

# “Time to Re-Place the Gospel”

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Preface by Editor-in-Chief, ‘Theoecology Journal’, Prof. Bob George  
The editorial board thanks Tom for giving permission to reproduce his article which originally appeared as a paper in the online periodical [www.ecotheo.org](http://www.ecotheo.org) on May 21, 2014.



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Heretical though the title of this essay sounds, there’s no need to warm up the tar or pluck the chickens. The heresy lies not here, but rather in a truncated Gospel, which has effectively dis-placed the good news of Jesus Christ. It’s time to re-place it.

## Place Matters

For reasons I do not fully understand, the Gospel preached from the North American pulpit has largely begun with sin and ended with forgiveness, which, to be sure, are absolutely essential elements. But the Bible contains more. A lot more. And what’s left out of this CliffsNotes version is also essential: namely creation and new creation, garden and city, the orthodox beginning and end. In the Bible, place matters—both as part of God’s very good creation and as the arena in which we encounter the living God. In the truncated Gospel, place is irrelevant.

And that irrelevance shows in all-too-familiar and all-too-painful ways. The creation groans with mass extinctions, pollution, desertification and more. People, most profoundly the poor, suffer the results along with our non-human

fellow creatures. And our Gospel witness is tarnished and even our relationship with Christ is strained by our lack of care for His creation.

What if it were different? What if we Christians stewarded the creation as we were assigned in Genesis? What if we celebrated (not worshiped) the creation as the lovely handiwork of a loving Creator? What if we re-placed the Gospel? Doing so really isn't that hard. Even the simple steps of learning where our food comes from, where our trash goes and the names and needs of the birds, bugs and botany in our backyards goes a long way. Plus, it's a great way to get the kids outside and away from their addictive electronic gadgets.

### The Potential Impact

And as for impact, according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public life, 247 million Americans identified themselves as Christian in 2010. Estimates put the number of evangelicals alone at some 90 million. And every single one of us lives in a specific place. A place where people and plants and animals and forests and fields and streams all need our care. All need the restoring love of Jesus Christ, who we are told in Colossians created all things and through his sacrificial death on the cross redeems and reconciles all things to God.

Worldwide, the potential gets even more impressive, more hopeful. Our sheer numbers—2.18 billion—are one reason; but our locations—our places—are even more eye opening. The 2013 article in *Oryx: The International Journal of Conservation*, “Biodiversity Priority Areas and Religions—A Global Analysis of Spatial Overlap,” by researchers Mikusinski, Possingham and Blicharska shows a remarkable co-location of Christians and places high in biodiversity and therefore in need of protection. Using data from the World Religion Database and seven methods of identifying critical biodiversity regions, they found that Christians were the dominant religious group in all seven types of regions. All seven.

### The Real Problem

Findings like that combined with the growing realization among secular environmentalists that technical and regulatory fixes will not, in fact, fix our environmental challenges lead to astounding quotes like this one heard on BBC Radio by Gus Speth, whose environmental resume runs for pages and includes such stints as founder of the World Resources Institute, co-founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council and Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies:

I used to think that top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these

problems, but I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation and we scientists don't know how to do that.

The need is obvious, the invitation has been given, the people are in place and the first steps are easy. What are we waiting for? It's time to re-place the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Put out the fire and let the chickens go.

A Rocha is a nonprofit Christian conservation organization working in 19 countries to inspire, equip and engage Christians to steward the places where they live. Learn more and get involved at [arocha.org](http://arocha.org).

As an appendix to this article, I am also adding below the “Statements of Pope Francis on Creation Care”, as written recently by author Jack Jenkins. Bob George, Editor-in-Chief of Theoecology Journal.

Pope Francis has just made a powerful religious case for tackling global warming, calling on his fellow Catholics to become “Custodians of Creation” and issuing a dire warning about the potentially catastrophic effects of global climate change.

Speaking to a massive crowd in Rome, the first Argentinian pope delivered a short address in which he argued that respect for the “beauty of nature and the grandeur of the cosmos” is a Christian value, noting that failure to care for the planet risks apocalyptic consequences. He said:

“Safeguard Creation, because if we destroy Creation, Creation will destroy us! Never forget this!”

The pope centered his environmentalist theology around the creation story in the book of Genesis, where God is said to have created the world, declared it “good,” and charged humanity with its care.

Francis also made reference to his namesake, Saint Francis of Assisi, who was a famous lover of animals, and appeared to tie the ongoing environmental crisis to economic concerns — namely, instances where a wealthy minority exploits the planet at the expense of the poor. He continued:

“Creation is not a property, which we can rule over at will; or, even less, is the property of only a few: Creation is a gift, it is a wonderful gift that God has given us, so that we care for it and we use it for the benefit of all, always with great respect and gratitude.”

Francis also said that humanity's destruction of the planet is a sinful act, likening it to self-idolatry:

“But when we exploit Creation we destroy the sign of God’s love for us, in destroying Creation we are saying to God: ‘I don’t like it! This is not good!’ ‘So what do you like?’ ‘I like myself!’ – Here, this is sin! Do you see?”

The pope’s comments come on the heels of a five-day summit on sustainability convened at the Vatican earlier this month. The summit, entitled *Sustainable Humanity, Sustainable Nature, Our Responsibility*, drew together biologists, legal scholars, economists, philosophers, astronomers and other experts to discuss ways for the Catholic church to address a range of issues caused by climate change. In a joint statement published after the close of the conference, participants echoed Francis’ belief that environmental justice and economic justice are inextricably linked.

Human action which is not respectful of nature becomes a boomerang for human beings that creates inequality and extends what Pope Francis has termed ‘the globalization of indifference’ and the ‘economy of exclusion’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*), which themselves endanger solidarity with present and future generations,” the statement read. The pontiff’s catechesis and the Vatican’s summit appear to be part of a renewed effort by the Catholic church to draw attention to environmental issues. Keeping with a long history of Catholic environmentalism (including several pro-environmentalist sermons delivered by his predecessor), Francis addressed climate change in his inaugural mass as pope, and is rumored to be working on a formal encyclical on the environment.

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