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How Creation Care
Will Change
Your Faith, Your Life,
and Our World

Gardening Eden



**Michael
Abbaté**



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GARDENING EDEN

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Foreword

by Randy Alcorn

A few weeks ago, I spoke at a conference of several thousand evangelical college students. Most were from Bible-believing churches like my own.


My message concerned the promise of a New Earth and the biblical principle of continuity. From Scripture, I pointed out that just as our old bodies will be destroyed, then made new in the resurrection, so the old earth will be destroyed, and then made into a New Earth. Next I cited Genesis 1 concerning God's original job description for human beings living on this planet. I'll break right into the message here, quoting directly from the audio transcript, so you know exactly what I said (it's important to the story):

...and God saw that it was good. And then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth."

This was God's purpose: that we rule the earth as His image-bearers to His glory; that we would care for the animals, and do the other things that we do in the development of culture.

So God created man in His own image, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number (not just the two of you; it's going to be a world full of people); fill the earth and subdue it."

This word “subdue” is not a negative word. It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be concerned for the environment. And by the way, of all people, as stewards, don’t you think we ought to have reasonable concern for our environment and try to take care of it?



I hadn’t planned to ask that question, but I did. Suddenly somebody applauded. Now, at conferences, if you ask a question to a crowd and there’s widespread agreement, often enthusiastic applause erupts as a way of saying “yes.” If there’s moderate agreement, there’s moderate applause. But even if relatively few agree, there’s an unspoken etiquette whereby some give a token applause, if nothing else to rescue the lone clapper! But that day something remarkable happened. Nobody else clapped! The solitary clapper suddenly stopped, as if to say, “Oops... never mind.” (Ever had that feeling when you realize, in a crowd of people, you’re the *only* one laughing?)

As I continued speaking, I joked about the awkward moment, saying, “Wow! Someone started to applaud!” I was alluding to the fact that it was surprising that anyone would applaud a pro-environment statement at a conservative evangelical gathering. (By the way, I am thoroughly evangelical and in some political issues conservative.)

Now, trust me, it didn’t hurt my feelings that no one else applauded. Those attending this conference were very warm and responsive to my messages. No problem there.

But here’s my point: these people were serious Christians attending a Christ-exalting, Bible-believing, and Bible-teaching conference. Yet even the peer pressure exerted by that one individual clapping failed to elicit applause from so much as one other person. *Why?*

I think the answer is that the great majority of those present were not only theologically conservative, but socially and politically conservative. And concern for the environment is generally regarded as part of

the *liberal* agenda. What *sounds* socially liberal *sounds* theologically liberal. And, understandably, biblical conservatives don't want to sound liberal.

I'm politically conservative on issues such as abortion, in which lives are at stake. But I am also concerned about the welfare of the environment God has entrusted to our care (in which, by the way, human lives are also at stake). I see absolutely no contradiction between the two positions. In fact, they are a perfect fit.

I believe that even if concern for the environment makes us "sound liberal" to some, we should be willing to express it because God says we are the caretakers of His creation. That is our biblical job description, our divine calling from the beginning. It shouldn't matter whether caring for the poor or caring for the environment is considered conservative or liberal. Who cares? We should seek to be biblical and Christ-centered, loving God and our neighbor, and not worrying about labels and who else does or doesn't agree with us on a given issue.

I trust there were many young people in that audience concerned about caring for the environment. Many of them might have joined the applause had someone made the comment on their college campus. But I believe their conservative evangelical conditioning did not allow them freedom to affirm that conviction. Even though I made my comment about the environment based on Scripture, it did not seem safe or appropriate to join the applause. Had I spoken in defense of the unborn, which I have on many occasions, if one person had applauded that day, I guarantee others would have followed (unlike the deafening silence you'd hear on most secular college campuses).

Let me just say it: care for the environment is not something that can be comfortably applauded in many Bible-believing church contexts. It is not a popular subject.

I believe this needs to change. We need to be part of cultivating a



new biblical peer pressure that is pro-creation. Mike Abbate's fine book *Gardening Eden* can be part of that change.

