

Eco Church Study 2: Creation Care – the neglected issue

Reverend John Stott, died in 2011, aged 90, one of the most influential Anglican clergymen of the 20th century ; indeed, in 2005 Time magazine declared him to be one of the 100 most influential people in the world. He was noted as a leader of the worldwide Evangelical movement, one of the principal authors of the Lausanne Covenant in 1974, and rector of All Souls Church, Langham Place, from 1950 to 1975.

Stott's influence was greatly extended through his commitment to writing. He was the author of around 50 books, some of them Bible commentaries, others dealing with basic elements in Christianity, and all capable of being read with profit by both clergy and laity. "The Radical Disciple" published in 2010 was his final book in which he outlined eight key aspects of discipleship, bringing all his many years of experience and reflection to bear on a series of neglected questions.

Creation Care ("from Radical Disciple" chapter 4).

In pinpointing what (in my view) are several neglected aspects of radical discipleship, we must not suppose that these are limited to the personal and individual spheres. We should also be concerned with the wider perspective of our duties to God and our neighbour, part of which is the topic of this chapter: the care of our created environment.

The Bible tells us that in creation God established for human beings three fundamental relationships: first to himself, for he made them in his own image; second to each other, for the human race was plural from the beginning; and third, to the good earth and its creatures over which he set them.

Moreover, all three relationships were skewed by the fall. Adam and Eve were banished from the presence of the Lord God in the garden, they blamed each other for what had happened, and the good earth was cursed on account of their disobedience.

It stands to reason therefore that God's plan of restoration includes not only our reconciliation to God and to each other, but in some way the liberation of the groaning creation as well. We can certainly affirm that one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth (e.g. 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1), for this is an essential part of our hope for the perfect future that awaits us at the end of time. But meanwhile the whole creation is groaning, experiencing the birth pains of the new creation (Romans 8:18–23). How much of the earth's ultimate destiny can be experienced now is a matter for debate. But we can surely say that just as our understanding of the final destiny of our resurrection bodies should affect how we think of and treat the bodies we have at present, so our knowledge of the new heaven and earth should affect and increase the respect with which we treat it now.

What then should be our attitude to the earth? The Bible points the way by making two fundamental affirmations: 'The earth is the LORD's (Psalm 24:1), and 'The earth he has given to the human race' (Psalm 115:16).

In May 1999 I was privileged to take part in a day conference in Nairobi on 'Christians and the Environment'. Sharing the platform with me were Dr Calvin De Witt, Au Sable Institute Michigan, and Peter Harris of A Rocha International. Participants that day included both leaders in the Kenyan government and representatives of churches, mission organizations and NGOs. The meeting received wide publicity. It was evident that creation care is neither a selfish interest of the developed 'north', nor a minority enthusiasm peculiar to birdwatchers or flower-lovers, but an increasingly mainline Christian concern.

The assertions that the earth is the Lord's and that "the earth he has, given to the human race" complement rather than contradict each other.

Soon afterwards an *Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation* was published (1999) and the following year a substantial commentary appeared, edited by R. Berry and entitled *The Care Of Creation*. The assertions that 'the earth is the Lord's' and that 'the earth he has given to the human race' complement rather than contradict each other. For the earth belongs to God by creation and to us by delegation. This does not mean that he has handed it over to us in such a way as to give up his own rights over it, but rather that he has given us the responsibility to preserve and develop the earth on his behalf.

How then should we relate to the earth? If we remember its creation by God and its delegation to us, we will avoid two opposite extremes and instead develop a third and better relationship to nature.

First, we will avoid *the deification of nature*. This is the mistake of pantheists who identify the Creator with his creation, of animists who populate the natural world with spirits, and of the New Age's Gaia movement which attributes to nature its own self-contained, self-regulating and self-perpetuating mechanisms. But all such confusions are insulting to the Creator. The Christian realization that nature is creation not Creator was an indispensable prelude to the whole scientific enterprise and is essential to the development of the earth's resources today. We respect nature because God made it; we do not reverence nature as if it were God.

