Where Garden meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate

E. Calvin Beisner

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In spite of its subtitle, this book is not an initial statement by any evangelical on the environment. Instead it is Beisner’s summary of the recent debate between him and his evangelical critics. The seven chapters are less than half of the book; five appendices reproduce relevant speeches and previously published articles.

Most evangelicals have stressed answering the secular criticisms of the Church which began with Lynn White’s 1967 Science article. Beisner summarizes this work and commends some of it, especially Richard Young’s Healing the Earth. God gave people stewardship responsibility over His creation, but this is a delegated authority or a “subordinate ownership” (p. 11). Most evangelicals have emphasized the delegated nature of our authority, because their goal was to answer secular critics who claimed that Christians use the Bible to justify selfish domination of the planet. While Beisner emphasizes human ownership of the creation, he calls for balance; the earth is the Lord’s, but God has given it to people. Beisner is right in saying that humans are expected to make decisions about how to use the environment which require that we exercise this authority, but the common sin is to forget that we must all answer to God for how we make these decisions.

Beisner sees the Genesis account of creation as showing God bringing “increasing order out of chaos” (p. 113). For Beisner our stewardship goal is to bring order to the earth until it becomes like the Garden of Eden (p. 125). He claims this as a new insight; Beisner says that he and others previously failed to distinguish sufficiently between the Garden and the rest of the earth. Adam was told to till and keep the Garden, but he was told to subdue and rule the earth. What was needed was different in the two settings; according to Beisner, the Garden only needed to be cultivated.

Reviewer

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and protected, while the rest of the earth needed more work to get it to the same level of perfection (p. 13). Yes, God did say that His creation was very good. But for Beisner "what God made good He intends to make better, and He intends to use people to do it" (p. 13). So before the Fall God commissioned Adam to make all of the earth like the Garden (p. 19). Beisner sees our stewardship goal as opposing the establishment of wilderness areas where animals rule; every wilderness must be conquered until it submits to being our garden (p. 127).

Our stewardship task was made harder after the Fall for two reasons. Sin has caused us to use God's creation for our own selfish ends and this has damaged the environment. But also, God cursed the earth and made it less productive and less cooperative; it would rebel against Adam's rule. The earth "would behave toward Adam as Adam had behaved toward God—a fitting punishment for Adam's sin" (p. 19). Beisner is careful to refer to the Curse separately from the Fall and commends Young for recognizing that "the curse is more than merely the natural consequences of human abuse of nature." Beisner criticizes other evangelicals for neglecting the environmental role of God's curse (pp. 18–23). While God's curse came because of human sin, people did not curse the earth; God did. But just as God did not cast away humans because of our sin, He intends to redeem the whole earth. God has promised that eventually the creation "will be liberated from its bondage to decay" (Romans 8:19–21). Beisner expects this to happen by a progressive "reversal of the effects of the Curse" through "the transforming power of Christ in the lives of the redeemed" (p. 125).

Beisner sees population growth as necessary to fulfill the dominion mandate. We must fill the earth with people before we can fully subdue it and rule over it (p. 122). Population growth is also a sign of God's blessing (pp. 147–148). When God blesses a nation, he increases their population and makes the land more productive so that there is enough food. "When God curses a land, He empties it of human population and domestic animals, returning it to the wild beasts." God promised to bless the land when its people are faithfully obedient and to curse the environment in response to people's faithless rebellion, until they repent and seek him again.

Beisner says that those who are concerned that the carrying capacity of the earth may not support population growth "think more like Lot than like Abram. They focus on the material world rather than on the infinite faithfulness and goodness of God" (p. 96). Those who are concerned about overpopulation see people as consumers and polluters; Beisner sees people as producers. Christians should be especially productive and creative, because Christ's redeeming work is restoring the image of God in us (p. 101) and "the image of God includes creativity" (p. 102). History has shown Beisner to be right and Malthus and his followers to be wrong, largely because improvements in technology have outpaced our consumption of resources. Beisner expects this success to continue as we "become better and better at making more and more from less and less as time goes on and the Church of Jesus Christ expands" (p. 109).

Beisner finds empirical support in declining real prices of "nearly every extractive resource," because real prices are "the best measure of scarcity available" (p. 108). This is true as long as private markets work perfectly, but there are exceptions to the rule. For example, with common property ocean fisheries, low prices and large harvests may lull us into thinking that there is no problem. But private property rights to the fish are established only by catching them, so each fisherman rushes to establish this private property right before others do. The result is overfishing: too much effort is devoted to catching too many fish too quickly. So large harvests and low prices are not a good indication of how soon a common property fish population may be depleted. It would be nice if we could just change
the common property rights into private property rights without catching the fish, but the fish won't stand still for that (literally) in the open ocean.

Beisner sees economic development as the solution and not the cause of the most serious environmental problems. He says that "no one ever died—no one ever even got sick" because of "still-hypothetical problems" (p. 170) such as global warming, acid rain and ozone depletion. Beisner admits that there are some environmental problems, but not in the developed world. Yes, lack of access to safe drinking water kills millions each year in poor countries (p. 79). But for Beisner the problem is poverty and not external costs which some people ignore as long as others bear them. Because Beisner sees poverty as the real cause of environmental problems, economic development is his solution.12

"There is a very strong statistical correlation between level of economic development and reduction of pollution" (p. 170).

Beisner charges his opponents with "Environmental Misinformation."13 The "doomsayers" selectively cite statistics that support their case while ignoring conflicting evidence, and the "cornucopians" do the same. As Beisner says "the proper aim of both parties should be truth" (p. 70).

The problem is that both Beisner and his critics think that they have found empirical truth, and that their opponents are blind to this truth. It seems strange and sad to see this much venom among Christians, especially when the dispute concerns whose view of reality is more accurate.

ENDNOTES

1 Genesis 1:28 and 2:15.
4 Beisner, page 12; he refers us to his earlier books, Prosperity and Poverty (pp. 28–29) and Prospects for Growth (pp. 23–24).
7 Young cited in Beisner, page 22.
8 Beisner, page 121. Beisner cites especially Isaiah 33–34 and Jeremiah 4 to support this view.
9 Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 8 cited in Beisner, page 48.
10 Beisner, page 157; and Beisner's Prospects for Growth, chapters 6–7.
11 Beisner observes growing harvest rates and concludes that "there is no indication that this trend has reached its peak and is about to reverse," p. 164.
12 Beisner rejects redistribution as being un-Biblical in "Justice and Poverty: Two Views Contrasted" and also in Prosperity and Poverty, chapters 4–5.
13 For more of his "critiques of the scientific weaknesses of environmentalism" see his Prospects for Growth and Man, Economy, and the Environment in Biblical Perspective.

REFERENCES