For too long, evangelical Christians have neglected our God-given calling to care for the planet entrusted to us. One reason may be that our eschatology indicates the earth is headed for ruin anyway, so there's no point in trying to rearrange the furniture on the *Titanic*. Well, I too believe that the present earth will come to an end, as graphically described in 2 Peter 3. But God made this earth, and He promises us a New Earth.



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It makes no sense to say that because the earth will be destroyed, therefore we shouldn't take good care of it! Do we argue that because our bodies will be destroyed we shouldn't take good care of them? What would you say to your teenager if you warned him not to smoke, and he replied, "But it doesn't matter, because the Bible says we're going to die anyway"?



God entrusts us with the earth as He entrusts us with our bodies, and He intends for us to take care of both. If you are conservative, then doesn't it make sense to try to conserve your own health, your family's health, and the health of the world we inhabit? (That "conservation" became a *liberal* term instead of a *conservative* one is counterintuitive.)

Perhaps because many environmental activists scorn the Bible and Christian beliefs, we have ignored our stewardship job description, as if it were somehow incompatible with the gospel. But it was God, not an environmental extremist, who delegated to us the responsibility of creation care. It was *God*, not an animal rights activist, who entrusted animals to us. Just as John 3:16 is inspired by God, so is Proverbs 12:10: "A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal."

I have pointed out to people the inconsistency of their outrage that baby seals are being cruelly clubbed to death, while they defend the fact that baby human beings are being cruelly ripped apart in their moth-

ers' wombs. We *should* oppose cruelty to baby animals, *and* we should oppose even more cruelty to baby humans.

I stand with my friends, believers and unbelievers, who are concerned for the poor and the environment, even though we sometimes disagree on the best policies related to helping both. God's Word makes clear His passion for the poor and His appointment of us as the caretakers of the earth. If I am a Bible-believing Christian, then these matters simply *must* concern me.

True, we cannot return this world to Eden. Yes, we should be looking forward to the New Earth, which God alone can make. (We humans have proven miserable failures when it comes to utopia-building.) Absolutely, human beings are more important than snail darters and spotted owls.

But we should still be caring for this earth under the curse. While it groans awaiting redemption, as Romans 8 says, we need to be all the more careful to steward it with wisdom. We do this not because we owe our existence to Mother Earth, but because we owe our lives and eternal destinies to our Father God, and we owe it to Him to care for His earth.

You do not have to like or agree with Ralph Nader or Al Gore in order to care about God's creation. You can disagree, as scientists do, on the subject of the causes and effects of global warming. But Christians have no business dismissing everyone who cares about this planet as "environmental wackos" or "eco-Nazis," cranks and chicken littles. Yes, of course there are extremists. (Hey, I live in Oregon. I know those extremists, but I still want Oregon to remain clean and beautiful!) Remember, there are "Christian wackos" too, but most of us do not appreciate being dismissed by that label. Don't throw out the baby of responsible earth-care with the bathwater of anti-enterprise gloom.

In *Gardening Eden*, my friend Mike Abbaté has done a wonderful



job drawing attention to our calling to care for the earth. His book is well researched and readable, engaging and valuable. There is a directness, focus, and passion to *Gardening Eden*, coupled with a rational and thoughtful consideration of others.

This book in your hands is not written by someone on the radical fringe, out of touch with the modern world. From the day Mike first met with me to share his vision for this book, I could see that he is smart and savvy, wise and articulate. Mike is a skilled professional, a landscape architect and a city planner, an accomplished expert in his field. In fact, he's now planning director of Gresham, Oregon, the city I live in and where I was raised. He is also a Bible believer and a committed follower of Jesus. Good for him that he takes so seriously the sacred task of stewarding God's earth. I am delighted to stand with him.

As you read Mike's book, keep in mind God's Word: "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1). This is not our place to trash. It's God's place to treasure. To care for the world is to care for its people. To take care of people is to fulfill the second greatest commandment, to love our neighbors as ourselves. In doing so we also obey the greatest commandment, to love God with all our hearts.

"The LORD rejoices in all he has made!" (Psalm 104:31, NLT). If He rejoices in it, so should we. When you rejoice in something, you go out of your way to preserve it.

Proverbs 21:20 says, "In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has." Foolish people consume; wise people preserve, understanding that even if we die tomorrow, we should leave something behind for our children and our children's children, and the generations that may follow. The earth is not disposable. Nor are its resources inexhaustible.

