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Evangelicals and the Environment: Thoughts from CETA's Outgoing President

The Canadian Evangelical Theological Association (CETA) "seeks to provide a forum for scholarly contributions to the renewal of theology and church in Canada." This year CETA called for conference papers on "Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Creation and the Environment." Half of the papers for the conference, held May 31, 2008, at the University of British Columbia, dealt with this year's theme. *Church & Faith Trends* interviewed David Guretzki, the outgoing CETA president, about the response to this year's call for papers and what it might say about evangelical engagement with environmental issues.

David Guretzki, Ph.D., is the Dean of Briercrest Seminary and Associate Professor of Theology. He also serves on the board of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.

Church & Faith Trends (C&FT): What does this year's CETA conference say about evangelical views on the environment?

David Guretzki (DG): I wouldn't want to say too much definitive about evangelical views on the environment solely on the basis of our conference. There may be some indicators that environment is not a high priority for many evangelical scholars, but I also appreciate the time and financial constraints that so many working in evangelical institutions are under, and the lack of interest in the conference is not necessarily indicative of a widespread lack of interest in environmental issues (though, admittedly, it may be indicative of just that!). But I do know that it was one of the more difficult topics to get paper proposals on in the past four years that I have served as president.

I personally think that there is still a significant gap between our evangelical theologies of creation and contemporary debates about the environment. As I teach in an evangelical college and seminary, I do know that most of my students and colleagues express concern about environmental issues and most of us seek to live our lives in as an "environmentally correct" way as possible. But I also suspect that our "environmental conscience" has as much (if not more) to do with the general public education about issues such as global warming than it has to do with any specific theological teaching.

Generally, I think Evangelicals have emphasized that the creation mandate of humans' having "dominion" over creation should be understood in terms of stewardship rather than in terms of domination (i.e., it is our responsibility to care for creation as God's good creation). But in terms of practice, I'm not convinced that Evangelicals do anything much distinctly different than the average person who is seeking to be environmentally friendly just because we all know that we are facing a global crisis.

In another respect, I also think that Evangelicals, on average, feel ill-equipped to know how to respond or speak intelligently on things like the global warming debate precisely because the debate itself is couched wholly in scientific terms. Many Evangelicals have probably just decided that they have nothing to offer simply because they don't have the scientific training to engage it, either by way of affirmation or critique. But that, to me, is the crucial issue: we have allowed a scientistic framework/worldview to dominate the terms of the debate, if for no other reason than this is still the main language that Westerners speak and understand when talking about big problems like the environment. We have to admit that theological perspectives on the environment are very difficult to hear when most every part of our life in the modern world is understood through the largely pragmatic lenses of science and technology.

C&FT: Only three of the six papers presented at this year's conference dealt with the environment. Why do you think you received only a modest number of proposals for papers that dealt with the environment?

DG: I think that most scholars have fairly specialized programmes of research and most are quite cautious about stepping across disciplinary boundaries. So those trained in classical disciplines (OT, NT, theology, church history, etc.) may have interest in areas and issues outside their specialty but don't necessarily feel qualified to speak to a topic such as the environment, especially when so much of the discussion is couched in scientific terms.

C&FT: Did these three papers in any way try to address contemporary environmental concerns?

DG: Not in a direct way. [Andrew] Gabriel's ["Jesus, History and the Covenant in Karl Barth's Doctrine of Creation"] was really a more specialized paper on Barth's view of history as found within his doctrine of creation. [Scott] Dunham's paper ["The Moral of the Story: Augustine on God, Creation and Dominion in Genesis"] was an attempt to correct misreadings of Augustine on the role of humans in creation, especially given the fact that Augustine is sometimes noted as being one of the early culprits in the denigration of the relationship of humans to creation. [Doug] Harink's paper ["The Transformation of Creation: Theological Reflections on 2 Peter 3"] dealt more with the theme of transfiguration as a key motif in 2 Peter as a hermeneutical key of sorts. So none directly made proposals regarding *practices* relative to the environment, but all were seeking to identify some important theological underpinnings that may contribute to a clarified evangelical view of creation and the environment.

