

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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An Environmental Apocalypse: Where Is It?

Evangelical Christians are often charged with preaching the doom-and-gloom of the coming apocalypse predicted in Revelation. There is little doubt that this teaching is often overdramatized. But there is an environmental apocalypse that also needs critical evaluation. Since 1972, we have been told that environmental disaster is imminent and those warnings are usually accompanied by the language of the apocalypse. Such predictions framed in apocalyptic language have spawned much of the modern environmental movement. How should we think about this?

- First, columnist George Will offers a compelling perspective on the doom-and-gloom predictions of some environmental leaders over the last 40 years. This past June the UN [environmental] Rio+20 conference occurred and few even noticed or reported on this conference, which began in 1992 in Rio as the Earth Summit. In a sense, the dire predictions of environmental disaster started in 1972 with the book, *The Limits of Growth*, published by the Club of Rome on “the predicament of mankind.” The thesis of this book was that economic growth worldwide was doomed by looming scarcities of almost everything. Will also reports that MIT proposed models that foresaw the collapse of civilization due to “nonrenewable resource depletion” and population growth. Observe this apocalyptic language from a *Time* magazine article of that period: “The furnaces of Pittsburgh are cold; the assembly lines of Detroit are still. In Los Angeles, a few gaunt survivors of a plague desperately till freeway center strips. . . Fantastic? No, only grim inevitability, if society continues its present dedication to growth and ‘progress.’”

The MIT modelers predicted that 12 important commodities would soon be gone because of human emphasis on growth—aluminum, copper, gold, lead, mercury, molybdenum, natural gas, silver, tin, tungsten and zinc. Will quotes Bjorn Lomborg who summarizes what has happened: “Technological innovations have replaced mercury in batteries, dental fillings and thermometers; mercury consumption is down 98% and its price was down 90% by 2000. Since 1970, when gold reserves were estimated at 10,980 tons, 81,410 tons have been mined, and estimated reserves are 51,000 tons. Since 1970, when known reserves of copper were 280 million tons, about 400 million tons have been produced globally, and reserves are estimated at almost 700 million tons. Aluminum consumption has increased 16-fold since 1950, the world has consumed four times the 1950 known reserves, and known reserves could sustain current consumption for 177 years. Potential US gas reserves have doubled in the past six years. And so on.” The MIT modelers and the Club of Rome have both missed something: human ingenuity in discovering, extracting and innovating. The Club of Rome’s 1972 report and the MIT modelers summarized above gave impetus and energy to the modern environmental movement with all of its cynicism and skepticism about economic growth, which is the only way poverty will be solved in this world. The vacuous nature of

their predictions is now evident, but we continue to embrace as a culture the environmental apocalypse that economic growth will bring. Will closes his perceptive essay with this paragraph: “In 1980, economist Julian Simon made a wager in the form of a complex futures contract. He bet Paul Ehrlich (whose 1968 book “The Population Bomb” predicted that ‘hundreds of millions of people’ would starve to death in the 1970s as population growth swamped agricultural production) that by 1990 the price of any five commodities Ehrlich and his advisers picked would be lower than in 1980. Ehrlich’s group picked five metals. All were cheaper in 1990. The bet cost Ehrlich \$576.07. But that year he was awarded a \$345,000 MacArthur Foundation ‘genius’ grant and half of the \$240,000 Crafoord Prize for ecological virtue. One of Ehrlich’s advisers, John Holdren, is Barack Obama’s science adviser.” These awards to a man whose predictions have been flat wrong!!!!

- Second, what then do we do as Christians? Because of the silliness of some of the above predictions, does that mean we have no environmental responsibility? Absolutely not! We are to be responsible stewards of God’s world, for to do so is a fulfillment of our role as His image-bearers (see Genesis 1 and 2). The non-human creation is of great significance to God. He created the physical world as a deliberate act. God also takes pleasure in His physical world. This is clear from the Creation Ordinance in Genesis 1 and 2 and from 1 Timothy 4:4: “For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude.” (See also Psalm 104:31 where we see God rejoicing in His works.) The point is that if the physical world is of importance to God, then it must be to us—His creatures—as well (see also Job 39:1-2, Colossians 1:16 and Psalms 19:1-4).

It is likewise imperative to note that God has a covenant, not only with humans, but also with the nonhuman creation. After the flood, God made a covenant with the physical creation: “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark” (Genesis 9:9-10). The physical world has dignity, worth and value quite apart from its service to humanity. Incredibly, God’s redemptive plan also has a cosmic quality to it. The biblical hope that the whole created order, including the material world of bodies and rivers and trees, will be part of the kingdom confirms that the created order is good and important. Romans 8:19-23 demonstrates that at Christ’s return the groaning of creation will cease, for the creation will be transformed: “The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (v. 21, NIV). Since we are God’s stewards over His creation, what should be our motivation? Are we good stewards for **pragmatic** reasons or for **moral** reasons? The pragmatic view posits that we should be good stewards over God’s world because our very survival depends on it. For example, if we farm the hills irresponsibly, we will lose topsoil and harm our ability to produce food. If we wantonly kill snakes, eventually we will be overrun by rodents. If we mine copper irresponsibly, we will cause horrendous erosion that harms the waters. If we burn the rainforests, we pollute the air and destroy oxygen-producing trees, which in turn threaten our supply of oxygen. But the Bible rejects this as the sole motivating force for good stewardship. Instead, Scripture implores humans to exercise good stewardship over the physical world because to do so demonstrates honor and respect for God’s created order. The physical creation should not be exploited, because it is morally wrong to misuse God’s created order. Having God’s perspective, we responsibly farm, we

shun wanton destruction of animal life, we responsibly mine copper and we cease recklessly burning the rainforests because we respect and honor that which God has honored and respected. We show honor to the physical world with which God has a covenant relationship. Christians should, therefore, be the leaders in responsible environmentalism. As God's theocratic stewards, we represent Him when we honor His physical world.

See George Will's essay in the Washington Post (20 August 2012) and James P. Eckman, *Biblical Ethics*, pp. 87-93.