Creation care makes good sense even if it were not explicitly stated



in our job description. But read Genesis 1 and 2, and you will see that it clearly is.

If I told you I loved my children but allowed open gas lines in the house, removed the smoke detectors, and let broken windows go unfixed, you would have reason to question my parenting. Why? Because if a parent loves his children, he'll do his best to provide them a safe home.

God never revoked His plan to entrust the earth's care to us. Romans 8 makes clear that the whole creation fell on our coattails, and, in our resurrection, will rise on our coattails—all the more reason that we should care for it.

Now, my discretionary stewardship decisions may look quite different from yours. You don't have to do it my way; I don't have to do it yours. Legalism in creation care is as stifling and ineffective as all other legalism. But together as Christ-centered, Bible-believing, people-loving Christians we should agree to be creation-loving. We shouldn't have to follow secular culture in reasonable creation care; we should lead the way. And when people ask why we care about the planet, we should be ready to tell them we love this world because we love its Creator and Redeemer.

I love the fact that Mike Abbaté doesn't leave us on the theoretical level but offers specific suggestions for creation care, right down to alternatives in growing and buying food. Mike is not using this book to make extreme claims or pick a fight or take political sides. This is not a political book that stereotypes or berates people or assumes the worst of them. If you find some things in the book you disagree with, fine. You don't have to wear a Tree Hugger T-shirt. (I don't.) We can still disagree about which government policies will and will not help care for the environment, as long as we are truly committed to caring for the environment.



Gardening Eden contains good theology, worldview, science, and practical application. This book is fair and balanced, demonstrating an unapologetic love for God's creation, something conservatives and liberals alike should share. It is a welcome and much-needed resource, whose time has come. I pray it will open the minds and hearts of many to the privileges and responsibilities of stewarding God's world.



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Now, let me finish my story. After speaking at the evangelical youth conference that day, I stayed and spoke with many students who were wonderfully responsive. Afterward, as my wife, Nanci, and I headed to lunch, I smiled and said to her, “Wasn’t that something when that poor person applauded and nobody else joined in?”

Nanci, eyes big, replied, “That poor person who applauded was *me!*”

Well, Nanci, I know you will applaud Mike Abbate’s book. And I hope you, the reader, will join in applauding the notion that we should be thoughtful caretakers of God’s creation. Not *in spite of* the fact that we believe the Bible and trust Jesus, but precisely *because* we do.



Part I

The Garden State





“They Do Not Care”

ON THE ROAD

By the toe of my boot,
a pebble of quartz,
one drop of the earth's milk,
dirty and cold.

I held it to the light
and could almost see through it
into the grand explanation.
Put it back, something told me,
put it back and keep walking.

—TED KOOSER, U.S. Poet Laureate,
Delights & Shadows



It's remarkable the things people will tell you when they consider you a stranger. I suppose we all bring our preconceptions when we meet someone, assuming they think just like we do.

Recently I was invited to speak at a university in the Midwest on the topic of designing sustainable campuses and communities. The people who invited me were curious about some of the projects our firm had been involved with on the West Coast. They hoped to learn lessons they could apply locally.

It was February, and after arriving in the frigid subarctic temperature, I set about getting my bearings and willing my blood to thicken. In the three days leading up to my talk, a guide toured me around the university, the city, and the surrounding rural area. She was a wonderfully energetic and passionate biology professor, and she hoped my talk could be a catalyst for change in the community. Her commitment to protecting the earth was deep, and she longed for others to catch a vision of ways the community could be transformed into one that cared about "proper ecological stewardship."

As we visited snow-covered parks and natural areas, the frozen winter air invading my lungs, I became aware of the shortcomings of my wardrobe. Hailing from the Pacific Northwest, I had Gore-Tex, but not

enough woolen padding for the bright, crystalline world in which I found myself. We warmed up in local restaurants, where I was honored to meet many of her academic friends who shared her passion for improving their community and flattered me with their excited attention.

