

Bible-Based Environmental Conservation for the 21st Century and Application to Present Life Situations

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Abstract

For many, it is unbelievable but the Bible has a great deal to say about the environment and its conservation. Also, environmental crisis is a concern to many in the world today but whenever such challenges come, most people think and believe that it is a science-related, hence the need for a science-based environmental solution. There is general biblical ignorance as far as environmental issues are concerned yet the Bible is an all-round book for guiding Christians in all matters of life. Thus, many of our environmental problems are rooted in the Christian faith as this paper will expose. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present the contribution of Scripture towards environmental conservation and expose their implications therein.

Key terms: Environment; conservation; Biblical knowledge; degradation; technology

Introduction

Imagine that you are an astronaut returning to earth after a long trip to the Moon or Mars. What a relief it would be to come back to this beautiful, bountiful planet after experiencing the hostile, desolate environment of outer space. Although there are dangers and difficulties here, we live in a remarkably prolific and hospitable world that is, as far as we know, unique in the universe. Compared to the conditions on other planets in our solar system, temperatures on the earth are mild and relatively constant. There are plentiful supplies of clean air, fresh water, and fertile soil which are all regenerated endlessly and spontaneously by geological and biological cycles... and perhaps the most amazing feature of our planet is the rich diversity of life that exists here. Millions of beautiful and intriguing plant and animal species populate the earth and help sustain a habitable environment... From time to time, we should pause to remember that, in spite of the challenges and complications of life on earth, we are incredibly lucky to be here! (Cunningham et al, 2003: 21).

From the above quotation, we see that we live in world that has put the environment under siege. However, the planet earth is good but the actions of human beings contribute to the destruction of this environment. Also, there is climate change, deforestation, loss of biodiversity and clean water shortage; all these are the main environmental problems facing the planet today. These environmental problems and their effects do not discriminate: the rich and poor are equally affected.

Definition of environment

This paper will briefly define the term environment. It refers to the living and non- living things that we find around us. Water, trees, minerals, plants, animals, marine resources, space, air and homes are all parts of our environment (Morrison 1999). When we damage the environment, we threaten our own survival and that of our children. He continues and notes

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that in modern times, our economic and technological needs have led to us ignoring the effects of our actions on the environment. Development has led to the environmental damage to the ozone layer from chemicals, deforestation, desertification, pollution of air and water, damage to the soil, erosion and the destruction of many species of plants and animals. The result is that today we find ourselves in a situation where resources are being used up at an alarming rate and pollution is threatening the health of people and other living things.

Bible and other extra biblical texts and their implications on environment

In his *Handbook for Christian Living*, Kienel (1991) underlines that:

Today there is a growing fascination among Christians and non-Christians alike with the environment, and man's use of the earth's natural resources. Biblical stewardship of the earth is increasingly becoming a hotly debated issue as Christians grapple with the problems of resource management, industrialization and population. A balanced and thoughtful approach to man's role in his natural environment needs to begin with a Biblical foundation (Kienel, 1991: 104).

Indeed, Christians and non-Christians alike are affected by the adverse effects of environmental degradation, hence the need for a concerted effort to promote its conservation. Elsewhere, it is noted that Pope Paul IV realized that there was an environmental crisis and he declared that:

Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature, he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of degradation. Not only is the material environment becoming a permanent menace, pollution and refuse, new illnesses and absolute destructive capacity—but the human framework is no longer under man's control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may be intolerable. This is a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family (Laciviltacattlica, 2016).

Environment, Creation and Stewardship

Chatfield (1998) summarizes many of the key issues we have to remind ourselves of and he especially notes that everything that God has made belongs to Him and has to be cared for by us in trust. As we care for the lives of people, we care too for the life of the planet earth and for ourselves as an integral part of it. We need to remember that 'the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it' (Ps 24:1). God is the creator, possessor and sustainer of the entire world and all that there is in it. While commenting on this Psalm in relation to the environment, Tokunboh Adeyemo, an editor of the *African Bible* says that: 'When we think of our world, its mountains and valleys, its rivers, oceans, underground water, the vast variety of plants, trees, flowers, birds and animals, we realize how wonderful creation is...the land we live in belongs to Him who made it all. We are like tenants who have to make use of it, and God entrusts the care of it to us'. After all, the Genesis story of the role of humans in this natural world (Gen.2:15) is very significant and it calls us to be wise stewards as people created in His own image.

