

Consecration, Stewardship, and Accountability: Remedy for a Dying Planet

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THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS WE FACE TODAY is symptomatic of an ignorant, greedy, lazy, and often evil society. More policies, rhetoric, and money will not solve the earth's environmental problems. Only when we stop trying to cure the symptoms of the earth's environmental sickness will we understand more fully that real solutions require changes in our thinking and in our hearts and a significant sacrifice of current lifestyles. The issue is whether we will make the changes because of wisdom or be compelled to change because of environmental catastrophe.

Our reluctance to address seriously environmental issues is based on at least five fundamental misunderstandings of scripture. These misunderstandings are not merely academic or doctrinal; they are central to the perpetuation of life on earth and the spiritual and temporal edification of all of God's creations.

First, we have misunderstood the commandment to have dominion over the earth and subdue it. Often we have interpreted this to mean that we own the earth and thus have an unlimited right to plunder it and devour its resources for our pleasure. This interpretation shows itself in greed, self-justification, and rapaciousness, but its weakness is revealed in environmental pollution and resource depletion so dramatic as to jeopardize the very lives of future generations.

In contrast, the Lord intended the earth to be a revolving stewardship, to be passed from generation to generation. Each generation is to use the earth's resources to meet real temporal needs and justifiable wants, while consistently conserving and protecting the earth so that it might be maintained as a healthy, vibrant home for future generations.

The second misunderstanding stems from a misinterpretation of Doctrine and Covenants 104:17, "For the earth is full and there is enough

and to spare." Careful reading of the context of verse 17 reveals that this passage was never intended to justify wanton consumption of resources or to gainsay the problems of human population growth.

For it is expedient that I, the Lord, should make every man accountable as a steward over earthly blessings, which I have made and prepared for my creatures. I, the Lord, stretched out the heavens and built the earth, my very handiwork, and all things are mine. And it is my purpose to provide for my saints for all things are mine. But it must needs be done in mine own way: and behold this is the way that I, the Lord, have decreed to provide for my saints, that the poor shall be exalted, in that the rich are made low. For the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare; yea, I prepared all things, and have given unto the children of men to be agents unto themselves. Therefore, if any man shall take of the abundance which I have made, and impart not his portion, according to the law of my gospel, unto the poor and needy, he shall, with the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment (D&C 104:13-18).

Five times in this passage the Lord asserts his title to the earth, not ours, and specifies that his earthly resources are for the use of the Saints and the poor, not for the lusts of the rich and powerful. The Saints, as stewards over the earth's abundance, will prosper from generation to generation only if they take what they need and consecrate the rest for the poor, and are careful not to neglect or abuse the other creatures who share the earth with them (v. 13). This is the law of consecration upon which our presence on the earth and use of its resources are predicated.

The law of consecration in no way justifies today's levels of consumption, production, profit, riches, and accumulation. Many of us are forfeiting our inheritance in the kingdom through self-centered exploitation of air, water, minerals, animals, plants, other people, and in some cases entire communities. Our voracious consumption of earthly resources is a usurpation for which we will be tormented hereafter. As blessings are predicated on obedience to eternal law (D&C 130:20-21) and promises are suspended for disobedience (82:10), we uphold the rapacious and their political allies at the peril of our own temporal survival and spiritual salvation.

The third misunderstanding relates to our place in the natural world. We tend to see ourselves as a special creation with ultimate biological control, uniquely independent of and even transcendent to nature's laws. If difficulties arise through our use or misuse of the earth, we believe that human technology will solve the problem.

In reality natural laws are inescapable and govern all life on earth, including human life. For example, one law is that life needs air. If we pollute the air, all life forms will suffer poor health and higher mortality. Simply stated, noxious fumes are not good for living things—whether to-

bacco smoke, automobile exhaust, or industrial discharge: it is the law. On a global level the atmosphere is physically and chemically set to sustain life within a narrow range of temperature, precipitation, and sunlight. We will not have temperate climate with rain in season if we choose to destabilize the atmosphere with chemicals deleterious to the system God set up: it is the law.

