the Psalmist sees the creation as a gift which blesses man in such a way that it brings praise from him: "The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us. God has blessed us; let all the ends of the earth fear him!!" (Psalm 67:6-7)

And again the Psalmist sees creation as a gift of such glory that it is a glory to God, a praise to God: "Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars . . . , Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Beasts and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!!" (Psalm 148:3, 9-10)

Creation, then is a good gift from God. And this should begin to determine that constellation of attitudes which appropriately determine our relationship to the rest of the created world. It should, furthermore, reveal that constellation of attitudes which inappropriately shape a relationship to the created world.

For instance, in the former, we might find the following attitudes: gratitude, delight, concern for the relationship of future generations to the created world, a sense of responsibility for the well-being of a delicate gift, a reluctance to tamper too drastically with that which was made by the wisdom of God, etc.

In the latter constellation we might find the following attitudes: greed, rapacity, fear, idolatry, a lack of concern for care of the gift, etc.

III.

The gift of our created world is, then, a good gift. But--this good gift of God has been broken--by man. The Bible indicates to us that it shares in the fall of man. Thus, where man sows, weeds leave their proper place and befoul the place of sowing. Where man once named the animals and stood as undisputed Lord of them, he now must fear many of them.

The gift remains--it still serves to sustain us, it still bears a kind of glory that can elicit praise of God, it still gives delight. But it is broken. And like man, the Apostle Paul tells us, the creation also waits with eager longing for the final coming of Jesus, that it too might be remade.

A gift which is good, a gift which has suffered brokenness through our own wickedness --that is what we are dealing with. It is no wonder that in spite of nature's glory, in spite of the delight we take in her, we are, nevertheless, not quite at home with her. Indeed, we are, at times, cast into an adversarial role with her.

IV.

Man, in his relationship to the physical world, is not passive. He is, instead, its head. Indeed, there is a real sense in which the physical creation cannot become what God intended without man.

In the Genesis story man's headship is seen in his vocation as a gardener. As such, man is given the gift of Eden and the gift of this world. In this place he will find the means for life, a place where he can physically become all that God has intended him to be. All the trees in the garden are given to this God-imagined creature that he might live by their fruit. All but one. And by the one we understand that even as lord of the physical world, man himself has a Lord--the One Good Lord who is the Giver of good gifts.

As a gardener, man is placed in his world to care for its well-being. He is not to kill the Golden Goose, but to tend it. By itself the garden becomes unruly. Man is to prune and nurture it--and to harvest it. To destroy it or any species of tree in the garden would finally be to despise both the gift and the Giver.

It is, of course, true that the whole of earthly creation is not needed to give us food or clothing or shelter. We harvest it in other ways as well--in wonder and delight, in appreciation of the greatness of the Creator, etc. Thus, there is a real sense in which man must see the whole created world as a kind of garden, over which he has been placed as gardener.

It is a narrow path we are called to--this walking the earth as a gardener. On the one hand, we constantly are tempted to use the earth in such a way as to wreak havoc. On the one hand, we are an ignorant people who can foolishly upset delicate ecological balances in such a way as to

destroy species after species. On the other hand, the world really is God's gift to us--to use and to cherish. In our tending of this "garden earth" it is therefore essential that we remember our proper place in this world. We are gardeners. Indeed, man is the Lord Gardener. But it is the good gift of God that he tends. And it is the Giver of the gift who is our Lord. And in all things, even in gardening, it is His wisdom that we need.

It is important in seeking the wisdom of God to be gardeners that we remember that delight, wonder, praise of the Creator are legitimate and important fruits of our relationship to the gift of the natural world. Not only for ourselves, but for future generations. Thus, we are concerned to preserve even the seemingly most useless of species, to preserve large tracts of wilderness for the sake of these wild creatures that would die without these tracts.

This need to preserve means that there are limits to our activity as gardeners. We are, as has been indicated, a people marked by ignorance and sin. It is not for one generation, or even a thousand generations, to touch everything in this world. For the sake of future generations, for the sake of nature herself, we refrain from pruning everything. It is not mindless activity we have been called to, but prayerful, thoughtful, activity. There really are some things that we don't yet know how to prune, how to nurture. Given this situation we see that gratitude to God for such a gift as our physical world should sometimes evoke patience, waiting, observation.

V.

Up to this point we have spoken of the created world as a gift, from God to man. We have indicated that this gift is a good gift, and we have also indicated that, because of the fall of man, nature in many ways is not herself. Thus, broken man can no longer feel perfectly at home in his "garden", but he is sometimes forced to oppose the power of this garden, which in its brokenness brings about injury, sickness, and even death. Finally, we have indicated that nature is a gift which is often to be embraced actively, mankind being called to function as a kind of Lord Gardener by God Himself.

But there is one feature which we must now mention, one which is necessary to understand if we are not to understand nature as an utterly alien power, and that is the fact that man is part and parcel of the created world. He is part of nature. It is true that he is nature's head and lord, but he is also part of nature. In his very physicality, in his physical needs and weakness, he is one most especially with the living creatures about him.

He might, therefore, be the Lord Gardener, but he is not the Creator of the garden. He might be head and lord, but he is also in a deep sense, part of the garden also. He can, therefore, never act as its enemy, and even in his adversarial, role with her, he will pity nature, and having curbed her destructive power over him, will seek to yet tend and nurture her.

VI.

God cares about His creation. He cares about the gift he has given to us. We know this in at least three ways.

