An Adventist Theology of the Earth: Ready for a Leap Forward?

Summer temperatures in Southern California in June and July 2003 were as usual, often far above those of a living human body. As a guest lecturer in the School of Religion at La Sierra University, Riverside, I valued an air-conditioned office and the computer used during the academic year by Dr Warren C Trenchard's student assistant. But the benefits were far more than pleasant physical space and electronic technology: they included vibrant discussions with Trenchard and access to some of his recent manuscripts. One of them, "For the Beauty of the Earth: An Adventist Theology of Ecology," has since been published in *Spectrum: The Journal of the Association of Adventist Forums* 31, No 3 (Summer 2003), 34–45.

Trenchard directs La Sierra's graduate programs and is Professor of New Testament and Early Christian Literature there. His PhD studies at the University of Chicago and ongoing research have flowered into significant journal articles and books from major presses. Now, in this new *Spectrum* article, he applies similar rigour to a neglected field.

Christianity began in considerable measure as an apocalyptic movement and it maintains a living interest in the world to come. It is not surprising, therefore, that it has been roundly, and often rightly, criticised for neglecting environmental responsibility. This lack has been experiencing increasingly effective correction since the 1960s, not least by the burgeoning literature that Trenchard cites. Adventism has been slower than mainstream Christianity to come to terms with this long-neglected dimension of biblical thought. Yet, as Trenchard contends, there are cogent reasons why our theology demands more attention be given to the well being of the planet on which we reside.

Trenchard calls us to "develop an Adventist theology of the earth within a paradigm of five basic affirmations": creation, deterioration, salvation, anticipation and restoration. God is creator and sustainer of the physical world as well as its human, animal and plant life. The rebellion of humans degraded the planet and life upon it. God in Jesus Christ has confronted this deterioration and provided for the ultimate restoration of the world and life upon it. God, through the Holy Spirit, provides instalments toward this restoration. The fifth affirmation, restoration, declares that "God will restore the physical world and its human, animal, and plant life to their pristine state for eternity."

However, Trenchard moves beyond the significance of such affirmations to stress the relevance of two symbols that he identifies as central to Adventism: Sabbath and Sanctuary. The Sabbath celebrates God's creation and sustenance of the earth and its life forms, and "is a reminder that God saves not only humans but also the earth." Sabbath rest is "an anticipation of the earth's ultimate renewal," calling us to "work tangibly now to advance that renewal," realising "that the ultimate rest of eternity will include the restoration of the earth from deterioration."

Trenchard is most compelling of all in the application he makes of the doctrine of the Sanctuary, underlining the importance of God's view of humans and their physical environment. He notes the applicability of the Sanctuary symbol to creation, deterioration, salvation, anticipation and restoration, finishing with a sentence (Pauline in its length!) calling Adventist Christians who embrace the sanctuary symbol to "acknowledge that from the beginning of creation God has been present in and identified with the earth and all its human and other life forms." Not only did God's presence continue to grace the earth after human rebellion occurred, it climaxed in the Christ event, it is experienced through the Holy Spirit, and it will be completed "when all things are restored to their pristine perfection." The evidence is beyond dispute, well focused in Trenchard's final words: " God will hold humans accountable for how they have fulfilled their responsibilities to care for the earth."

Trenchard's original title for his article was "A Paradigm for an Adventist Theology of the Earth." He is even more interested in a theology of the earth than in a theology of ecology, believing that the appropriate religious motivation for ecology is a positive theology of the earth. His central purpose, therefore, is to register an urgent call for the development of a theology of the earth that will result in ecological responsibility. To this end his article lays out a paradigm or framework for constructing such a theology from an Adventist perspective. Along the way he documents how, in recent decades, Adventists have begun to more adequately apply their theology to the issue of ecology. His essay calls for both reflection and action. Its significance does not demand a step forward—but a well-calculated leap toward better articulation and implementation of neglected responsibilities that are inherent even in the millennialist aspects of Adventist theology.

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