

Christian Positions on Environmental Theology

	Name	Description	Strengths	Challenges	Key Scriptural Themes	Likely Outcomes
1	Humans First--Anthropocentrism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Natureⁱ was given to humans to occupy, use and enjoy. This is, effectively, the 'default' position (i.e. under pressure we opt for this eg the Victorian bushfires). This is essentially Lynn White Jnr's accusation of Christians. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognises the reality of human dominance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accountability to other humans What is "human interest"- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maslow's hierarchy of needs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Today vs tomorrow Here vs there (NIMBY) Us vs them Rich vs poor Resource vs "value" Eco-feminism/Social justice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Imago Dei (Gen 1:26ff) (Humans are a higher order over the rest of creation) Gen. 1: 28 ("...fill the earth and subdue it...")—Is this prescriptive or descriptive?? 	<p>A growing recognition that biodiversity, low pollution, etc are in our human interest, as are social justice and gender equality. Maybe anthropocentrism is not as bad as it is made out to be?</p>
2	Stewardship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An extension of "Humans First" but includes a clear accountability to God for nature. Recognises our ecological context and posits a role for us not just to draw on it but to care for it as agents of the Creator. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formally recognises our accountability for how we relate to and use nature. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accountability for what? i.e. what is a good environment? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Productivity? Biodiversity? Safety? Sustainability? Concept criticised as "tired" presumably because it doesn't go far enough for some. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hones the <i>imago dei</i>. "The earth is the Lord's..." (Ex 9:29, Ps 24:1, 1 Cor. 10:26) Concept of the "garden" in which we were placed to tend it and look after it. (Gen 1:29). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Christians actively involved in environmental concerns out of a sense of calling/obligation to God. Still conflict out of a need for a definition of what is good for nature and what is good for humans—and which takes priority!
3	Reconciliation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We were created with a four-way relationship (Human to God, human to other humans, human to self, human to nature). With the Fall, <u>each</u> of these relationships were broken (sin). As agents of reconciliation, Christians are called to work on this dimension as on the others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognises our ongoing "out of steppedness" with nature and our responsibility to work things out continually. Concept of grace and of looking to our future hope when things will be sorted out. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No clear call to action here. Can be used as an excuse to cop out of our responsibility to do anything "<i>Do evil that good may come</i>". The relationship with nature all too often has taken the back seat to the other relationships The "historical problem" ie was there a time when humans were in harmony with nature (ie pre-Fall)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The "multi-dimensional" fall (Gen 2:4b-3:24). Recognition that God's creation and salvation is wider than just for humankind eg "God was in Christ reconciling the <u>world</u> to himself" 2 Cor. 5:19 Reflects our eschatological hope and the reality that full reconciliation will not happen yet. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humans striving to live <u>with</u> nature as areas of dysfunction emerge and our understanding of the dimensions of that develops Recognises the "open-endedness" of our situation and the need to address situations as they emerge (the "road map" is not in Scripture!). The concept of Wicked Problems, complexity (multiple stakeholders and perspectives to be resolved).
4	Environment First—Eco-centrism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature has a right to exist as and of itself. Humans are ecological upstarts with no right to presume on nature as they have. Just about everywhere humans have touched nature they have spoiled it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear focus on addressing environmental challenges. Raises nature above human claims. Dares to consider that humans may have to cop some pain (from lower standard of living to reduced population). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environmental criteria becoming tyrannical (environmental fundamentalism). Raises nature above human claims (Problem of theodicy). Will environmental totalitarianism work when economic totalitarianism (communism) didn't? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "The earth is the Lord's..." (Ex 9:29, Ps 24:1, 1 Cor. 10:26) Past practices recorded in scripture (e.g., Josh 17: 14-17) are not necessarily God-endorsed (see also Habel's "<i>An Inconvenient Text</i>"). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Nature" is the ultimate determinant of what is good and what is bad, right and wrong. BUT, who determines what nature requires? How? With what criteria? —Does this create a new high priesthood, suite of laws, a new legalism/pharisaism? Sometimes uncertain whether humans have a place here at all.
5	Access to God—Theo-centrism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We see and meet with God most clearly and purely in nature untouched by human "development". Anything that detracts from nature detracts us from God. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forceful reminder of the majesty and grandeur of God. Places a non-utilitarian value on nature. This perspective can be healing and affirming (eg Job) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shifts the <i>imago Dei</i> to nature and not to humans (Psalm 8 problem). Human suffering (esp. during natural disasters) ie nature is not always majestic. No place for providing for human needs (ie a real tension that this perspective cannot resolve). Human responsibility for nature becomes difficult—essentially Get Out! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Psalms 104 and Job 38 ff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature on a pedestal with humans the interlopers. How do humans fit into the whole picture? Exposed to a "Trump-ist" reaction (i.e. there is a fragility/brittleness about this perspective)
6	Evangelism First	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preaching the Gospel (saving human souls and building the church) is the sole responsibility of Christians. Everything else is secondary. At best environmental concern is a means to that end. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Priority of the centrality of the Gospel understood in a very narrow sense. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Problem if the Gospel and mission are defined narrowly and salvation as solely recruitment into the kingdom and building up church numbers (a football team focussing on recruitment and not playing the game) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Great Commission (Matt 28:19) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environmental action seen to be a means to an end. Environmental concern is clearly secondary (if that) and may be be a distraction from the Gospel.
7	Armageddon is nigh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Armageddon is near, destruction of the planet will hasten the end times. EO Wilson: "<i>The most dangerous of devotions...is the one endemic to Christianity: 'I was not born to be of this world.' With a second life waiting...The natural environment can be used up.</i>" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear expectation and anticipation of our future hope. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is this really what Christ asked us to do while waiting for his second coming? If Christ takes another 2000 years to get here what of our children and children's children? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be married with position 6 if one accepts a dualistic view of creation (i.e. heaven and earth, sacred and secular). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not only is the environment a distraction, there is a positive disincentive to get involved. Nature is seen to be an idol and environmentalism a religion to be eschewed.
8	Get on with the Job	<p>Why waste our time theologising? We know that much needs to be done so let's get on with it.</p> <p>Environmental degradation is a challenge and making it a moral issue just compounds the confusion.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focussed on action.. Not waiting to get the theological house in order (this in itself is a theological statement). Often not even a moral issue. More a pragmatic one. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Danger of narrowing the environmental challenge to "It's a job!". Can we separate out the sacred and the secular? Aren't these inseparable? The theological perspectives of these are unstated but implicit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "...and whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; (Col 3:21f) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have seen some stunning projects in which Christians have just got on with the job. So much of the current good work being done is by Christians working within their professions. Many would be bemused that this has a theological angle. If you want to save the planet, put your money on these guys.

ⁱ For simplicity, I refer to "nature" as the non-human-made environmental context in which we live; "creation" as everything God has made human and non-human, visible and invisible; and "the environment" as the context in which we live including the human-built environment. References to "ecology" and "ecological processes" relate to nature and the processes that occur within it.

I have tried to be as objective as I can in presenting these positions as I believe that each is genuinely held by intelligent people who are struggling with how we relate to nature. I have restricted the number to eight as more than that starts to get confusing. Thus, some closely held detail of some positions may not be included here.