Luther as Environmentalist:
The Liberating Gospel and Care for Creation

By Johan Bergh

As a responsible citizen who cares about the livelihood of others, you’ve probably begun to develop habits of reducing, reusing and recycling. What you may or may not be doing as a religious leader in your community is utilizing your public voice and office to advance the cause of caring for creation. My intention here is to describe how the gospel of Jesus frees us to care and act, and to invite you to use your voice and life as a religious leader to step into the challenges of environmental stewardship and justice. My intention here is to invite you to get grace and to go green. Go GreenGrace!

But why should you? After all, isn’t your job as a faithful follower of Christ about working with folks on their relationship with God and not about working on their relationship with others, to say nothing of how it is not about working on their relationship to plants, animals, soil, and water?

Actually, that is not much of an issue anymore. I am referring to the part about not paying attention to environmental concern because it is viewed as outside the purview of religious life. Mainline religious folk have made this connection for a long time. In recent years evangelicals have also made advances to join the movement. Indeed, instead of refusing to see environmental justice as integral to the faith, you may feel motivated to step out and act. Or you may already be involved. If that is the case, great! But please get busy, because the planet is on life support. On the other hand, maybe you do have hesitations about seeing environmental advocacy as part of the faith. If you do, I want to offer the fundamental reasons why the two realms are connected.

But there is more. Maybe you are convinced that political and social environmental action is absolutely critical, and you are only too happy to turn away from what you see as the church’s historical shallowness of focusing so much on “salvation” and neglecting the weightier matters of justice. Maybe you want to take Christianity to the streets. You want to abandon the worship buildings because you believe that faith is people loving people with God’s love and not God loving people with God’s love. If that is the case, I want to offer one fundamental reason why I believe this view is misguided: salvation for Christians is not a prelude to activism, and certainly not tangential to activism—it is itself the ultimate activism and the only action that matters. God destroys our self-

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righteousness and replaces that self with God’s Self as described in Romans 6. The result is that this New Self only does what God’s Self does, namely, love the world—including the Earth and all creatures, not just human beings—at all costs.

David Rhoads writes concerning the cosmic nature of salvation spoken of by Joseph Sittler:

Sittler pointed to this passage from Colossians [1:15-20] as an adequate Christology. Here is an understanding of the cross of Jesus that extends to the whole created order. Jesus did not die for humans alone to be reconciled to God. Instead, Jesus’ death is a reconciliation of all things in the whole of creation. The consequence is that humans too are reconciled with “all things” and therefore placed in a new and responsible relationship with the whole created order. The work of Christ as a cosmic redeemer catches the sinner up in a drama of redemption that includes the whole cosmos and is therefore able to address our environmental crisis.

So I want to remove a huge wall that keeps those of us in the church from paying attention to and doing something about our not-so-green Earth. This same wall keeps social activists in the church from seeing that Jesus Christ is not simply the best social activist—the one who embodies God’s love for all—but that he is actually the savior of the world.

The mission of God, incarnated in the person of Jesus, is to bless and heal the world and all persons in it so that we no longer have concern for personal destiny. God reconciles God’s Self with us (no thanks to us) and thus frees us to attend to the reconciliation needs at hand: our neighbor’s welfare and creation’s care.

Jesus did not establish a new religion named Christianity. Instead, in his very person and mission he destroyed—and continues to destroy—all attempts by people to construct belief systems or behavioral patterns that attempt to create or establish a relationship with God. He does this because relationship with God is already established by God. Jesus is God’s definitive word to that reality.

That being the case, Jesus shuts down all our religious pretense and shuts up all our religious bauble and calls us to do the following: instead of drawing all our attention to establishing our relationship with God, we are freed (the operative word here) to give all our attention to where it belongs (and to the only place, by the way, where God’s attention and heart goes), namely, to the care and well-being of creation which includes both our neighbor and our Earth.

Martin Luther put it this way: “God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does.” Today I would respectfully amend Luther and write, “God does not need our good works, but our neighbor and environment do.” Luther, in his famous work “On the Freedom of a Christian,” digs deeply into this notion of being freed by God from religion in order to practice justice and pursue wholeness. He creatively uses two contradictory statements to name one singular truth:

“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.”
“A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

The singular truth is this: a Christian is given the totality of life which includes identity, community, meaning, and destiny.

Thus firmly grounded in Christ, one’s full attention in life is given over to caring for what is before us (getting traction in our relationship with the world) rather than focusing on what is beyond us (getting traction in our relationship with God). Jesus’ own ministry demonstrates this. When teaching, he wanted the people of God to get into their thick skulls and hardened hearts that God has them covered, in all dimensions of life, and that therefore radical trust in God is possible: “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—yes, you of little faith?” (Matthew 6:28b-30).

