

Garbage Theology

Findings of a Garbologist/Theologian/Environmentalist

by John E. (Jack) Swanson

Archaeology has been a boon to the understanding of the Bible by giving insights into the language and culture during the time of the writing of scripture. A science that has emerged today using basic archaeological principles is called "garbology." It is the study of the language, culture and behavior of the contemporary world by sifting through and analyzing smelly, pasty, moldy, wet trash.

Garbologists have an advantage over the archaeologists. They can interview the human trash producers. It is here that the study of garbage makes its best contribution regarding human behavior. The garbage makes its best contribution regarding human behavior. The garbologists' most significant find is that what their research in the landfills reveals is not congruent with what people say they are doing.¹

It is the intention of this essay to dig into our garbage to learn what it tells us about our attitudes toward natural resources and how it reflects what we believe about ourselves and about God. It will also suggest a revision of our understanding and treatment of garbage based on an understanding of the Christian faith.

Garbage is something everyone produces. It is estimated that in the United States each person produces 3.5 pounds per day. It is a viable source of information regarding human behavior. In the garbage can or landfill we see evidence of our insatiable desire for convenience, our indifference to the other (both human and non-human) and personal laziness. Values that have been shaped by and emerged from such behavior have led to the disregard for and disruption of the balance of the natural world, glorified the use rather than the love of the natural world, and ignored the necessity of biodiversity

In a landfill we find these items:

Paper	41%
Yard/Garden Waste	18%
Metal	9%
Rubber, Leather, Other	8%
Food Waste	8%
Glass	8%
Plastic	7%
Other	1% ²

What might the excavations of a landfill tell us about our attitudes toward the environment?

1. We live with abundance. We take more than we need. We have more than we need. We confuse our wants and our needs. We have a compulsion to consume.³ Landfills show that when there is not a shortage of a commodity there is more waste, and that the greater the variety in a diet, the more the spoilage.⁴
2. We impact our natural world with poisons to create a "perfect" piece of fruit and throw the produce in the dumpster behind the market place when it "spoils." We will pay the price for unblemished produce.
3. We are heavily dependent upon technology. As magnificent as this is, Thomas Berry warns: "The immediate danger is not possible nuclear war, but actual industrial plundering."⁵
4. We are reluctant to acknowledge limits upon our system, and we wear blinders to the population explosion. This becomes apparent when we begin to run out of space to put garbage.
5. Advertising and packaging contribute to products in the landfill. They indicate our obsession with

health, sanitation and the safety of products. Tamper-proofing, quality and cleanliness are all "good" reasons for packaging.

6. A corollary to the above is what advertising and packaging tell us about the competition in the market place, the lack of trust in the human community and the absence of personal discipline with regard to the way things that belong to others are handled.
7. Communication in the written form has taken over. Over 40% of the landfill is paper. Ironically, even the environmental groups produce volumes of printed matter to campaign "against the use of certain highly visible and famously odious forms of garbage."⁶
8. Products have short-term use. How often does a polystyrene cup get used before it is pitched?
9. A manicured environment is important to many people. Grass clippings and dead leaves in plastic bags fill landfills. For the sake of appearance we deny one type of natural cycle and create a problem where recycling is virtually impossible. Measurements are being taken to minimize this problem.
10. It appears that science exists for the benefit of technology, the welfare of the human species' medical needs and the fulfillment of the "good life." It is just within recent history that science is being directed toward the care of the earth.

Garbage is where human history and natural history converge.

Here is a "theology" that emerges from the garbage dump.

The unholy trinity that leads to environmental destruction: indifference, laziness, and convenience born of abundance.