The earth's resilience and capacity to absorb our environmental irresponsibility is limited. The earth will not, however, deal out its own abuse in response to our repeated violation of its laws: it is too similar to its maker to act revengefully. Rather, like a beast of burden overworked and abused, it will grow weak and sick, and finally, stripped of its vitality and resilience, it will simply lie down and die. Consider the prophesied catastrophes of a darkened sun and a bloodied moon, vapors of smoke, great pollutions, waves of the sea heaving themselves beyond their bounds, famines, thunder, fierce and vivid lightning, tempests, earthquakes, and hailstorms in the last days. These universal perturbations are symptoms of deep infection by violent, abusive mis-stewardship and evil more than simply divine punishment upon the wicked. For if, as Enoch observed (Moses 7:48), the earth itself suffers and cries out in pain over the evil inflicted upon it, can we expect that its life-sustaining systems should continue unaffected: "Woe, woe is me, the mother of men! I am pained, I am weary, because of the wickedness of my children."

Technology has beguiled us with the notion that we can save ourselves from the results of our own environmental abuse by manipulating the natural laws which govern the earth. Most technological advances are driven by profit and have been the cause of, not the solution to, environmental deterioration. In Satan's world funding for profitable technology, however dirty and destructive, will always outpace funding for research into technological solutions.

The fourth misunderstanding is that the Lord will solve all our problems, environmental and otherwise. In reality the Lord has made it clear that we are personally accountable for what we know and what we do with our knowledge. Consequences of poor management, greed, irresponsibility, and apathy will be visited upon us. The Lord has said:

Whosoever perisheth, perisheth unto himself; and whosoever doeth iniquity, doeth it unto himself; for behold, ye are free ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God have given unto a knowledge and he hath made you free. He hath given unto you that ye might know good from evil, and he hath given unto you that ye might choose life or death (Hel. 14:30-31).

Thus if we choose to defile the earth, we must live with the stench, sickness, death, and ugliness of a ravaged environment, and will answer to the creator for desecrating his property. The Lord does not interrupt

free agency, and he suspends the consequences of poor exercise of agency only for the repentant. Again our options narrow down to either desecration or consecration. If we choose consecration, the fullness of a renewed, paradisiacal earth will be ours, and we will inherit all the Father has. If we choose desecration, we will remain under degraded conditions, and the Lord will weep over our loss.

The fifth misunderstanding of scripture responsible for environmental degradation—and possibly the most pernicious and perverted of all—is that worldly wealth, power, and influence are the rewards of faithfulness. Many consider TVs, VCRs, RVs, telephone answering machines, luxury cars, boats, and extravagant homes to indicate special divine favor. Some even invoke preexistent faithfulness to justify their temporal holdings and worldly power. None of this, however, has any basis in revealed theology. The Lord not only deplores financial and social disparity (D&C 70:14), but the pursuit of worldly wealth is altogether abominable to him. The Lord has said: “Seek not for riches but for wisdom, and, behold, the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto you, and then shall you be made rich. Behold, he that hath eternal life is rich” (D&C 6:7). False social, economic, and political systems, ignorance, apathy, insensitivity, and greed cause misery, class disparity, and environmental havoc. God is not responsible for these collective and individual failings. He commands us to be healed of all these ills through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, he has forever renounced the use of force to correct human defects and waits for us to come to sanity, either motivated by wisdom or compelled by human-induced catastrophe.

Indications of biologic catastrophe, or of a planet in peril, are all around us. Scientists are monitoring the disappearance of frogs, birds, predatory animals, lichens, forests, and other species one by one. The environment is unraveling before our eyes. The question before us is will catastrophe force us at an enormous cost in human and biologic life to make changes at some future time or will we prevent the disaster by political and individual action now?

Individually we must cleanse ourselves from the blood of the innocent earth. First, we must shed the false expectations and misunderstandings mentioned above and replace them with genuine comprehension. We must cease to regard nature and wilderness as enemies, and instead cultivate in our own hearts and in that of our children sensitivity for the environment. We must learn to respect all creatures, both plant and animal, and make a place for them in our lives, communities, and national parks and public lands. We may do this by observation and study, starting with the simple things around us. We can hang a bird feeder by the kitchen window and keep a bird guide close at hand. If we discover ants in the backyard, rather than kill them with insecticides and poisons, we

can teach our children that ants are good, having been pronounced good by God after creation's fifth day. Thus we may teach our children to appreciate the life which God created, as Brigham Young taught the Saints on two occasions during the cricket plagues: "Last season when the grasshoppers came on my crops, I said, 'Nibble away! I may as well feed you as to have my neighbors do it. I have sown plenty and you have not raised any yourselves.' When the harvest came, you would not have known that there had been a grasshopper there."¹ On another occasion he said:

