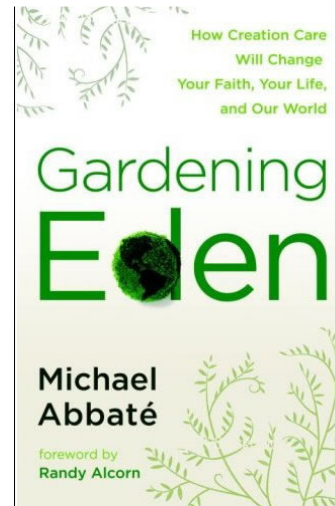


BOOK REVIEW

Title: GARDENING EDEN
Author: Michael Abbate
Published by: Waterbrook Press



Forward by: Randy Alcorn

(the forward is printed with full permission below in its entirety for your review)

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 work. 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 the freedom to affirm the 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.

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 mother's 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 love 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 Abbat'e has done a wonderful job drawing attention to our calling to care of 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 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 the Mike Abbat'e 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.

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 Abbat'e'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.