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Calvin (1990) asserts that

...the earth with everything in it though it belongs to God was intended by God to serve man's needs. Man was not made for the earth; the earth was made for man. It is man, not the earth or anything in it, who was created in the image of God. To have man subservient to the earth is to turn the purpose of God in creation on its head. Certainly, the environment should be protected but it must be protected for the sake of man, not for its own sake. Anything else is idolatry nature (Beisner, 1990, p163).

Therefore man must not wreck creation and the entire environment but must enjoy and work towards its maintenance. The environment is the mainstay of the humans and should be guarded jealously.

Indeed, destructive acts have greatly affected our environment. Taking care of what God entrusted to us should be one of the cardinal responsibilities that we should take:

If Christians are not objective and humble in their approach to the use of the earth's resources and the role of man in his environment, they risk mistakenly imposing on others their own standards rather than God's. Human beings are created to be a part of a larger community, and therefore have responsibility to exercise dominion over creation in a way which is responsible not only to God, but to all human kind, including future generation (Kienel, 1991: 106).

Thus when we damage the environment, we threaten our own survival and that of our children.

Plants, Trees and Forests

Trees and plants are vital for the survival of all things in creation including human beings. Without them, we can't live a full life. They are at the centre of the environment. Trees have great importance on this planet. Various global summits and conferences have always advocated and encouraged the planting of trees:

They keep us cooler, which means that less energy is used, fewer emissions are created and pollutant levels are reduced. In fact some governments are starting to consider planting trees to address air quality and global warming issues. The Kyoto Protocol, the international treaty whose goal is to reduce global warming by decreasing the emission of green gasses, allows countries that have signed the treaty to meet their carbon targets by cutting emissions or by planting forests (Earth Friendly Gardening, 2016).

Despite their importance, rainforests are facing intense pressure, and the figures on the rates at which they are disappearing are staggering. The following is a historical but relevant example:

All of the primary and original rainforests in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Haiti have been destroyed and the destruction is nearly complete in Ivory Coast. The Philippines lost 55% of its forests between 1960 and 1985.

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Thailand had lost 45% by 1985. The destruction continues today. Around the world, 2.4 acres of rainforests are destroyed every second. This translates to 149 acres every minute, or 214,000 acres each day (an area larger than that of New York City) or 78 million acres each year (larger than Poland) [Tiplady, 2003: 108].

Now we can take an example of Uganda in relation to the destruction of forests.

Uganda's forest cover declined from about 5 million hectares in 1990 to 3.7 million hectares in 2005. This was a result of encroachment for agricultural production, deforestation to produce wood fuel, urbanization, industrial growth, migration and problems of internally displaced people (Nemaug, 2007, online).

The above report about Uganda by NEMA (National Environment Management Authority) of 2007 gives us a general picture of the destruction of forests and the possible causes. Unfortunately, it is going from bad to worse. All the effects on human beings are disastrous. This is partly due to corruption and negligence by the state as far as environmental conservation is concerned.

The Bible has various references and teachings about trees and plants that were very significant to the ancient Israelites. "From the beginning of Bible story, the land of Palestine has supplied a sufficient amount of food for the people and their cattle. The people of the lands in the Bible found use for nearly every plant from the forests on Mount Lebanon to the scrubby shrubs of the desert" (Packer, 1995: 241). This meant that nearly every plant had a use!

In Genesis, the relevance of plants to human existence becomes explicit on Day Six following the creation of land, animals and the first human beings. Plants and trees bearing seed are assigned to man for food whereas other plants are left for animals to eat.

