Scottish lenses, languages and landscapes:
Engaging evangelicals with environmentalism

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Introduction

In 2019, the United Kingdom announced that COP26, the United Nations Conference of Parties which focuses on issues of climate change, would take place in Glasgow, Scotland. Initially scheduled for November 2020 and then re-scheduled for November 2021, this was due to be the first quinquennial assessment of the progress that governments were making towards the targets set in the Paris Agreement made in 2015.

As a Christian living in the Glasgow conurbation and working in Tearfund, a Christian international development organisation birthed from the Evangelical Alliance which works primarily through the local church, there was a new impetus to consider how the church in Scotland responds to environmental issues such as climate change. ‘Environmentalism’ was an issue that had rarely been discussed in my evangelical church circles and any reference tended to draw on the concept of ‘stewardship’. In contrast, I knew a number of churches and clergy, outside of evangelicalism, that were much more engaged in preaching and advocating for a more pro-environmental stance, but in turn they were reluctant to engage with stewardship as a concept and used theological arguments that were not persuasive to an evangelical audience. Anecdotally, it seemed obvious that there was a misalignment between evangelical theology and the language of environmentalism.

Such personal experiences have recently been echoed by recent research produced by Youthscape and Tearfund1 which highlighted that
only 9% of church-going young people in the UK have a perception that their church is doing enough about the climate, and only 37% believe their church leaders see it as something they should care about. As this is a demographic that has been immersed in the language of environmentalism at school and through TV programmes, it has worrying implications about the churches’ ability to not only discuss environmentalism but to find the language to engage with this and future generations. Moreover, 84% believe it is important for Christians to respond to climate change and 86% more broadly believe that their faith teaches them to care about injustice.

In contrast to the young people, Rushton and Hodson found that ordinands were generally moderate in their views of environmental theology, and the evangelical ordinands gave some responses that might suggest less interest in environmental concerns. This highlights the need for Theological Educational Institutions (TEIs) to have a role in environmental education. As Hodson and Hodson argue, ‘our present and future ministers are going to need to be resourced theologically, missiologically and practically to live out an effective message of hope in this challenging and uncertain world.’ Whilst there are a number of modules on environmental theology in programmes such as Common Awards, these tend to be electives and therefore those that do not already consider environmental issues important in their ministry will choose not to take these up unless it is embedded into curricula or we find a language that they can identify with.

This paper seeks to briefly look at the nature of evangelicalism in Scotland, in order to understand the lens(es) being used to view environmentalism. In light of this, we will look at some of the language that is being used and how these resonate or not theologically, before proposing the approach and language that may be most useful to evangelicals.

Scottish evangelical lens

Whilst in this paper reference is made to Scottish evangelicalism, the definition of this term is not straightforward and not without controversy. Unlike in the United States of America, evangelicalism in Scotland, and in Britain as a whole, is not suggestive of any particular political party association, political ideology or position on social issues, which makes
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it difficult to refer to it as a single entity, especially on a social issue such as creation care.

Although the term has faced and continues to face a number of ‘crises’, not least due to its association with Donald Trump in the USA and its Anglo-American origins in the context of a global church, it has historically been defined using a framework originally published in 1989 by Scottish theologian, David Bebbington. He wrote:

There are the four qualities that have been the special marks of Evangelical religion: conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism.

In each of these four qualities, the focus for evangelicals has been highly anthropocentric, not least in the case of conversionism and activism as human responses to the Christian message. Conversionism was also bound up with convictions such as justification by faith, defined in purely human terms and predicated by a human understanding of sin. Bebbington described it as follows: ‘Because human beings are estranged from God by their sinfulness, there is nothing they can do by themselves to win salvation. All human actions, even good works, are tainted by sin, and so there is no possibility of gaining merit in the sight of God.’

As we shall see later in this paper, such an anthropocentric perspective has an impact on an evangelical understanding of the trifold relationship between the Godhead, humanity and the rest of creation. Given the evangelical theme of biblicism, in order to understand this trifold relationship more fully we must begin with biblical text.

