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Homiletics

George W. Hoyer
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Ralph L. Moellering
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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HOMILETICS

The Environmental Crisis and Christian Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

The world is our field. The number of times that has been said has not made it untrue. The fact that our practice in late years seems to be following department of agriculture policies and permitting the field to lie fallow does not alter our enthusiasm for the motto. There is a certain buildup of our self-image which results when we repeat to one another that the scope of our work is worldwide.

On one edge of the field there has been a running discussion about what it is that the church should be doing in its acreage. It has centered on the meaning of the Gospel and the implication of our Lord's directive to teach all that He has commanded. Some standing there have insisted that the church's business is to proclaim what God has done once and for all for this world through His Son, Jesus Christ. The life, obedience, death, and resurrection of Jesus as a sacrificial atonement for a rebellious and sinful mankind, it is argued, is the power to make disciples and to preserve them in salvation to the end. It is admitted that there will be social implications of that Gospel proclamation, of that discipleship, of that salvation in present days and current problems. Some who argue at the edge of the field insist that neither those implications nor any proposals for solutions are appropriate topics for the church's preaching or themes for its liturgy's prayers and sacramental strengthening. Others concede the possibility that these areas will provide paragraphs for application in sermons, but contend that the direction of those applications should be restricted to individual Christians functioning as citizens in the social and political realms. There are others discussing the issue on the edge of the field who are blunt to say that the whole meaning of the Gospel in our day is so dependent on the visible expressions of love which are its results that there is no point in verbalizing at all until we are doing a better job of visualizing. They do not hesitate to add that since possibilities in this work are dependent on political action, whole congregations ought to focus their efforts in action as specific as lobbying and demonstrating. Since many of those who represent each point of view are not simply standing there idly, the field is being cultivated in many acres, by different tools, and the seed is being sown.

The last two months have included in this section of the journal a stress on the importance of the parish pastor's commitment to the parish. This month a sermon is presented that undertakes to address itself to a problem as wide as the world. It is one of the less controversial of the subjects that could have been selected for this purpose, but it does raise the question of how the parish pulpit tackles the problems of the world. It will be read by many with the Lutheran spectacles of Law and Gospel. They will be looking for the definition of the problem and inquiring whether it actually describes something for which the church has the solution in the Gospel. They will be looking for the assertion of the Gospel, inquiring whether it is indeed a proclamation of God's unique act in Jesus Christ for the saving of His world, or whether it is a recommendation for the enactment of human policies that could be adopted by human citizens of the world and carried out by their human wills and abilities.

Readers will react—and discover as they read—that these alternatives are not the extent of the possibilities. If application is specific, it must propose action that can be carried out by the hearers. If preaching is to be congregational, however, it must be aimed at the varied positions of the people who make up the audience, even though they all be one in Christ. If the Gospel is to be specific, however, it must proclaim the action which was carried out, and could be carried out, by God alone, and which He undertook to accomplish

through the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, continues to effect through the action of His Spirit, and will bring to completion in the return of Christ at the end of the age. God did not do all that in order to change Republicans into Democrats. He did do it, however, to change men. The forgiveness of their sins is basic to that change. A forgiven man is freed from the curse of the Law. He no longer needs to fear the Law and no longer feels compelled to fight the will of God. He is at liberty to undertake to do what the revelation of the love of God has made clear to him is the will of God for all His people and for the world He gave them to inhabit. A gospel that is less a power than that is less than the Christian Gospel. The Christian Gospel need not always be proclaimed toward such specific responses, it is true. But if a proclamation ever implies that forgiveness of sin is grace abounding to the chief of sinners in order that he may relax and do nothing, it is untruly proclaimed. We ought not to sin that grace might abound. Nor ought we to stand here by the edge of the field because we believe that grace does abound and we will all be paid the same two denarii anyway.

Is it possible to proclaim the action of God in Christ as power for repentance and involvement in newness of life without making the connections to guilt and then to the forgiveness of sins? That is one aspect to be considered. Another might be whether or not the involvement in newness of life might not be more directly empowered if the Gospel is indeed proclaimed specifically to the sin that inhibits the good action, and then asserted as the release into newness of life. A third would be the inquiry as to the amount of time that should be devoted to the exerting of the power of the Gospel, and the degree to which the literary or communicative form in which the Gospel is asserted is in direct ratio to its effectiveness.