I soon found that my professor friend's passions for ecology transcended the physical world and extended to the spiritual as well. She felt that the religion of Christianity—indeed, Christians themselves—were responsible for the vast majority of environmental degradation worldwide. She ridiculed believers, the four Christian colleges in her city, and the churches and denominational headquarters located there. “They deny global warming,” she said. “They do not care about species going extinct. They're more concerned with their own comfort than they are with clean water and air for future generations.” These were her decided conclusions.

On the third morning, she exclaimed, “I'm a recovering Southern Baptist.” I looked at her, waiting for the explanation or the punch line. “I was a dyed-in-the-wool creationist until my fourth year of college, when I finally saw the evolutionary light.” Evolutionary light. This was her phrase. And then she launched into another attack on the hypocrites who claim to love one another but refuse to support efforts to protect the environment.

The complaints were not new to me, and they certainly were not without foundation. In fact, the very same convictions have been pivotal in prodding me along on my own ecological-spiritual journey.

Each of her comments jabbed my psyche. I was weary of the diatribes and wanted to say, “The choice between faith and the environment is a false dichotomy. You don't have to choose secularism to care about creation.” But I held my tongue. I barely knew her, and I reminded myself that one person's strong opinions aren't generally improved by another's.

As we rode in her Subaru through downtown neighborhoods, past



buildings and parks, it became clear that she assumed I shared her deep convictions about the irreconcilable difference between ecological concerns and Christian faith. To her, my silence was assent.

The day of my presentation arrived and, with it, the university community awaiting my thoughts. The auditorium began to fill with students thirty minutes early, but I was surprised by the number of community leaders, city staff, and local professionals who gathered as well. The room was soon filled to capacity, with people standing in the rear and along the sides.

I began with self-evident truths. There are many reasons why it makes sense to plan, design, and build in ways that are compatible with the natural systems of the planet. All of these reasons—protecting the earth for our descendants, alleviating suffering, ensuring species continuance, helping the economy—are appropriate reasons to respond to living in harmony with our environment.

However, I said, these same concerns can arise from two quite distinct worldviews.

Secular humanists believe that we must not do anything to disrupt the natural evolutionary process already taking place all around us. We must ensure that we do not harm the earth's ability to support all living things in the future. E.O. Wilson, the Pulitzer Prize-winning biologist, is a compelling advocate of this worldview:

Earth provides a self-regulating bubble that sustains us indefinitely without any thought or contrivance on our own. This protective shield is the biosphere.... Upon its delicate health we depend for every moment of our lives.¹

1. E. O. Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 27.



In fact, Wilson recognizes the important link between faith and conservation, though he isn't a Christian. *"We will not reach our full potential without understanding the origin and hence meaning of the aesthetic and religious qualities that make us ineffably human."*

The second worldview, I explained, comes from the first book of the Bible. Up flashed these words on the screen: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15).

I mentioned that this initial directive has not been a topic of much emphasis in Christian circles, nor in any of the other major world religions, for that matter. For much of the last century, religious institutions have missed—or ignored—our responsibility as stewards of the creation and to the Creator. However, people of faith have long relished the grimy pleasures of gardening. The process of nurturing life brings contentment and a sense of wholeness in the accomplishment. We instinctively understand that we were designed to be gentle gardeners. We just haven't realized that the entire planet is our garden.

I went on to share some of my ideas for conservation and sustainability, and following my talk, a number of people came forward to tell me that they had never heard faith mentioned as a reason for environmental stewardship. I explained that, in fact, it was the original reason, and the Christians among them were appreciative. As people filed out, I looked around for my passionate friend. She was nowhere in sight. I hoped she wasn't deeply offended. She was to be my ride back to the airport.



Everywhere we go, we see and hear of impending ecological catastrophe. Global climate change, holes in the ozone layer, extinction of



species, hurricanes, deforestation, and starvation caused by drought and pollution all compete for our attention. What do we make of this situation? Are our lives impacting, even causing these global issues? Surely we are not responsible for the dodo birds and the woolly mammoths, are we?

Sometimes it's a matter of our survival to dismiss these distressing headlines. We're just trying to get through another day. Still, we know there's more to life than survival.

When the shift came for me, I was in the process of getting through my hitch in the navy. I had my whole life ahead of me. My concerns were with figuring out who to live life with, what I was going to do for a living, what type of education I would need, and where I would live. My definition of “the future” encompassed just under five years.

