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**A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO THE ENVIRONMENT:  
WHAT ADVENTIST SCHOOLS, COLLEGES, AND  
UNIVERSITIES CAN DO**

by

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## **Introduction**

In recent years we have seen a surge in the awareness of environmental concerns and many regions of the world have seen major efforts taken by governments and nonprofit organizations in addressing this issue. In this paper I intend to explore firstly, the role Christians and Adventists in particular could play as stewards of the environment; secondly, the significance of our attitude to our overall mission of caring and being service-oriented citizens; and thirdly, I will be looking at some possible practical implementations of environmentally friendly applications of these environmental principles in our colleges and universities.

The Christian Church historically has been shy of being identified with or being closely involved with environmental movements and issues. To a large extent there was a “blame game” that was apparent between the environmentalists and the church. On one hand the environmentalists blame the church for some of the major environmental problems, such as overpopulation. The text “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:22) has often been used to point to the explosion of the human population. On the other hand, some Christians referred to environmental enthusiasts as “tree huggers” and attributed environmental problems to technological advances. These opposing views sort of minimized any involvement or association of Christians with “green ideas”, and anything “environmental or green” was looked on as being anti-Christian or worldly.

The world is poised to take stock of the ways we interact with our natural systems. As Christians we have a moral and social responsibility of being on the forefront, insofar as this appears to be in line with biblical principles. There is a misconception and maybe even an excuse among some that has led us to feel that we need not worry about the environment, as we are just

“passing through” in this planet and that our focus needs to be on heaven rather than this earth. Others among us want to have nothing to do with being identified with the pantheistic view that nature is to be worshiped or the idea that all creatures are of equal value, so we then stay clear of any association with environmental forefronts. In this paper I will look at the need for us as Christians to take note of the instructions given to Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:15 where they were commissioned to take care of the earth. I will also be dealing with simple everyday tasks that all of us could do both at home and on our campuses that will help us move in the direction of being more environmentally friendly.

I would like for us to consider an important aspect of biblical teachings that we as church and educational institutions have not paid much attention to in the past. I trust that this will help us as educators and the church as a whole to take a moment and analyze the way our daily lives affect the environment. I will give biblical references and implications which could help us shape our thoughts and actions towards becoming more environmentally conscious. I also hope that we as educators will play an active role in integrating faith and learning in our institutions through the promotion of good stewardship of the environment. We need to impress in the minds of our youth the idea of being environmentally friendly and instill in them the values of environmental stewardship. It would be important for each of us to consider the implications of our failure to take care of the earth. One implication of this failure is clearly stated in Revelation 11:18, where it says that the Lord will destroy those who destroy the earth. This should not be seen as a punishment or God’s wrath poured out, but as the consequence of our neglect of following sound environmental principles given in the Scriptures. Adventist campuses could take advantage of this timely venue in reaching out to the community through environmentally friendly projects and services.

## **The Christian Worldview on the Environment**

In Genesis 1:1 we see God's handiwork manifested in His creation, which declares the glory of God. "In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth" and it goes to conclude in Chapter 2 that God's act of creation brought together something that was "good". Throughout the Bible there are references to God's stewardship principle and a call for us to take care of the earth. It is apparent that before the fall there was perfect harmony between the biogeophysical environment and humans. Ellen White in the book Education pointed out that all creatures followed the great law of life (E. White, 1953, pp. 103). After the fall however there was an evident change in the way humans related to the environment. There was a need to toil and deal with thorns and thistles (Gen 3:18). The environment was often viewed as a force to reckon with. Many viewed progress in light of controlling nature and the environment. Early sailors saw the wind and storms as a challenge to overcome, so the Christian view was rooted in the view that nature was an entity to be controlled and managed rather than protected and defended. The forces of nature were to be gotten under control and harnessed for our benefits and any form of association with nature was looked upon with skepticism. This is largely a result of the association of pagans and pantheistic ideology which include the worship of nature and specific objects of nature. In many cultures nature is looked upon as a deity to be worshipped. This is evident in many eastern religions where devotees actually worship large trees and other features of the environment.

