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THE "E" WORD

**Your may not have heard it in your church,
but here's a theologian who insists you should.**

Electronic technology now available has given us a new vocabulary. Of course, there is "e-mail" (electronic mail) as opposed to "snail mail"—with postage stamps sent through the Post Office. The Eau Claire (Michigan) Seventh-day Adventist Church, of which I am a member, even has "e-board" now. When an important issue comes up that needs a vote before the next scheduled board meeting, members are solicited for their input via e-mail. To save postage, we are all sent "e-minutes."

I've been pondering another "e" word. What kicked my reflections into gear was something I read suggesting that Christians have been slow to link ecology with theology. Others allege that of all the world's religions, Christianity has been the most contemptuous of the environment. We are accused of abusing the "dominion" that God bestowed on human beings at creation.

What about this linking ecology with theology? Adventists still hear occasional sermons about stewardship, which usually mention nothing about our stewardship of the natural world. Surely we need to be reminded to manage our money carefully and to pay a faithful tithe. But when, if ever, are we urged to be mindful of our care for the Earth—the water, the air, and the animals? The conclusion of many ecologists is that our planet's creatures and its many systems are not doing well. Mounting evidence indicates that Planet Earth is indeed "groaning" (Rom. 8:22, NIV).

Heavenly Ecology

Let's face it, in this "land of

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plenty” we’ve not found it easy to be frugal with the Earth’s abundant treasures. And yet, when God brought the children of Israel to the “Promised Land,” described as rich with “milk and honey,” he instructed his people on good ecology. The Mosaic law takes a strong stand on the protection of nature—outlawing even the destruction of fruit trees to aid a military campaign (Deut. 20:19). Animals also were to be treated humanely. For one example, the big work animals were not to be muzzled to prevent them from eating while doing the heavy work involved in agriculture (Deut. 25:4).

God also instructed his people regarding the close ties between human and animal life. In a significant study, ATS president Jiri Moskala describes this linkage: (1) Both animals and humans were created with the “breath of life” (Gen. 1:20, 24; 2:7, 19); (2) God blessed them both (Gen. 1:22, 28); (3) Humans and animals alike were given a vegetarian diet (Gen. 1:29, 30); (4) Animals as well as humans have blood in their veins. That blood is a symbol of life (Gen. 9:4-6); (5) Both could be responsible for murder (Gen. 9:5; Ex. 21:28-32); (6) They were both included in God’s covenant (Gen. 9:9, 10); (7) Both were under the death penalty if they engage in bestiality (Lev. 20:15,16); (8) Both animals and human beings are given Sabbath rest (Ex. 20:8-10;

Deut. 5:14); (9) The firstborn of humans and animals belonged to God (Ex. 22:29, 30; 13:12, 13); (10) Priests and sacrificial animals had to be without spot or blemish (Lev. 21:17-21; 22:19-25); (11) Animals could not be sacrificed unless eight days old, and then they were to be dedicated to God. The same time period was given for a boy to be circumcised (Lev. 22:27; Ex. 22:30; Gen. 17:12).¹

This impressive connection between humans and animals in Scripture is only the beginning manifestation of the close linkage between ecology and theology. Recall that after the Flood, animals are explicitly included in God’s covenant with the Earth:

“Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying, ‘Now behold, I myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; *and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you: of all that comes out of the ark, even every beast of the earth.* I establish My covenant with you.’ . . . God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant which I am making between Me and you and *every living creature* that is with you, for all successive generations. I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and *the earth*’” (Gen. 9:8-13, NASB).

In the oldest book of the Bible,

when God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, he spends four chapters detailing the wonders of the created world, the longest "speech" in Scripture.