C&FT: CETA is committed to "the renewal of theology and the church in Canada." So much of theological renewal is the rediscovery of the past. Where do you think Evangelicals and evangelical theologians will find the resources that provide a different framework and aid in that renewal of creation/environmental theology?

DG: I think it is significant that evangelical scholars—due in significant part to the influence of theologians such as Thomas Oden at Drew University and D. H. Williams at Baylor University—are beginning to rediscover the patristic roots of the faith. That is, Evangelicals are increasingly looking to the theologians and pastors of the first five centuries of the church, alongside the usual attention reserved for careful study of the Luthers, Calvins, and Wesleys of the Reformation era. Many of the patristic writers such as Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Augustine had robust theologies of creation, but they have suffered under significant misrepresentations of their thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many Evangelicals are going back to these great thinkers and finding great resources in thinking about what it means to say, "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth."

I also find it interesting that many Evangelicals have increased ecumenical interest Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, even while recognizing that significant theological differences remain. And though I may be a bit biased in this regard, I also find it fascinating the most oft-discussed theologian at our CETA conferences in the last four to six years has been Karl Barth, who though traditionally viewed with suspicion by Evangelicals in the twentieth century, nevertheless has one of the most comprehensive doctrines of creation ever written, extending over 2200 pages (in translation) in his *Church Dogmatics*! Barth, too, was very interested in the fathers of the early church and engaged them extensively in his own work. But beyond this, thinkers like Barth and the early church fathers will be important resources for Evangelicals because they all alike model ways in which one can speak biblically and theologically about the nature of the world while using and yet not capitulating to the dominant worldviews of their day. The question is: Are there other ways to address our current environmental crises in terms other than those set by science and technology?

C&FT: You mentioned earlier that a "scientistic framework/worldview" dominates current public discussion about the environment. What framework/worldview do you propose as an alternative that would allow Christian theologians to contribute to both the public discussion on the environment and the discussion taking place in the church?

DG: As Christians, I think we must thoroughly revisit what Karl Barth called the primary Christian confession of the New Testament: Jesus is Lord (cf. Rom 10:9). As Evangelicals who have historically and readily confessed that Jesus is Lord and Saviour of the world, it is troubling to me how little we have thought about what that means relative to the question of the environment, about nature, and about our place in the world. Indeed, Lordship talk among Evangelicals seems to have been largely restricted to Jesus being "Lord of my life" without too often considering that he is "Lord of Heaven and Earth."

Critics rightly point out that historically Christian accounts of creation have tended to focus on the Genesis account of God telling the newly created humans to "rule over" the earth—which has prompted some to an exploitive relationship. Yet in Colossians 1, John 1, and other New Testament passages we find out that it is by and through the Lord Jesus Christ that "all things were created" and that all these things in heaven and earth "were created by him and *for* him." In other words, a truly Christian and evangelical account of the relationship of humans to nature will acknowledge that any responsibility that humanity has been given to "rule over" the earth must immediately be qualified alongside the greater truth that such dominion over the earth is not for our own sake, but for the sake of Lord Jesus Christ who created it. He alone is Lord and we are but his servants.

The main problem that I see in a scientistic/technological framework is that the world is still viewed as being primarily here for *our* benefit. That this is true can be seen in how often secularist environmentalists make a plea for us to consider our future generation of children and grandchildren and the world they will inherit. While this plea is certainly worth considering, it still fails to acknowledge that the reason non-theistic environmentalists ultimately want to save the environment is for *us*—albeit "us" a generation or two removed. But Christians should be concerned about the environment precisely because it is not our own but is owned by Jesus Christ, who promises to return to this earth one day and to live here with us as our eternal Lord and King, but who in the meantime has graciously shared this world with us as his gift to us.

To use a simple analogy, Jesus Christ has created a beautiful guest house in which he graciously invites us to live. But not only are we expected to live here, he expects us to develop and decorate it in such a way that upon his return, he would be glad to live here with us. But instead of gratefully and actively developing it with his return in mind and for his honour, we trash his guest house with our wild parties and by wrenching every bit out of it as we can for ourselves.

So although we may legitimately worry about what we are leaving for future generations, an evangelical framework of Christ's Lordship will help us to start thinking (and acting) much more about what kind of world we are leaving for our returning Lord.