



THEREFORE

Periodical of the Christian Life Commission of the
Baptist General Convention of Texas

*I appeal to you therefore,
brothers and sisters,
by the mercies of God, to
present your bodies as
a living sacrifice, holy
and acceptable to God,
which is your
spiritual worship.
— Romans 12:1*



ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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Introduction

The following text is the 2006 *Christian Life Commission Report to the Convention*.

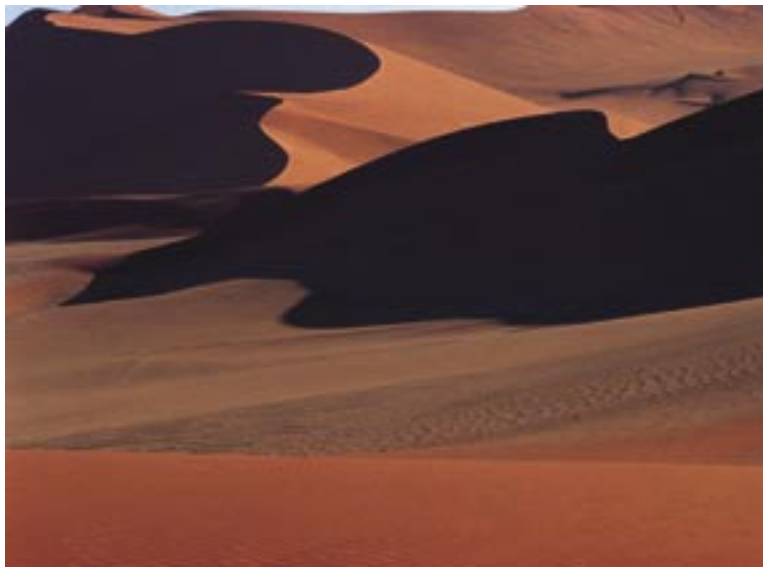
Nearly a quarter of a century has passed since the publication of Jonathan Schell's bestseller, *The Fate of the Earth*. As he described in horrific and scientifically grounded detail the devastating effects of nuclear holocaust on the earth and its inhabitants, Schell captured public attention. The prospect of becoming, as Schell put it, "a republic of insects and grass," had a galvanizing effect, and a groundswell of concern exerted pressure toward change. While many other factors led to scaling back the threat of nuclear devastation, garnering a critical mass of public concern at a grassroots level regarding the fate of the earth made a difference for good at a critical moment.

Now we are faced with still another critical moment regarding the fate of the earth, namely, environmental degradation. Despite decades of rhetoric on behalf of the environment, not enough is happening to save the world from ecological catastrophe. The earth is afflicted by disorders and dysfunctions caused by human activity, and unless humanity faces its crimes against nature with humility, wisdom, and urgency, we will find ourselves overwhelmed by unprecedented disaster. It is important to begin to understand such warnings in the sobering and spiritual dimensions they deserve, that is, as prophetic words to us regarding the fate of the earth. Just as nuclear holocaust threatens the world as we know it, so also does global environmental collapse.

The Problem

Simply put, human activities--economic and otherwise--are outgrowing and assaulting the earth's capacity to support these activities. We are consuming renewable resources faster than the earth can regenerate them. Forests are shrinking, grasslands are fading, water tables are declining, fish populations are falling, and soils are eroding. We are using up oil reserves at such a rate that we leave ourselves little time to develop alternative sources of energy. We are discharging greenhouse gases into the atmosphere at such a rate that nature cannot absorb them, setting the stage for global warming. We are introducing toxins into the environment so that fundamental elements of life--water, soil, and air--are themselves becoming toxic.¹

As the result, seemingly isolated and unusual events, like powerful storms and extreme heat waves, accumulate and coalesce into patterns which dramatically alter not only our lives, but the lives of our children and grandchildren. Resources which amassed over the ages are used up in single generations of human activity. Natural thresholds are violated and crossed, and before enough of us realize it, glaciers melt, seas rise, deserts expand, species disappear, and arable land recedes. The environment which all of us share and depend upon for our very lives is injured in ways which are difficult, if not impossible, to heal. What environmentalists call the "overshoot and collapse" mode, which we have long observed locally, we now observe globally. The deterioration of forests, grasslands, water tables, and fish populations and the rise in carbon dioxide levels are occurring *everywhere*.



