

HUMAN IMPACT ON
THE ENVIRONMENT IN
THE NEW TESTAMENT
A Rereading of Matthew 5:13-16
in the Nigerian Context.

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INTRODUCTION

The earth is ailing, and every creature in it, including humankind, is affected. The evidence suggests that human activity, particularly in the last 100 years, has contributed significantly to the suffering. Humans treat the earth according to their perceptions of it. If people see each other as alien and the earth as inert matter, their behaviour will reflect that perception. If people see each other as part of the same family, and the earth as connected to them because of its sacred origin in the same God who made them; they may be motivated to live in harmony under God.¹

Humanity is part of the environment too, however, and it would be as much of a mistake to ignore human claims to existence and thriving as it would for humans to ruin the environment for selfish gain. Both matter, because both come from the same divine source and exist by virtue of the one God's gracious love. The earth is ailing because anthropology and ecology are not treated holistically, and both are suffering the consequences. The unitary, sacred origin of all informs the premise of this paper, which is that it is possible and desirable for people to live and work within their environments, not

as enemies, nor even as uneasy bedfellows, but harmoniously under God. If humanity can understand that all creatures, including humans, are under God, it might then use its God-given intelligence to find out how to 'safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth. Several attempts were made in the past even by the Federal Government of Nigeria to curtail the misuse of the environment.² Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) was established to control the Nigerian Environment, its resources exploitation and management. But field observation revealed that environmental degradation is growing at a rate worse than the pre-FEPA period. Solution to these problems require going beyond the strategies and objectives of FEPA.³

To solve the problem, we must have the right theological perspectives or view about the place of the land in God's creation and especially as this relates to man? That is, who is man in relation to the land? Francis Schaeffer⁴ interacted with this question indirectly somewhat when he quoted Lynn White as writing that "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation about the things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and our destiny –that is by religion." If the Government cannot do it alone the Christians need take up the challenge. To do this successfully, the Christians must be the vanguard by being the salt and the light on the earth. This is the task this paper sets for itself. It is believed that the findings as well as the recommendations will go a long way in solving environmental problems in Nigeria.

HUMAN IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT

It has to be recognized that, to an extent far beyond any other species, humanity is capable of, and indeed can hardly stop itself from, consciously transforming its environment. One way of understanding this is to see that, for the most part, animals and

plants adapt to the environment in which they find themselves, whereas most humans attempt to make environments adapt to them. Human perception of the world and its place in it has informed the way it has gone about this adaptation, and Christianity has contributed to the way these perceptions and consequent attitudes have developed.⁴

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, scientific discoveries were predicated on the belief that the world was objectively observable and behaved mechanistically. Humans could harness the natural forces of the earth and make it serve them. They saw and experienced the earth as a storehouse of rich resources to which they could help themselves, so their engagement with the world was extractive, industrial and non-renewable. Christians will acknowledge that although the image of humankind having 'dominion' over the earth is a biblical one, it can become distorted into a justification for abuse and exploitation of the

Earth God has created. Thus, for example, the confident engineers of the Victorian era saw themselves as exercising their God-given right to command and control the world around them⁵.

The twentieth century saw a rise in secularism in the West, which supported the project of growth without limit. The need to develop materially became paramount, as happiness was seen as being something to enjoy now, on this earth, and not beyond it. The freedom to use and abuse the earth could be contained while there was not too much of it going on. But there has never before been anything like the level of human intervention seen during the twentieth century, and there is now great cause for concern. The extent to which humans altered their environments in order to live the lives they wanted was unprecedented. The level (rather than the intrinsic nature) of alteration of and interference with the earth upon which humanity is engaged is such that the earth may be reaching

breaking point. These are the signs of the times to which environmental scientists and others are pointing, and the pictures of the future that they paint are not happy ones for the human species, nor for life on earth generally.

JESUS TEACHINGS ON THE ENVIRONMENT A REREADING OF MATT.5:13-16

You are the salt of the earth but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything... You are the light of the world... Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:13-16).