Divine distinctiveness

As we consider differing Christian approaches to environmentalism, discussions revolve around the relationship between three actors: the Godhead, humanity and non-humans (both animate and inanimate). Our consideration of such relationships both emerge from our various theological positions and shape our theological understandings. The
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question is, to what extent is each actor distinct from the others, and if it is distinct, what is the nature of the relationship between them; and finally how is each involved in the broader Christian narrative of protology, hamartiology, soteriology and eschatology (origins, sin, salvation and the last things)?

Within Scottish theological traditions, the least controversial of these relationships is the distinction between the Godhead and the rest of creation. Divine holiness, the eternal, uncreated God being set apart from all that has been created, is relatively uncontroversial. From the opening statement in Genesis 1 that ‘In the beginning God created’ through to Revelation where the creatures proclaim ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come’ we have statements about the distinctiveness of God from all that has been created.

Whilst within Christian theology, the distinctiveness of God is relatively uncontroversial, it is not necessarily straightforward. As we look at less common traditions in Scotland such as Orthodox and Byzantine, the concept of theosis (also known as deification) would lead us to understand that humans might become divine, although even this has an absolute limit as they can never be part of the triune Godhead.

Likewise the incarnation and the indwelling of the Spirit, both of which are recognised in all the mainstream Trinitarian Christian denominations and traditions in Scotland, albeit with various nuances, provide another area of crossover between the divine and the created world. Yet even these also have limits. The incarnation of Jesus, ‘who lived a truly and fully human life from conception to death […] also belonged to the unique divine identity’, as identified in a range of passages including Isaiah 40, John 1, Colossians 1 and Philippians 2, is limited to the person of Christ and not to all humanity. In contrast though, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is more widespread, but the divine power still resides with the Holy Spirit rather than those who are being indwelt.

Human distinctiveness

In theological terms, the most significant question in this subject is the extent to which humans are distinct from the rest of creation, and in turn the nature of the relationship between the two.

In Genesis 1, on the fifth day God created the swarming ‘living creatures’ in the sea and sky (Gen 1:20), followed on the sixth day by the
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‘living creatures’ on the land (1:24) such as the cattle, before creating humanity. The account of the creation of humanity is expanded upon in Genesis 2:7: ‘Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.’ (Emphasis mine; throughout this article I am quoting from the New International Version [NIV] – one of the most popular Bible translations among evangelicals.)

There is a tendency for us to read these passages and emphasise the distinction made in the NIV between humans as ‘living beings’ as opposed to ‘living creatures’. The argument often made is that humanity has had the breath of life breathed into them to make them ‘living beings’, giving them a soul. The challenge, however, is one of translation. In many of our English translations a distinction is made between humans as living beings in contrast to other ‘living creatures’, when in fact the original Hebrew texts use the same word. Ruth Valerio explains:

It is also worth considering that the phrase, ‘living creatures’, in verse 20 is the same as that used of ‘the adam’ in Genesis 2.7, where it says that God breathed the breath of life into his nostrils and ‘the man became a living being’. Sometimes people ask if other creatures have souls, and the Hebrew word for ‘creatures’ and ‘being’ is the same word: nepeš, which elsewhere is translated ‘soul’ but simply means ‘being’ or ‘life’ (e.g. Deut. 6.5, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your nepeš and with all your strength’, and Ps. 103.1, ‘Praise the Lord my nepeš’, and many other places). So both Genesis 1.20 and 2.7 use the same word yet one is translated ‘creatures’ and the other ‘being’.15

This false distinction creates two tendencies. On the one hand, we promote humanity above all creatures, seeing ourselves as more important than other ‘living creatures’. On the other hand, we demote the rest of creation, and particularly animal life as less than ‘living beings’. In either case such distinction is dangerous as it creates a case for objectifying and devaluing these other living creatures. This reinforces a view that these other living creatures can be used as humans see fit rather than having within them the breath of life, which comes from God only.

To remind ourselves of our status, we just need to look at passages such as Genesis 2:7 and Psalm 103:14 to remember that, as we often repeat at
funerals, we are formed out of dust. This is why the psalmist can ask: ‘When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?’