It is understandable that Christians perceive this as being contrary to Christian principles of worshipping the Creator and not nature that was created by God. This has led to many instances whereby Christians including Adventists remain in the backseat when it comes to addressing the issues of the environment. This is also probably the reason why the Evangelical Church stayed

completely away from any involvement in environmental issues until very recently. In the PBS (Public Broadcast Services) documentary “Is God Green?” Moyer talks about a pastor in Boise, Idaho, USA whose careful study of the Scriptures revealed how the neglect of the environment was hurting humans. We have allowed our prejudices about the environment to mask the many humanitarian and health issues that are related to the environment. The Bible has several references to the importance of caring for the environment. There are also many anecdotal evidences of how simple Christ’s was life here on earth. His life must have had a very low “carbon footprint,” a term which relates to the addition of carbon dioxide to the environment by our activities polluting the air and raising the temperature. During the time of Jesus environmental problem was not an issue because there was no massive use of pesticides, or excessive drilling and use of fossil fuel or dumping of nuclear wastes as we see today around the world.

Christians have long been looked upon by the secular world particularly the “environmentalists” as anti-environment and at times Christians are blamed for many of the problems we face today. This position was exonerated by Lynn White in several of his writings particularly his 1967 essay on “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” where he argued that the civilization of his time exploited nature to such a degree that he questioned not only the quality but the very survival of the civilization itself. He also pointed out that even though the rise of science and technology was largely responsible for the large scale ecological disruption, it was the way they were used that was in question, not so much the technology itself. Lynn White found scapegoat in the history of the Judo-Christian ideology. He pointed out that according to their traditions it was perfectly acceptable to exploit nature even though they agreed that it was wrong to exploit humans; so he espoused the idea that the western society had a dualistic ethical

system. He saw Christians having a polarized view in the values placed on humans and the environment. According to White, Judaism and Christianity maintained an uncalled for dichotomy between humans and the environment (L. White, 1967), a thesis that has since been repeatedly challenged.

Lynn White (1973) looked for his reasons in Scripture and wrote “God planned all of this explicitly for man’s benefit and rule; no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes.” Lynn White (1973) did acknowledge that the Christians in the seventies were no longer as anti-environmental as the earlier Christians. Howard (2002) recounted that “early discussion of the role of Christianity in the environmental crisis was adversarial and unproductive”. Howard further added “I believe that all such attempts to cast blame for current environmental problems on any group or belief system are ultimately counterproductive”. Today most environmental groups generally do not look at Christians as a scapegoat to blame for the current environmental problems.

It seems as though Lynn White is mistaking western industrialists for Christianity. The Bible is consistent about caring for the earth. There are many references to sound ecological principles and practices in the Bible, and that is where Christianity should have its true foundation and basis. The Bible speaks about the year of jubilee, (Lev 25:1-11; Deut 15:1-11; Ex 23:10-11) when the land was left untilled for a year after six years of cultivation. That is good and sound agricultural practice. This time was also known as the “agricultural year” or “sabbatical year”. Often anything that is western is associated with Christianity, and this is not necessarily the case. The Bible is very clear about the value system that God has shared with the Israelites and we have ample biblical evidence of a God who has laid these principles for our benefit.

Francis Schaeffer (1976) was not only concerned with a “thinking” faith but a “living” faith and he was a good example of someone who practiced what he preached. As a Christian, he uses the Bible as a source of his guide to living and being a faithful steward of the environment. Schaefer (1970) in his book “Death in the city” uses Paul’s writings in the book of Romans and drawing lessons from there for our own time. He argues that we need not only believe what Paul is saying but act on it in our daily living.

Today we see all around us in the cities and in remote places all kinds of environmental poverty. We are confronted with a challenge that seems insurmountable, but we need to keep in mind that at times like this, we need the Bible where the principles of ecology are laid out for our consideration. We need to consider our attitude towards the environment and reflect on our roles as educators in the training of our students. Our best example would be to look at how Jesus dealt with the issues of His days. When there was something that affected people adversely, particularly those who were less privileged in the society, He was there to assist. There were numerous occasions when He attended to the needy and displaced. In light of His custom, it would be easy to assume that Jesus would have attended to what is a major assault on the human race today. According to the United Nations, it is estimated that about 18,000 children die due to hunger and malnutrition every day, and about 17% of the world’s population has no safe and clean water to drink.