Archeologists tell us that we are not the first humans to be threatened by environmental disaster. Over 5,000 years ago, the Sumerians had established the most advanced civilization on earth. Their carefully engineered irrigation systems were the backbone of agricultural development which supported a sophisticated social structure, including the first known cities and written language. A subtle, but critical flaw in the Sumerians' design,

however, led to salt levels rising to disastrous levels in cultivated fields throughout the Tigris-Euphrates valley. Eventually, the economic system and engineering prowess which vaulted Sumerian society forward led to its demise.

This same story can be retold with varying details for other advanced civilizations throughout the course of human history. A few of these civilizations actually responded to environmental degradation quickly enough and wisely enough to save themselves. Over 600 years ago, for example, Icelanders began to realize that the overgrazing of grasslands was contributing to catastrophic soil erosion, which if left unchecked, would have rendered vast tracts of grassland barren. By adjusting their sheep herds to sustainable levels, the Icelanders not only survived, but thrived.

The Bible and Environmental Stewardship

Wisdom at a societal level comes in large measure from the foundational stories which form our lives. If Christians are to respond wisely and well to the environmental challenges which confront us, we will need God's power

and counsel to guide us. Fortunately, scripture is replete with the very guidance we need. The full tapestry of biblical teachings and the theological reflections which they evoke enrich our understanding of God's relationship with the world. The images of *God-centered creation*, *trustworthiness*, *incarnation*, *goodness*, and *Spirit-led renewal* all speak of how deeply the world's life is connected to God.²

First, the Bible teaches us that creation's deepest value resides in its relationship to God, not in its usefulness to humanity. For Christians effectively to join the struggle to save and preserve the environment, we must be clear about this fundamental scriptural distinction. The first verse of scripture gives us our orientation:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

(Gen. 1:1-2, RSV)³

In the beginning was God, and everything which follows flows from God's creative Word and Spirit:

*Then God said,
let there be light. . .
let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters. . .
let the waters under the heavens be gathered together
into one place. . .
let the dry land appear. . .
let the earth put forth vegetation. . .
let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to
separate the day from the night. . .
let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures. . .
let the birds fly above the earth across the firmament of
the heavens. . .
let the earth bring forth living creatures according to
their kinds. . .*

(Gen. 1:3-24, RSV)

Only after all of these creative words are spoken, only after they spring to life in the birth of the cosmos and all of its nonhuman inhabitants, only after God so delights in creation that the pronouncement, "And God saw that it was good," appears six times in the short space of twenty-five verses-- only then is humanity created in God's image. Because humans are created in God's image, they are joined to



God's providential care of creation, which God repeatedly blesses and pronounces good before and after the man and woman are spoken into existence.

In the immediate context of Genesis 1:24-31, dominion is given to humans over the other creatures God created. In the larger context of the creation narrative throughout which creation is loved and valued by God, dominion is clearly intended as responsible stewardship rather than selfish domination. Like good shepherds, humans are called by God to honor the intrinsic goodness of God's other creatures and to secure their well being. The plants, and later the animals, are given to humans for food, but always in the context of faithful stewardship. Care and respect, rather than wantonness and rapaciousness, are intended to characterize humankind's relationship with the rest of creation (Gen. 9:1-5).

For Christians, dominion must be discerned in the way of Jesus, who taught us that the one who rules is the one who serves, that the way of the cross redefines lordship as servanthood (Mark 10:35-45). Jesus says that the good shepherd does not exploit his sheep, but lays down his life for them (John 10:11). Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann captures the essence of a Christian understanding of dominion:

The human person is ordained over the remainder of creation but for its profit, well-being, and enhancement. The role of the human person is to see to it that the creation becomes fully the creation willed by God.⁴

The contrasting notion that the world was created for humans to conquer and to exploit finds its logical bearing not in scripture, but in the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, scientific discoveries were predicated on the worldview that the cosmos was a mechanism which could

be objectively observed and manipulated. Humans could scientifically harness natural forces and resources to their own advantage. According to this worldview, the earth was a storehouse of riches to which humans were entitled, and so human engagement with the world was extractive, industrial, and nonrenewable.

