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obedience of faith*

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We were greatly blessed by being invited to hold the consultation jointly with the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies. This institute has a long track record of pioneering involvement in this field. The experience of the campus in the woods in environmentally friendly buildings, field trips to explore the surroundings, and a communion service under the trees above a lake was conducive to the experience of God and nature.

Two serendipities heightened our awareness. A number of participants had attended the Rio Earth Summit. This provided the first opportunity for many to reflect on and discuss its recommendations. Secondly, the day the Forum began, the Institute director condemned a tree as unsafe. It came down (to his regret), but occasioned a tree planting ceremony as part of the conference. Five trees, one for each continent, replaced the one tree struck down.

Those trees will stand many years from now, as will the two trees my family planted in our garden this weekend. A practical response to the essays and report in this volume might be in the next six months to find an occasion to plant a tree to the glory of God and to the benefit of humanity, at your home, in the churchyard, in the seminary grounds.

An International Evangelical Environmental Network was also established at the Forum, initially facilitated by the Au Sable Institute and the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies as the secretariat. Those wishing to associate with this network are asked to write either to the Au Sable Institute, 731 State Street, Madison, Wisconsin, 53703, USA, or the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Box 70, Oxford, UK.

Rev. Dr. Chris Susden is the Resident Director of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies in Oxford, England. [p. 122](#)

Summarizing Committee Report of the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission and Au Sable Institute Forum

**‘EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT’ 26–31
AUGUST 1992**

This report seeks to summarize the substance of the discussions at the Au Sable Forum, 26–31 August 1992. The Forum comprised 60 individuals from 8 countries and 5 continents. They had a wide variety of expertise, academic disciplines, and current professions, but all were closely concerned in different ways with the natural environment.

The report identifies the many points on which there was substantial agreement between the participants. A few points are identified separately, however, either because it was agreed that further consideration was desirable or because there was substantive

disagreement within the group (these areas of disagreement are noted in the text below). The points are grouped in three sections:

- I. The Biblical theological framework
- II. The *praxis* of sustainable development
- III. Tasks for the Christian community and individuals.

The discussion was undertaken against the background of the creation in the northern part of the lower Michigan peninsula and instruction on the flora, fauna, geography and geology of the area, and on seven specific degradations to which creation is currently subject:

(1) *alteration of Earth's energy exchange* with the sun that results in *global warming and destruction of the Earth's protective ozone shield*. A specific example: Ozone loss each spring over Antarctica, based upon 25 years of nearly continuous measurements by the British Antarctic Survey station at Halley Bay detected slight ozone decline in the late 1970s, greater declines the 1980s, with 30% depletion by 1984 and 70% the total column ozone content in 1989. [Anderson, J., D. Toohey and W. Brune. 1991. 'Free Radicals Within the Antarctic Vortex: The Role of CFCs in Antarctic Ozone Loss.' *Science*. 251: 39–46.]

(2) *land degradation* that reduces available land for creatures and crops by 'adding house to house and field to field' and destroys land by erosion, salinization and desertification. A specific example: [p. 123](#) Infiltration of rain water in eroded soils may be reduced by over 90%; in Zimbabwe water runoff is 20% to 30% greater than on non-eroded soil, with resulting water shortages even during years with good rainfall. [Pimentel, D., et al. 1987. 'World Agriculture and Soil Erosion'. *BioScience*. 37:277–283.]

(3) *water quality degradation* that defiles groundwater, lakes, rivers and oceans. A specific example: In Europe and the U.S. between 5% and 10% of all wells examined have nitrate levels higher than the recommended maximum of 45 milligrams per liter. [Maurits la Riviere, J. 1989. 'Threats to the World's Water'. *Scientific American*. September 1989:80–94.]

(4) *deforestation* that each year removes 100,000 square kilometers of primary forest and degrades an equal amount by over-use. A specific example: In Thailand forest cover declined from 29 to 19 percent of the land area between 1985 and 1988. In the Philippines undisturbed forests have been reduced from 16 million hectares in 1960 to less than a million hectares left at present. [Repetto, R. 1990. 'Deforestation in the Tropics'. *Scientific American*. April 1990:36–42.]

(5) *species extinction* that finds more than 3 species of plants and animals eliminated from Earth *each day*. A specific example: In Ecuador since 1960 the original rainforest has been almost totally eliminated and converted to cash crops; a small remnant at Rio Palenque of less than one square kilometer is the only remaining site for 43 plant species and the adjacent Centinella Ridge that once supported 100 endemic plant species was cleared between 1980 and 1984. [Given, D. 1990. 'Conserving Botanical Diversity on a Global Scale'. *Annals of the Missouri Botanical Gardens* 77:48–62.]