But an amazing thing happened to me on my way to the future.

My wife and I created another human being. Brooke, the first of our two daughters, arrived on the scene announcing that a change in our outlook was in store. In an instant, time was redefined. The future suddenly extended beyond me and my immediate needs. Three years later, her sister, Maryn, joined the refrain, and these two new lives initiated a chorus demanding profound change in me. Suddenly, “the future” stretched far beyond five years. In fact, I was able to see ahead a generation, to the time when my daughters were my age. I noticed that along with my new expansive power, a new realization of weakness grabbed at my heel. *What sort of world am I leaving for their inheritance?*

My worries about one-dollar gas prices vaporized and were replaced by images of a smog-choked, barren landscape where most elements of life—air, water, land—were irrevocably damaged. The future felt suddenly close. It mattered. Where the world seemed headed was not a place I wanted my girls to be. When you wrap your



arms around an infant, maybe you can see this way too. What lies ahead for him or her?

As I sit here today, nearly half a century has migrated from the future into the past for me. And once again, I notice that the passing of time only expands our vision of the future. Grandchildren are coming, and terrifyingly, great-grandchildren are imaginable. Now, instead of seeing only twenty years ahead, I am wondering about half a century. This is quite a disconcerting paradox; the older I get, the further into the future I can see.



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And the future takes on new meaning. I find myself less concerned about my life today and more anxious about tomorrow for those I love. Today's headlines become more ominous, not because I will be affected, but because they will be. A new reality has gripped me and, perhaps, you as well: our daily stewardship of this planet is our down payment for our children's children's children. Anyone with more potent time-traveling powers than I had at twenty might draw the same conclusions.



After my talk, I grabbed my luggage and waited in the lobby. In a few minutes, the biology professor pulled up and jumped out to help me load the car for our ride to the airport.

“That was a wonderful talk,” she stated flatly as we drove along. Realizing the wall she'd been building between us for the past few days, she began to knock it down, brick by brick. She shared more about her background and the thoughts she'd been having about the link between faith and stewardship, and then she looked at me with new eyes. “You know, our university chaplain has asked me to come and talk about protecting the environment.” She nodded and added, a bit

more enthusiastically, “I really enjoyed your perspective on bringing together the spiritual and the physical.”

“Thank you. That’s wonderful,” I said, meaning it.

Another benefit of age: the older I get, the more I appreciate life’s surprises. It occurred to me we had a lot more in common than either of us realized. Later, as I considered our final conversation more, I realized she had helped me discover a bridge across the divide between faith and environmentalism. And for that I was more than grateful.



Praise for
Gardening Eden

“Firmly one of the most socially relevant topics today, environmentalism elicits a variety of intense reactions. Michael Abbaté’s book lifts creation care above the typical debate and gets back to its appropriate starting point—on our knees, in awe of the Creator. His passion for God and affection for creation is evident throughout, while weaving together science, Scripture, and personal experiences, with probing and comfort-squashing questions. As he advocates for worship, he also provides numerous practical, and even easy, tips for caring for creation that has me thinking far beyond energy efficient light bulbs and my stellar compost pile.”

—TIM OSBORN, lead pastor, Mosaic Church, Portland, OR,
www.mosaicportland.org

“This is a book Christians should read! Though our primary task is to carry out the Great Commission while on this earth, we must not neglect the place God created for us to live.”

—DR. GENE A. GETZ, president, Center for Church
Renewal; host, Renewal Radio, Dallas, TX

“Evangelicals will be well informed and morally challenged to tend the garden without being throttled. And, progressives will be thrilled to hear the Christian call to care for the earth. Where was this two decades prior? I give my evangelical and progressive, two green thumbs up!”

—REV. LEROY HEDMAN, Georgetown Gospel Chapel,
Seattle, WA

“Michael Abbaté’s book *Gardening Eden* offers a sound, compelling, and practical approach to ‘Creation Care.’ As people seeking to become better ‘gardeners’ ourselves, we appreciated Michael’s style and approach and wholeheartedly recommend this book!”

—MIKE AND DANAE YANKOSKI, authors
of *Under the Overpass*