

Creation Care and Mission

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We live in exciting times. All over the world the church is recovering the truth that the gospel is concerned with restoring three areas of relationship. Principally it brings peace between people and their God, through Jesus Christ the Redeemer. Secondly it can restore relationships between people, through Christ who breaks down all the walls of hostility. Finally it makes possible a renewed relationship between people and God's Creation itself. This manual has given many examples of work that focusses specifically on this last essential aspect of gospel reconciliation. But how does it relate to those who are working in the more usual tasks of cross-cultural mission? Those tasks may range from servicing the computers of a denomination in South-East Asia, to translating scripture in central Africa, from cooking at a conference in Kazakhstan to teaching Old Testament in Lebanon. Surely there is nothing of Creation care in any of that? But there is, as some essential biblical insights may help us to see.

We begin by taking seriously the perspective of scripture that makes it plain that we live in the creation, not the environment. That is to say that when we have anything to do with the material world, it is with God's handiwork that we are involved, and thus all we do in our lives, all our actions, have to do with what the Creator has made, and so of course with the Creator himself. If we think of the world merely as "the environment", or "nature", or even more selfishly as "natural resources" we tend to think of it as what is around us, and there for us. We take our place, idolatrously, in the centre of things. But biblically the world and all we see, at least that which we have not ourselves transformed, is both from God, and for him. That brings much of our daily living into the conscious context of our personal and communal relationship with God; just as every Christian is inevitably a witness, every Christian and Christian community must inevitably care for Creation if it means anything at all to say that we believe in a Creator God. So whatever our work, our relationship to creation is part of it, and reflects our relationship to God. If we wish to care for Creation better, we need to worship God more fully! If we wish to worship as the Bible intends, we must recognise that we join the worship which creation itself offers to God. And if we wish to worship in offering our souls and bodies as God encourages us to do, we must make our care for his creation part of that.

We go on to discover that the creation is everywhere, and not merely in the countryside. We often think that environmental issues are for the foresters, or the biologists, or maybe the agriculturalists and rural development workers. But we all turn on taps or fetch water, we all switch on or off lights or light fires, we all breathe and eat. All of these things involve us in choices, and responses to God's good gift of creation. They may well also involve us in the suffering that has been brought into the world through the Fall. The water may be polluted, the light comes at a high cost to creation, the very fabric of our food is increasingly an artefact of profit-driven choices that have major implications for many other species of plants and animals that share the planet with us. So whether we live in a mega-city, or a tiny hut in the rainforest, we live in Creation, and its care is our concern.

Most of all, we express our relationship to God, and therefore witness to it and make it evident, by all that we are, and not merely by all that we say. So an abusive or indifferent relationship to the Creation sends confused signals if we wish to proclaim Christ the Creator. Often it is our concern for the church that encourages us to cross cultures and undertake the challenges of work in all kinds of places, regardless of the difficulties that we may encounter. We know that Christ died for his church, and so our concern is not a trivial one. But what is the church for which we are concerned, and what is the gospel that we wish to see spread through all the earth? The church is the community of people redeemed from the three broken areas of relationship that we have talked about above. But if we ourselves continue to live that broken-ness, what do we bring with us to the different societies that we enter, and the churches elsewhere that we go to serve? Globalisation

ensures the export of the unsustainable and abusive western lifestyle – what Tom Sine has called the McWorld syndrome. Inevitably globalisation has its Christian counterpart in the development of a more uniform Christian sub-culture world wide. In so far as that sub-culture has its origins in western societies, it can unconsciously perpetuate the western indifference to creation and the consumerism that mark the wealthy nations, and western missionaries risk bringing their toxic cultural additives admixed with the life-giving gospel they intend to share. Non-western missionaries, increasingly in the majority, bring similar assumptions about their relationship to the creation with them wherever they go to serve. What we must recognise is that this is not merely an unfortunate detail, but that the very gospel itself, corrupted in that fashion, does no justice to Jesus Christ, the Redeemer and Creator, who we wish our gospel to reveal.

What can we do in practical terms therefore to make sure that we are faithful witnesses to him in our life and work, regardless of where that life and work is lived out, and regardless of what its official business is?

Firstly, just as it is now normal for some degree of anthropological or cultural study to be a regular part of cross-cultural training, along with the obvious demands of language study, so we should make it an essential part of our preparation to acquire an equal awareness and understanding of the physical setting in which we go to work. By definition those who merely visit a place are unfamiliar with all of its dynamics, ecological and otherwise. They tend to be acutely unaware of the constraints that must exist if their life is to be sustainable in an unfamiliar environment. They also have far less invested in its sustainability, because unlike those they have come to serve, they can always leave! If they are part of demonstrating or teaching a lifestyle that results from the gospel, as inevitably they are, cross-cultural workers need to be aware of the local context if they are not to endorse or even recommend disaster.