You in this passage is emphatic - *You my followers and none others are the salt of the earth*. Salt was used in the ancient world to flavour foods and even in small doses as fertilizer. Above all, salt was used as a preservative. Rubbed into meat, a little salt will slow decay. Strictly speaking salt cannot lose its saltiness, sodium Chloride is a stable compound. But most salt in the ancient world derived from salt marshes rather than evaporation of salt water and thus contained many impurities. The actual salt being more soluble than the impurities could be leached out leaving a residue to dilute it was of little worth⁶.

The question on *how can it be made salty again!* is not meant to have an answer. The point is that if Jesus' disciples are to act as a preservative in the world by conforming to kingdom norms, they can discharge this function only by retaining their own virtue though the Jews saw themselves as the light of the world (Romans 2:19). The true light is the suffering servant (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6) fulfilled in Jesus himself (Matthew 4:16 cf John 8:12; I John 1:7). Derivatively, His disciples constitute the new light (Ephesians 5:8-9). In the OT as in

the NT light most frequently symbolizes purity as supposed to filth, truth as supposed to error, knowledge as supposed to ignorance and divine revelation and presence as opposed to reprobation and abandonment by God⁷

The reference to a city on a hill is at one level fairly obvious. Often built of white limestone, ancient towns gleamed in the sun and could not easily be hidden. At night the inhabitants' oil lamps would share some glow over the surrounding area; such cities could not be hidden, so also it is unthinkable to light a lamp and hide it under a peck-measure. A lamp is put on a lamp stand to illuminate all. Jesus' disciples constitute a true locus of the people of God and the means of witness to the world.

In verse 16 Jesus drives the metaphor home. His disciples must show their good works, that is, all righteousness, everything they are and do that reflects the mind and will of God. And others must see this light. It may provoke persecution but that is not a good reason for hiding the light by which others may come to glorify the Father; the idea that if you cannot beat them you join them should not be pronounced in the midst of Christians*.

According to Tasker⁸, the prophets as well as the disciples are expected to be peculiar people. By the nature of their calling they should be distinctive. It is this truth that is expressed in Jesus' description of them as the salt of the earth. The most obvious general characteristic of salt is that it is essentially different from the medium into which it is put. Its power lies precisely in this difference. So it is, says Jesus, with His disciples. Their power in the world lies in their difference from it. The Christian is as different from other men as the salt on a plate is different from the food into which it is placed. Moreover, another primary function of salt is to preserve, to arrest decay, to act as an antiseptic, so that the germs latent, for example in meat, may be rendered ineffective when salt is

rubbed into it. The disciple accordingly, are expected to be a moral disinfectant in a world where moral standards are low, constantly changing, or in no-existence. But they can discharge this function only if they themselves retain their virtue and this calls for much self discipline. As Jesus goes on to point out, if a disciple has lost his virtue he is like salt which has lost its saltiness and so become a wholly useless commodity fit for nothing else except to be thrown out on the street and trampled on by passers-by¹⁰.

In the Lucan version of the saying it implies that it will be a waste of time and energy to scatter it on the land or put it on the compost heap (Luke 14:35). But the disciple of Christ must not, through fear be an unworthy influence, or remain silence about their religion. They can, and they must, bear witness to the faith that is in them through personal example. This is the truth underlying the metaphor used by Jesus when He tells them they are the light of the world. They obtain their light from him who is supremely the light of the world, but if it is to shine in their world, it must be in a conspicuous position and on an unobscured intervening object. It is the city set on a hill that is visible to those who live on lower levels and it will be absurd, Jesus adds, to put a candle under a mill-tub instead of placing it on a candle stick and then to expect the occupants of the house to sit by it¹¹. The disciples must not hide themselves but live and work in places where their influences will be felt and the light that is in them be mush fully manifested to others, not for their own glorification, but that others may see that the light of real goodness, finding expression in practical acts of loving kindness and service is a light not of this world but coming from God and may in consequence be led to give honour and praise to its Giver.

No doubt, Jesus expects Christian to be steward of God's creation.

Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let

them rule over the sea and the bird of the air, over the livestock overall the earth and over all the creatures that move along the ground. (Genesis 1:26).

