

Preface

WE CHRISTIANS HAVE STRUGGLED with “physicalness” and with physical existence for centuries.⁵ We seem to be perpetually conflicted about our bodies, about the physical world around us, and about the sciences that study our bodies and the physical world. But in truth, Christianity ought to be affirming of physical existence. We are the ones, after all, who worship the God who created it all and who redeemed it by becoming physical flesh himself and living on earth as a human (John 1:14).⁶ God literally became a physical being who required food, grew, learned, talked, walked, metabolized nutrients, eliminated waste, felt pain, bled, and depended for life on the Palestinian ecosystem in which he lived. Jesus, like all of us, was a *dusty earthling*—bone and blood amidst the dirt and rocks of planet earth. Even in his post-resurrection state, Scripture says, he was “flesh and bones,” a physical being (Luke 24:39). We Christians ought to stop being so ambivalent about our bodies and the physical world and embrace the earthy, organic character of our theology and ourselves as part of God’s earthly creation. Today in the early twenty-first century, we humans are facing an array of ecological problems stemming from our troubled relationship with the rest of the physical creation. These problems will almost certainly increase as this century unfolds. We Christians need to engage with ecology. Herein is a small contribution to that engagement.

In this book I argue that we are thoroughly and completely physical beings—part and parcel of God’s good creation. And as physical beings, we are also ecological beings—what I call *eco-physical beings*—drawing our life and sustenance from the ecosystems that surround and support us along with all creatures on God’s good earth. As eco-physical beings

5. Peterson, “In and of the World?” 242.

6. I have elected to use conventional male pronouns for God, but clearly God is not gendered—neither male nor female. After all, he created gender. I hope this does not offend my sisters (or brothers) in Christ who read this book. In all other contexts I have tried to use gender-neutral language.

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we are subject to all the principles, patterns, parameters, and limits (ecological realities) that govern all of life on this planet. Moreover, as the uniquely ethical species made in the image of God, capable of genuine moral life and a special relationship with God through Jesus Christ, we are called to embodied eco-physical living and nurturing oversight of God's earthly creation, all to his glory. This is the message of this book.

In chapter 1, I introduce the basic argument of the book and discuss what I call the *Ecological Problem*—the array of difficulties we face in the world today stemming from our troubled relationship with the rest of creation. I make a claim for the thoroughly physical nature of Christian spirituality and its relationship to the Ecological Problem, which is, at its origin, spiritual in nature.

In chapter 2, I speak to the premise that we are separated from the rest of creation. Our broken relationship with the rest of creation arises in a primal sense from our rebellion and sin, but it has been exacerbated by historical, philosophical, cultural, and religious factors in Western culture, especially in the modern period. I survey these and show how they have contributed to where we are today.

Chapter 3 focuses on scientific findings that relate to our human nature. Modern neuroscience and biology are showing more and more our commonalities with other animals. I examine some of the scientific developments that affirm our physicality, our kinship with other creatures, and our integral membership in God's eco-physical world. At the same time, I review scientific findings that affirm our uniqueness among God's creatures and that justify God's placing us over his creation (Gen 1:26–28). We are the *ethical species*—the one species on earth capable of managing God's world such that God can hold us responsible for it. We are dusty earthlings to be sure, but we are special dusty earthlings.

In chapters 4 and 5, I look into Scripture for the theological principles that pertain to my argument. Chapter 4 focuses on God and humans—how a biblical grasp of the nature of God and of ourselves helps us understand our place within the world. Chapter 5 examines some additional relevant biblical issues including the image of God, the dominion mandate (Gen 1:26–28), ecological sin, theocentrism, and God's redemption of creation.

In chapter 6, I describe some of the principles, patterns, parameters, and limits that govern our earthly eco-physical existence. This includes feedback loops, nutrient cycles, energy flow and exchange, food

webs, population dynamics, and so on. In the course of this discussion, I note some of the implications of these ecological realities for us dusty earthlings living on God's earth.

In chapter 7, I discuss ethics. As dusty earthlings called to follow Jesus, how should we live and what should we do? I offer two virtues—humility and self-control—and two principles—kenosis and justice. And I argue that we should rejoin creation in praising God and suggest some ways to do that.

In chapter 8, after summarizing, I conclude with some comments on topics relevant to my thesis including what I call “eco-consciousness,” ecological education, individual action and public policy, population, economics, and a look to the future.

My goal is to take Jesus, Scripture, our physicality, and God's physical creation seriously and try to see how these relate to the ecological problems of our day. I offer answers to some questions, leave some questions unanswered, and raise still others. My goal is not to be exhaustive or to make final statements but to move the conversation along. If you join with me in this endeavor, maybe both of us will come a little closer to following Jesus in a more authentic way in his world.

I am an evangelical, and I have tried to write the book from that perspective. I hope my fellow evangelicals will read it—especially conservatives. While they have been rightly concerned with the primacy of Scripture and the importance of orthodoxy, they have been reluctant to engage with ecology. Their reasons for this are understandable, but ecological problems are here to stay. It's time for *all* of us Christians to engage the problem and bring our prodigious biblical and theological resources to bear. For Christians, ecology and creation care are integral to our faith and life in Christ within his creation. (They are not merely political.) There are marvelous opportunities for ministry and witness to the gospel, in word and deed. I urge my conservative evangelical brothers and sisters to engage with ecology. I hope this book will encourage them to do so.

The book is my own, and I take full responsibility for it. I apologize in advance for errors. Without a doubt there are some. I welcome correction, comment, and response. For us dusty earthlings, life is learning, and I hope to learn much from this endeavor. My e-mail address is below; write to me and tell me what you think.⁷

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