

Caring for Creation – the new frontier of mission

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For many Christians who care about the world, the current environmental crisis seems not only to be out of reach, but more properly left to others of a more political turn of mind. Christian caring has traditionally focused exclusively on human need in all its many and desperate forms, but its environmental causes or context have rarely seemed to figure in the picture. However, we are living in remarkable times as the church worldwide is recovering its ecological conscience, and many opportunities to rediscover ways of making Jesus known as Lord by caring for his creation are opening up around this needy world. So it is long overdue for us to look again at some of the reasons for what has proved in the past to be tragic Christian indifference, but is now becoming a new frontier of Christian mission. We need to recognise that it is Christian leaders in the poorer world who are prompting us to see how the devastation of the environment is impacting church and society, and who are asking some of the following questions:

- If what surrounds us is God's handiwork and not merely the human environment or human resources, as secular groups would have it, isn't that some indication that we should look after it?
- What is the biblical basis for such a concern for creation?
- We now recognise that environmental causes more than any others are contributing to human suffering. They have led to more people becoming refugees in the last decade than warfare, and lie behind over half the world's disease. So isn't that sufficient reason for us to re-consider if we need to get involved?

Is creation care biblical?

The way the Bible frames the question, 'What is Christian mission?' is to ask us who Jesus is, and what it means to follow him as Lord. Many passages serve as examples: the first chapters of Mark's gospel are among the clearest presentations of many. Through a series of episodes, Mark introduces us to Jesus – Lord over sickness, religion, politics, the personal life. And then as he tells us of Jesus stilling the storm, he makes it clear that he is Lord over the weather, and by extension over all creation. This goes far beyond seeing the story as simply a reassurance of personal comfort in times when the weather gets rough and the boat of our personal life threatens to be overwhelmed. Equally, from the beginning of Genesis to the final promises of Revelation, the biblical story is one of God's love reaching out to his whole creation, and supremely to people within it. Nothing else can explain the promise of the first covenant in Genesis 9:17: 'This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on earth', or the ringing hope of Romans 8:19–21: 'The creation itself was subjected to futility... in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the glorious freedom of the children of God'. The Bible understands that those who follow Jesus as Lord are led straight into relationship with him, and thereby to the restoration of all their relationships, personal, social and with the wider creation itself. We never find the biblical call to mission beginning with people, then simply trying to assess their most pressing needs. This agenda owes more to the humanism of the renaissance and enlightenment than a robust Christian world view that begins with the question, 'Who is God, and how can we make him known in the world?' The logjam in evangelical thinking that has so sadly opposed social action to evangelistic endeavour, rather than understanding both as a consequence of the knowledge that Jesus is Lord, is only one of the consequences of this false point of departure. For people like ourselves, raised in a post-enlightenment culture that puts people and not God at the heart of our thinking, such a re-ordering doesn't always come naturally but we cannot but admit that it is more biblical.

Does creation care matter?

It is unlikely at best, and incoherent at worst, to imagine that God is indifferent to the widespread destruction of what he has created. To think that we can claim on the one hand to love God, and then to be indifferent to his creation, or even worse to live destructively, is even more tragic. As has been well said, 'It is impossible to say you love Rembrandt while you trash his paintings.' Set the wonderful promise of God's redemption of creation against some of the current statistics – worldwide we risk losing half of the meagre 4% of plants we have already managed to describe in the wonderful treasure house of biodiversity which God has made. Some groups such as birds are less dramatically at risk – only 12% will be lost in the next 50 years it seems – but then there are only just over 9,000 species to start with. What we are witnessing is casual, widespread, catastrophic destruction even while our awareness of the causes becomes ever more clear. We are in fact seeing the consequences of religious choices as human society on the western consumer model opts for personal comfort at the cost of the survival of the wider creation.

A distinctively Christian response

So much for the beginnings of a theology for creation care, but how can it work out in practice? How does the wonderful prospect of hope for creation take shape in particular places in our own times? For the last 20 years, A Rocha has been working to show how a distinctively Christian response can bring protection to endangered areas and species, and new hope to embattled human communities. Behind it all is a Christian witness that recognises the relevance of the gospel to everything God has made. Now working in fifteen countries including Portugal, Lebanon, Kenya, and the Czech Republic, teams are conducting scientific research, educational programmes, and through living communities often based in field study centres, they are living out in practice what the gospel means to all comers. From the Alvor marshes of Portugal, to the Arabuko-Sokoke forest of the Kenya coast, or the Bekaa Valley marshes of Lebanon, and even on the post-industrial waste ground of the Minet site in Southall, England, where an A Rocha team has led the creation of a country park, there are grounds for hope. These habitats that would otherwise have faced severe threats may now continue to show something of the wonder of God's care in creating remarkable and beautiful biodiversity, and the communities around them have the chance to know more of their Creator and Redeemer. For each one of us, where we live, there are opportunities to include our daily interactions with the created world in the dialogue of our discipleship.

Over the years, understanding of the crisis overtaking the creation has been greater in the secular world of environmental NGOs of many different kinds than in the church. However, many of the secular groups now realise that questions of belief are fundamental to finding solutions, and several of them have begun to see how a Christian response can bring vital new insights to intractable problems in nature conservation. The Christian community worldwide has a remarkable opportunity to recognise the essential role of creation care in the task of mission, and to learn to live and work differently. As the crisis deepens, events will make this ever more urgent, and we must pray that our biblical convictions, and our relationship to Jesus the Creator and Lord, will lead us to act before it is too late.