

Book Review of *True North: Christ, the Gospel, and Creation Care*, by Mark Liederbach and Seth Bible, B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, Tennessee, 2012

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Should Christian theology be consulted in the task of resolving environmental crises? Should Christians, faced with environmentalist claims about impending disaster, race to their Bibles to offer a “green Christian” interpretation of the need for sustainability and “creation care,” emphasizing human sinfulness and greed? Or should Christians instead use Scriptures about the sovereignty of God and his beneficent creative power to undercut such narratives, and instead emphasize the dignity of humanity and the dominion granted to humans as the pinnacle of creation? Indeed, should Christians prophetically declare that another, “more real” reality awaits those who put their faith in Christ, and remind men that claims of environmental crises in this world are likely to distract us from preparation for the next? Which is the proper role of the church?

Mark Liederbach and Seth Bible, scholars at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, declare in their 2012 book *True North: Christ, the Gospel, and Creation Care* that there is another way to approach these issues. We should instead, they argue, start with “a clear focus on Christ” (p. 27), and allow that to guide our thinking on claims of environmental crisis. The problem with Christian engagement on environmental issues is that it is reactive rather than proactive—Christian environmentalists have largely baptized the claims of the environmental movement, while Christian skeptics (Liederbach and Bible hesitate to call them anti-environmentalists) endorse the economic and social status quo of dismissing those claims. Our goal ought rather to be, they argue, a constructive position based in orthodox theology and Christ-centered ethical thinking—one that establishes what we know to be true about God and his word prior to pronouncing on current events.

In that sentiment, they remind me rather strongly of my own ecological training under the late Howard T. Odum, one of the founders of systems ecology. Odum argued against the “issues-based” or “problem-based” instruction going on in environmental studies departments around the world, and claimed that such an approach undermined the real task of finding environmental solutions. He preferred a rigorous curriculum in environmental science--based in chemistry, physics, geology, biology, and ecology. However most textbooks begin by focusing on environmental "problems"--pollution, toxic waste, erosion, biodiversity loss, climate change--rather than training students in first principles of actual sciences. Starting with issues invariably means sorting out political claims and emotional appeals, rushing to judgment in order to appear relevant, and adopting policies before understanding the scientific facts on the ground. Starting with basic science, he said, allowed the scholar to build up a core of knowledge and understanding of how ecosystems work that would serve him well in the task of sorting out competing environmental claims.

In an epigram at the start of their Chapter 1, the authors quote Roger Gottlieb:

“It is quite interesting and not a little ironic that the new ecotheologies often start not by discussing God, faith, tradition, or the holy, but with referenced to information provided by biologists, chemists, and ecologists.”

If only that were true, Christian environmentalism (and its skeptics) might be on much firmer ground, and have more to discuss. Instead, the “ecotheologies” that Gottlieb critiques start with environmentalist claims, with ethics and claims of crisis instead of science. If conversations started with the findings of biologists, chemists, and ecologists, there might be some way of reaching common ground, but instead they tend to begin with reactions to claims by environmental advocacy groups, political parties, and pressure groups. The vast majority of creation care advocates and critics fail to distinguish between environmentalism and environmental science. Odum’s critique was that this leads to shallow thinking and failure to recognize ideology rather than science. Careful reasoning demands a positive foundation in scientific reality.

In a parallel fashion, Liederbach and Bible are making a similar critique of environmental ethics, much of which is motivated by claims of crisis, or by the need to debunk claims of crisis. Chicken Littles, who claim “the sky is falling down” (when it is clearly not) are contrasted with the Ostriches, who keep their “heads in the sand” in the face of danger (clearly a foolish strategy). Starting with crisis distorts moral reasoning, and the authors of True North explicate that problem. They stop short, however of providing a robust solution, preferring in the bulk of their book to lay the necessary foundation ignored by both camps in the Christian environmental debate. They ask, and answer, in six tight chapters, the core questions of who Jesus is, how he relates to his Creation, and how that understanding is foundational to the task of creating a Christ-centered environmental ethics. As Odum argued for the necessary foundation of basic science prior to analysis of particular problems, so too Liederbach and Bible argue for the foundation of sound theology prior to the tackling of environmental crisis narratives. Both argue that understanding reality—be it scientific or spiritual—must precede personal and political action.