Nature's Primary Purpose

According to the Psalter, the primary purpose of nature is to reveal the glory of God. Stanley Jaki considers this objective to be a significant issue and wonders whether Christians should "not feel compunction of heart for turning forests into wastelands while repeating the Psalms about trees shouting to God for joy."²

The prophet Jeremiah also highlights the intimate relationship between God and his creation, even during judgment:

"Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Behold, I will refine them and try them; For how shall I deal with the daughter of My people? Their tongue is an arrow shot out; It speaks deceit; One speaks peaceably to his neighbor with his mouth, But in his heart he lies in wait. Shall I not punish them for these things?' says the Lord. 'Shall I not avenge Myself on such a nation as this? I will take up a weeping and wailing for the mountains And for the dwelling places of the wilderness a lamentation, Because they are burned up, So that no one can pass through them; Nor can men hear the voice of the cattle. Both the birds of the heavens

and the beasts have fled; They are gone'" (Jer. 9:7-10, NKJV).

When speaking of his judgment against sin, God includes a lament for his created world.

The Scope of God's Covenant

The last two verses of the Book of Jonah are striking. In a dialogue with his petulant prophet, God reveals the reasons for his mercy toward Nineveh: "Then the Lord said, 'You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?'" And the book ends with God's intriguing reminder of his profound mercy, which included not only the wicked Ninevites, but also the animals (Jonah 4:10, 11, NASB).

The psalmist echoes the same sentiment: "Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains. . . . O Lord, You preserve both man and beast." "The Lord is good to all, and he has compassion on all he has made" (Ps. 36:6; 145:9, NIV). Maybe God's statement to Jonah shouldn't really be such a surprise. Many of us get so wrapped up in our busy lives and routines that we forget how important the natural world is to the

Creator. However, the concluding question in the Book of Jonah pointedly reminds us that God's tender regard encompasses even the animal kingdom. In God's thinking, a close link exists between redemption and creation. Though Christians treasure the correct doctrine of salvation, they often need a more comprehensive doctrine of creation.

Through his prophets, God repeatedly affirms that his covenant involves all the created order, and that ultimately the original perfection of creation will be restored:

"I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety." "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord" (Hosea 2:18; Isa. 65:25, NRSV).

Within the promises of the removal of sin and the restoration of Edenic perfection, the animal kingdom is included. The prophet Isaiah eloquently describes the righteous reign of Christ re-establishing justice and righteousness on the Earth:

"The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;

And a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, Their young shall lie down together, And the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole. And the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord As the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:6-9, NKJV).

An Emphatic Revelation

Many New Testament references speak of God's care for his creation. We are told that not a single sparrow falls to the ground without God's knowledge (Matt. 10:29). Jesus reminds us of the divine concern for Earth's creatures: "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them" (Matt. 6:26, NKJV).

In the final book of Scripture, the entire created world is again dramatically encompassed with judgment. In Revelation 7:1, four angels are pictured: "holding back the four winds of the earth" (NIV), so that no wind would blow "*on the earth, on the sea, or on any tree*" (NKJV). These four were joined by another angel having the seal of God, with the command: "*Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads*" (Rev. 7:3, NASB).

After the seventh trumpet sounds in Revelation 11, the 24 elders fall on their faces to worship God, and cry out against those who have created havoc on the Earth: "We give you thanks, O Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. And the nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth" (Rev. 11:17, 18, NRSV).

Throughout the entire canon, we are never allowed to forget the profound value that God places on his creation.

Love God, Love His Creation

All this suggests to me that authentic Christian faith must include ecological concern. Much is at stake, as evidenced by our polluted air and contaminated water. If we are created in God's image, we should reflect his loving concern for this world. We must educate our-

selves to treasure God's creation as he does. As pioneering ecological theologian Joseph Sittler says: "When we turn the attention of the church to a definition of the Christian relationship with the natural world, we are not stepping away from grave and proper theological ideas; we are stepping right into the middle of them. There is a deeply rooted, genuinely Christian motivation for attention to God's creation, despite the fact that many church people consider ecology to be a secular concern. 'What does environmental preservation have to do with Jesus Christ and His church?' they ask. They could not be more shallow or more wrong."³ □

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- ² Stanley L. Jaki, *Patterns or Principles and Other Essays* (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1995), p. 39.
- ³ Joseph Sittler, *Gravity and Grace* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), p. 15.

