

---

# Pro Rege

---

Volume 21 | Number 1

Article 6

---

September 1992

## Environment and the Christian: What Can We Learn from the New Testament? (Book Review)

Delmar Vander Zee  
*Dordt College*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)

---

### Recommended Citation

Vander Zee, Delmar (1992) "Environment and the Christian: What Can We Learn from the New Testament? (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 21: No. 1, 23 - 25.  
Available at: [http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol21/iss1/6](http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol21/iss1/6)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).



A quarterly faculty publication of  
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

One final note of sadness. In both novels, Iowa men do not fare well. They lack passion, except for their work. They show little, if any, ability to understand the needs of the women with whom they live. They can be well-meaning, but they appear domineering and brutal at worst, Old McDonald bumpkins at best.

Others will have to assess the accuracy of this evaluation—whether or not what Smiley, a woman, and Waller, a man, are suggesting about Iowa men, farmers in particular, has any currency.

Obviously, however, what is true is that both of these books continue to flesh out a paradigm of contemporary life almost overworked in recent years: that of deeply feeling, strongly sympathetic women being dominated and often emotionally, if not physically, violated by powerful, unfeeling men. One sees and

reads it everywhere—in one of last year's surprise movie hits, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, as well as another recent Pulitzer Prize novel, *The Last Confederate Woman Tells All*.

But there's reason to be proud. Ever since the turn of the century America has enjoyed brilliantly accomplished regionalistic writing from the hands of its Southern writers—Wolfe, Faulkner, O'Connor, Welty and a host of others. Perhaps with Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and, to a lesser extent, Waller's *Bridges of Madison County*, American readers may become acquainted with a whole new world—the American Midwest.

Midwesterners—Iowans in particular—could do worse than the start we've received from these two novels.

*The Environment and the Christian: What can we learn from the New Testament?* edited by Calvin B. De Witt (Grand Rapids: Baker) 1991. 156 pages, paperback. \$7.95. Reviewed by Delmar Vander Zee, Professor of Biology.

This book, one in a growing genre of literature by Christians responding to the global environmental crisis, is an important book because of its focus and its rigorous contents. Lynn White's broadside, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," (*Science* 155:1203-1207), provided the wakeup call to the Christian community. A key response to L. White was that his criticism rested on a misreading of mainly one Old Testament text, Gen. 1:28, and that this Old Testament dominion passage cannot be narrowly interpreted outside other biblical contexts. Much has been found in the OT to support a biblical view and an obedient response toward the global environmental crisis. But, what of the New Testament? Is the NT silent? These questions were behind the Au Sable Forum (Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, Mancelona, MI) that called together several NT scholars in the summer of 1989 to address the question in this book's subtitle.

Arising out of a forum, each chapter of the book was written by one person who heard the other presentations and subsequent discussions before submitting a final copy. That integrative process plus the carefully drafted introduction and epilogue by the editor, Calvin De Witt, makes the book very readable and coherent.

In the "Introduction" a framework is laid by reviewing seven degradations of creation (land conversion and habitat destruction, species extinction, land degradation, resource conversion and waste production, global toxification, alteration of planetary exchange, human and cultural degradation). These are not a pedantic litany of physical and biological prob-

lems, but rather a whole view of the global crisis divided into manageable categories. The editor discusses briefly how each degradation ought to be viewed biblically, and directs readers to later chapters by references and questions.

In the opening chapter, "Christ as creator and redeemer," Loren Wilkinson wades in with the NT concept of Christ's lordship. Is he both a cosmic and personal Christ? How are these related? To get at these questions the author explores the OT meanings and creation contexts of "spirit," "law," and "wisdom," as seen, for example, in Gen. 1, Ps. 104, and Prov. 8. He connects this with the NT and its presentation of Christ as Lord of the cosmos (John 1:1-3 and John 3:16). This incarnate cosmic Christ came to be an atonement, understood as the renewal of creation as well as satisfaction and example. Wilkinson argues that if atonement is seen only as satisfaction and example, it should not be surprising to find Christian ethics that neglect human involvement with the creation. Only the view of atonement as renewal of creation takes into full account the cosmic lordship of Christ.