Medicinal Plants

There are some medicinal trees and plants which unfortunately are becoming less and less because of the indiscriminate methods of destroying trees, plants and other types of vegetation. A child born in this century knows little (if not nothing) of the medicinal plants! Yet as in the olden days of the Bible, the same medicinal plants are still very vital. They form part of the environment. Many plants and trees are medicinal: living organisms provide us with many useful drugs and medicines. More than half of all prescriptions contain some natural products. The United Nations Development Programme indicates the value of pharmaceutical products as indicated in the following (Cunningham et al, 2003: 279) list of some natural medicinal products:

Product Source Use

Penicillin	Fungus	Antibiotic
Tetracycline	Bacterium	Antibiotic
Quinine	Chincona	Malaria
Reserpine	Rauwolfia	Hypertension
Vinblastine	Periwinkle	Cancer (Cunningham et al, 2003: 280)

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The Bible also records some of the medicinal plants such as Hyssop that was a sweet smelling plant in Egypt and Palestine (Ex. 12:22, Lev. 14 and Numbers 19.6) it was also used in ceremonial rituals. Mint was another one it was used as medicine and for seasoning food. It was also used for tithing. Rue was a very important herb (Luke 11:42); it's a disinfectant, medicine and temple tithe. Mint was for anointing oil. (Ex. 30:23), perfume (Prov. 7:7) and a ceremonial cleansing (Esther 2:12). All these and others not mentioned, were medicinal plants which the Israelites and used. Trees remain a constant source of medicine for human race. Even, most ethnic groups of people have their own medicinal plants but if they are destroyed, it is a total loss.

Fruits of the Trees

Fruits and vegetables make a surprisingly large contribution to humans. They typically contain high levels of vitamins, minerals, dietary fiber and other complex carbohydrates. It is common knowledge that food comes from other organisms. Many wild plant species could make important contributions to human food supplies either as they are or as a source of genetic material to improve domestic crops (Cunningham et al, 2003: 278). According to the history of Israelites, there were fruits from trees of the land. "The various fruits mentioned in the Bible show not only the fertility of Palestine but the Israelites ingenuity in growing, harvesting and preparing them for use. Fruits were eaten fresh, dried, pressed into cakes and squeezed for juice, some were used as medicine (Packer, 1995: 245). Some of the fruits included Almonds (Jer. 1:11-12), Apples (Song of Solomon 2.3, 5, 7:8, Joel 1: 12), Figs (Deut. 8:8), Pomegranates (Num. 13: 2-5), Grapes (Num 13: 23), Mulberries (2 Sam 5.24, Ps 84.6 and Luke 17.6). These are some of the fruits mentioned in the Bible. They were just not there as creations but to be enjoyed. God is wise He knew of the great function of fruit in a person's life. Thus they should be planted to enrich and preserve the environment. There is a strong appeal in the Bible about fruit trees and trees generally:

When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy trees by putting an axe to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees of the field people, that you should besiege them? However, you may cut down trees that you know are not fruit trees and use them to build siege works until the city at war with you falls (Deuteronomy, 20:19-20).

Even though it applies to a war situation; still fruit trees are also significant for those outside the war. This principle of respect for the environment is very vital for us today; sparing fruit trees is not accidental. It also calls for the planting of fruits in our gardens and compounds instead of flowers only. It was a divine plan for Gods' people and so it is for us today. The fruits were not only for the people living at that time but they were for posterity. Brown & Motyer have this to say:

The children and grand children of those who live in the city will need the fruit which should come from those trees. It is devastatingly cruel to make innocent children suffer by not making adequate provision for their future happiness and security...every country desperately needs its trees and the present ecology debate has reminded us all of other unique contributions to our life. Their presence beautifies the landscape, their leaves guarantee a continual supply of

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oxygen for the air we breathe, they provide a rich variety of fruit, they shelter birds and animals and their roots help to secure the stability of the soil. Their self-propagation is God's thoughtful provision for their essential continuance (Brown & Motyer, 1993: 34).

The implication of this text presents trees and their fruit to be a 'gold mine' as far as environmental issues and their relation to human kind is concerned. Many people may be ignorant of the use of trees. Without such forests, communities and individuals suffer the consequences as follows:

Rainforests form a truly astonishing part of our environment...the destruction of the rainforests is taking place at a truly astonishing rate...it is as though the nations of the world decide to burn their libraries without bothering to see what is in them...in one case, flooding. Thailand claimed 450 lives after deforestation and caused £200,000,000 worth of damage" (Keene, 1995:147).

Another example where people have adversely reaped from their actions is those in the Sahel region in Africa, Morrison (1999) notes that:

The Sahel is a strip of land to the south of the Sahara Desert. This region used to be covered in Savannah grasslands. However, repeated droughts and increased land use for agriculture have meant that most of the vegetation and fertile soil has been destroyed; today many people in these parts are hungry and want to sustain themselves. Many people have migrated away from farming areas to cities, where they have to face poverty, lack of employment and poor living conditions. The city of Nouakchott in Mauritania is a good example; in 1960 there were fewer than 20,000 people living there, but by 1990 refugees fleeing from desertification and drought stricken areas had caused this number to rise over 350,000 (Morrison, 1999: 122).