From this perspective, "dominion" morphed in to "domination," and the

rape of the earth was authorized for centuries to come. Confident scientists and engineers saw themselves exercising their God-given right to command and control the world, and business and industry took full advantage. Chicago businessman W. P. Rend's quote in 1892 illustrates the mindset of domination:

Smoke is the incense burning on the altars of industry. It is beautiful to me. It shows that men are changing the merely potential forces of nature into articles of comfort for humanity.⁵

This anthropocentric orientation collides with the theocentric bearing of scripture. In the first chapter of Genesis, God creates, blesses, and calls forth humans in God's own image to share in the stewardship of creation. In the second chapter of Genesis, creation is a garden which God expects humans to tend. The Psalter poetically depicts the God-centeredness of creation:

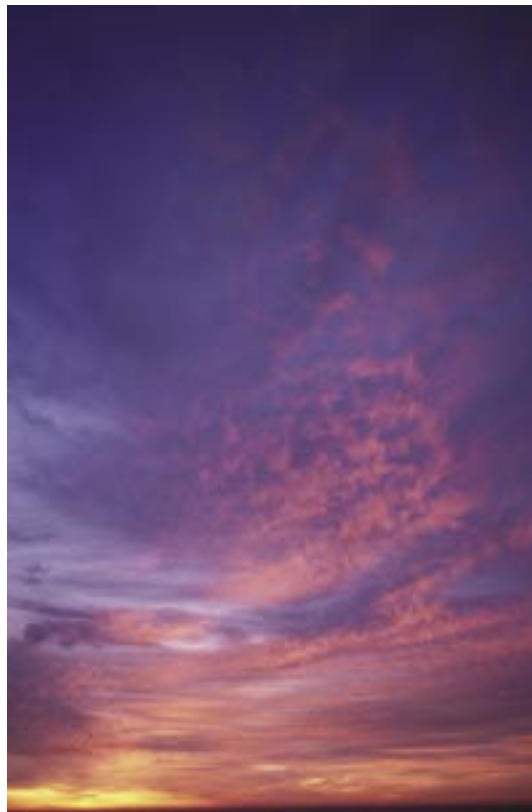
*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.*
Psa. 19:1-4

*The earth is the LORD'S and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.*
Psa. 24:1-2

The closing chapters of Job use God's providence over creation to expose human pretension:

*Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars,
and spreads its wings to the south?
Is it by your command that the eagle mounts up
and makes its nest on high?*
Job 26-27

Many other passages could be cited which affirm the God-centeredness of the cosmos and which confront the arrogance of human-centered expressions of domination. A theocentric, rather than an anthropocentric, worldview lies at the heart of a biblically based environmental ethic.



Second, the Bible affirms that creation displays a trustworthiness and reliability which manifests God's providence and presence in upholding the world. Historically, the rise of the scientific revolution was interpreted by some as a means of transforming and perfecting God's created order. The inference was that God-granted human ingenuity could make creation even better. While the impact of industrial and technological revolutions have undeniably provided enormous benefits, the net result of human activity now threatens the earth's demise rather than assuring its perfection. A biblical theology of creation affirms and resonates with environmental science's now decades-long investigation into the earth's intricate balances and interrelationships. The theological counterpart to environmentalists' recognition of balance in the natural order is reflected in Psalm 104:

*Bless the LORD, O my soul. . . .
You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
You make the clouds your chariot,
you ride on the wings of the wind, . . .
You set the earth on its foundations, . . .
You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to use, . . .
The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has its home in the fir trees. . . .
O Lord, how manifold are your works!
in wisdom you have made them all.*
Psa. 104:1-3, 5, 14, 16-17, 24

Throughout the considerable length of the Psalm, the Psalmist affirms an order, wisdom, and trustworthiness that manifest God's presence and grace in the world. The same message is conveyed in the Genesis 9 account of the so-called Noahic covenant, which God makes not just with Noah and his family, but with the whole of creation:

This is the sign of the covenant I will make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. . . . When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.
(Gen. 9:12-13, 16)

In the context of environmental degradation, these and other passages help us to remember the God-granted harmony, wisdom, and grace inherent to creation and to live accordingly with care, respect, and humility.