Whilst we can see above that humanity has a common status with the rest of creation, it is important to stress that we are also distinct. Such distinction is based primarily on Genesis 1:26-28 where we can see two key distinctions, firstly in our nature and secondly in our commission. The first distinction is that God says, ‘Let us make mankind in our image [...]’ making humankind God’s image-bearers. What this quite means is a mystery; theologians for centuries have been trying to get to grips with the nature of imago Dei. The only other reference to humans as God’s image is in Genesis 9:6, but what is clear is that it is seen as a distinguishing characteristic of humanity in contrast to other life forms. Also, this image-bearing applies to all humanity, not just Adam, and not only to some particular form of being human. As Douglas and Jonathan Moo write:

We bear God’s image not by virtue of our wisdom, our reason, our stature, our strength, or even our capacity for moral judgment. A baby bears God’s image just as you or I do, and as do the physically and mentally infirm. The stress in Scripture on the universality of the image of God demands that we recognize the image of God in all human beings. In fact, it is often especially through children and the apparently weak that God reveals his purposes.

Therefore we cannot assume that being made in the image of God means that we have God’s physical image, or God’s mental, social or emotional characteristics. The only thing that we can truly say is that there is something in bearing God’s image that makes us distinct from other living beings. This is particularly highlighted in Genesis 9, following the flood, when humans are given explicit permission to kill other creatures and eat their meat, but not to kill humans: “‘Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything. [...] Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.”

The other distinguishing feature of humanity is their commission in Genesis 1:28: “‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over
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every living creature that moves on the ground.” Some elements of this commission are shared with other living creatures, such as the filling of the earth in the same way as the sea creatures are expected to ‘fill’ the seas in 1:22.

Human and non-human creation

A contested area, however, is in regard to what it might mean to ‘subdue’ (NIV) the earth or to ‘rule over’ other living creatures, both of which are linked and to some degree in contrast with Genesis 2:15 when the man is tasked with working and taking care of the Garden of Eden.

The word used for ‘subdue’ in Hebrew, *kabash*, has an authoritarian connotation to it, in the sense of battling with something to bring it under the authority of a person. This connotation suggests that without human interference the earth would grow wild in a way that is not desirable to God – hence the commission to subdue (*kabash*) it. Somewhat in contrast to *kabash* is God’s instructions to Adam regarding the Garden of Eden where he is tasked with working (*abad*) and taking care (*shamar*) of the garden.

The garden is generally taken to be representative of the whole world, if not the cosmos, and this working (*abad*) and taking care (*shamar*) is not as authoritarian as *kabash*. It has a more parental tone, such as the discipline of working the land that is in its own best interest. In this case then the subduing of the land is not to satisfy the whims of humanity but rather to help the land fulfil its full potential.

Therefore, we can see that the creation narrative in Genesis positions humanity in a place of acknowledging that God is truly other and humanity fits in the same category as the rest of creation, but it is made in God’s image and has a particular responsibility in enabling creation to fulfil its God-given potential. Saying that, some church traditions and theological positions will emphasise either humanity’s common features with the rest of creation, or its distinctiveness. This exhibits as either a cosmological or anthropological focus in their theology.

Evangelicals and the rest of creation

Returning to our understanding of evangelical theology, if evangelicalism interprets conversion and justification either exclusively or at least
primarily in human terms, this in turn emphasises the distinctiveness of humanity from the rest of creation. It is understandable therefore why such a position is sometimes described as anthropocentric (humanity-centred), and is contrasted with theocentric (God-centred) or biocentric (biosphere-centred) perspectives. Such contrasting terminology however is very unhelpful as by arguing that the evangelical theology is anthropocentric, by default is arguing that it is not theocentric – a position that would seem highly offensive to evangelicals, particularly due to their emphasis on God’s work of the cross. Therefore it is not the theological centre or focus that is significant but rather an anthropological lens or filter, that tends to limit the theological discussions to anthropological terms.

An example of this anthropological lens is in how the Bible is interpreted in exclusively human terms. John 3:16, perhaps the most commonly quoted verse by evangelicals due to its focus on the cross, is nearly always referred to in human terms. Whilst the second half of the verse does seem to focus on humans in ‘whosoever believes’, the first half is not exclusive to humanity. ‘For God so loved the world (cosmos)’, suggests that the giving of the Son was for all of creation, both human and non-human. The evangelical anthropological lens does not just understand this verse solely in human terms, but in some circumstances evangelists have even sought to replace the word ‘world’ with the name of an individual. Such an approach has understandably given rise to the accusation that some forms of evangelicalism are a form of contextual theology steeped in the individualism that emerged in the Enlightenment era in Europe and America. It is important to note that whilst God’s love does extend to the individual human, the point of the verse is that it is much more inclusive than only particular individuals, communities, or even the whole humanity.

