

# **The Christian's Care of Creation**

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*We in the United States, as part of the world's richest 20 percent, own 85 percent of the world's income, yet are responsible for producing 66 percent of the world's greenhouse gases, and consuming 70 percent of the world's energy.*

*-Miguel A. De La Torre*

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What does a follower of Jesus do with the above statement? How do we respond? Is this gross disparity acceptable? Do we simply ignore it and move on with life? If we do, are we truly following Jesus? These are the kinds of questions I have been asking myself since seeing this quote in De La Torre's book, *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*.

My Christian heritage did not allow much room for discussing the Christian's responsibility to care for the environment. In fact, any talk of an environmental agenda was typically classified as *off-limits* and *liberal*. Our focus, I was taught, should be on *rescuing souls from hell, not on hugging trees and saving whales*. After all, eternity is what matters; not the here and now. I was also taught that we must be careful to worship the Creator, not the creation. The environmental movement *reeks of creation worship*; nothing short of idolatry, it was argued. This legacy of my spiritual heritage resulted in a paradigmatic crisis as I read De La Torre and other sources this quarter.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the relationship between the Christian and the environment using the lens of Christian ethics. My hope is to answer some of my own questions about what role I should take toward the environment as a follower of Jesus who is attempting to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness and justice in the here and now. To accomplish this I will review relevant arguments from two books; *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, by Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, and De La Torre's book, from which the quote above comes. After

reviewing the relevant material from these two books I will ask some analytical questions of each argument and then seek to come to a conclusion as to what I learn means for me and those under my spiritual influence.

In Chapter 21 of their book, Stassen and Gushee present their argument for the *Care of the Creation*. They do this by first outlining the *Dimensions of the Ecological Crisis* followed by a review of the three *Approaches to an Ethic of Creation Care*. Finally, they make some *Biblical and Theological Reflections on Creation Care* and suggest some *Transforming Initiatives and Christian Practices*.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout most of human history, creation has survived on renewable resources. There was very little consumption and our supply of resources seemed endless. This is no longer the case. With the coming of industrialization, our ability and need to consume began to outgrow the renewability of our resources. In addition, we are now dependent on our non-renewable resources for the maintenance of our industry.

*Because of the power of our machines, we are now the largest part of nature, and we are dependent for our health on what we are destroying. Our machines and our industry are the main force that consumes, pollutes and destroys what God has given us. It is not nature out there and us here, but us as part of creation, and the rest of creation on which we depend for human life.*<sup>2</sup>

We simply cannot keep up this pace. It is not sustainable. We must take note of what we are doing, but our common tendency is to do so well after it is already too late.

Our unbridled consumption of God's one-time gift has resulted in a long list of ailments. Many locations on our planet suffer from air pollution and the whole planet suffers from global warming. Some argue that global warming is either not real or not as

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 21 of *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* by Stassen and Gushee is found on pages 427-446

<sup>2</sup> Glenn H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, 428-429

bad as the environmental experts say; but much of the dissenting research is funded by the oil industry, which stands to gain the most if doubts can be raised.<sup>3</sup> Resource depletion and deforestation are happening at increasing rates. We are also seeing a negative impact on our environment due to our growing world population growth. More people mean fewer resources to go around and an ever increasing use of what is already limited. Finally, “economic injustice increases ecological degradation and ecological degradation causes human suffering, and will cause suffering for the rest of history in a dangerous downward spiral.”<sup>4</sup> We simply cannot keep up the pace and expect things to continue as they are.

The authors then show that there are three distinct approaches to addressing this crisis. The first of these is the anthropocentric approach. This view puts human beings in the center, having dominion over the rest of creation.<sup>5</sup> The proponents of anthropocentric thinking place a significant amount of trust in the free market to regulate our consumption. Stassen and Gushee suggest, however, that the free market, without help, i.e., some level of regulation, “will not tell us we are in trouble”<sup>6</sup> until it is too late.

