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Going Green

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Turn off the water when you brush your teeth. Ride your bike to school. Take reusable bags to the grocery store. Recycle. Use compact fluorescent light bulbs.

These simple acts are but a few of the ways in which people “go green,” seeking to preserve and improve the environment. But these aren't just green habits, they're also holy habits, ways in which Christians show their love for God and neighbor and express their Christian discipleship.

Holiness Habits

Holiness is bringing one's life in line with God's will. Often holiness is manifested through habits such as prayer, worship, sacraments, Scripture study, and accountability to a Christian community. These habits enable us to stay focused on God and help us live our lives in accordance with God's desire for humanity.

While Christians should never neglect traditional spiritual practices, we also can develop many other holy habits reflecting God's heart for creation. “Green” habits (such as reducing waste and consuming less), for instance, can provide us with ways to be holy, to connect with God, and to grow spiritually.

Green holiness may especially resonate with younger Christians. The millennial generation is a green generation. Millennials have grown up hearing about greenhouse gases and carbon footprints; they've been educated in schools with recycling bins in the classrooms and cafeterias.

They're more likely than previous generations to be conscious of how their actions affect the environment.

The challenge for those who minister to youth is to help them make connections between earth-friendly habits and discipleship, to help them see going green as an example of Christian holiness. Often the church makes these connections using vague buzzwords such as *creation care* and *stewardship*. But what are the biblical and theological underpinnings of these concepts? What other Christian themes are related to our treatment of the environment? And how can we help young people develop green habits that are also holy habits?

Roots in Scripture

The concepts of creation care and stewardship have their roots in the Bible's opening chapters. Upon creating human beings God says, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Genesis 1:26). Later God says to humankind, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). In the second creation story, God places Adam in the garden of Eden to "till it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15).

Jesus casts light on this responsibility in his parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). A man who's going away on a journey entrusts a different amount of money to each of three servants. One gets five talents, another two, and another one. While the man is away, the servants with five and two talents invest their money and earn an additional five and two talents, respectively, for their master; the servant with one talent, on the other hand, buries the talent, squandering what the master has given him. The master rewards the first two servants and punishes the third.

This parable makes a couple of important points—about stewardship, of course—and in a related way, creation care. First, it advises us to not waste what God has given us. Second, it reminds us that the resources God has given us should be used for God's glory, not our own.

Caring for creation means managing God's property—what God has entrusted to us. We are God's stewards, God's property managers—a vocation we shouldn't take lightly.

Taking shorter showers and turning off the sprinklers, for instance, aren't merely ways of lowering the household water bill; they're also means of conserving an increasingly scarce resource—fresh water—that God intentionally designed for use by all of God's creatures. Conversely, discarding items that could be reused or recycled is akin to burying a talent in the ground. Christians believe in a Creator who declared the earth and everything in it "good" (Genesis 1:31).

Green Means Loving Our Neighbor

Though the concepts of creation care and stewardship are important and grounded in Scripture, they're by no means the only reasons for Christians to go green. Jesus tells us that the second greatest commandment—second only to loving God—is to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39; Leviticus 19:18). Loving our neighbor means also loving our environment.

More than a billion people lack access to safe drinking waterⁱ, leading to death from dehydration and water-related diseases for millions of them. According to a report by Credit Suisse, an international financial services group, water use has increased “more than double the rate of population growth,” making fresh water a coveted resource that people fight to control.ⁱⁱ

However, daily habits that reduce water use—turning off the water while brushing one's teeth, collecting and reusing the water that runs while one is warming up the shower, and so on—preserve water necessary for human survival and well-being. Habits that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, such as driving less frequently (or taking the bus instead driving or asking parents for a ride) and turning off lights and electronics when they aren't in use, may slow or stall the retreat of glaciers that are important sources of clean water in many parts of the world. In short, caring for water is caring for people.

Of course, pollution affects not only the clean water supply, but also air and soil quality—which has obvious adverse effects on people's health, especially those in certain socioeconomic groups. Robert D. Bullard, director of Clark Atlanta University's Environmental Justice Resource Center (EJRC), writes in his book *Dumping in Dixie*, “An abundance of documentation shows blacks, lower-income groups, and working-class persons are subjected to a disproportionately large amount of pollution and other environmental stressors in their neighborhoods as well as in their workplaces.”ⁱⁱⁱ

While righting these wrongs often requires advocacy (and God certainly calls Christians to be advocates for justice in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets), daily habits such as reusing and recycling materials that we'd otherwise throw away and properly disposing of items that could release toxins into the water and soil (such as batteries) ease at least some of the environmental burden on these communities. Where environmental justice is concerned, adopting green habits is a means of loving our neighbors as ourselves.

All of these practices—conserving water, reducing waste, conserving energy, and properly disposing of potentially hazardous materials—also have an effect on food supply and the overall health and beauty of the environment. This means they are holy practices—ways of connecting with God by expressing our love for our neighbors and for all of God's creation.

The Spiritual Benefits

We also shouldn't forget that green practices themselves can also foster

personal spiritual growth. An old adage (and popular bumper-sticker slogan) says, "Live simply so that others may simply live." While true, a slightly modified version of this quip is equally true: "Live simply so that you may simply live."

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his followers not to store up "treasures on earth" (Matthew 6:19). He later told a rich young man that, to have treasure in heaven, he must sell his possessions and give the money to the poor (Matthew 19:21). In Luke, Jesus told a parable about a man who foolishly believes that building bigger barns for his many possessions will bring him contentment (Luke 12:16-21). All of these teachings suggest that material possessions can distract us from God and from the abundant life Jesus promises. They also suggest that the consumerist ethic that so many in the industrialized world subscribe to is contrary to God's will for humanity.

Going green means, on some level, rejecting consumerism. The first of the "three Rs" of environmentalism is "reduce." That is, consume less. Taking a critical look at how much we consume and identifying ways to buy and use less are good for the environment and for the soul. Doing so is a means of conserving valuable resources and storing up treasures in heaven instead of on earth. It slows the production of environmentally unfriendly materials and eliminates distractions that separate us from God.

Claiming these environmental practices as spiritual disciplines may lead young people to additional spiritual habits and more comprehensive lives of holiness. If a youth can commit to the simple practice of collecting the water that runs while the shower is warming up and using it to water plants, could he also commit to spending some time each morning praying and/or reading Scripture? In both cases, he'd be starting his day by acknowledging God as his creator and guide.

If a high school student can be an active member in an environmental group at school, could she also be an active part of a small group at church? In both cases, she'd be part of a group that holds its members accountable for a more faithful and responsible way of living.

Making Connections

Many Christians, and particularly young Christians, believe that preserving the environment is good, but they don't necessarily see caring for the earth as an integral part of a life of Christian discipleship. But there are clear connections between going green and Christian themes grounded in Scripture.

Our stewardship over God's creation is a holy calling. Therefore, naming eco-friendly habits as holy practices is a sanctifying process: It can enrich our relationship with God and help us grow spiritually, and these practices honor what God has lovingly and carefully created. What other holistic life-practices should we help our students claim as holy?

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- iFrom Deloitte, http://www.deloitte.com/dtt/press_release/0,1014,cid%253D143131,00.html.
- iiRichard Wachman, "Water becomes the new oil as world runs dry," *The Observer*, December 9, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2007/dec/09/water.climatechange>.
- iiiRobert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie*, third edition, Westview 2000, p. 1.