Secondly, we must avoid the opposite extreme, which is *the exploitation of nature*. This is not to treat nature obsequiously as if it were God, nor to behave towards it arrogantly as if we were God. Genesis 1 has been unjustly blamed for environmental irresponsibility. It is true that God commissioned the human race to 'rule over' the earth and to 'subdue' it (Genesis 1:26-28), and that these two Hebrew verbs are forceful. But it would be absurd to imagine that he who created the earth then handed it over to us to be destroyed. No, the dominion God has given us should be seen as a responsible stewardship, not a destructive domination.

The third and correct relationship between human beings and nature is that of *cooperation with God*. To be sure, we are ourselves a part of creation, just as dependent on the Creator as are all his creatures. But at the same time he has deliberately humbled himself to make a divine-human partnership necessary. He created the earth but then told us to subdue it. He planted the garden, but then put Adam in it 'to work it and take

care of it' (Genesis 2:15). This is often called the cultural mandate. For what God has given us is nature, whereas what we do with it is culture. We are not only to conserve the environment but also to develop its resources for the common good.

It is a noble calling to cooperate with God for the fulfilment of his purposes, to transform the created order for the pleasure and profit of all. In this way our work is to be an expression of our worship since our care of the creation will reflect our love for the Creator.

Another thought: it is possible to overstate this emphasis on human work in the conservation and transformation of the environment. In his excellent exposition of the first three chapters of Genesis *In the Beginning*, Henri Blocher argues that the climax of Genesis 1 is not the creation of human beings as workers but the institution of the Sabbath for human beings as worshippers. The end point is not our toil (subduing the earth) but the laying aside of our toil on the Sabbath day. For the Sabbath puts the importance of work into perspective. It protects us from a total absorption in our work as if it were to be the be-all and end-all of our existence. It is not. We human beings find our humanness not only in relation to the earth, which we are to transform, but in relation to God whom we are to worship; not only in relation to the creation, but especially in relation to the Creator. God intends our work to be an expression of our worship, and our care of the creation to reflect our love for the Creator. Only then, whatever we do, in word or deed, shall we be able to do it to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

These and other biblical themes are opened up in both *the Declaration* and the commentary on it. They deserve our careful study?

THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

It is against the background of this wholesome biblical teaching that we need now to confront the current ecological crisis. It has been explored in a variety of ways but every analysis is likely to include the following four ingredients.

First, there is the accelerating world population growth. According to the population division of the United Nations in approximate terms, calculations began in AD 1804, which is when the population of the world reached 1 billion. By the beginning of the twenty-first century (i.e. today) it had reached a total of 6.8 billion, while by the middle of the century it is reckoned that it will have reached the incredible total of 9.5 billion.

Because it is difficult to remember statistics, a simple mnemonic may help:

Past: 1804 - 1 billion

Present: 2000 - 6.8 billion

Future: 2050 - 9.5 billion

How will it be possible to feed so many people, especially when approximately one-fifth of them lacks the basic necessities for survival?

Secondly, there is *the depletion of the earth's resources*. It was E. F. Shumacher who, in his popular book *"Small is Beautiful"*, drew the world's attention to the difference

between capital and income. For example, fossil fuels are capital; once they are consumed they cannot be replaced. The appalling processes called deforestation and desertification are examples of the same principle. Others are the degradation or pollution of the plankton of the oceans, the green surface of the earth, living species and the habitats on which they depend for clean air and water.

Thirdly, *waste disposal*. An increasing population brings an increasing problem because of how to dispose safely of the undesirable by-products of manufacturing, packaging and consumption. The average person in the UK throws out his or her body weight in rubbish every three months. In 1994 a UK report entitled *Sustainable Development: The UK Strategy* recommended a fourfold 'hierarchy of waste management' in an effort to contain this growing problem.