The next major NT theme addressed in the book is "Christ as the second Adam." This theme is developed by Ronald Manahan, who probes deeply into the meaning and role of the first Adam from the OT and Hebrew tradition. From the key NT passages in I Cor. 15 and Rom. 5 the analogy is made between the first Adam and Christ, the second Adam. Is this just an interesting theological exercise in comparing two biblical figures? No, argues the author; the fall

of the first Adam into sin had cosmic-creational implications. Humankind became alienated from God, others, and the land. All these relationships are ultimately—and temporally—to be restored in Christ. “The beneficence of these good relationships comes through the One who was fully obedient to his Father” (53). As a concluding encouragement Manahan notes that the Christian calling is broad and inclusive. “The followers of the last Adam should be foremost among those vitally interested in the cosmos” (55).

Not only is Christ figured as the second Adam in the NT, but Christ’s resurrection is seen as a vindication of creation. Raymond Van Leeuwen focuses on what the resurrection implies for all of creation, not just humankind. Van Leeuwen begins this chapter by examining the shallowness of what is meant and practiced by “New Testament Christians,” those Christians who look only to the NT for literal directions for living. He reminds us that the scripture of the apostles and of Paul, useful for “teaching . . . and training in righteousness,” was for them the Old Testament! He also notes that the modern church’s emphasis on soul saving and world flight is essentially the same as the heresy of Marcion. A secular counterpart to this heresy is the subjugation of nature by technology and exploitation-for-profit—a modern Gnosticism traceable to Francis Bacon.

From Romans 4 Van Leeuwen notes that creation and resurrection are parallel realities, and that Christ was raised for (did not just die for) our justification and righteousness. This means for today, Van Leeuwen argues, hope of and for the created order also—because of the resurrection; the incarnate (earthly) body arose! Resurrection is not to be seen as being raised—as an escape—from the earth. “The righteous requirement of the law is nothing less than a life lived in harmony with the Creator and the creation” (64). “That justified situation means that in Christ we are restored to Adam’s position of steward of the earth on behalf of the Creator” (65).

Van Leeuwen also points out that the creation will be transformed rather than destroyed. This is a pivotal point, because many NT Christians excuse their use and abuse of the physical and biotic creation by saying it is going to be destroyed anyway. This “use and destroy” lifestyle does not find support in scripture. How then shall we live?

The cosmic “new creation” of God begins with those who are “in Christ”; so also Paul’s ethic begins with a focus on human beings as our neighbors, fellow image-bearers of God. But precisely because our existence is bodily . . . [we are

earthlings], the NT Christian ethic cannot, and does not ignore God’s good creation. Love for neighbor cannot exist without love for the earth . . . . For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

So ends this powerful chapter.

One of the ongoing questions facing Christian environmental scholars is, why is there not a direct NT call to care for the earth? Gordon Zerbe addresses this by focusing on the “Kingdom of God and stewardship of creation.” He cites four categories of meanings for the Kingdom of God in the NT: 1) the Kingdom as a vision of future salvation, 2) the Kingdom as a present reality, 3) the Kingdom as a new order of conduct, 4) the Kingdom as evident in a new, redeemed community. In all these, God’s rule is exemplified in the creation of the universe—a theme implied and undergirding all of the NT. He develops the argument along the following lines. In the Kingdom as future vision (Rom. 8) all *creation* is restored, and several biblical passages confirm that restored humanity’s proper habitat is earth. In Matt. 5 the meek inheriting the earth is equal to receiving the Kingdom (82). Those who inherit the new order (Rev. 5) will be made a “Kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on earth.” Even the Lord’s prayer, a most powerful witness to the NT testimony to earth-keeping, calls for God’s will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven. This prayer asking for God’s order in the present age is not limited to personal piety. Moreover, personal piety is carried out *on earth*. If earthkeeping is not explicit, it certainly is implicit in the NT, the author rightly argues.

Zerbe continues to develop the NT view of the Kingdom by insisting that one’s coming into the Kingdom is manifest by true righteousness and that this righteousness or new order of conduct is comprehensive (88). If righteousness involves restoring, then the human/nature brokenness must also be restored. This is what Isaiah 11 and 65 and Rev. 11 and 19 clearly imply. Especially worth noting is Rev. 11, where those who destroy the earth will themselves be destroyed. Finally, argues Zerbe, the new redeemed community “must see part of its redemptive mission as helping to restore the degradation of creation” (89).