Third, the Bible teaches that God's salvific work in Jesus Christ encompasses the whole of creation. Biblical theology focuses on the entire message of scripture and how the great themes of scripture interconnect. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, "new creation" breaks into the world:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:16-18)

The Old Testament images of salvation imply a healing and wholeness that bear on the covenant relationship between God, the people, and the land. While the complexities of these relationships are often difficult to understand and interpret in contemporary contexts, it is clear that the Bible's understanding of justice is bound up in these relationships. The biblical visions of Sabbath, which allows the land to rest, of Jubilee, which allows the land to return, and of Shalom, which envisions harmony between God and all of creation, are all expressions of "doing justice." According to the New Testament, God's justice is fulfilled in the Christ event:

For creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subject to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from the bondage of decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom. 8:19-23)

Paul says the reign of God in Christ initiated the hope of creation's brokenness being healed. This redemption of creation is expressed elsewhere as Christ's victory over the principalities and powers in terms of defeating the

rebellion that threatens to destroy all that God intends for the world:

He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

(Col. 1:17-20)

Attempts to individualize or spiritualize the new creation in Christ fail to appreciate this sweeping vision of scripture. The new creation encompasses the whole of life, including the material world.

Fourth, the New Testament doctrine of the incarnation reaffirms the Old Testament doctrine of the goodness of creation. The opening verses of the Gospel of John tell us that the in-the-beginning Word which was "with God" and "was God" "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1: 1, 14, RSV). In contrast to later Greek philosophical thought which believed the material realm was separate from and inferior to the spiritual realm, the Bible teaches us to regard the universe as matter quickened by God's Word and Spirit. In this way scripture affirms both that the material and spiritual in God's created order are inseparable and that creation is the wondrous and exquisite handiwork of God.

The contrast between biblical and Hellenistic worldviews also impinges on the doctrine of salvation. While religious thought inspired by Greek philosophy taught that salvation entailed escaping the material world's inherent inferiority and corruption, the Bible affirms that the One who was the very Word of God became a human being so that creation might be reconciled to God.

For Martin Luther, the connection between the incarnation and the goodness of creation was intrinsic and undeniable:

Now if I believe in God's Son and remember that he became man, all creatures will appear a hundred times more beautiful to me than before. Then I will properly appreciate the sun, the moon,



the stars, trees, apples, as I reflect that he is the Lord of all things.⁶

During the early centuries of the church, the dualism between the material and spiritual realms fostered by non-biblical religious and philosophical teaching was so culturally accepted that Christians were often co-opted by world denying viewpoints. Against the clear teachings of their own scriptures, many Christians lapsed into regarding the material realm as separable from and opposed to the spiritual and denigrating the body and physical existence as less than honorable.

The dualism between matter and spirit survives even now and reminds us that the church's commitment to creation care must be firmly grounded in the biblical vision of the goodness of creation reaffirmed by the reality of the incarnation.