Fourthly, *climate change*. Of all the global threats which face our planet, this is the most serious.

Ultraviolet radiation in the atmosphere protects us, and if the ozone is damaged it exposes us to skin cancers and upsets our immune system. So when in 1983 a huge hole in the ozone layer appeared over the Antarctic and its neighbouring countries, it aroused a great deal of public alarm.

A few years later a similar hole appeared over the northern hemisphere. And by then it was recognized that the ozone depletion was due to chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), the chemicals used in air conditioners, refrigerators and propellants. The Montreal Protocol called on the nations to halve the emission of CFCs by 1997.

Climate change is a related problem. The warmth of the earth's surface (essential for our planet's survival) is maintained by a combination of radiation from the sun and the infrared radiation it emits into space. This is the so-called 'greenhouse effect'. The pollution of the atmosphere by 'greenhouse gases', especially carbon dioxide, reduces the infra-red emission and increases the temperature of the earth's surface. This is the spectre of global warming which may have disastrous consequences on the configuration of the world's geography and weather patterns.

Reflecting on these four environmental hazards, one cannot help but see that our whole planet is in jeopardy.

'Crisis' is not too dramatic a word to use. What would be an appropriate response? To begin with, we can be thankful that at last in 1992 the so-called 'Earth Summit' was held in Rio and made a commitment to 'global sustainable development'. Subsequent conferences have ensured that environmental questions have been kept before the leading nations of the world.

But alongside these official conferences several NGOs have arisen. I will mention only the two most prominent explicitly Christian organizations, namely Tearfund and A Rocha, both having recently celebrated a special anniversary (forty and twenty-five years respectively).

Tearfund, founded by George Hoffman, is committed to development in the broadest sense and works in close cooperation with 'partners' in the Majority World. The wonderful story of Tearfund has been documented by Mike Hollow in his book *A Future and a Hope*.

A Rocha is different, being much smaller. It was founded in 1983 by Peter Harris, who has documented its growth in two books: *Under the Bright Wings* (the first ten years) and *Kingfisher's Fire* (bringing the story up to date). Its steady development is remarkable, as it now works in eighteen countries, establishing field study centres on all continents.

It is all very well to give our support to Christian environmental NGQS, but what are our individual responsibilities? I leave Chris Wright to answer the question, What can the radical disciple do to care for the creation?

Chris dreams of a multitude of Christians who care about creation and take their environmental responsibility seriously:

They choose sustainable forms of energy where possible. They switch off unneeded appliances. They buy food, goods and services as far as possible from companies with ethically sound environmental policies. They join conservation societies. They avoid over-consumption and unnecessary waste and recycle as much as possible.

Chris also wants to see a growing number of Christians who include the care of creation within their biblical understanding of mission:

In the past, Christians have instinctively been concerned about great and urgent issues in every generation . . . These have included the evils of disease, ignorance, slavery, and many other forms of brutality and exploitation. Christians have taken up the cause of widows, orphans, refugees, prisoners, the insane, the hungry — and most recently have swelled the numbers of those committed to 'making poverty history'.

I want to echo Chris Wright's eloquent conclusion:

It seems quite inexplicable to me that there are some Christians who claim to love and worship God, to be disciples of Jesus, and yet have no concern for the earth that bears his stamp of ownership. They do not care about the abuse of the earth and indeed, by their wasteful and over-consumptive life-styles, they collude in it.

'God intends . . . our care of the creation to reflect our love for the Creator'.

To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it (Deuteronomy 10:14).

Questions:

Consider whether creation care is a neglected topic for Christians.

Look at Genesis 1:26-28 and then at Genesis 2:15. Do you accept that the dominion God has given us should be seen as responsible stewardship, not destructive domination? (Study 3 looks at this again).

What can the radical disciple do to care for creation? Do you accept Chris Wright's dream for a multitude of Christians who take their environmental responsibility seriously?