That Liederbach and Bible don’t spend much time constructing an edifice on that necessary foundation is no shortcoming at this point. Their apparent lack of background in ecological science is not a real deficit, because what we need from them, and what they ably provide, is theological and ethical grounding. They offer a compass heading, pointing to the True North (Christ) who will orient our journey. They don’t provide a map or an illustration of the terrain we will navigate; they provide the tools that will keep us from losing our theological way. We will still need other orienteering skills, to use their metaphor. We will need good science to go with our good theology. What we would eventually want from them, in a future book, is guidance for how virtue of prudence dictates cultivating systems for assessing claims of crisis based on more fundamental information about God and his world. At the end of this review I ask some questions about what that future work might entail.

The authors situate “creation care” in a context of a broad Christology, as it must be. It is, as C.S. Lewis would have put it, a “second thing” and not a “first thing.” It must be subsumed in its proper place as a part of Christian discipleship if it is to have its true priority. Allowing environmental concern to become a dominant theme, or an identity, says something about its priority that just isn’t faithful the Christian worldview. To place it in context, the authors explain the significance of Christ (in successive chapters) as the Creator of all things (chapter 2); the Creator of humans as image-bearers of God (chapter 3); the Incarnate and Resurrected Redeemer (chapter 4); and the coming King (chapter 5), before summarizing their work in a final chapter. In every chapter they outline the often latent theologies of current creation care advocates and critics, and they offer a robust, Scriptural alternative that alternately challenges and enriches the debate.

They are not afraid to critique the inadequacies of current Christian environmentalist “orthodoxies.” In Chapter 3 they provide a very useful discussion of the current fashion to interpret the Genesis 2 narratives in a way that calls primarily for Christians to “serve and protect” creation (the preferred translation of *‘abad* and *shamar* in Genesis 2:15 for eco-evangelicals). The argue that such a translation is not so much an error as an impoverishment of the full meaning of the commands, and they carefully draw out how a richer understanding puts the role of humans in the context of the true worship of God in the temple of Creation. They draw on a wide range of Old Testament scholarship to describe the creation as part of the matrix of worship. Their powerful description makes it clear why some in the non-Christian environmental movement might be led astray, since the awesomeness and beauty of Creation are meant in their very design to inspire us to worship. Implicit in their argument is a strong evangelistic element, because if Christians can understand the true design of nature they can use it to persuade non-believers to be reconciled to the Creator.

Though the goal of the authors is to equip Christians to think about their own role as stewards and disciples, every chapter is teeming with the tools for communicating the gospel and for telling forth the the revelation of God in nature and in the Bible. The book is not a textbook in evangelism, but just as it is a foundational text for environmental ethics it is also a foundation for communicating the glory of God to a modern world that understands the beauty of Creation and that feels insult when the Creation is harmed.

True North is a masterful text and a refreshment to those who detect a lack of biblical grounding in Christian environmental debates. But does it really provide a way to address claims of environmental crisis? Does it equip the church to navigate the treacherous waters of environmental conflict? Does it provide guidance for understanding and combining the insights of special revelation (found in Scripture) and general revelation (found in, among other things, science)?