The second approach is called biocentric, which suggests that there is no difference between human beings and the rest of creation. In other words, creation is what is in the center. In biocentric thinking, if there is any mention of God it is typically from a pantheistic perspective, meaning that God is “identified with or part of the earth or the universe.”<sup>7</sup> It is this approach that so much of the secular environmental movement

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 432-433

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 434

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 435

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 437

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 437

has identified with and this is what has led many Christians to make “the mistake of associating ecological concern with neo-pagan New Age movements.”<sup>8</sup>

The final approach presented by the authors is called theocentric, which places God in the center and claims that all of creation finds its value in its relationship with the Creator. There are several versions of theocentrism, but the authors land in what they call the covenantal and Trinitarian version of theocentrism. Basically, this version suggests that the Triune-God “made a covenant with all creation after the flood and that Israel’s covenant included duties to the nonhuman creation.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, God’s involvement in caring for his creation is manifested through our participation in such.

Stassen and Gushee “sharpen the focus a bit”<sup>10</sup> by examining the dual themes of redemption and reconciliation as found in Colossians 1:13-20. The object of redemption is sinful human beings. The rest of creation, though not sinful, is still fallen and in need of reconciliation. We, as the redeemed, are ministers of reconciliation<sup>11</sup> and have an obligation to seek such for the rest of creation. To do otherwise is to ignore the clear pattern of God’s care for his creation as seen throughout scripture.

To conclude their discussion, Stassen and Gushee provide some simple steps the church can take to begin to have an impact on this global crisis. The church can “take energy conservation measures, and talk about them in sermons, Sunday school classes and small groups.”<sup>12</sup> The church needs to lead out in these things. Other options would be making adjustments to thermostats and walking and riding bicycles more often. These

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 438

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 440

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:19-20

<sup>12</sup> Stassen and Gushee, 443

suggestions are both simple and small, but they are at least steps in the right direction. Most importantly, though, is that the church lead out in the area of discipleship, teaching its body to examine *all* things through a Christocentric lens. We need to be asking ourselves where our treasure is as our consumptive practices are intimately connected to the current state of the environment.

Miguel A. De La Torre devotes Chapter 7<sup>13</sup> of *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins* to his discussion of the Christian response to the environment. His focus is a bit different than Stassen's and Gushee's as he filters everything through the lens of those who have been marginalized by the dominant culture. De La Torre divides the chapter into four sections based on his hermeneutical circle for ethics, the purpose of which "is to formulate a praxis – a system of Christian ethics – to change the reality faced by those living on the margins of society."<sup>14</sup>

The first section of the circle is to "observe from below"<sup>15</sup> by seeking to see things from the historical and contextual perspective of those on the margins. Observation is followed by reflection and critique of "how the present social structures justify racist, sexist, and classist norms."<sup>16</sup> The third step of the hermeneutical circle for ethics is praying, which "ties theory based on observation with the faith community most affected by the ethical dilemma."<sup>17</sup> For De La Torre, prayer in the hermeneutical circle is "a communal process by which a disenfranchised faith community accompanies its

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<sup>13</sup> Chapter 7 of *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins* by Miguel A. De La Torre is found on pages 122-139

<sup>14</sup> De La Torre, 58

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 59

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 62

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 63

members and stands in solidarity during its trials and tribulations.”<sup>18</sup> The final step of the hermeneutical circle is acting, or implementation of the solutions reached through the first three steps. De La Torre gives several case studies at the end of each chapter, giving the reader a chance to learn from how others have historically walked through the hermeneutical circle. The page requirement for this paper will not allow me the space that would be needed to address De La Torre’s case studies at the end of Chapter 7.

De La Torre begins the chapter by sharing a portion of a private memo from a high ranking officer with the World Bank which claims “that underpopulated countries in Africa are vastly *underpolluted*.”<sup>19</sup> This mentality “reduces humans to their economic value”<sup>20</sup> and justifies the perpetuation of “the old patterns of colonialism and imperialism.”<sup>21</sup> De La Torre’s observations reveal that those living on the margins of the dominant culture are impacted the most by environmental abuses from the dominant culture.

De La Torre then explains how western Christianity has “historically perceived the environment as an unlimited storehouse of raw materials provided by God for human convenience.”<sup>22</sup> This has resulted in a current reality that not only justifies but often condones the wasteful sacrifice of our natural resources all in the name of progress. It has also led to a significant interconnectedness between the exploitation of the earth’s resources and the marginalized.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 64

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 122

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 123

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 128-129

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 129

This theme is continued in the praying step by looking at the eschatology of western Christianity; an eschatology that believes “that the destiny of human beings is to reside with God in heaven, and that the earth is but a place of sojourn until we reach that destiny.”<sup>24</sup> This belief system, argues De La Torre, “has encouraged, at the very least, neglect of our environment.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, if this earth is not our home, then why worry? If this earth is going to be destroyed one day when Jesus returns, then why do we need to take care of it?