Fifth, the Bible affirms that the Holy Spirit is central to the church's faith and witness on behalf of renewing creation. One of the most neglected and potentially most fruitful resources for the church's renewal and empowerment regarding creation care is a biblically grounded appreciation of the Spirit. God's Spirit, which is literally the Hebrew word for wind, blew over the waters of chaos and brought forth the cosmos. The Psalmist declares that God's Spirit gives life to all creatures and renews the face of the earth (Psa. 104:30). The same Spirit assembles the dry bones of Ezekiel's vision into the resurrected people of God (Ezek. 37:1-14), reminding us of the creative amalgam of earth and Spirit which becomes a living being in Genesis 2:7:

Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

This conviction regarding the deep dependency of all life upon God's Spirit lies behind the eschatological promise claimed at Pentecost for the Spirit to be poured out on all flesh, including sons and daughters, old and young, slave and free (Acts 2:17-21, cf. Joel 2:28-32). Immediately before this verse, the text of Joel says,

*Do not fear, O soil;
be glad and rejoice,
for the LORD has done great things!
Do not fear you animals of the field,
for the pastures of the wilderness are green;
the tree bears its fruit,
the fig tree and vine give their yield.*

Joel 2:21-22

To evoke the image of John 3, the Spirit blows where it chooses, consistently choosing to renew the fullness of

creation. The Bible reminds us that Spirit-led renewal embraces more than individual congregations or even the whole church and that our hopes and prayers for the gift of the Spirit should be as all-encompassing as the Spirit is depicted in scripture itself.

The Bible makes it clear that God is both transcendent

above the world and immanent in the world. As we address the threat of environmental degradation, we do well to remember that these emphases are not at odds in scripture, but inextricably related. What other worldviews have taught us to separate, the Bible teaches us to connect, and it is in the connection that Christians find the wisdom and power to address the crises which threaten the earth. As stewards of creation, let us remember and be guided by these central biblical teachings:

- ❖ that creation's deepest value resides in its relationship to God, not in its usefulness to humanity;
- ❖ that creation displays a trustworthiness and reliability which manifests God's providence and presence in upholding the world;
- ❖ that God's salvific work in Jesus Christ encompasses the whole of creation;
- ❖ that the New Testament doctrine of the incarnation reaffirms the Old Testament doctrine of the goodness of creation; and
- ❖ that the Holy Spirit is central to the church's faith and witness on behalf of renewing creation.

Doing Something about Environmental Crises

First, lead congregations to understand that Christian discipleship includes environmental stewardship:

- ❖ Conduct Bible studies on environmental stewardship. Over the past two decades, excellent resources have been developed for church-based teaching regarding creation care. We recommend the Christian Life Commission's curriculum, *"The Call of Creation: Biblical Studies in Environmental Stewardship."* The curriculum includes lessons for children, youth, and adults and is available in published form from the CLC. In addition, the CLC website (www.bgct.org/clc) offers and links to a number of other environmental resources.
- ❖ Focus on creation care in worship through sermons, hymns, and readings. Worship resources are also available on the CLC website.
- ❖ Explore the possibilities of establishing recycling projects at church. Alternatively, encourage church members use community-based recycling facilities.
- ❖ Investigate energy conservation options open to the church. Do an energy audit to identify opportunities to save and conserve. Explore the expanding opportunities for churches to use renewable energy sources, such as solar.

Second, do your part to clean up and preserve the environment. Drive well maintained, fuel efficient cars. Explore practical, cost efficient ways to conserve energy. Conserve water and other precious natural resources. Recycle items which are sensible to recycle. Switch to renewable and environmentally friendly sources of energy whenever it is possible to do so.

Third, create a pro-environmental expectation for public officials. Because environmental degradation occurs slowly and often out of our immediate field of vision, we are all too silent about critical environmental issues. Because we are silent, public officials correctly assume that we do not care enough about ecological catastrophe even to contact them. Other seemingly more immediate issues crowd their agendas, and little is done to correct serious problems. Many critical

environmental issues require the address of public policy at local, regional, state, national, and international levels. For example, even if we personally do our parts to reduce the discharge of greenhouse gases into the environment, the threat of global warming requires effective national and international attention for any hope that positive change will actually occur. Also, government agencies have the responsibility of enforcing critical environmental legislation. Unless we create the expectation that public officials will be held environmentally accountable, environmental degradation will continue unabated.