No, but it’s a start. Consider the “True North” metaphor itself: the sea captain navigating his ship may be tempted to put trust in inner feelings, or in the consensus of the crew; he may even choose the wrong star to navigate by. The successful sea captain instead puts his trust in tradition (having learned from his ancestors), the science of astronomy (though he might not be a scientist), direct observation (that Polaris is north, and constant), and the reliability of his senses (knowing that Polaris is north, knowing how to recognize it in the sky). He doesn't find true north by trial and error, or by consulting scripture. He has experience and reason to guide him, and a faith that the movement of heavenly bodies is intelligible and not capricious. He is trying to solve an empirical question, and he behaves wisely, by a fixed external point. Scientists and Christian (and sea captains) have confidence in a reality beyond our senses. Christians realize that the reality is both spiritual and material, and so we can learn from both special and general revelation. We Christians, more than the post-modernists, can recognize a harmony between faith and science.

This is where a Christian epistemology that finds sense and meaning in both nature and revelation is most valuable. We have a real world to interpret--not a world of illusion and unreality but hard, visible, sensible creation--and we can have a relationship with the Creator of that world, helping us understand not just how it works, but why it works. Augustine said as much: that we must learn how to interpret our Christian experience in light of God's general revelation AND his special revelation.

The authors refer regularly to the task of navigating life with a broken compass, and they warn of the postmodernism that dulls the senses by casting doubts on the existence of True North. But in truth, scientists as well as Christian ethicists are concerned with the threat of postmodernism; belief in the existence of reality and the knowability of truth is something Christians and many scientists share (largely because science emerged in the context of Christendom). Moreover, humility in the quest to uncover truth characterizes Christianity and science at their best--Christian values and scientific values enjoin us to "test all things", to submit ourselves one to another, not to esteem ourselves more highly than others, and to point to truth outside ourselves that can be recognized by others. In claiming this I make no blithe equation between Christianity and science--there are profound differences in the end--but there are commonalities in worldview that make our interpretation of the natural world something that can be shared. Science is incomplete as a tool for deciding what to do, for knowing what is good. But in the area of Creation Care we must be careful not to confuse science for a mere rival to Christian faith. Various kinds of environmentalism, drawing as they do from diverse worldviews, may compete against the Christian worldview, and against those environmentalisms Christians should guard themselves, becoming able to distinguish the degrees by which they comport with or challenge Christian ethics. But science may well be faith's best ally in forming a Christian environmental ethic.

Interpreting the general revelation is hard work though, and evangelicals especially need a fresh understanding of how to use it. Some environmental conflicts are conflicts between worldviews, but many aren't. Many are empirical questions, and Christians need a stronger ability to sort scientific insights from political and ideological positions, and they need a stronger ability to recognize conspiracy theories when they arise. Christians may be no better than the rest of the world at distinguishing science from non-science, yet we above all should recognize the importance of doing so—for the very reasons Liederbach and Bible give in their central chapters. We need Christians who are also scientists to help us make sense of scientific uncertainty, and to give us courage to apply the Christ-centered ethics that Liederbach and Bible help us to construct, when the facts warrant it.

Without that understanding, the reader may skirt dangerously close to the postmodern perspective that reality doesn't matter--that an understanding of the natural world doesn't matter--because people will simply choose to accept or reject, to exaggerate or ignore, science on the basis of their worldview. Liederbach and Bible have helped set the terms of such a challenge to postmodernism. Rather than letting the environmental debate devolve into a "he said/she said" trumpeting of pre-existing positions, their approach will push the reader toward something more fundamental: a preparation for interpreting data and claims based on an orthodox, Christocentric worldview, which they go on to construct in subsequent chapters. The goal for Christians would be to be able to interpret data about potentially dangerous situations and to respond appropriately. That might sometimes mean siding with the Ostriches (reminding them not to be haughty in their dismissal of danger, and comforting the Chicken Littles) and it would sometimes mean siding with the Chicken Littles (helping them to be even-handed and prudential, and chiding the Ostriches for the reckless endangerment they would have permitted). But above all it would mean exhibiting a Christlike character and faith in the sovereignty, justice, and mercy of God.

True North is recommended reading for all Christians, but especially for environmental professionals, scientists, and those involved in the policy process. They'll find their faith deepened and their pre-existing beliefs challenged, and they'll find themselves better equipped to give an answer for their faith to a watching world.

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