Much of the Christian church has historically been criticized for its zealous attention to the salvation of the person without a corresponding attention to the salvation and well-being of society and Earth. Lutherans have often been included in this so-called “quietistic” faith category, and rightly so. This is because we have not seen the radical nature of the freedom we have been given—the Reconciliation—when we are “subject to none.” Oswald Bayer, in referring to how Christ destroys the Old Self (“Old Adam”) before Christ raises it from the dead, writes:

In view of the commonly held suspicion that Lutheran theology promotes a form of quietism, we need to point out that the reverse side of this death of the old Adam is supreme liveliness and activity. This is no paradox. If I finally pin myself down and judge myself on the basis of what I have done and do, and if I let myself be pinned down by others, by their looks, their words, and their behavior, I am no longer free. But if I am liberated from this captivity, from my own absolute claims and from those of others, then this gift of freedom brings with it a sense of perspective that enables me to distinguish between person and work. 

Lutheran systematic theologian Gerhard Forde addresses this "reformation explosion" that was muffled, if not extinguished, by Orthodoxy. Read what Forde writes about Luther’s first thesis that Christians are both perfectly free and perfectly servants:

‘A Christian is a perfectly free Lord of all, subject to none.’ What does that mean? The answer is that it means just what it says! A Christian is subject to absolutely no one or anything. It means that because of God’s act in Christ Jesus, that which makes you to be a Christian, you are absolutely free from all the nonsense that people usually and inevitably associate with the name of religion. It means that God has care of everything that has to do with your relationship to him. You are subject to no one, no institution, no set of rules, no laws, nothing.
absolutely nothing. You are free, absolutely free! God alone, absolutely, has done everything. Or to put it even more strongly: God has, in effect through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, put up for the entire world a blazing KEEP OUT sign over the whole province of religion and salvation. This, God has said, is my business alone. He has put you, and every one of us, out of the salvation business, and shoved us out into the world where our real business is. That, really, is what Luther meant when he insisted that salvation is by grace alone, sola gratia. It means that God has an absolute monopoly on the salvation business, and that you are free, absolutely free, when you simply take God at his word. He has made you a free Lord of all things.8

Notice where we are placed when we are taken out of the salvation business: as Forde says, we are “shoved out into the world where our real business is.”

The church’s real business, because of reconciliation by God in Christ Jesus, is the stewardship of neighbor and Earth. Yes, we are to be “witnesses” to the resurrection (Acts 1), but this, I believe, is exactly what we are doing when we work for justice with neighbor and Earth. This is not to deny or denigrate the place of actually naming the reason you are doing all this as a follower of Christ. 1 Peter 3:15 speaks of being prepared to name “the hope that is in you.” When you serve neighbor and do justice with creation you will be asked why. This is especially true if you do more than just give lip service. And when you are asked, you should name the source: Jesus Christ set you free to be this way.

If we think that care of creation and environmental stewardship are an add-on to our central mission as a member of Jesus’ church, then we may not have seen God’s mission of healing the world and blessing it through Christ Jesus. On the other hand, if we think that care of creation and environmental stewardship are critical for church advocacy and that church mission should focus on social action but not on Jesus’ cross and resurrection which save us from our sinful selves, then we may not have seen the full dimension of Christ’s atoning work. His work is not only central to our witness and work, but is, in the end, the only word of hope we have to offer the world, regardless of the correctness of our advocacy and action.

We are freed to go green, thanks to God’s grace.9

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1 www.greengracepostings.blogspot.com is the author’s blog where he welcomes your ongoing participation and partnership in environmental stewarding and the life of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

2 Cf. Brian McClaren, *Everything Must Change* (2007). In numerous publications, McClaren has marvelously chronicled the opening of his evangelical faith from a narrow concern for personal salvation to the wider mission of God for the healing of—and justice for—the entire planet. Evangelical churches seem to have been slower to embrace environmental stewardship as a core value within their faith. Napp Nazworth writes:
A 2009 survey conducted by The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life showed that white evangelical Protestants were less likely than any other major religious group to say that the Earth is warming because of human activity (34 percent). By comparison, 58 percent of the unaffiliated, 48 percent of white mainline Protestants, and 44 percent of white non-Hispanic Catholics said that the Earth is warming because of human activity. Among evangelicals, there have been two main groups representing either side of this debate. The Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI) represents global warming activists while Cornwall Alliance represents global warming skeptics (www.christianpost.com, June 12, 2012).


4 There are actually three major theological foci in my schemata that inform my thinking on faith and environment. Shared here, "Reconciliation," is the foundational one and the topic of this brief treatment, but the others build upon it. Listed below are the two others:

Restoration
God's justice calls for all those who love God and neighbor and creation to work for the restoration of just and equitable relationships. Abuse of natural resources and neglect of natural ecological dynamics will continue to exact a heavy toll for both society and environment. It is imperative that we restore the ecological balance.

Recreation
Enjoying the outdoors with a myriad of activities and sports over the years is a key way in which I have appreciated and engaged our natural environment. From my early years when my mother simply wanted us to play outside and "get some fresh air," to my adult years when actively running, biking, hiking or playing ball, I have been re-created while I recreate. In this sense, activity and play outdoors, enjoying or employing the natural world for recreation, is a gift of God to me for renewal and vitality daily.


9 An excellent way for congregations of all faiths to get comprehensive traction in environmental stewardship action and advocacy is the Greenfaith Certification Program (www.Greenfaith.org).