De La Torre goes on to answer these implied questions by suggesting “that our refusal to recognize the damage being committed to the environment constitutes the ultimate form of oppression, for it brings destruction to life (including human life) on this planet.”<sup>26</sup> There is a direct connection between our care of the environment and our care for the marginalized. “If liberation is to come to the earth’s marginalized, then it must also come to the earth.”<sup>27</sup> By ignoring the issue, we are complicit with the subjugation of the earth and its resources and this complicity extends to the immoral treatment of those on the margins. We are “not called to dominate the earth; rather, human beings are called to be stewards of the earth’s resources, insuring that each person has sufficient resources to meet his or her needs.”<sup>28</sup>

My analysis of these two presentations will be filtered through the four dimensions of holistic character ethics model as presented in Chapter 3 of *Kingdom*

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 132

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 133

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

*Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context.*<sup>29</sup> Stassen and Gushee argue “that four dimensions are important: our passions/loyalties, our perceptions, our way of reasoning and our basic convictions.”<sup>30</sup> They go on by saying:

*If an ethic lacks explicit attention to any of these dimensions, it either lacks the ability to take a clear stand on concrete ethical issues, or it takes the stand naively, unaware of and uncritical about its own crucial assumptions. It lacks the power to detect errors and weaknesses in that dimension of character, to know where to repent and change. It is like a soldier who rushes into battle with his helmet but forgets his sword and shield.*<sup>31</sup>

Not wanting to rush into battle unarmed, I will now seek to examine and consolidate the two presentations into a single ethic that both informs and results in action.

In the dimension of passions and loyalties, Stassen and Gushee argue that what is driving the environmental crisis is an unbridled addiction to the output of an industrialized society. The more we get, the more we want, no matter how this lust impacts the environment. “If we put our treasures in greed and shape our incentives so that greed for ever more treasures is rewarded, then our loyalties and our perceiving will focus on greed, and we will consume exponentially more each year in a limited earth that is a one-time gift from God.”<sup>32</sup> De La Torre’s argument is similar but slightly different in that he focuses on the dominant culture’s emphasis on domination instead of stewardship. Of course, for De La Torre, the root of such domination is greed and a desire to maintain the status quo. What I have learned is that we must examine our passions and loyalties. We must ask the difficult question of whether we are trying to

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<sup>29</sup> Chapter 3 of *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* by Stassen and Gushee is found on pages 54-78

<sup>30</sup> Stassen and Gushee, 59

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 429

serve both God and greed. We must also ask ourselves if it really matters to us that our greed for more comes at the expense of those living in the margins. This is the core of the issue as I see it. Can we say we are seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and justice when really what we are seeking is life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? When life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is defined by gas-guzzling SUV's and designer clothing manufactured in third-world sweatshops, is there any question about where our treasure lies? Jesus said we cannot serve two Gods. If our passions and loyalties are centered in an unbridled lust for more consumption, then we are not serving God.

In the dimension of perceptions, Stassen and Gushee argue that our perception is not of a long-term nature. Since our desires are being met now, we assume they will be met in the future and we choose to ignore any warning signs that would suggest otherwise. Our perception is now, not then. The problem is, however, that the organic function of the earth and the consumptive function of the industrial system do not match up. The one consumes the other at a rate that will one day result in there being nothing left to consume. Then it will be too late to do anything. De La Torre makes the same argument, but from a different perspective, suggesting that our perception is too long-term in nature; that our focus on the promise of heaven is what keeps us from seeing and recognizing the problem. "Jesus is coming soon to rescue the faithful from an earth destined to total destruction. Any attempt to preserve or safeguard the earth is a waste of time."<sup>33</sup> I tend to think that both arguments are correct. I also think that both views of the dominant perception point to a complete misunderstanding of the kingdom of God.