Though God is the creator, he gave humanity the responsibility of being the ruler under God's sovereign supervision. This is a way of being the salt and the light for God. There are several implications of this statement for environmental concerns:

- Christians must obey what God says to be his servant. God said that men and women must rule over and take care of the world. To fail to do so is disobedience. They must take care of God's asset-Jesus told several stories about wealthy men who left their property under the care of a steward. It was the steward's responsibility to take care of and even improve the asset, which belong to the master that is left under his care. Since we have been appointed the steward of God's earth, it is our responsibility to take care of our environment in the best way¹².
- Christians have been given specific responsibility – God did not just create us because he had nothing else to do or he wanted some kinds of toys to play with. God created us to be his companion. In that position, God gave us specific responsibilities. We are to be *worker together with God in the care for the earth*.
- Christians are to be spokesperson for God –Seldom does God come down and specifically speaks to people. God speaks through people who will be His spokesperson. This is why Jesus first appointed the 12 and ultimately the mission of all Christian disciples.
- Christians are to be the representatives of God –The Apostle

Paul says in II Corinthians 5:20, "Christians are therefore Christ's ambassador". Ambassadors look out for the interest of the person or government they are representing.¹³

The premise on which Jesus based his environmental teachings in the New Testament is the Creation Mandate¹⁴ in the Old Testament, that:

- God saw that everything he made was "good" (Gen. 1:20-25, also 1:9,12,18). God saw that it was "very good" (Gen. 1:31).
- God blessed man, and all living creatures, using the same words "be fruitful and increase in number" (Gen 1:28, 22).
- Man was set apart from other creatures. He was made in God's image (Gen 1:27), and given authority over, and responsibility for, creation (Gen 1:26, 28).
- Man was to work the Garden of Eden and care for it (Gen 2:15). He was to use but not abuse it. In today's language his use was to be sustainable.
- As a result of the fall, management of the environment became difficult (Gen 3:17-19), yet man still had authority over creation, and responsibility for it, because he still bears the image of God (Gen 9:6, 1 Cor 11:7).¹⁵

When we turn to the New Testament, God's care about his creatures continues. (Mat 6:26-27). We therefore have a continuous witness about the importance of the environment from Adam to Noah to Moses to Jesus.

- The Earth has a future, even after Jesus' return. It will be renewed (Rom 8:19-22), and will be our eternal home (2 Pet.

3:13).

Although the Earth will ultimately be renewed, the present destruction of the environment cannot be ignored. In fact, in Rev 8:7-11 it seems to be a means of judgement. (The imagery is symbolic, but are we seeing a fulfilment of this now as the Earth heats up (v.7), as the oceans become acidified (v.8-9), and as our rivers become polluted and saline (v.10-11)?

The implication of the above is that we should acknowledge that the Bible makes plain our responsibility to care for the environment, a responsibility we have neglected. We should also acknowledge that God speaks to us, not just through his word, but also through his creation (Psa. 19:1-4, Rom 1:20, Mat. 6:28-29). We should accept our duty of stewardship over the environment (Gen. 1:26-28). As green groups have been telling us for decades, this involves acting locally and thinking globally. Acting locally involves reasonable measures to minimize the harm we do to the environment personally. Thinking globally means acknowledging the role of government in those areas that are properly its concern. We should "give to Caesar what is Caesar's" (Mat. 22:15-22), and cooperate with government in seeking the common good (Rom. 13:1-7). These scriptures refer specifically to the right of governments to levy taxes, and their duty to preserve law and order. I would argue that protecting the environment is also very much the business of government, both at the national level and in appropriate international agreements. There is nothing we have more in common than the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the climate we and all God's creatures live in. Because these things cross the boundaries between nations, our response must be local, national, and also global.¹⁶

Christians who have the opportunity can serve God through involvement in the political process (Gen. 41:41-57, Nem. 1:11-2:2, Dan. 5:29-6:3). We can make a difference!

Our legitimate concern for the environment should not distract us from our primary focus, which is the extension of the Kingdom of God (Mat 6:19-21). Nevertheless, care for the environment is part of responsible living through which we honour God and witness to the world (Mat 5:16).