Environmental pollution is also a major concern worldwide. As I look at the life of Jesus, it is easy to see that He would be there to help with the hungry children who are suffering due to the abuse by uninformed farmers and ranchers of the land which now fail to produce crops leading to massive desertification. Jesus will be there where hundreds suffer as a result of polluted water, air and the soil. We are constantly reminded of the results of mismanagement of

our environment as we saw during the 2004 Tsunami in Asia and 2005 Katrina in New Orleans. Some may say that those were natural disasters but they were a mismanagement of our coastal shorelines. In my research I have found that very often it is the human disturbances that lead to erosion of coastlines that fails to act as natural barriers (Perumal, 1994; Perumal & Maun 1999; Perumal & Maun 2006). Man made buildings and levees are no match for the waves but a naturally formed sand dune would well have withstood the impacts of the storm and waves. Countries like the Netherlands and Canada have long learned from these experiences and avoided further calamities.

### **Environmental Issues and its Global Impact on Humans**

In the last decade or so we have seen a major shift in the way the world views environmental issues. There has been a greater acceptance on the part of citizens of the world, including some skeptics, to pay some attention to issues like climate change, population explosion, hunger, and global health. There is greater awareness today that the sad state of the environment in some ways is linked to the way we as humans have dealt with the environment. Our way of life and the technological advance we have made has to a large extent, been responsible for the calamities and our advances have been at the detriment of the environment. The IPCC's (International Panel on Climate Change) report in 2007 pointed out that climate change occurs largely due to human activities and effects on the environment. In this section I will be discussing the relevance of these environmental issues to our lives. To a large extent how we continue to conduct our lives in regard to the environment will depend on our environmental worldview.

Some look at certain areas of the world and their local weather patterns and see a paradox as some of these areas are getting colder instead of becoming warmer. They wonder “where global warming” is which has been reported in the media and scientific studies. The issue is not to take specifics out of its context. As we look at local weather we could notice such contradictory trends but reports and studies consistently show that there is a global overall trend of warming and a pattern of climate change. Many studies also show that there is a correlation between temperature increase and carbon dioxide increase in the atmosphere.

There is ample evidence in our environment today that the use of chemical or inorganic pesticides, insecticides, rodenticides and herbicides has drastically affected our soil, water and to some extent air qualities. Widespread use of such chemicals inspired Rachel Carson (1962) to write her epic book “Silent Spring”. This book is largely regarded as being instrumental for the modern environmental movement. It has awakened many to look at our actions and responsibility as stewards to the environment. The discharge of toxic chemicals into the air through automobile exhausts and industrial chimneys and discharge outlets has contributed substantially to the assault of the biosphere. Consider the death of about two hundred individuals around the Minamata Bay area in Japan called the “Minamata Bay disease” in 1956. These toxins were traced to the mercury discharged from industries into the bay. Proper disposal could have prevented such incidence. Another case is the “Love Canal” episode in the Niagara region in USA, where hundreds of children were affected from irresponsible dumping of toxins and nuclear wastes until 1953 in a municipal area, where a school was later built. Scores of such stories worldwide show that we as humans are often unaware of the real consequences of getting involved in activities that cause deaths and despair. We as Christians need to be in the forefront,

educating our students and church members to be aware of and to be responsible for the environment we live in.

It is quite apparent that there is increasing drought, poverty, disease and hunger worldwide. The Church through its humanitarian arm, ADRA (Adventist Disaster and Relief Agency) and a number of other churches and school groups have helped in the alleviation of these problems, but we know well that the scope is immense. As pointed out eloquently by an ancient Chinese proverb we need to teach people how to fish rather than just giving them the fish for a time. As educators we must find ways to incorporate the culture of living responsibly in relation to our environment. We must be mindful of our actions and be thoughtful of how our actions will affect the environment, our home. This idea and value system well instilled in our young people will go a long way in creating responsible stewards that will carry that value system on to the world they interact with. The root cause of many of the problems is a lack of genuine care and responsibility towards the Creator and “His creation-the earth, our environment and home”.