In the first place, while God was making the world, even before He created man, He paused several times and delighted in what he had made. "It is good. It is good. It is good . . ." Very simply, He liked what He had made, and found it perfectly and delightfully made.

In the second place, we are told by both the Psalmist and our Lord Himself that God cares for each of His creatures. Even the sparrow is given a home in His temple.

In the third place, creation is described by the Apostle Paul in the 8th Chapter of Romans as having a stake in the final appearance of Jesus. Made for man, creation suffers in a kind of brokenness caused by sin. And as such, creation longs for the coming of Jesus when it, too, will be made whole.

This gift, this good gift we have been given, then, is precious to God. And to abuse it is not only to despise God, but it is to abuse something God loves.

VII.

We cannot lose sight of the fact that the law of God was not summed up by Jesus as the love of grizzly bears and oak trees, or even the love of the lilies of the field. We are, first of all, commanded to love God, and then commanded to love our neighbor.

For the Christian, then, environmental concern can never become an excuse to ignore or devalue one's neighbor. Concern for the natural environment will never justify the slaughter of unborn children. Nor will it ever justify the practice of euthanasia in an older, non-productive, and yet product-consuming population. These doors are forever shut by God. For if we are Lord of the Garden, we are nevertheless not Lord of our neighbor. God has kept that prerogative to Himself. Nevertheless, this much must be said: the love of God involves gratitude for the created world, and the love of neighbor involves deep concern for the well-being of the created world.

For, finally, the created world, apart from God Himself and our neighbor, must be seen as the normative gift from God to man. We were meant to be in the garden, not to replace it. The garden is given to us as a source of life and delight. A mankind which seeks its well-being by destroying the garden is finally a mankind on a quick road to suicide. A mankind which takes greater pleasure in the works of his own hands than in the work of God's hands is a mankind in the grip of a foolish and idolatrous obsession.

VIII.

Let me now turn to the matter of theological epistemology. It is popular today to conceive a need, and then attempt to image a god who will meet that need. Attempts have been thusly made to describe a god who will best help us to be sensitive to the environment about us. For these so-called theologians, the knowledge of god comes from a kind of stew involving a need, an imagined solution, and a little pseudo-bible study.

This is not only nonsense, it is also idolatry. God is who He has revealed Himself to be. And we, as His people, are called upon to obediently confess Him thusly: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the knowledge of this revelation we are led to life with the living God. The road which begins with a need and then attempts to image a god to meet that need does not lead to God, but finally, as Karl Barth has told us, to Feuerbach, to a god who is nothing.

Furthermore, as we come to know the living God, it should be evident that His love for us and all His creation is beyond measure. The attempt to image a god who can better love and enable us to love is foolish. However we construe an idol, we cannot begin to conceive a love greater than the love of the One Living God. It is only in Him that we find real love, and it is only in Him that we are enabled to love rightly.

IX.

We are now ready to indicate several ways of relating to the created world which are both harmful to mankind and disobedient to God.

A) One way is the divination of nature. We see this tendency in the religious practices of people throughout the world. Nature is seen as powerful, glorious. She is feared. She is seen as something to be worshiped and appeased. The mystery of the Creator is dislocated and inappropriately placed in nature. This is simply one form of idolatry.

GK Chesterton makes an interesting point in his book on Francis of Assisi. He points out that this tendency to locate divinity in nature was so potent that nature was ignored by the Church until the time of Francis. Only then were the people of God ready to see the sun as the sun and to celebrate its glory in gratitude to God instead of worshiping the sun. Only then was the creation able to be seen and appreciated for what it really is.

B) Another way is the exploitation and destruction of the created world. Here mankind is seen worshiping not nature but himself. Here he is seen as interpreting his desires as a justification for any action, and thus is willing to use and destroy whatever it takes to satisfy himself. It is fair to say that wherever men have been powerful, this kind of self worship has taken place. We have seen the destruction of nature by powerful men in both capitalistic and communistic economic

systems. But it is also fair to say that unbridled capitalism actually encourages this kind of idolatry and exploitation, it having, as Karl Barth has somewhere pointed out, as its central motivation the vice of greed.

C) Another way is the notion that all our ills are rooted in technology. This simply is not true. (It is also true that technology cannot cure all our ills. Nor will it make us better people, just more efficient animals.) Both man and nature have experienced the fall, and a return to an imagined harmony with nature will not change this fact, nor will it eradicate sickness and death.

Different forms of this foolishness are seen. One is in the many different health fads we find. Basic to all of them is the idea that there is some natural secret that will restore us to a kind of natural Edenic healthiness. Corollary to this simplistic "secret" is the radical distrust of the scientific method and the paranoid fear that somehow scientists, and especially doctors, are part of a kind of universal plot to keep us from the "real" truth.

D) Another way, as mentioned earlier, is the devaluation of the neighbor in favor of nature. This devaluation is seen in the refusal to understand man in his rightful role as gardener or the refusal to see the created world as a kind of gift to mankind. It is further found in the notion that man is simply a part of a larger ecosystem, and nothing more.

None of the above models will finally help us to obey God, love our neighbor, or care for the world about us. Only the truth will help, and that finally has been given to us, revealed to us by God Himself. If we start from there, we can begin to make decisions that will be appropriate and helpful.

Mike Frank © 1990

Scripture quoted from: Revised Standard Version of the Bible, 2nd edition, copyright 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.