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA

Misguided anthropocentrism has had unfortunate effects both on the earth and on humanity itself. The human species, as a result can be and is seen as irrelevant at best, and at worst a terrible calamity for life on earth, a rogue species of rapacious bipeds bent on destruction. But this self-abnegation and false modesty are equally mistaken perceptions and can just as easily lead to destructive behaviour. 'We are treating our environment, our planet, in an inhuman, godforsaken manner precisely because we see it in this way, precisely because we see ourselves in this way.'¹⁷

Christians have been blamed for the environmental crisis all over the world because of the dominion interpretation of Gen. 1:28. But the creation accounts of Gen. 1 and 2 throw more light on how the passage should be interpreted in the light of other scriptural passages. This is the reason why the first solution to the environmental problems in Nigeria lies within the church circle. Religious leaders need to firstly debunk the negative connotation of dominion theology in the mind of the people. Christians should be told that God's intention and demand from them is that they should be steward or caretaker of the environment¹⁸. It is true that God has given other creatures in the environment as food and resources for prosperity, but on the other hand, man is also charged with the responsibility to take good care of the environment. Therefore, Christians should change their hostile mentality towards the environment to a more positive and caring one. That of *salt and light* in this context.

Once Christians believe that all things are created by God, they must also remember that the Bible declares that we live for God's glory, not our own. As Dreibelbis¹⁹ puts it "we live to glorify God, and nature glorifies God; therefore, we ought to protect nature, whether or not it suits our interests... A respect for the creation leads us to a reverence for God, and likewise, our reverence for God is reflected in our care for the creation."¹⁷ Hammering on what should be the attitudinal disposition of mankind toward the environment, Harry Spalling believes that:

A degraded creation hinders God's revelation, abuses his providence, and detracts from his praise. As stewards, humans have a special place in creation, for the creator entrusted it to mankind (Gen. 2:15). Humans may enjoy the fruits, but they should not destroy the fruitfulness of creation. Developing, using, conserving, or preserving resources must always occur within the framework of stewardship. This means caring in such a way that the Creator is revealed, life sustained, and God is praised.

When the Christians lead with example of caring for the nature in their vicinity, it is certain that many other people will join their good initiative and make the environment to be a better place to live in. Religious leaders should therefore channel their Bible study outline towards environmental issues. Practical steps should be taken to ensure that messages on caring for the environment are inculcated in the lives of the people. Dyke has shown that what helped the Western world in caring for the environment for sustainable development is their response to Lynn White's allegation that Christian teachings on dominion theology brought about environmental crisis.

Christian scholars in general, and Reformed evangelical Christian scholars in particular therefore began a sustained

intellectual battle against White's work. In doing so, they not only refuted White's accusations, but also created a body of scholarship demonstrating that environmental stewardship was rooted in biblical teaching and doctrine. In addition to this, Christian academics began to incorporate these resources into their teaching, they also began to use them to shape new courses, and their entire curricula in environmental studies, which led to the development of programmes, majors, centres and institutes dedicated to environmental stewardship.

CONCLUSION

Humans have encroached significantly into each of the earth's spheres, on which all living beings depend, and never more so than in the last 100 years. The twentieth century can be seen as a time of tremendous human prodigality, a project of growth without limit. The project has favoured some and hurt far more others. The solution to inequality has been seen as yet more growth, but if humanity cannot restrain its own exuberance it may be that the earth is forced to do it. The evidence in each of the spheres is that a tipping point may be close, when what has been withstood for centuries can be no longer. The sudden changes that would occur in weather systems, the fertility of the soil, the water and the world of living creatures if this tipping point were reached could be devastating. Even if ecological devastation is not on the horizon, for Christians there must be recognition that the project of growth without limit has to be curtailed. Furthermore, the injustices spawned by massive growth already exist.

Two-thirds of the world does not have enough to eat while the other third is trying to lose weight. There are good reasons to believe that the so-called natural disasters that harm the two-thirds world are part of the consequences of human encroachment on the earth's systems.²² The earth is a magnificent place and it is a privilege to be

part of it, but it seems that humanity, unlike other species, has to learn its place. The understanding required in order to do so is not primarily scientific, though science must inform it. Jesus' teachings on the environment offer great contributions to this understanding (as could be seen from above); using resources from biblical and theological perspectives.

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