

DEFENDING THE FAITH TODAY (5)

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Scott Hoezee, *Remember Creation: God's World of Wonder and Delight* (Eerdmans, 1998), 115 pages.

Scott Hoezee, a Reformed pastor in Grand Rapids, has written two books dealing with Christian attitudes toward creation. He is concerned that Bible-believing Christians, both Reformed and evangelical, allow unbelievers to set the pace in celebrating the beauty of creation, in taking seriously our duty to protect it, and also in acknowledging the great gift we receive in the scientific study of nature.

He admits that in some respects this attitude is understandable. After all, creation is now considered to be the accidental result of a naturalistic evolutionary process; the ecological movement is in danger of being hijacked by militant animal rights activists and New Age pantheists; and modern science is all too often used as a basis for atheistic ideologies. But does this justify a Christian disregard of the ecological problems and a negative attitude toward science? Hoezee does not think so. His arguments, based on Scripture, are worth listening to. I concentrate in this article on the first of the two books, which reminds us of God's delight in his creation and points to ways in which we can learn to protect and nourish it. The second book, which focuses on the Christian attitude toward science, I hope to review in the next instalment.

The cosmic battle

In the introductory chapter, Hoezee observes that Christians appear to find debates on the *origin* of the universe much more important than the question how to live responsibly in the creation as it is *at present*. He refers to the "Top 25" list of books annually published by the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*. "The readers who select these books each year," he comments, "routinely vote for volumes that critique fossil records, Darwinian theories, and the state of scientific education in public schools and universities. . . . Books dealing with a Christian view of ecology or celebrating the beauty of God's handiwork have never made the list." He grants that Christians have a stake in the creation-evolution debate, but does not believe that the atheistic attacks are a real justification for us to "take more interest in this ancient aspect of the creation than we do in our daily celebration and maintenance of that same creation." After all, the Bible says far more about God's delight in his creation than about the origins of the world.

Referring to the use of the word *battle* in the titles of some anti-Darwinist books, Hoezee points out that the war about origins is not the only one we have to fight, nor is it the most important one. There is also the great battle between God and Satan about the *present* world. The Bible clearly reveals not only that God made all that exists, but also that he continues to love and cherish his work, "that he even now is redeeming it from the clutches of the Evil One, and that he will one day soon make a new creation of wonder and delight." "Given," Hoezee continues, "that the Son of God died to redeem the entire universe from its bondage to decay, is it any surprise that the devil even now seeks to undermine and sully the created splendors of this world? Given that one day soon God will renew everything from primroses to quasars, is it any surprise that the devil is furiously seeking to block that re-creation?" In short, promoting wrong ideas about cosmic origins is only one item "on the devil's very long list of things to do each day."

Why the lack of concern?

Hoezee notes that Christians who are most concerned about the authority of the Bible tend to be least concerned about the dangers to the environment. In fact, fundamentalists and other believers in biblical inerrancy are not infrequently hostile to environmentalism. In spite of their strong belief in biblical authority, they pay little or no attention to the many passages speaking of God's love for his creation. One reason for this paradoxical stance has already been mentioned, namely the anti-Christian attitude of many environmentalists. Hoezee points out, however, that we have a vicious circle here. "First, Christians largely ignore the physical world in favor of more 'spiritual' emphases. Then when non-Christians step into the ecological vacuum with predictably non-Christian teachings, Christians hold up those teachings as evidence that they must further distance themselves from the environmentalist movement." (I wonder, incidentally, if that process has not been going on in other areas as well – such as racism, apartheid, colonialism, gay bashing. Must we not explain the world's hostility toward Christianity in part on the fact that when unbelievers deal with what they consider injustices, many Christians not only distance themselves, but persistently and sometimes stridently criticize the efforts?)

The anti-Christian attitude of many environmentalists, then, is one reason why Christians ignore or oppose the movement. Another factor is that some believers see Christianity's only concern to be the saving of souls, and conceive of salvation "as an escape route out of the creation and into a heavenly realm – a realm often depicted as being as unlike this earth as is imaginable." Assuming the world to be transitory, doomed to final destruction, they do not believe there is any sense in bothering about its present "groaning" (Rom. 8), its degradation and decay. But in fact, Hoezee reminds us, creation will endure. The New Jerusalem will come down to *this* planet (Rev. 21). We are indeed looking forward to a better home, but that home will still be *this* earth, cleansed and renewed, for God will not allow his good work to be destroyed. Creation and its importance to God are pervasive themes in the Bible, from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. It is, Hoezee says, God's "first love." Redemption came in the service of creation. Why then do so many Christians speak of creation only in order to attack the theory of evolution? Is there no more to be said and done?

The care of creation

Fierce debates are taking place today on climate change, pollution, endangered species, the dying out of species, and the depletion of forests, water supplies, and natural resources in general. Scientists and politicians disagree on both the severity of these developments and their causes and ultimate consequences. Rather than taking a position on these complex and controversial issues, Hoezee wants to remind Christians of their duty – regardless of whether or not the environmental crisis is as severe as is being claimed – to heed the biblical command to be caretakers of the world.

That command is clear. So is the fact that Christians have all too often ignored it. Secular environmentalists like to put much of the blame for the world's decay on the biblical teaching that the human race is to dominate and subdue the earth and to rule over its fellow-creatures (Gen. 1:28). Although, as Hoezee points out, eco-unfriendliness occurs also in civilizations ruled by non-Christian religions like Buddhism and Hinduism and even more so in modern atheistic dictatorships, it is true that Christians have used the mandate as an excuse for exploiting the earth. They must realize that one can "rule" in very different ways, namely in a caring, godlike manner and in a despotic, demonic one. Having been made in God's image, humans must imitate him who rules in such a way that all

things happen “not by chance, but by his *fatherly* hand.” Christ ruled by emptying himself, thereby setting an example for his followers. Christians should also remember that the human being has been appointed a steward of creation and will be held accountable for the way he rules and uses it.

Care is to be shown for the physical creation, for the earth’s vegetation, and for the animal world. The animals receive much attention in the Bible. We read in Proverbs 12 that the righteous man cares for the needs of his animal. Herein he follows his God, who established a covenant with Noah *and with every living creature that was with him*, who ordained that domestic animals, like humans, be allowed to rest on the Sabbath, and who rejoiced when Nineveh repented, and that not only for the sake of the human inhabitants but also because of the “many cattle.” We can learn from the Psalms, the Book of Job, and the Bible generally, that God cares for and rejoices in all his creatures, also in those that are of no benefit to humans – the eagle, the raven, and the sparrow, the lion, the leviathan, the mountain goat, the wild ox, the coney, the ostrich, and the behemoth or hippopotamus, which “ranks first among the works of God” (Job 40:19). All creation praises its Maker, pouring forth speech day by day.

A helpful book

I hope that this book will find a wide readership among us. I recommend it in the first place to our Christian teachers who tell me they have a hard time finding the right approach when dealing with environmental issues. On the one hand they know of the exploitation of nature and of the need to end this abuse. But they are also aware of the anti-Christian, anti-human elements in modern environmentalist movements, elements that are endorsed by secular texts and perhaps even by ministerial guidelines. To find a “balanced” approach can be difficult.

Hoezee’s book, I believe, can be helpful here. It is a slim volume, engagingly written, honest, and thoroughly biblical. It conveys a genuine delight in the world of nature and a genuine gratitude for God’s bountiful gifts, admits the urgent need to protect creation, and gives pointers as to how we can do so, not first of all in the world at large, but in our own homes and localities. It will “speak” to children. But it also deserves the attention of the adults in the Christian community. The work of environmental protection may not be left in the hands of secularists only.