Too frequently congregational hearers react to a sermon by citing its deficiencies. If the weak spots can be accurately identified by the listener, the possibility for self-proclamation lies before him. He can then, by the use of his intellect and his sanctified will, resist criticizing the preacher and begin to expand what he has heard to make it more relevant to his own need. He can develop what has been said into God's specific condemnation against his personal stance or failure. He can pick up the Gospel clue and move forward with it in meditating on all that God did do, and all that God in hope does intend for him as a new-made man. Are there readers who can be encouraged into similar action? A copy of one of the homiletics books on the sale table in the seminary bookstore to the best amplification of problem or power in this sermon!

GEORGE W. HOYER

ISAIAH 24:1-6

REVELATION 21:1-5a

RALPH L. MOELLERING

In the first article of the Apostles' Creed we confess: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." From early childhood we have been taught to praise the Creator for the many-splendored marvels of our bountiful earth. In surveying God's magnificent deeds in the realm of nature the psalmist exults: "Thou visitest the earth . . . Thou greatly enrichest it. . . . Thou waterest its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its

growth. . . . The pastures of the wilderness drip, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy." Songs and prayers of grateful appreciation for the eye-pleasing elegance of our natural surroundings are an integral part of our response in worship to the beneficence of our Creator.

Sadly enough, overpopulation and industrialization have combined to tarnish this idyllic picture. With compulsive consumption and incessant greed we have squandered our God-given resources and blighted the good earth. Now some wag has parodied

"America the Beautiful" to sound like this:

O cancerous for smoggy skies, for pesti-
cided grain . . .
Irradiated mountains rise above an asphalt
plain.
America, America, thy birds have fled
from thee;
Thy fish lie dead by poisoned streams
from sea to fetid sea.
America, America, thy sins prepare thy
doom.
Monoxide clouds shall be thy shroud,
thy cities be thy tomb.

I

A repellent vision! An abhorrent specter!
But verified by reputable scientists, and all
too similar to the prediction of the prophet
Isaiah—the dismal fate of a people who
broke their covenant with God. In ancient
Judah and in 20th-century America the par-
allels are striking and disturbing. Before
our eyes we have depicted a lurid and appal-
ling scene of a world scourged by the wrath
of God. Under His chastisement all distinc-
tions of rank and class are swept away. We
all suffer the dire consequences of our com-
mon folly. When it comes to the inescapable
judgment, "God is no respecter of persons."
"Behold, the Lord will lay waste the earth
and make it desolate, and He will twist its
surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it
shall be, as with the people, so with the
priest; as with the slave, so with his master . . .
as with the creditor, so with the debtor."
Historical experience should have taught us
that. Floods, tornadoes, and earthquakes
abolish in an instant all artificial barriers be-
tween white and black, privileged and un-
derprivileged. And so, too, our environmental
crisis does not exempt churchgoers or law-
abiding citizens or individuals in a high in-
come bracket. We are all caught in our un-
pleasant predicament together. If we are
"bound in the bundle of life," we are also
joint victims of the contagion and contamina-
tion of sin.

Man is intended to be both a child of God
and a child of nature. He can only achieve
satisfaction as he lives in harmony with both
the Creator and his fellow creatures. Accord-
ing to the Genesis story, as soon as the pri-
meval couple disobeyed the divine mandate
they experienced the repercussions in the
natural order; the ground was cursed as
thorns and thistles made labor tedious.
Matter is intrinsically good, but it has been
infected by man's evil doing. The violation
of God's laws has not been limited to theft
and murder; it has included upsetting the
balance of nature—depleting resources for
destructive wars and private enrichment.

Now we are in serious trouble. The alarm
has been sounded from coast to coast. Earth
Day and college teach-ins have focused atten-
tion on the steady deterioration of our en-
vironment and the bane of overpopulation.
At present 3½ billion people inhabit our
planet. In the next 30 to 40 years this num-
ber could be doubled.

How will these hoards of humanity be
fed? Impressions that seafarming is just
around the corner are illusory. The assump-
tion that we have inexhaustible supplies
available in the ocean is erroneous according
to Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich. Mean-
while, the race to loot the sea is in full
swing, and Washington University biologist
Barry Commoner warns that poisoning of
the seas has reached a precarious level. Toxic
substances do not diffuse throughout the ocean;
they concentrate in filter-feeding animals.
"No one knows," says Ehrlich, "how long
we can continue to pollute the seas with
chlorinated hydrocarbon insecticides, poly-
chlorinated biphenyls and hundreds of
thousands of other pollutants without bring-
ing on a worldwide ecological disaster."