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<sup>33</sup> De La Torre, 133

When we focus on the here and now and ignore the future, we forget that the kingdom of God coming on earth, now, as it is in heaven, includes the reconciliation of all of creation with its Creator. We forget that this is God's will, that his creation be reconciled to him. The result of our forgetfulness is that our consumption is leaving little to be reconciled. At the same time, our focus on heaven ignores that Jesus prayed for God's will to be done on earth, now, just as it is in heaven. Our focus on heaven ignores the here and now, which is a significant part of the kingdom of God. By not seeing this, we are often blind to our complicity in the injustices of the world. We must allow our perception to be transformed into one that fits the timeless nature of the kingdom of God; both now and then. Otherwise, we will not perceive that there is even a problem.

In the dimension of reasoning, Stassen and Gushee and De La Torre all argue that what is missing in our reasoning is a sense of community. Stassen and Gushee suggest that what we lack is a sense of community with nature. "We humans are not something apart from nature but a part of nature."<sup>34</sup> De La Torre's argument adds to this by suggesting that in addition to a lack of community with nature we also lack a sense of community with humans. "The prominent Eurocentric thread within Christianity, as practiced by the powerful and privileged, has created a faith with little connection to or understanding of a collective or communal spirituality."<sup>35</sup> When our reasoning is centered in individualism, our conclusions will result in individualistic direction. If, however, our reasoning is centered in a strong sense of community, our conclusions will result in directions that are good for the whole. Individualistic reasoning does not allow us to love our neighbor. Our thoughts and directions cannot move beyond our love for

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<sup>34</sup> Stassen and Gushee, 431

<sup>35</sup> De La Torre, 128

ourselves. For our reasoning to be complete, we must learn to see that we are part of a community, whether we see it or not. This has been modeled for us in the Trinity; God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit, distinct, yet one. We live in a similar communal relationship; with human beings, with the rest of creation and with our Creator. Reasoning from this communal perspective will open our minds and hearts to the plight of our communal partners and to God's heart of redemption and reconciliation.

The final filter is the dimension of our basic convictions. Stassen and Gushee argue that what is missing in our basic convictions is an understanding of God's desire for all of creation to be reconciled to him. *Our* focus on *our* redemption has elevated *our* status in *our* thinking, placing *us* in the center and not God. De La Torre's argument is similar in that our basic conviction is that "for the most part, the environment has been seen as a means of satisfying the wants and desires of human beings."<sup>36</sup> He is suggesting that we have placed ourselves at the center and this is limiting our ability to make right decisions. We human beings have positioned ourselves in the center, choosing to reign as king. Instead, we need to acknowledge the reign and rule of our Creator. This is the only way we will be able to see this problem in its fullness. We must learn to see things from God's perspective, for this is what it means to be under the reign and rule of a king.

My analysis of these two chapters has resulted in several things. First, I found the answer to some of my questions at the beginning of this paper. I can absolutely say that the answer is no to the question of whether or not the gross disparity in the quote at the beginning of the paper is acceptable. I can also say that the answer is no to the question of if we can simply ignore the disparity and move on with life. Finally, I can also say no

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid

to the question of if we do ignore the disparity, are we truly following Jesus. But what does all of this mean? Saying no is not enough. How is my life going to change?

I have seen that my spiritual heritage was like that soldier who ran into battle without his sword and shield. I have, in my past, had misguided passions and loyalties. Much of this changed for me when I went into ministry and began to see the futility in pursuing two masters. At the same time, I know that there are still remnants of this present in my life. I have also seen that my perception has been strongly influenced by the unbalanced focus on heaven, over and above the here and now. Again, this has been changing in my life, but this analysis has showed that I still use this lens from time to time. I have also seen that my reasoning has often been non-communal. I have been guilty of individualistic reasoning. I must think of myself as a part of a whole, where what is bad for the whole is bad for me, even if it doesn't seem that way in the immediate. Finally, I have seen that I have often been guilty of placing myself on the throne instead of acknowledging God's right to be king.

Seeing these things are the first steps to a deeper understanding of what it means to care for God's creation. I now understand that my pursuit of God's kingdom and his righteousness and justice must include a pursuit of both the redemption of humans and the reconciliation of the rest of creation. I must also teach this deeper understanding of God's kingdom to those under my influence and then we must work together to bring these things to pass.

## Works Cited

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