Fourth, create a pro-environmental expectation in the corporate world. Many of us work for corporations; some of us serve on corporate boards; and all of us are customers to whom corporations are in some measure accountable. As the corporate world comes to understand that employees, board members, and customers care about the environment, positive changes will occur with regard to hazardous emissions, pollution, energy use, and other important environmental issues.

Conclusion

Underneath the concern about environmental collapse and the search for environmental healing is the growing realization we are on a path that cannot and will not guide the world to a sustainable future. Increasingly, we realize that the world as a whole is not working, not working for the world's poor, not working for the world's children, not working for societies crippled with debt, not working for the air, water, land, forests, and animals. Even in prosperous societies where the phrase "not working" seems less applicable, environmental and social decay, spiritual emptiness, mindless consumerism, and growing economic despair continue to haunt us.

Furthermore, it is now undeniable that the categories of brokenness mentioned above are so tightly interconnected and interdependent that social justice and environmental justice are in fact inseparable. Our best

efforts to reduce poverty and to improve the lives of children will inevitably fail in the face of unremitting environmental degradation.

Yet what seems like an unsolvable set of problems presents us with an enormous opportunity. The very gravity of our situation demands that we respond with vigor, creativity, and commitment to critical problems which we have too long ignored or slighted. We have the knowledge and resources both to avert



environmental collapse and to address critical social issues like hunger and poverty. Just to name a few examples, we *can* reduce greenhouse gas emissions by switching to clean and renewable energy sources. We *can* reduce deforestation by more systematically and comprehensively committing to paper recycling. Reforestation *will* in turn reduce carbon dioxide levels, increase aquifer recharge, and reduce soil erosion. Enhancing the availability of water, soil, and other natural resources *will* in turn enhance the effectiveness of agricultural development and other anti-poverty efforts. The very interconnectedness of environmental degradation and social crises which seems from one vantage point to be daunting is from another vantage point advantageous. Winning the fight against environmental collapse will help us to win the fight against hunger and poverty and to improve the lives and futures of the world's children.

The real question turns on which vantage point we choose. Will we continue to ignore or slight critical environmental and social issues in favor of selfish, narrow, and partisan interests? Or will we choose to think about our children and grandchildren instead of ourselves, to think about the common good instead of our particular good, to think globally instead of tribally, to think long-term instead of short-term, to think about real solutions instead of quick fixes, to think about what it might mean to share instead of to hoard, to think about the plain truth instead of the party line?

The choice between these paths is not only starkly determinative, but spiritually governed. Because of the depth and intransigence of human sin, we will not make the right choice unless God grants us the strength of character to do so. Despite all of our resources, despite all of our technological prowess, unbridled greed and

willful stupidity will prevent us from choosing the right path unless God quite literally saves us from ourselves. Fortunately, God knows our plight and hears our cries even when we are too blind and self-absorbed to utter them.

Fortunately also, the Bible addresses the very problems which plague us, for each stems from some form of injustice. And the Bible is all about justice--justice for the poor, justice for the oppressed, justice for children, and as we have seen, justice for the earth itself. The Gospel proclaims that the Christ event which inaugurates the reign of God incarnates the justice of God.

We are the bearers of this Good News, which we are called to share with humanity and which alone will sustain us through the long journey toward the healing of the earth and its wondrous inhabitants.



¹Lester R. Brown, *Plan B 2.0: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), p. 3. We are deeply indebted to Lester Brown and the Earth Policy Institute's environmental assessments throughout this report.

²Wesley Granberg Michaelson, "Renewing the Whole Creation" in *Christians and the Environment: A Study Guide* (Washington, D.C.: Sojourners), pp. 4-9. We are deeply indebted to Wesley Granberg Michaelson and the Sojourners online study guide for biblical/theological reflections throughout this report.

³All scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

⁴Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 33.

⁵John Robert McNeill, *Something New under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2000), p. 59 quoted in *Sharing God's Planet: A Christian Vision for a Sustainable Future* (London: Church Publishing House, 2005), p. 1.

⁶Quoted in "Why Ecology is a Christian Issue," the July-August 1995 issue of *Therefore*, the periodical of the Christian Life Commission.



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