(6) *waste generation and global toxification* that results in distribution of troublesome materials worldwide by atmospheric and oceanic circulations. A specific example: DDT is found in the fatty tissue of penguins in Antarctica and pesticides are found in a remote lake on Isle Royale in Lake Superior between the United States and Canada.

(7) *human and cultural degradation* that threatens and eliminates long-standing knowledge of native and some Christian communities on living sustainably and cooperatively with creation, together with the loss of long-standing garden varieties of food plants. A specific example: A 1975 study of Hanunoo tribe of the Philippine Islands found that an average adult could identify 1,600 different species—some 400 more than

previously recorded in a systematic botanical survey; for Nigeria and elsewhere in the two-thirds world there are similar findings. [Awa, N. 1989, 'Participation and Indigenous Knowledge in Rural Development', *Knowledge*. 10:304–316] p. 124

I. THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

God in Creation

1.1 All creatures are deeply intertwined with and dependent on each other, and humans have no right to destroy or despoil other species. However, since Evangelical Christians have affirmed that God is distinct from creation, and has given humans a unique status among creatures, some environmentally conscious people have felt that Christianity has given humans license to exploit other creatures. Some such people feel that the Earth ought rather to be identified directly with divine powers (symbolized by Gaia, the earth goddess) or regarded as God's 'body'. We affirm that God is indeed distinct from creation, yet deeply involved in it. This involvement arises not from natural necessity (as though the Earth were God or part of God) but from the triune God's free love and grace. God the Son, as the eternal Word, gives form to all creatures, and became human flesh, with which all creatures are interconnected; while God the Spirit breathes energy into all.

1.2 We affirm the value of the Gaia hypothesis (that the Earth, or its living creatures, form one interconnected system) for scientific research. While we reject the religious implication sometimes drawn—that the Earth is a divine being—we recognize that many are attracted to it as a result of the spiritual hunger prevalent in secularized industrial societies and of the church's failure adequately to proclaim its living, triune God as both clearly distinct from and intimately involved with the creation.

1.3 Some critics of Evangelical Christianity feel that its frequent use of masculine God-imagery, in contrast to feminine imagery, heightens a sense of God's distance from the world. At the same time, many feel that feminine imagery implies an identity between God and creation. While we did not discuss specific constructive responses to these concerns, we recognize their importance. We also affirm that adequate imagery for expressing God's 'masculine' and 'feminine' characteristics are to be found in Scripture, and that the Bible's main concern in this area is to communicate that God is *personal*.

The Goodness of Creation

1.4 We wholeheartedly affirm that the universe, as created by God, is good.

1.4.1 We experienced some uncertainty and disagreement as to the nature and presence of evil in relation to creation. We did not attain p. 125 clarity as to whether death as experienced before humankind's fall should be regarded as natural or evil, or as to exactly what the 'curse' brought with this fall, or how it operates.

The Fulfillment of Creation

1.5 In the Old Testament, the creation account begins by showing the threefold relationship between God, creation, and humanity. This relationship is later exemplified in the covenant with Israel, which includes the people of Israel, the gift of the land of Israel and their responsibility for it to God. The well-being or despoliation of the land was connected with their obedience or disobedience. In the New Testament, this triadic relationship of God, people of Israel, and land of Israel is reaffirmed and extended as the triad of God, the new people of God and the liberation of all creation. God's call to faith in Jesus Christ includes the call to care for and work towards the transformation of all creation.

1.6 God's purposes for creation include the development of urban areas. Concern for creation should not compete with, but should include and enhance, the development of healthy urban environments.

1.7 God draws all creatures towards a final fulfillment, the bodily resurrection of redeemed humanity and the liberation of all creation. The resurrected Jesus is the 'first fruit' of this liberation. The resurrection enlivens our responsibility for involvement in environmental matters, since it indicates how highly God values material reality, and arouses our hope, giving energy for the task.

1.8 The Sabbath rest is both a replication of God's rest in creation and an anticipation of creation's final perfection when it participates with the people of God in their rest. In both cases humanity is to trust that God will provide what is needed for life.