For evangelicals, the understanding of the non-human elements of creation in theological terms directly affects their engagement in environmental issues and the language that is used, as it raises questions of how the rest of creation relates to sin (hamartiology), salvation (soteriology) and life beyond this present life (eschatology). If the rest of creation has no place in these theological conceptualisations, then it opens up the possibility, if not certainty, of viewing the rest of creation through a utilitarian lens, i.e. in terms of how humans use the rest of creation.

Utilitarianism, like evangelicalism, is not uniform; writing on the subject has been prolific since 1789 when Jeremy Bentham defined utility
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in terms of what produced pleasure or averted pain. The intention here is to highlight three forms of utilitarianism that, whilst not being mutually exclusive, have been held by evangelicals—namely, the language of stewardship, dispensationalism and Baconian dominionism.

For many evangelical Christians the language of ‘stewardship’ has been the default or only way of describing the relationship between humans and non-humans. Indeed, the Cape Town Confession of Faith, written at the evangelical congress known as Lausanne II, states that ‘all human beings are to be stewards of the rich abundance of God’s good creation.’

There can be no doubt that this term has some degree of usefulness and biblical basis, however there are limitations which are often ignored. As a term, stewardship has been useful in highlighting that humans are neither the owners or masters of that which is created, but rather that there is a higher authority to which humans are accountable to in regard to their relation to created world. The term also implies a degree of care for what has been entrusted to the stewards. Of course, such an understanding of stewardship is helpful in grasping how humans may understand their role in kabash, abad and shamar, whilst also stressing the distinctiveness of the creator.

In Jesus’ parables, we see examples of what good stewardship may look like, whether this be in the parables of the wise steward in Luke 16:1–13, the talents in Matthew 25:14–30, or of the servant who knows the master’s will in Luke 12:42–48. Each of these parables stress the steward’s role in maximising the potential of the object being stewarded and the benefits gained by the steward of performing this function well, e.g. ‘sharing in the master’s happiness’ (Matthew 25:21, 23). However it is also noted that stewardship is primarily for the sake of the master.

Whilst there are some benefits to drawing on the language of stewardship, and although there are a number of passages that highlight the use of the gifts we receive to serve others, ‘stewardship’ does not fully describe the relationship between human and non-human creation. Instead the terminology being used in theological circles is credited to Matthew Hale, a seventeenth-century English lawyer, who understood the concept in much the same way as a property estate manager. The role of such an estate manager was not just to prevent the wilderness from taking over the estate, but rather to tame and improve the land, in order to increase its yield for the landowner. Whilst this historical background does not
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preclude its use, its connotations of not only seeing humans as separate to the rest of creation, but also in some way superior, must be noted.

For evangelicals using an anthropological lens in their language of stewardship continues to not only be popular but also well-aligned with their theological position. If non-human creation is absent from a theology of salvation, then at best it is understood as a suite of resources to be used by humanity. An unfortunate by-product of this position is that by considering stewardship as a taming of the wild, there is an implication that the rest of creation is bound up in sin. Such an implication, coupled with the steward doing the work of the master, creates a spiritual dualism with redeemed humanity being contrasted with the wild rest of creation.

It is from this position that we can see that the language of stewardship, taken to an extreme, could result in the theological position of dispensationalism. Throughout the twentieth century the theology of dispensationalism – a theology that understands biblical history as a series of dispensations that will pass away – grew in prominence amongst evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic. Whilst there have been debates around the premillenial or postmillenial nature of dispensationalism, the broad theological thinking became part of mainstream evangelical thought and consequently also solidified the understanding that non-human creation would pass away, rather than being part of the eternal hope.