Two actual examples, one negative and one positive serve to illustrate the point. In a semi-arid African country, missionaries began to feel acutely the difficulty in training church leaders who belonged to a nomadic group. The people were never in one place long enough for the teachers to complete any serious work. As the missionaries understood little of the interaction between the movement of the cattle, and the availability of food, they resolved to sink a borehole that would avoid the need for wandering, and provide constant water, keeping the people in place for long enough to be taught thoroughly. Needless to say, within four months the land for some thirty kilometres in every direction had become a dust bowl, trampled by the constant presence of the many animals who had now settled down in the area. Serious poverty was only averted by the resumption of the old nomadic lifestyle.

More positively, in a South American country, a pastor was very concerned by the way his church people were destroying the last of a dry-land forest in order to sell the wood for much-needed fence poles. Once the trees were cut, the land soon lost its topsoil, and families who had once lived in the area were forced to move. Furthermore the pastor was convinced by teaching Genesis that this kind of way of living by destruction didn't reflect a proper human response to the Creator. So he gradually introduced a bee-keeping economy which ensured the protection of the woodlands that were habitat for the bees, but which served to safeguard the livelihood of his church members over future years. Properly understood, and obediently undertaken, the search to understand creation is part of a quest to understand God, just as the search to understand a culture is an act of compassion that reflects God's love for the people he has made. John Stott has reminded us of the dictum of the seventeenth century astronomer, Johann Kepler, that in studying the creation we are "thinking God's thoughts after him." It cannot afford to be a neglected or forgotten part of our preparation if we are truly concerned to be of service in places which are unfamiliar to us.

Secondly, we can simply offer to our host country and church an awareness that our relationship to creation is relevant to our relationship with God and to our discipleship. For many Christian communities that will come as an entirely new idea, and will also conveniently serve to challenge the besetting dualism which does such damage in Christian living. World-wide the idea that God is indifferent to the material has taken root in popular Christian thinking, and its results are seen on

every side in the form of strained marriages, disrupted families, ugly Church buildings, and incoherent Christian thinking about the world around us. An affirmation of the fundamental goodness of Creation, and of the possibility of redemption in the midst of life, rather than by escaping life, is urgently needed. It will need great humility, and the awareness of our partial understanding of many issues, but it will do greater justice to the truth that any idea of what is “spiritual” must include all that is of the Spirit of God, rather than meaning “non-material” as is too often popularly assumed. A more biblical recognition of the role of the Holy Spirit in creation should protect us from that.

Then thirdly, we must re-examine how our work in evangelism, which in one form or another makes up such a major part of normal missionary endeavour, is affected by a recovery of our understanding of God as Creator, and people as his creation. Once again this may seem to be of limited relevance, but in fact the reverse is true. If we begin from the understanding that in common with all people, both those who call themselves Christians and those who don't, we are created human beings, we are immediately spared from a disastrous “us and them” posture. Whatever our good intentions, we need to accept that this has been widely misunderstood as elitism or arrogance. We share the gospel with those who hear it, it is for all of us, no matter what stage we may have reached in hearing or receiving it. There is a kind of created community here. Furthermore we understand that everything about all people is in some measure created – body, soul, spirit, person. The old and agonised discussions about the priority of evangelism over social work, and maybe the newer ones about the importance of creation care, set against evangelism, can only survive if we regard people, quite unbiblically, as souls on legs, or some other disembodied entity. God's care is manifest to all his creation, and not merely a part of it. His care is for the created person, in need of redemption in all its fullness, and not merely for some non-material entity deemed to be eternal. Moreover, the understanding that all people, in every place and in every condition, share an equal status as created beings gives us a renewed motivation for crossing cultural barriers, and reaching out everywhere with the good news. No human community should be overlooked, or regarded as less important. Chris Wright has pointed out that the affirmation of Psalm 24:1 is similarly intended to be a contentious challenge, a call to mission “The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.” Above all, we must be aware, because of the fact that the word was made flesh and lived among us, that whatever our preaching or talking, it will often be our embodiment of the message that speaks loudest. Once again our model is the ministry of Jesus, whose words served as explanation for the mighty works of God, and whose action in laying down his life and taking it up again brought our redemption. Tellingly we celebrate that now in a meal together, and not just in words. We cannot neglect the material reality that embodies our verbal evangelism. Who we are is as much our preaching as what we say.

Finally the simple actions which involve us in exchanges with the Creation can be looked at and seen for what they are – either as grateful or exploitative, potentially worship, or thoughtless and indifferent. How do we use paper, or electricity, or transport, in our work? What is left for the future when our work is complete? Do we recognise any constraints and limits, and how are the other members of God's creation affected by our projects?

So – if we see the growth in the number of environmental missions we should rejoice, but then beware of thinking we can leave any of this to the professionals. For as we have seen, whatever our work or our life, it is inevitably something that we will all do, and the choice we face is merely whether we will do it well or badly, whether we will do justice to the gospel, or will distort it.