All these and other examples reveal and express the significance of trees, and the environment in general. What has been explained is not only unique to the Sahel but can as well happen elsewhere when people are not environmentally alert to avert the unfortunate incidents that affect the development of Africa.

Birds and the Environment

Let us see the place of birds in environment. Birds as part of the natural world and environment were to be protected by the Israelites. The Bible has much to tell about birds:

If you come across the bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on her young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young, but be sure to let the mother go so that it may go well with you and you may have a long life (Deuteronomy 22: 6-7).

In this text we are called on to respect and conserve wild life and the birds in particular. Tourism has become a lucrative Ministry for various countries but it cannot thrive when we

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are not keen on conserving or protecting birds. The bird was to be spared so that it can lay eggs again. These matters of conservation are of great importance in Deuteronomy and reflect the Lord's concern for the continuity of life of his created beings. It is observed that 'the large scale killing of any species can lead to a serious diminution of its numbers and to eventual extinction (Brown and Motyer, 1993: 214). Men and women are meant to serve as responsible stewards in the world which God has made for their enjoyment. The earth is the Lord's and so is everything in it. We have no right to plunder God's property (Deuteronomy 22: 6-7).

In addition, many people derive great pleasure, fulfillment and inspiration from watching birds and listening to them. But birds are also an intricate component of ecosystems, which we need for our own survival. Ecosystems such as forests and the marine environment provide us with food, medicines and important raw materials. They keep the climate stable, oxygenate air and transform pollutants into nutrients. Birds play an important role in the effective functioning of these systems. As birds are high up in the food chain, they are also good indicators of the general state of our biodiversity. When they start disappearing, it means something is wrong with our environment and that we urgently need to take action (Europa, 2016 online).

Elsewhere, we also see the ancient fathers of the church and their teaching and love of creation. St Francis of Assisi preached to the birds as follows:

My brothers, the birds, you should praise your creator very much and always love him. He gave you feathers to clothe you, wings so that you can fly and whatever else was necessary for you. God made you noble among his creatures and he gave you a home in the purity of the air; though you neither sow nor reap, he nevertheless protects and governs you without any solicitude on your part (Conservation, 2016 online).

We find this good sermon to the birds very educational and inspirational. It calls us to promote the conservation of our environment. However, what is happening today is that most of the birds are on the verge of extinction. If St Francis came back today, he would preach a different form of sermon! He had passion for the environment. That is why he is called the '*Patron of Ecology*'.

Land and the Environment

One point to raise here on land is that soil erosion and other factors led to the loss of good soil in the Israelite community. Rains could easily wash the rich hillside soil downstream to low-lying valleys:

To prevent erosion, farmers planted fruit trees and vines or built terraces. Terraces abounded in the hill country. Sometimes a layer of rock resisted weathering and formed a natural wall. This held in place the reddish soil that the farmer could plant with wheat, barley, legumes and vegetables in addition to fruit trees and vines. When there was no natural wall, the farmer had to clear the area of ever present stones and use them to build a wall at the lower side of the hill (Conservation, online).

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Thus we need to borrow a leaf from Israel's example of protecting soil from being eroded and pass it on to our children.

Poverty and the Environment

It is stated that 'two of the greatest global challenges are elimination of poverty and the reversal of environmental degradation. Income derived from the environment is a major contributor of livelihood of the poor and this direct dependency on nature does not appear to be decreasing (Nema, 2007). It is well understood that 'poverty is also a source of ecological degradation, and the alleviation of poverty by the poor through their struggle for justice is an ecological concern...unless the poor have alternative source of food and basic needs like fuel, they too will want only to destroy whatever natural environment is around them (Nema, 2007: 69). Because one is poor, he/she cannot afford the basic needs of life, she/he is prone to abuse the environment in various ways for survival.

This practice involves indiscriminate cutting of trees and forests for fuel and agriculture respectively. Poor farming methods that affect soil fertility are also practiced by the poor due to lack of sufficient resources like land to be able to practice real agriculture. Soils get exhausted year by year leading to low levels of production and income; making a vicious circle of poverty.