Humanity and Creation

1.9 Although all creatures receive life ultimately from God, human beings are intertwined with all other creatures, and in this sense dependent upon them for life. Yet humans are also called to a special task of caring for creation in a shepherdly manner, since they reflect God's image in a unique way. Many felt that the traditional term 'stewardship' adequately describes this task. Others cautioned that it can convey the mistaken notions that God is an absentee landlord, and that humans may therefore manage creation in any way that they see fit. [p. 126](#)

1.10 We affirm that all God's creatures are valuable in and of themselves, apart from any usefulness to humans. Though humans may at times use other creatures in the attainment of legitimate purposes, they are (so far as possible) to support the well-being of other creatures.

1.11 Where humankind has significantly damaged creation (see p. 1), the motivation for its restoration comes from our stewardship responsibilities, our hope for the liberation of creation, and the sufferings inflicted on particular groups of people, especially the poor (in the context of the fact that Jesus shared humanity's sufferings and proclaimed good news, especially to the poor).

Spiritual Dimensions

1.12 Humans participate most fully in God's purposes for creation through personal appropriation of the benefits of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection, which become present, participatory realities through the Holy Spirit. Essential for this participation is spirituality focused on Jesus's teaching and his cross, enlivened by the Spirit who moves throughout creation and connects our yearnings with those of all other creatures.

1.13 While we do not entirely understand how they operate, we affirm that supernatural forces of evil seek to block the accomplishment of God's purposes for creation. We therefore expect our participation in these purposes to involve struggle with these forces, and sometimes to involve suffering, which we will overcome through reliance on the triune God.

Sections II and III below assemble points for consideration and action by the Christian and wider communities. They should not be read as a complete manifesto, but as points which arose in the course of inevitably time-limited discussions: there were many relevant matters which were not touched upon.

II. THE PRAXIS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

2.1 We affirm the concept of sustainable development as that which seeks to provide an environment that promotes a life of dignity and well-being compatible with the

continuation and integrity of supporting ecosystems.¹ The concept includes the concern that material **P. 127** blessings should be available to successive generations as a fundamental God-given right. We note that beneath this concern lie absolutes of justice, equity and human responsibility which are not always expressed. Sustainable development cannot depend on the changing values and aspirations of succeeding generations, which may be in conflict with each other and with the divine will.

Population

2.2 We noted the importance of the issue of population as part of care for the environment. This is an issue of culture rather than technology. Current methods of assessing the value of the environment fail to make adequate allowance for the value of the environment where it provides livelihoods. We would urge a culture-specific approach of promoting child-spacing, with due regard for the sanctity of human life, rather than the one-solution approach (of contraceptive techniques or abortion) advocated by some. We welcome the suggestion of providing for new parents non-contributory old age pensions, or life insurance for their progeny, to remove the incentive to have many children to provide for old age.

Over-consumption

2.3 Over-consumption in the North can have a debilitating impact on countries of the South. Consumption of non-renewable resources in the North should be significantly reduced by increasing recycling and reuse of materials and by encouraging transition to less material-intensive technologies.

Poverty and degradation of creation

2.4 The evidence of growing numbers of poor people in the world is unmistakable, as is the evidence of the worsening condition of the creation contributing to and in part caused by poverty. We recognize that a fundamental cause of poverty is the sinful nature of humankind which manifests itself through violence, greed, and self-interest overriding the God-given mandate to meet the needs of both the human and natural creation, and specifically of the poor. Human beings are interdependent with the rest of creation but distinctly unique in that they are made in the image of God. We believe that it is of equal importance when addressing the needs of creation to deal adequately with the needs of the poor, and specifically to address world hunger. **p. 128**

2.5 In poor countries, sustainable development requires first and foremost addressing the following interrelated tasks: the establishment of a just and stable political power; economic development to provide jobs and alleviate poverty; capital investments in human development to stabilize populations and enable people to improve their well-being and their livelihoods; protection of God's creation, in large part by providing poor and landless peoples with alternatives to the over-exploitation of marginal lands; and support for improved development practices that are appropriate both within the culture and to the task.

Development assistance

¹ We recognize that there are many different definitions of sustainable development, and the forum considered a paper that referred in greater detail to the question.

2.6 We recognize the need of low-income countries, communities, and economies in transition to receive technological, educational and financial assistance to meet the incremental costs of caring for the creation while promoting economic development.

Women

2.7 The enormous disparities that exist between opportunities and rewards for men and women, and the disproportionate burden, on women, of poverty and the degradation of creation, mean that expanded opportunities for women can result in substantial gains for them, their families and their communities. Increases in the status of women's education and earnings, along with the availability of maternity and child health care, are also significant factors in improving child nutrition and health, as well as tending to reduce family size and its impact on creation (see Population, 2.2).