The National Science Foundation has in-
formed us the clean air can no longer be
found even in the most remote areas of the
country. Even at the North Pole and on
Antarctica contamination has been reported.

Unless we can countermand this whole development we can be literally asphyxiated. One group of scientists has forecast that by 1980, 10,000 people will be inundated by a cloud of pollution in a single metropolitan area and die; in 10 to 15 years from now every man, woman, and child in the Western Hemisphere will have to wear a breathing helmet to survive outdoors; while many plants and animals will become extinct.

"The time has come," Russel Train writes in the Protestant publication *Tempo*, "to treat crimes against the environment on a par with crimes against society." The solid wastes of our technological civilization mount skyward. The president of the American Public Health Association describes us as "standing knee-deep in refuse, shooting rockets to the moon." The combustion of fossil fuels and the elimination of vegetation combine to produce changes in the oxygen-carbon dioxide balance of our atmosphere. Some scientists fear that our global climate could be drastically altered with adverse effects for everyone — possibly even making further life impossible.

Science fiction has become a normal form of mythology which offers fantasy framed by realism. It projects before us, like a tourist agency, previews of what we may anticipate — glimpses of the hell on earth that we may be constructing. For instance, J. G. Ballard portrays in his novel *The Burning World* the catastrophe which ensues when a thin film of plastic-like material covers the world's oceans and lakes, resulting in lack of evaporation and cloud formation with a decline in rainfall. Such a phenomenon, it is suggested, could accompany a chemical reaction caused by the dumping of industrial wastes, pesticides, and agricultural fertilizers, along with all the other "junk" we produce and discard, into the watersheds and rivers. What follows in the fictional narrative (which some dread as an eventual reality) is a worldwide drought. In desperation, in the novel, thirsty

people instinctively move toward the oceans, fighting and killing each other in a frantic search for indispensable water. At the beachline the government tries to establish desalting plants, but they are open only to the privileged elite. The deprivations are gruesome. The suffering is intense. The plot may seem farfetched, but similar scenarios are being written by sober-minded ecologists. We are all dependent on God's provision for our preservation and sustenance. Unless selfish exploitation is curbed and an ethics of mutual cooperation adopted, we may find that Isaiah's forewarning of desolation has been fulfilled: "The earth is utterly laid waste . . . the world languishes and withers . . . the earth lies polluted" — a curse devours every living thing.

II

For respite, and by contrast, we turn to the formation of a new heaven and a new earth graphically described by the seer in the last chapter of the Book of Revelation. The creative power of God has not ceased. Through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ a fallen world has been reclaimed. Evil has been conquered and good has triumphed. God loved the world so that He entered into our life to revive it and to elevate its quality. No longer are we condemned to be the victims of decay and bondage. We have been set free from the sins of covetousness and exploitation to become participants in a new creation. Even the putrefaction of the earth can be rectified. We have been equipped by God to become the instruments of renovation. All plants and animals—the whole creation—"has been groaning in travail together until now." But we have tasted the firstfruits of the Spirit. We are assured "that in everything God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose." The tasks may seem overwhelming. The odds arrayed against us are great. But nothing is impossible with our Benefactor. "If God is

for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, will He not also give us all things with Him?" Decadence, atrophy, and death belong to the old order. But the splendor of rich creativity has come to a climax in the appearance and ministry of Jesus Christ, our Lord. "A new heaven and a new earth" can arise. In the symbolism of "the holy city, the new Jerusalem" — the promise of eventual salvation — we find a morale booster for contending with destructive powers. Trust in God, hope beyond death, the anticipation of eternal glory — these are not deterrents to safeguarding and improving our present habitat. Prayer, worship, and the sacraments are not designed to be an escape from responsibility; rather they should be an impetus to more effective service in behalf of mankind. To rivet our gaze on the celestial panorama is not to become immobilized with mystical rapture. Rather is it a spiritual "shot in the arm" which goads us into taking practical measures to remedy the ills which beset us. The advantage which Christians have is their indomitable faith that nothing is in vain — from the perspective of eternity they cannot fail. They can persevere. As the Messianic prophecy of Ezekiel puts it: "I will make . . . an everlasting covenant with them. . . . My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people." The divine fellowship is inexhaustible. Gloom and despair are changed into joyous expectation. The consummation comes in the unending newness of love and peace. Obedience to God's will becomes free felicity. There is an integration of time and eternity in which "the former things have passed away" and all things have become new.