The last issues discussed by Zerbe are the questions of earth’s temporality (since the earth is passing away, why care for it) and the Christian theological tendency to “transmute the temporal horizon of redemption into a spatial one,” or as others have put it, being so spiritually minded that we are of no earthly good. He critically analyzes both questions and shows that

neither holds up under biblical scrutiny. "A proper understanding of the kingly rule of God does not allow Christians to escape the present but calls them to be co-workers for the realization of God's rule in and for creation" (92).

Vernon Visick's contribution to this book was perhaps the most difficult. The key question that he addresses is "Does the NT—in particular, the life of Jesus—suggest to us an effective, politically relevant method for responding to the ecological crisis?" (95). Since direct texts and passages are essentially absent on this topic, the context of Jesus' life is investigated. He bases much of his argument on D. Erhenfeld's work on the Jewish tradition, which was very much law and land ethic: 1) do not destroy, 2) prohibition against inflicting pain, and 3) keeping Sabbath. "On the basis of both historical research and reasonable conjecture, therefore, we may assume that Jesus personally lived a profoundly ecological ethic, even though it was kept in the background in the context of Jesus' particular historical situation" (98).

Visick correctly points out the fact that Jesus' life and teachings were very much political. He called for justice, especially for those marginalized. His was a politics of "servanthood." Visick argues, in essence, that

A Christian ecological ethic must approach problems the way that Jesus did: by critiquing [sic] the received way of doing things, by applying solutions in the context of new situations, and by bringing the treasured

insights of the past into a creative and life-giving relationship with the present. This approach will keep us from abstract idealism, utopianism, or legalism (101).

Visick concludes that ". . . Jesus can be our inspiration and our guide" (106). Perhaps Visick should have opened up a major section of his essay/assignment on this matter, but he deals with it in three rather brief paragraphs. I was left asking for more.

This book is a very important work. It is not the last word on the environment and the Christian, but it certainly is an important word for the Christian's role in creation. It is not a long book; it is easy to read. Each chapter is amply referenced with endnotes. The book has a general and scripture index. There is a 17-page appendix by David Wise which reviews environmental stewardship literature. This appendix is useful, but a more comprehensive review of Christian environmental literature is now available in *Rediscovery of Creation: A Bibliographic Study of the Church's Response to the Environmental Crisis*, by Joseph K. Sheldon (ATLA Bibliographic Series, 29. Scarecrow Press, 1992).

There is one glaring omission. In the section "About the contributors," which contains brief biographical notes, Gordon Zerbe, author of chapter 4, is missing. Other than that, the book is highly recommended for general reading, adult discussion groups, or as a supplemental classroom text.

*The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology*, by Millard Erickson (Grand Rapids: Baker) 1991. 625 pages. Hardback. \$29.95. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

The early church struggled with the question of who Jesus Christ is for almost four centuries before it reached a consensus in the Chalcedonian formula of 451 A.D. The first four ecumenical councils of the church were given over to such questions as how Jesus relates to God, how he is the savior, and how we are to understand his person. The formula adopted at Chalcedon was that the incarnate Christ is two natures in one person, and thus is fully God and fully man. Erickson's thesis is that Chalcedonian christology is still "intellectually justifiable" today, even after close to three hundred years of critical inquiry and examination. In short, Erickson states and defends what he takes to be an orthodox christology.

Erickson, who is certainly one of the most prolific Baptist theologians writing today, advances his thesis under three major headings. In the first section he lays out an evangelical christology. This section is the least problematic of the book, but it is also the least in-

teresting and helpful. Erickson's use of biblical materials is painfully proof-textish and Bible College-conventional. The chapter on second century heresies is pretty well done, however.

The second section consists of a series of essays in which Erickson reviews the major post-Enlightenment christologies. He treats separately Norman Perrin's form-critical christology, the existentialist christologies of Kierkegaard and Bultmann, liberationist christology, black christology, feminist christology, the process christologies of Norman Pittenger and John Cobb, universalistic christology, the post-modern christology of Mark C. Taylor, the mythological christology articulated in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977, edited by John Hick), and the narrative christology of Robert Krieg. Erickson's presentations of these positions are informative and generally well done. His analyses are often somewhat limp-wristed, however, as he fails to take many of the positions to