Mission and culture

2.8 Christianity is distinctive in not being bound to a particular cultural context. Both Christian mission and development work need to be properly sensitive to the cultural context, while affirming the active role of Christians within all cultures whether representing minority or majority viewpoints. Churches must be aware of and sensitive to existing sustainable patterns of development and indigenous stewardship practices in terms of self-reliance and equity, since Christianity is not an expression of any one cultural pattern. Where there have been situations of dependence and cultural imperialism, steps need to be taken to redress the wrongs of these situations. There needs to be reciprocity and respect between all Christians and cultures. Cultures [p. 129](#) interact and change. Missions and development activities are agents of change, and should work with national churches where they exist. The impact of these changes on the environment—positive and negative, intended and unintended—cannot be ignored, and are of great concern.

2.9 Lessons for the care of creation and methods or practices of Christian stewardship were drawn from the practices of Christians worldwide. An example was given from recent mission history where the outcome of Christian compassionate mission was to remove the hindrances to child survival, without compensating activity to relieve subsequent pressure on the environment. A more positive model is the church in Bali, a Christian community formed in the context of a community with a lively relationship to the surrounding creation. The revelation and love of Christ has expressed this concern for creation by building churches amid gardens and water, establishing experimental farms, and setting up credit unions and employment-creation programs. These innovations have been made without either compromising the uniqueness of Christ's revelation, or obliterating the many positive aspects of the Balinese culture.

Technology and Culture

2.10 Technological possibilities must be in a framework of Christian understanding, the socio-cultural context, and the natural environment. Uncontrolled development of technologies can ultimately threaten the very existence of humanity.

Farming

2.11 Agriculture. Modern methods of agriculture with inputs of chemical fertilizers and pesticides may lead to pollution of groundwater and other problems. Such pollution can produce health problems for human and animal populations. Chemical fertilizers fail to sustain the natural nutrients in the soil, resulting in reduction of crop productivity and eutrophication of surface waters. Often, in past agriculture, pests were controlled and

nutrient status of the soil was maintained by practices such as crop rotation, intercropping, multiple cropping, etc. However, in some cases, as in Ethiopia, traditional practices have resulted in loss of soil fertility and soil erosion. It is necessary to identify successful traditional practices and upgrade them as appropriate in order to develop (or recover) appropriate site-specific **p. 130** technologies which enhance crop productivity without degrading the environment.

2.12 Livestock. When animals or birds are domesticated to provide food or other products or services, attention should be paid to ensure their proper care and welfare. Modern biotechnology techniques have made it possible to introduce changes in animals and birds to enhance the quality and/or productivity of products derived from them like milk, meat, leather, etc., but such changes affect their natural lifestyles and may sometimes cause them considerable discomfort. The ethics of introducing such changes in living creatures needs to be examined in the light of scriptural teachings.

2.13 Wildlife. When animals in the wild are affected or used for human purposes, attention should be paid to ensure their proper care and welfare. Animals in the wild must be recognized as having certain needs for maintaining their life, their 'creatureliness' as willed by their Creator, their habitats, and their kinds. Destroying the animal world upsets not only the animals but also the ecological balance. Such destruction results from poaching, abusive use in entertainment, animal sacrifices, pollution, and destruction of their homes and habitat. Abusive use always takes place when cruelty is involved, and/or the species is over-exploited. Trade in animals and animal parts must always be done in accordance with strict ethical criteria.

Industry

2.14 The principle that the 'polluter pays' and that 'one person cannot exploit or pollute another person's source of living' must take account of who the polluter is—he/she is often the actual consumer on whose behalf the producer acts. Shaping technology so as to prevent pollution and or reduce it at source can often be much cheaper than cleaning it up later.

Military Preparations and War

2.15 Wars (including terrorist activities, military preparations, and some forms of training) degrade the environment. The Bible insists that the environment be protected in case of conflict (for example, olive trees may not be destroyed). If even a small percentage of the resources devoted to armaments, research and development were diverted to environmental conservation, substantial improvement could be achieved in the state of creation. **p. 131**

III. TASKS FOR THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AND INDIVIDUALS

The Kingdom Community

3.1 The church's task is to take part in and give expression to the present and future kingdom of Christ. When that kingdom arrives in its fullness, creation will be set free from its bondage to decay.