According to present appearances, next year we may expect grasshoppers to eat up nearly all our crops. But if we have provisions enough to last us another year, we can say to the grasshoppers—"these creatures of God"—you are welcome. I have never had a feeling to drive them from one plant in my garden, but I look upon them as the armies of the Lord.²

We must cultivate a sensitivity for the infinite and eternal beauty of the earth, deepen our reverence for God in his capacity as a creator, and follow his admonition in section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand; of things both in heaven and on the earth, and under the earth: things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass . . . that ye may be prepared in all things when I shall send you again to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you, and the mission with which I have commissioned you (vv. 78-80).

As we begin to comprehend and appreciate the earth and its natural processes, we are better prepared to recognize dangers to any part of it. We are better prepared for involvement in the political process and in various community organizations which promote environmental accountability and stewardship. We are better prepared against deception when our elected officials lie to protect their corporate backers. Nevertheless, we must also recognize that Satan's false world has been imposed upon the earth, and in most instances his financial schemes and conspiracies determine the use of God's earthly resources. Very little has changed since Plato wrote that only scoundrels acquire public office. Often the good that we do is undermined by the bad that others are doing, especially when they are cunning, deceptive, well-financed, and politically

1. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, Eng.: Latter-day Saints' Booksellers Depot, 1855-86), 3:159.

2. *Ibid.* 12:121.

powerful. Perhaps the best we can do is to purify our own hearts and tend our own garden.

We must henceforth cease to regard the earth as a commodity belonging to us. It is a community of living things, including ourselves. As we begin to comprehend this, we will have a genuine desire to love, respect, and protect the earth.

We must reevaluate and bring our personal values in harmony with eternal principles.

We must acknowledge that free agency has temporal and spiritual consequences; it places upon each of us a responsibility which we cannot evade.

We must recognize that those with the greatest resources have the greatest responsibility to use them to care for the earth and all its inhabitants.

We must consider and act on our personal responsibility to protect the earth by changing patterns in our lives which diminish its life-sustaining capacities.

We must never allow ourselves to become casual in our use of the earth's resources, but receive everything from the earth in reverence and gratitude.

We must consume less, pollute less, discard less, conserve more, recycle more, and share more.

We must remember that our relationship to the earth must always be based on personal integrity. We must do what is right and not what is merely economically feasible or personally profitable. Anything less is irresponsible and exploitative.

We must cleanse our hearts of the influences of a world corrupted by greed, hate, evil, and selfishness. We must seek to find greater joy and happiness in virtue, truth, charity, kindness, simplicity, sacrifice, and gentleness.

Finally, because political and financial conspiracies will frustrate our most exhaustive collective efforts, we must pray for the safety of our earth home, relative to issues both global and local. "And when Enoch heard the earth mourn, he wept and cried unto the Lord, saying: O Lord, wilt thou not have compassion upon the earth?" (Moses 7:49)

After many years of plunder and abuse, we now find ourselves at a crossroads of understanding where we must choose between despoliation and nurturance, between desecration and consecration. Global catastrophe is imminent; only in Zion will there be safety. But Zion will not, cannot, be established with our present lifestyles of consumption, opulence, and pleasure: the luxury cars, the big boats, the ATCs of the young, the RVs of the retired, the big houses, and all such things must be sacrificed if we are to shoulder personal and collective responsibility for es-

tablishing Zion. If we fail to do so, we shall face the climatologic and biologic storms of a ravaged and dying planet alone.

On the other hand, Zion will not be moved and will be a place of spiritual and temporal splendor in perpetuity. It will be a place such as was described by Hugh Iltis: "If we love our children, we must love the earth with tender care and pass it on, diverse and beautiful, so that on a warm spring day 10,000 years hence they can feel peace in a sea of grass, can watch a bee visit a flower, can hear a sandpiper call in the sky, and can find joy in being alive."³

3. Quoted in G. T. Miller, *"Living in the Environment": An Introduction to Environmental Science*, 5th Ed. (New York: Wadsworth Publishing Co.).