Water and the Environment

In Uganda, the declining condition of wetlands has placed the ecosystem and the livelihood of the people who depend on them at risk (Nema, 2004). Indeed most people are at risk because of the abuse of water sources like the wetlands which various people and organizations have abused.

Eventually, all these can lead to serious health problems and environmental damage. It is also a common fact that factories located near rivers or oceans produce materials that pollute the water and negatively affect the environment. Water is life as it is always stated. When we do not have good water to drink and for daily usage, we fall sick and die from waterborne diseases such as cholera. Waterborne diseases are quite common among many communities in the third world countries.

Pollution of the earth leads to the massive and increasing destruction of God's creation, our natural environment. "But our environmental crisis has also become a moral and spiritual issue, since it is overwhelming the earth's ability to repair itself and to support not just human life but animal life and plant life as well. What greater sin could there be than to destroy future generations' ability to live on our planet? (Nema, 2004).

On water pollution, one of the theologians, Kinoti, observes that:

Growing human populations have reduced the amount of water available per person and increased pollution of drinking water. More than 5 million people die each year from diseases caused by unsafe drinking water and a lack of water for sanitation and washing. When rain water carries fertilizers and pesticides from farms into lakes and rivers, fish and other creatures may die" (Kinoti, 2016: 616).

Indeed this is the truth concerning man and how he contributes to the destruction of environment. Hence, environmental issues are of great concern since our lives are ever in perpetual danger.

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Conclusion

The Bible in this matter is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training Christians on issues of the environment (c.f.2 Tim.3:16-17). That helps to open our eyes in this 21st Century. As a resource for teaching and sensitizing the community, it should be one of the reference points to expose environmental issues, especially in the Christian communities. Man is given authority to have dominion over creation but not to wreck it.

Recommendations

Sensitizing people about trees, forests and fruit tree planting: The church needs to sensitize people about tree planting. There is need to team with relevant authorities and other NGOs to sensitize people on this aspect.

Care of Earth ministry: This can be established at every level of Church organization from the basic Christian communities through the parish structure and diocesan offices right up to the national level. The earth care ministry should be a department solely catering for environmental protection and carrying out teachings and other related seminars.

The use of music, dance and drama to enhance faith-based environmental projects: The Christian community needs to promote music, dance and drama related to environmental conservation among both the young and old.

Incorporation of Environment issues in the theological training and other academic programs: Religious institutions should emphasize theological approaches to humanity. Its relationship with the natural environment like ecology and theology (eco-theology) should be part of the theology curriculum. Sustainable development needs should be strengthened in the theological curricular, thereby promoting environmental education and its implications on human beings.

Sharing of resources: There is need for the state to address poverty-related problems in the country, in order to promote conservation. The Church also needs to continuously preach the message of equality, love and sharing of the resources.

Environmental Stewardship: Based on Psalm 24:1 and Genesis 2:15, Christians should have a moral duty to care for the environment, not only for their own good now but also for the good of future generations.

Reverence towards land: The word of God has a very strong conservation message against over-utilizing and wearing out natural resources. An example is of (Lev 25) about leaving the land to lie fallow for a period in order to allow it to regain its fertility.

Support national and international policies of law: Christians should be law-abiding citizens in all aspects of society. They should not work in isolation. Kinoti urges Christians to “work alongside people such as Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan woman who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize because of her work to preserve Africa’s environment” (Kinoti, 2016: 616).

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Christian stewardship over nature: Christian stewardship is a requirement of our human dignity and therefore a serious responsibility to exercise dominion over creation in such a way that it truly serves the human family.

New technologies: Solar power and biogas need to be introduced on a wide scale as a source of renewable energy. By the introduction of such new technologies, much of the environmental crisis can be done away with at some considerable level.

Recycling: There is need to teach and sensitize people towards recycling the following: glass, plastics and even paper. These are broken down in the process and other new materials can be made from them. Organic waste can also be made into compost and used to restore soil fertility in various areas.

Fines and incentives: The state should impose heavy fines on the people, companies and industries that pollute the water in the lakes and rivers. However, those that promote environmental protection should be recognized by being given incentives that would motivate them to carry on such a noble responsibility.

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