Care for Creation and Evangelism

3.2 Many people in the environmental movement are in an intense religious search even though they explicitly reject Christianity. As Christians articulate a biblical view of creation and model loving care for its well-being, they will have significant evangelistic

opportunities. Christian environmentalists should eagerly take these opportunities to point people to Christ.

3.3 When people come to Christ and churches are formed, then in the process of obedient discipleship, care for creation frequently emerges. This care needs to be more consciously and systematically taught and sought as a mark of Christian discipleship, both for the individual Christian and for the Christian community, in place of expressions of discipleship which are limited to the life of the individual. Caring treatment of non-human creation will enhance our care for the crown of creation: men and women.

Youth

3.4 Because they will be around the longest, young people should (and often do) have a special interest in the care of creation. This special interest of the young requires the development of a robust environmental apologetic to be made available to youth and youth ministries. A commitment to evangelism is integral to efforts to care for creation and vice versa. Young Christians need not only to be equipped with evangelistic materials, but to be given practical teaching on issues of lifestyle, as well as opportunities to express their care of creation in a meaningful way. 'Whose Earth', the Spring Harvest initiative in association with TEAR Fund, is a model which has attempted to meet these goals in the United Kingdom.

The Sabbath Rest

3.5 God rested at the end of the creation week; he exemplified for us what 'Sabbath' should mean. In addition, the fourth commandment [p. 132](#) requires us to honor the Sabbath. Observation of the Sabbath may take many forms; however, it should fulfill the purposes of worship, rest, and re-creation. More thought is needed to develop ways in which Christians in differing cultures should observe the Sabbath, for the Sabbath is for creation.

Political Engagement and Education

3.6 The Christian community, who follow the one who is the Truth, must dare to proclaim the full truth about the environmental crisis in the face of powerful persons, pressures and institutions which profit from concealing the truth. Such recognition of hard truths is a first step towards the freedom for which creation waits.

3.7 The Christian community needs to develop practical policy approaches to the environment and environmental issues, based on biblical principles and sound analysis.

3.8 Christians need to form and join environmental organizations that apply explicitly Christian principles to environmental problems. In addition, they have an important witness as participants in secular organizations.

3.9 The Christian community must be willing to identify and condemn social and institutionalized evil, especially when it becomes embedded in systems. It should propose solutions which both seek to reform and (if necessary) replace creation-harming institutions and practices.

3.10 Churches should seek to develop as creation-awareness centers in order to exemplify principles of stewardship for their members and communities, and to express both delight in and care for creation in their worship and celebration. They should particularly aim to produce curricula and programs which encourage knowledge and care of creation.

3.11 The Christian community must initiate and support the process of education (for all its members) on the Christian approach to environmental ethics. In particular, Christian colleges and seminaries should provide teaching in this area. The church's goal

should be the growth of earthkeepers, both in the habits of everyday life, and in the provision of leadership for the care of creation.

3.12 Many other issues which may be the root cause or proximate cause of environmental problems may require similar political and educational initiatives such as those identified in paragraphs 2.2 to 2.7 above (population pressure, over-consumption, poverty, international financial transfers, and the status and role of women). p. 133

We welcome dialogue with all who are concerned with preserving and enhancing our environment (which is God's creation). We pray that these reflections may provide a positive contribution towards achieving the goals which we share.

The Earth is the Lord's ([Psalm 24:1](#)).

He [Christ] is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ([Col. 1:17](#)). p. 134

God's Love for the World and Creation's Environmental Challenge to Evangelical Christianity

Calvin B. DeWitt

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth in him, shall not be condemned ... But he that doeth truth, cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought according to God ([John 3:17](#), [18a](#), [21](#) GB).¹

CREATION'S INTEGRITY AND VIOLATION

'The time has come ... for destroying those who destroy the earth.'² This pronouncement of [Revelation 11:18](#) is one that made little sense to anyone until recently. It has been largely neglected in pulpit and pew, and has had little to do with people's 'manifest deeds'—the way people conduct their lives. This ominous judgement—proclaimed at the sound of the last trumpet—has been unheeded for apparently good reason. For how could human beings possibly destroy the Earth? How could people abuse their stewardship responsibility on such a scale? And why would people ever use their authority over creation ([Gen. 1:28](#)), to destroy creation—thereby to negate their own dominion! And, even if they did abuse their God-given stewardship of creation, certainly people would never gain enough power to destroy the Earth!

¹ The quotations at the beginning and conclusion of this paper designated 'GB', are from *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*, Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969. Archaic spellings of words have been replaced with modern spellings by the author.

² Scripture throughout this paper is taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version* Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.