Although dispensationalism declined in prominence towards the end of last century in Britain, many adherents of evangelicalism continue to have an unclear understanding of how the rest of creation fits into their eschatological thinking. Passages such as Romans 8:19, where ‘creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed’ are rarely mentioned, never mind unpacked to understand what may happen at such a point of revelation. Eschatology has therefore become a very uncomfortable discussion topic for evangelicals, and for this reason its use as a conceptual language around environmental issues has tended to get a negative reaction. Anecdotally, on a number of occasions when speaking to evangelical audiences I have been advised not to mention eschatology in relation to issues such as climate change, as it will just ‘turn people off’.

Another extreme that may derive from the use of stewardship language is that of Baconian dominionism. Drawing from the language of kabash (subdue), the seventeenth-century philosopher Francis Bacon interpreted the dominion given by God to humans as
a mandate for the progressive exploitation of the resources of creation for the improvement of human life. Previously it had often been seen as justification for the use of creation for human benefit, but only in the sense of authorizing the ordinary ways in which people already made use of the nonhuman creation: farming, hunting, fishing, mining, and building. It was not seen as a project humans were commanded to pursue.

Bacon’s interpretation moved the utilitarian use of non-human creation from a position of one where humans had permission to use it wisely, to one where it is mandated for the advancement of humanity. Such an approach considered that which was not human as having no intrinsic value or worth, but rather as resources or raw materials, opening up the opportunity for the industrial revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Scotland benefited through this industrial revolution, whether it be shipbuilding on the banks of the Clyde and Leith in Glasgow and Edinburgh respectively, the weaving of imported cotton in Paisley, or the mining of coal in Fife and Lanarkshire in order to fuel this new industry. It was in this economic context that Scottish evangelicalism emerged. This Baconian dominionism did not end with the industrial revolution, but rather to a more subtle extent continued into the new scientific age as a justification for the North Sea oil and gas industry, bioengineering and the use of genetic modification. Such industries and the significant amount of capital and employment involved in them, makes it extremely challenging for churches in areas where this is dominant to challenge this mindset.

Language and lenses

In conclusion, having looked at the evangelical approach, we return briefly to the language that is used around environmentalism and how it may or may not resonate with the evangelical circles. Given their anthropological perspective, language which implies an intrinsic value ascribed to non-human creation can be problematic; hence even the subject title is contentious. With terms being used such as ‘Environmental Theology’, ‘Eco-theology’, ‘Green Theology’ and ‘Earth-keeping’, many of these imply a focus on that which is not human. Somewhat in contrast, ‘Creation Care’ tends to be the most popular amongst evangelicals, not least because
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of the implied acknowledgment of the Creator. Care has been taken throughout this piece not to use terminology such as ‘the natural world’ but rather to talk of ‘non-human creation’ in order to stress that both humanity and that which is not human (animate and inanimate) are included in this creation.

With so many theological challenges around sin, salvation and eschatology, it can be difficult to establish how to engage evangelicals in the subject of creation care. Anecdotally, I have found that talking in anthropological terms seems to resonate best, i.e. what is the impact on humanity by not engaging in creation care. In the light of COP26, the impact of climate change on the provision of food, water and shelter to those living in poverty resonates much more than appealing to a sense of duty to care for creation or its intrinsic value.

Notes


4 Hodson and Hodson, 5.


6 See Mark A. Noll, “One Word but Three Crises”, in Noll, Bebbington, and Marsden., Evangelicals, loc. 211, Kindle.
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8 Noll, Bebbington, and Marsden, loc. 781, Kindle.
9 An overview of which of these theological themes are considered by various authors is given in Hodson and Hodson, “Environment”, 3.
10 Genesis 1:1.
11 Revelation 4:8.
12 Due to the focus of this piece being on Scotland where this tradition is less prominent, this point cannot be elaborated on here more fully.
14 It should be noted that these passages describe the incarnation in different ways, and with different nuances.
16 Psalm 8:3–4.
17 Genesis 1:26.
21 An example can be found at https://rightfromtheheart.org/devotions/for-god-so-loved-insert-your-name-here/.
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25 Moo and Moo, *Creation Care*, 85.
28 Moo and Moo, *Creation Care*, 183.
29 Bauckham, “Being Human”, loc. 608, Kindle.
31 Noll, Bebbington, and Marsden, loc. 570, Kindle.
32 This raises questions around the evangelical engagement with concepts like climate justice, and therefore opens up further discussions about social justice – but that would need to be left for another paper.