### **Biblical Guidelines on Environmental Stewardship**

The spirit of biblical literature is rather clear about the value humans should place on the environment. We are not to regard it as some form of a deity but rather to care and use it appropriately to our benefit. As alluded in Genesis 2:15 the Lord, right there in the Garden of Eden, instructed Adam to take care of the environment. It is a very basic ecological principle that the various biogeochemical processes of the environment work in concert to bring together the dynamics of a healthy environment. An underlying problem with the environment today is that lack of “care” for the environment which has disrupted the fabric of many ecosystems on our

planet. More than ever we need to recognize today, as the paradigm in environmental attitudes shifts, that our calling is to be responsible stewards of the environment. Revelation 11:18 clearly states that “the Lord will destroy those who destroy the Earth.”

Ellen G. White in Desire of Ages pointed out that “If men today were simple in their habits, living in harmony with nature’s law’s, as did Adam and Eve in the beginning, there would be an abundant supply for the needs of the human family. There would be fewer imaginary wants, and more opportunities to work in God’s ways. But selfishness and indulgence of unnatural taste have brought sin and misery into the world, from excess on the one hand, and from our wants on the other” (White, 1898). Here lie many of our problems; we live in a “throw away” society. We love to get more and more and our values are often measured by what we have rather than who we are. At the core of many of the problems we face, lie our attitude toward life and the value that we place on material things. This problem is compounded because of our technologically savvy society and the myriad of conveniences afforded readily by goods and services available.

Otewa (2001) commented that “Humanity is not in control of Nature but he/she is rooted in it”. He went on to state what he saw as an Adventist worldview in the following passage. “The other emerging view is the Christian worldview, especially the Adventist perspective, where Christ is seen as the bridge between the human race and the environmental restoration process. In this perspective, whenever one comes to a deadlock, one should humbly ask, what would Jesus do in this situation?” I agree with Otewa in that we as Adventists should ask ourselves often when dealing with any issues including environmental matters. I can see the compassionate hands of Jesus reaching out to those displaced by environmental atrocities. Looking at the life of Jesus, it is difficult to miss that point about His love and care for His children.

Henry Zuill (1994) in his paper referred to the verses in the Scriptures found in Matthew 6:26, 28-30: “Oh ye of little faith!” or “Where is your faith?” He wrote, in the same passage, of the Father’s care: “Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more valuable than they? So why do we worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now, if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore, do not worry”. Students have often asked me why God is allowing people all over the world to go hungry and I would tell them that God could provide for all our needs but He allows this as an opportunity for us to be accountable. He would do so in the same manner that Jesus did at the feeding of the multitudes. He asked the disciples to feed them, creating an opportunity for integration of faith and learning. Likewise the world’s hungry are an opportunity for us to put our faith into practice. We need to find ways to collaborate with Jesus and bring help to those suffering and misplaced. It is beautifully put into music in the 14<sup>th</sup> century lyrics by Teresa Avila that we are God’s hands.

*“God has no hands but our hands to do His work today,*

*God has no feet but our feet to lead others His way today,*

*God has no voice but our voice to tell others how He died,*

*and, God has no help but our help to lead them to His side”*

**Christians Today and Our Role as Environmental Stewards in a Global Environment**

Our very best and ultimate example on living is Jesus. It is clear from the gospels that Jesus was a caring individual. This is evidenced by His involvement in healing and His concern with human needs. We as Christians have a defined mandate to be concerned about the less fortunate in our midst, and today there is an increasing multitude of citizens who are victims of environmental degradation all over the world. We may see those who die each day due to lack of food, clean water or other resources simply as statistics.

As Christians it is our responsibility to walk in the footsteps of our Lord recognizing the pain and suffering experienced by many because of environmental neglect. We need to be actively participating in alleviating their pain from these environmental ills that has brought many to the brink of environmental catastrophe worldwide. We are often confronted with questions by students and by our academic community and our church community, as to what we could do as Christians to be good stewards of the environment. In this section I will list a number of areas where we can make a difference. They are energy conservation, water conservation, food consumption, transportation choices, and the 3 R's –recycling, reusing, and reducing. I will then consider how we can participate and make it a part of our living as we attempt to reduce our carbon footprint in this planet. We often consider ourselves as the remnant and the chosen, and I believe as Adventists we have a very special role today as we are confronted with the need for caring for our environment. As environmental stewards we ought to be in the forefront in practicing and being good examples when it comes to how we live our lives and to avoid the “tragedy of the commons” scenario that is so often seen in our societies. Garrett Hardin (1968) wrote about the “tragedy of the commons” an essay which highlighted two destructive attributes (i) the little harm I do to the environment does not matter, and (ii) if I don't do it then someone

else will harm it anyway. Everyone thinks only about how he/she can benefit from the environment and not consider the fact that when it is harmed, all of us will suffer.

