

# Man-Usurper or Steward?

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CRISIS IN EDEN, A Religious Study of Man in Environment

By Frederick Elder

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The author of *Crisis in Eden*, a Presbyterian minister, believes that modern man has two alternatives open to him in relation to the natural order. He can think in terms of man *and* environment, with man standing over against nature. Or he can think in terms of man *in* environment, with man as an inextricable part of nature. These two choices have more than just scientific issues at stake; there are theological and religious implications as well. Elder goes to the Scriptures for the cause of the environmental crisis and to the churches for the solution.

The "exclusionists," who view man in opposition to nature, are those who have created the prevailing definition of nature in today's society.<sup>1</sup> Man, they believe, is the epitome of created value, the measure of all creation. Their extreme anthropocentrism causes them to view the various aspects of life as separate file folders in a drawer and not as a web of interdependent strands. They subscribe to current trends toward increased technology and urbanization. Though their critics are concerned about man's increasing control over his environment, the exclusionists believe man is doing nothing more than fulfilling that purpose for which he came into existence.

Elder believes the exclusionist view of nature, the dominant one in Western society, has been shaped by the centuries-old interpretation of the doctrine of Creation. In the second chapter of Genesis, man is presented as the center of all creative acts. He is created first, and all that comes after him is for his benefit; other living creatures are created because "it is not good that man should be alone." In chapter one, though man is created last, he is made in the image of God, given dominion over all creation, and enjoined to subdue the earth. It is this interpretation of the Creation doctrine, Elder concludes, that has been the source of man's anthropocentrism and of a distorted view of nature.

Life scientists from several fields compose the bulk of those Elder terms "inclusionists."<sup>2</sup> They view life as a unit, a self-contained biological spaceship that can function correctly only when all elements of the system are in balance. Although man may be important, they refuse to view him as isolated from the other elements of nature. Western man's interesting control over nature appalls them; and they point out the paradox that as man more and more dominates the earth, he is less and less its master. He is faced only with the prospect of living in an ever more crowded, manipulated environment. Inclusionists look forward to a world where man functions as a knowledgeable dominant, moderating his biological and technological activity so that once again he may have the balance of nature so necessary for survival.

The inclusionists are not willing to let the exclusionists have the final word on the biblical doctrine of Creation. The first chapter of Genesis depicts man as the last of

God's created works, indicating a dependence on what was created previously. Man could not exist apart from the life forms created before him. When the dominion verses (1:27, 28) are considered in this light, man will see himself as a steward of Creation, not a usurper. By declaring Creation "good" at the end of each Creation day, God assigns value to all life forms, not just man.

Elder draws on ecological evidence to show that man is killing himself by refusing to acknowledge his dependence on nature and the need for balance in all its elements. By polluting every level of his environment, he is virtually committing suicide. Strong measures must be taken, especially in the area of population control, since ultimately the cause of the environmental crisis is too many people. But the people that are here must be willing to undergo sacrifices in a consumer-oriented society if the problem is ever to be solved.

Elder recognizes that most of the world, and especially America, is not ready or willing to pay the price for a quality environment. It is one thing to propose solutions and quite another thing to enact them. For this reason, it is necessary to introduce new values and priorities into society. He proposes a "new asceticism" made up of three elements: (1) restraint (the size of the families must be limited); (2) emphasis on quality existence (preserving clear lakes is as important as acquiring material goods); (3) reverence for life (to eliminate *any* life form is wrong).

How is this new asceticism to become a reality? Not by government, because government is more a reflector than a shaper of society's values. Not by schools, because the role of schools seems to be that of questioning values, not transmitting them. Not by the family, because the family doesn't have enough moral authority left in American culture to be able to influence value change.

By such a process of elimination, Elder concludes that it is the responsibility of the churches to effect a new value-orientation. Churches have the advantage of numbers (fifty percent of all Americans are in church on a given Sunday) and of moral influence. By teaching that God is the Creator and Unifier of all life, the church can shift man's thinking from anthropocentrism to a new relationship with nature. Here is Elder's apocalyptic challenge to America's churches: "The churches could emerge from their parochialism and, armed with empirical and aesthetic, as well as biblical and theological, data, could lead the country, and through it the entire planet, back from the brink of ecological disaster on which it presently teeters" (p. 161).

Elder may have more faith in the influence of America's churches than the evidence warrants, but one can appreciate his challenge. America's churches need to begin influencing values rather than merely reflecting the values of its members. The Seventh-day Adventist church would seem to be in a better position than most, because it already has the necessary theology. What other church utilizes as much of its resources preaching and defending the Creation doctrine? The affirmation that God is the Source of all living things should demand concern about destruction of life by irresponsible living.

One could only wish that the church would spend less time attacking the evolutionists and more time exposing polluters of the environment. The Adventist church has always taught that nature reveals God's law and divine character. Shouldn't the church be outraged at the destruction of such an important medium of revelation?

Concern for health, one of the oldest Adventist trademarks, should logically embrace opposition to pollution, for no greater threat to healthful living exists.

By attacking the environmental problem from the theological base, Elder may rally the support of the Christian churches. Although most Christians support the ecology movement individually, they haven't seen justification for applying the muscle of the churches to the whole problem. *Crisis in Eden* can be an important means of bringing about their mobilization. The churches have been talking for centuries about saving the world. If they help save it physically, they will be in a better position to save it spiritually as well.

#### REFERENCES

- 1 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*. Introduction by Julian Huxley and translation by Bernard Wall. (New York: Harper 1959).  
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Harvey G. Cox, *On Not Leaving It to the Snake* (New York: Macmillan 1967).
- 2 Loren Eiseley, *The Immense Journey* (New York: Random House 1957).  
Eiseley, *The Firmament of Time* (New York: Atheneum 1968).

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