1. God is the "good life" in whatever way that is derived for each individual. In this paradigm God is providential. Faith is grounded in the "goodness" of God. The "good life" might be defined as that which is healthy, sanitary, convenient, safe and cooperative. "Good" is an extrinsic, not an intrinsic value.
2. Human beings believe in their ability to manipulate the earth. There is sufficiency of resource and the technological skills to adapt the resources. Good stewardship of the earth is expeditiously and rapidly moving natural resources to the trash heap.
3. Evil is more powerful than goodness and is perceived as succeeding. There is fear of destruction, invasion of privacy and contamination. Thus, people strive to rid themselves of what is wicked to them as efficiently as possible.
4. Time and space are for one's use. Each person decides one's values for oneself. A common criterion is that time is finite (the end will be soon), and space is infinite (there is more than enough, and it will take care of itself).
5. Hope is grounded in an earth that can supply and technical skills that can discover and invent. Comfort and convenience are words used in place of "salvation." When the word "salvation" is used, it refers to something beyond this life.
6. The sacred is that which is unblemished and manicured. The profane is the unkempt which must be pushed aside. (This is what the garbage person collects.) A sacred space is a setting which is garbage free for communion with God.
7. The creative and redemptive processes are for the benefit of humans to compensate for the sinfulness of the human species. Sin is inadequacy rather than rebellion against God and God's creation.
8. Stewardship is measured and motivated by the Gross National Product.
9. God's creation is to be consumed.
10. The use and value of non-human entities are determined by the use rather than the used.

Theology can be defined as a dialogue engaging the concrete world and the teachings of the faith. One could call theology the intersecting of the divine, the human and the non-human. From a Christian

theological point of view, what alternate understanding of the garbage dump can be perceived?

1. What God creates is good. (Note Genesis 1 and 1 Timothy 4:4.) In the natural order, that which is discarded by one organism is useful for another organism. Garbage must be seen as a part of the "goodness" of God's world. Convenience as the "good" must be challenged.
2. There are no sinless alternatives. Humans do not have ultimate knowledge of the consequences of any deed. TO think they can dispose of garbage and forever never need be concerned with its nonsense. Humans are committed to managing garbage, both what we create and what others create.
3. Jesus Christ is the reconciler of the world ,restoring relationships. This is the intention of God. Garbage must e treated within God's reconciliation plan. It is done by recycling (returning to the natural cycles what we have used) and re-streaming (making second and third uses of the items humans produce that cannot be returned to the natural cycle). Humans cannot be indifferent to anything they produce.
4. What does it mean to love one's neighbor? It means to reduce the amount of garbage that is created and to consider others when seeking solutions to the disposal of garbage. For this, an attitudinal change is needed. Humans have treated garbage and where it is disposed of as the despised, the unwanted. Humans must learn to live in community with all of creation. This requires effort, not ease.

A look at a garbage dump or even a garbage can brings to mind three Bible stories.

The first is the story of the rich man (Matthew 19:16-26) who asked Jesus what he should do to attain eternal life. Jesus instructed him to give up his possessions. However, he went away grieving because he had great abundance. TO obey Jesus would mean to do without his conveniences.

The second is the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). This text is a reminder of people in Third World countries scavenging the garbage dumps for food with dogs at their heels. The chasm between the two men was not poverty and wealth but the rich man's indifference.

The third is the parable of the man who entrusts his property to three slaves before he goes on a journey (Matthew 25:14-30). Two of the slaves put their talents to work while the third slave buries his in the ground. When the master returns he commends the two slaves and condemns the third for his laziness. The most repeated reason for putting things into the garbage is because one does not want to make an effort to do anything else.

What do people see when they look in their garbage can? What does it reveal about what they really believe about God, the care of the earth, and the values that are shaped by convenience, indifference and laziness? It is time Christians make a greater effort to be congruent about what they believe, say and do. They can start with the garbage. *John E. (Jack) Swanson, M.Div., is the Director of the Lutheran Outdoor Ministries Center in Oregon, Illinois. He is the author of two books about the environment and Christian life and faith: Birth of the Earth - Natural Wild Free and What Did Noah Do About Trash?*

End Notes

1. William Rathje and Colleen Murphy, *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 245.

Three sins inherent in technology which our society must recognize and combat: mastery, myopicism, and messianism. Mastery is the idea that humans can "control" the natural world. Myopia is disregarding an inclusive and catholic worldview. Messianism is the notion that technology can "save" the world.

The church teaches a sacrificial style of life to people who practice a lifestyle of consumerism. This is both a crisis of faith and a challenge for conversion.

2. Paul Connet, *Waste Management: As if the Future Mattered* (St. Lawrence University, 1988), 3.
3. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 115.
4. Rathje and Murphy, op. cit., 62.
5. Berry, op. cit., 72.
6. Rathje and Murphy, op. cit., 106.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)