### **Implementation of Environmental Projects on Adventist Campuses**

Many Adventist colleges and universities have taken steps towards being environmentally friendlier, but there is always more room for improvements. Environmental projects lend well in offering excellent opportunities for integrating faith and learning for our students in a very practical way. At La Sierra University, in Riverside, California we have implemented a number of noticeable changes which have been viewed in the community as reflective of an institution of higher learning that not only promotes but integrates what we believe. About six years ago we began an environmental club, which has been involved with a number of the projects on and around the campus. The club is made up of students from various disciplines. They work together in finding ways to get the entire campus more aware of and involved in environmental issues.

The University Studies Program instituted a senior level “University Studies” course entitled “Humans and the Environment”. The Biology Department offers an Environmental Conservation Class and both these classes are “Service Learning Courses”. All LSU students must take at least 3 Service Learning courses before graduation. In these courses the students are divided into various groups and throughout the quarter the students work on community service projects that involve caring for the environment. This includes projects like organizing a “Garden of Senses” for the Riverside Disabilities Association. In this project, the students have set up a garden in a vacant plot near the campus that allows disabled individuals to work on some gardening to help them be occupied and provide valued activity. The students help organize the

garden and help prepare needed materials. Some groups are involved with the after schools program at the local public elementary schools. They work with the elementary students on various environmental projects including working on an organic garden, starting environmental clubs in these schools and also instituting recycling projects. At times, they sit and talk to the youngsters about values and caring for the environment. We have received very positive feedbacks both from the school administrators and our students through their reflections and evaluations. For the last six years at LSU we have been conducting an “Environmental Awareness Campaign” In this campaign, judges from the community visit all the departments on the campus and evaluate their environmental friendliness using a simple evaluation form. This culminates at the Earth Day chapel when the departments are recognized for their efforts and everyone is reminded and challenged to care for the environment.

We involve faculty and students with various community projects, from working with local schools in their after school programs to helping out in street cleaning activities. As part of their service learning students put into practice what they have learned in the class. We establish research projects that focus on growing food crops that are drought resistant and students work in collaboration with the University’s SIFE (Students’ In Free Enterprise) team to help drought stricken areas of Rwanda, Africa. The Environmental Club along with the Chemistry Department initiated a biodiesel project and the pilot project was successful. This project provided a venue for the cafeteria to dispose their used oil without harming the environment because now the students are making biodiesel from the used cafeteria oil. Currently a project is underway on the campus spear-headed by the Environmental Club to use the open space in the parking area to install solar panels which will serve a dual purpose of generating renewable energy as well as providing shade for the vehicles.

Another simple yet profound step we could take as institutions is cutting down on the use of “throw away” items such as plastic drinking water bottles, which have become ubiquitous in our society today. It has gotten to the point where we feel good about using them. It gives a false impression that the water is clean and yet in many areas the tap water is just as clean if not better. Clean water is important and we should make every attempt at obtaining clean water for drinking, but that could be easily obtained from a filter and placed in a reusable bottle. Even though plastic bottles can be recycled most of them land in landfills and in areas of the environment that lead to contamination of our water systems. These bottles are made of plastics that leach out toxic chemicals when the bottles are exposed to sunlight, so besides harming the environment we are harming ourselves.

## **Conclusions**

Christians are called to be a people of principle and purpose as exemplified by Jesus Christ, our Lord, Savior and Master Educator. We as Christian educators are commissioned to take this message to our homes, classrooms and campuses. The opportunity of integrating these ideals in the minds of our students will have a major impact on the future of our church. Our influence and participation in helping our youth to realize that the natural resources are exhaustible and all on it is not always going to be there for us, will have a tremendous impact on our Adventist community at large. As we embark on this challenge we will be confronted with the enormity of the task and we need to recognize that it will take commitment and prayer. We can personally know that this is going to help another child or organism get a chance at survival in this planet. Furthermore we can integrate many of these environmental principles into our own lives as we involve students in meaningful environmental projects on and off our campuses.

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