



Lukas Vischer: What are the reasons for the churches' engagement for the preservation of the environment?

1. Place and Date of Publication

Manuscript (July 10, 1998) unpublished; no memory address available.

2. Historical Context

In June 1997, the Second European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz adopted the recommendation "that a network of persons with environmental responsibilities" within the churches should be set up at a European level. Lukas Vischer had been one of the initiators of the proposal. From 21-25 October 1998, 60 experts gathered at the Orthodox Academy of Vilemov in the Czech Republic. They founded the "European Christian Environmental Network ECEN". The Conference of European Churches provided support and organisational assistance. Lukas Vischer contributed the following "Suggestion for a theological statement (based on discussions in the preparatory group)".

3. Summary

What are the reasons for the churches' engagement for the preservation of the environment?

1. Who confesses God as the Creator will also be committed to preserve the life which God has created.
2. The creation story affirms that animals and human beings were created and blessed together. Only humans, however, can be held responsible to preserve God's creation.
3. God's creation remains a gift. Humans are entitled to make use of it. But they have to share it with other creatures and with future generations.
4. Responsible action will follow the traces of God's wisdom and give priority to love and community instead of the acquisition of power.
5. Wisdom demands not to overuse God's gifts.
6. The biblical laws concerning the Sabbath and the Jubilee year have a great ecological and social significance.

Why a common witness at the European level?

7. There is no way of meeting the ecological threats except through concerted action.
8. Today's ecological crisis has its roots in the industrialized countries while the effects of the crisis are world-wide. "The task is not only to work towards the sustainability of Europe. The question is how the countries of Europe contribute to the sustainability of the whole planet."
9. The churches have been relatively slow in recognizing the destructive consequences of the conquest of nature. "All the more they have today the task to remind themselves and the world of the critical potential of the Christian tradition."

Suggestion for a theological statement (based on discussions in the preparatory group)

What are the reasons for the churches' engagement for the preservation of the environment?

1. For the Christian faith, what we call today the 'environment' is more than the part of nature which surrounds us and makes possible human life on the planet earth. It is God's creation. Behold, it was very good, we read at the end of the first Biblical creation story (Gen 1,31). For the Christian consciousness there is no other choice than to respect, protect and preserve God's creation in its perfection and beauty. The churches cannot remain indifferent in face of the increasing destruction which human interference with the web of nature is causing. *Who confesses God as the creator will also be committed to preserve the life which God has created*, not only to secure the survival of humankind but primarily to give honour to God, the creator.
2. Everything, the whole universe, the earth, all life which exists on earth is the 'work of God's hands' (Psalm 8,4). Like all other beings, also humans are creatures. There is no difference between animals and human beings in this respect. The creation story emphasizes their similarity by affirming that animals and human beings were created on one and the same, the sixth day (Gen 1,24-31). But God entrusts human beings with a special mandate. While all animals are 'blessed', God 'speaks' to humans (Gen. 1,28). *Humans are capable of responding and can be held responsible*. They have the ability to 'cultivate' God's creation. They are not destined to rule over creation but to care for it and to develop and to preserve it.
3. God's creation remains a gift. It never becomes the property of human beings. Humans are entitled to make use of God's gift to secure and enrich their lives. But each individual has to be mindful of the fact *that he and she is not alone on earth*. We have to share God's gifts with others and need to be conscious of the fact that other generations will follow us. Each individual has been given a certain time span between birth and death. The limits which have been set must not be transgressed. Human beings are not lord and master over life, but stewards of God's gifts. The Christian commitment to the preservation of the environment is guided by the concern to secure the well being of future generations. Christians will not be satisfied with short-term considerations.
4. What is responsible action? The Bible tells us that before all other creatures God created *Wisdom*. Wisdom is called the 'beginning of God's works' and the 'beloved creature close to God's side' (Proverbs 8,22 ss). God's wisdom fills the whole of creation, and it is the task of human beings to discover its traces, to recognize and to follow them. To understand the meaning of creation humans must recognize their particular place within creation. The Bible leaves no doubt about the temptation inherent in human nature to acquire power over other human beings and over nature. Wisdom gives priority to the values of love and community.

5. Wisdom demands respect for God's gift. They must not overused. Though human life is only possible at the cost of the life of other creatures human claim on God's creation must stay within reasonable limits. The intrinsic value of every creature must be recognized. This applies to the *realms both of personal life and of society*. Like social justice the concern for the preservation of the environment belongs to the guiding principles of Christian witness in society. As much as all people need to be assured of their 'daily bread' the goals which determine today's society, progress, acceleration and unlimited economic growth, are to be called into question in the light of the Gospel.
6. Against this background the importance of the Fourth Commandment becomes understandable. The *Sabbath* is more than simply a day of rest. It has social and ecological significance. It serves to build and to restore community. The change from work to rest mirrors the rhythm which is inherent in creation. Like God who created in six days heaven and earth and rested on the seventh, we also shall behave. Creation shall be spared human activity on every seventh day. The laws concerning the Sabbath and Jubilee years are to be understood in the same perspective.

And why a common witness at the European level?

7. The European Ecumenical Assemblies in Basel (1989) and Graz (1997) emphasized the *common responsibility* of the churches for the preservation of the environment. Why?
8. In the first place because there is no way of meeting the ecological threats except through concerted action. The destruction of the environment transcends national borders and can only be contained through common efforts. *Numerous issues require joint analysis and co-ordination at the European level*, and in many cases solutions presuppose an attitude of solidarity. The church, as a community which transcends national borders, has the vocation to appeal to international and especially European solidarity.
9. The common witness of the churches at the European level is also necessary for the sake of the countries in the South. Today's ecological crisis with its world-wide effects has in many respects its roots in the industrialized countries. European countries bear therefore a responsibility which goes beyond the geographical borders of the continent. Together with other industrialized countries they are, for instance, responsible for the largest share in CO₂-emissions and therefore for the warming of the earth's atmosphere with its devastating effects especially on the countries in the South. The churches are to remind the European countries of their destructive role. *The task is not only to work towards the sustainability of Europe. The question is how the countries of Europe contribute to the sustainability of the whole planet.*
10. The European countries belong historically to the Christian tradition. The churches have therefore a special duty to remind them of the role in the world-wide horizon. The opinion is widely held that the Jewish-Christian tradition has contributed to legitimize spiritually and intellectually human domination over nature. Though this thesis remains controversial it is certainly true that the churches have been relatively

slow in recognizing the destructive consequences of the scientific, technological and industrial conquest of nature. *All the more they have today the task to remind themselves and the world of the critical potential of the Christian tradition.* The Biblical witness teaches emphatically that nature is far more than an object of research and consumption. It is God's beloved creation. God does not invite us in the first place to conquer nature but to praise the name of the creator together with all creatures. Both the first and the last sentence of Psalm 104 which enumerates the wonders of creation reads: 'Praise the Lord, my soul'!

July 10, 1998

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