Herein we find the basis for an environmental ethic which can halt the plunge toward disaster and readjust our whole sense of values. The American standard of living and increasing the gross national product are not the highest goals imaginable. What comes

as a jolt to many of us is the discovery that we have abused God's creation to achieve our much-vaunted economic superiority. To reverse this trend, to save precious resources, we may have to cut back and reduce our level of production and consumption. Our "repentance," our resolution to quit sinning against the generosity of God, implies that our basic attitude — our entire life style — must be drastically altered. Who are the culprits in ravaging the earth? Not overpopulated India or China, but affluent America. The average American uses more electric power than 55 Asians or Africans. A single American accounts for more detergents, pesticides, radioactive substances, fertilizers, fungicides, and defoliants in the rivers and oceans than are produced by a thousand people in Indonesia. One American is responsible for putting more carbon monoxide and benzopyrene in the air than 200 Pakistanis. Americans consume three times more food than the impoverished masses in Latin America, and each year the average citizen in the United States discards some 2,500 pounds of waste. Our guilt is overwhelming.

But restitution can be made. Change is possible. And faithful Christians can lead the way through their emphasis on the Biblical doctrines of stewardship and discipleship in the light of the cross. *Time* magazine and other popular journals have quoted an article by Lynn White Jr. in which he blames the Christian church for the environmental crisis. "Christianity," he writes, "in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions . . . not only established a dualism of man and nature, but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects."

This interpretation is an utter distortion of the truth. God's command to subdue the earth and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth

is not a blank check. Man has no license for ruthless devastation or conspicuous consumption. Man is only a temporary caretaker of whatever he uses for his nurture and well-being. In both the Old and New Testaments God is portrayed as the supreme owner and distributor of everything which exists. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," the psalmist proclaims. "Every beast of the field is mine and the cattle on a thousand hills. . . ." Man stands in a creature relationship to God. According to the parables of Jesus he must give an account of how reliable and how competent he has been in utilizing what has been entrusted to his safekeeping. The kind of crass materialism which saturates our present-day society comes under the sovereign ecologist's indictment. "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?" "It is written," Jesus rebuked Satan, "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Sensual delights and the accumulation of wealth are not the sum total of what is desirable. Apart from a firm commitment to God in Christ, expressed in love and concern for people and a wholesome environment, life can become empty and drab. If personal sacrifice is necessary to reclaim the earth, if we are compelled to give up luxuries and conveniences to which we have become accustomed, we can find our inspiration in the sign of the cross. In keeping with the paradoxical teaching of Jesus, we may lose our life through self-indulgence, while we may save our life through self-denial.

As much as possible we should make the vision of a New Jerusalem a present reality—even while we await its completion beyond time and history. What remains to be said is that our commendable determination to enhance the quality of our life must be translated into specific, concrete acts of reparation and advancement. Getting the facts and disseminating educational information

are prerequisites for effective action. Churches and schools can sponsor teach-ins with films, speakers, and literature. As individuals, Christians can be examples to their neighbors and associates by starting with simple and obvious steps like salvaging aluminum cans and newspapers, refusing to buy products in disposable containers, forming car pools, and eliminating waste wherever possible. Even to renounce our fascination with superfluous gadgets would be a move in the right direction.

A balanced ecology, of course, will never be attained without political action. Pressures will have to be exerted, boycotts will have to be organized against the corporations which contaminate our air and water. Agitation for remedial measures in every community will have to be deliberately instigated. Strategic coalitions will have to be formed which can elect candidates who champion a healthy environment. The automobile industry must be required to remove lead additives from gasoline and eventually find an alternative to the internal combustion engine. And the mammoth problem of a burgeoning population will have to be dealt with on many fronts.

All the proposals which might be made for ecological action cannot be detailed from the pulpit. What a sermon on this subject can provide is a sharpened awareness of our responsibility and a review of the Biblical doctrines of creation and stewardship which can motivate our involvement. Isaiah's oracle can be a grim reminder of how severe God's judgment could become if we persist in our violation of His laws and misuse His good gifts. On the other hand, the vision of the Apocalypse—the beauty of the holy city, the elimination of pain and suffering—can encourage us in our pursuit of goodness and righteousness in our endeavor to preserve and to improve the world in which we live. Throughout our struggles, in moments of

pessimism and apparent defeat, our hearts can be uplifted as we look ahead toward our eventual destination: "Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest . . . that Promised Land with radiancy of glory and bliss beyond comparison; that sweet and blessed country, the home of God's elect."

"These words are trustworthy and true. . . . He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen." May we be found faithful and obedient servants! "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Berkeley, Calif.