



FUTURE SHAPE



Caring for God's creation

Mission studies for ministers on creation care

1 Creation care is mission

“The iconic images of 2007 polar bears stranded, glaciers melting in the Himalayas, forests coming down all over Africa and devastating floods from Bangladesh to Ghana may be as nothing to what will happen if people do not take immediate action.”

(John Vidal)

NOTES

A. Introduction

In this first study we are exploring the view that a commitment to creation care is an integral part of contemporary mission. For the purposes of this session, we are using as our main source Chris Wright's substantial contribution to the subject in his book, *The mission of God: unlocking the Bible's grand narrative*, which one Baptist reviewer has described as “a blockbuster”.

We'll begin with four introductory questions:

- 1 Is it true that we are already up to our necks in an unprecedented global crisis of our own making?
- 2 If we are, does that crisis have any serious connection with Christian faith?
- 3 Are there not more important spiritual concerns which demand our attention and our action?
- 4 How on earth can we argue that 'creation care' is an integral part of

Christian mission and, therefore, a good use of our money, our time and our personnel? Isn't 'creation care' simply the latest middle-class Western fad?

B. Three options for Christians

Let's look now at three possible points of view and see how we react to them:

- 1 **Christians know that the gospel is about personal salvation, the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Their real home is in heaven and the long-term condition of the earth cannot be an urgent priority for a truly Christian agenda.**

For those who have such an understanding of the gospel, we are glad you are journeying with us. A full consideration of the issues would take us deeper into a discussion of the

'missio dei' ('mission of God') concept which has been a feature of recent missiological debate especially since the famous 1952 world missionary conference held in Willingen, Germany. Suffice it to say two things for now:

- ☑ We gladly affirm the full biblical truth and the personal faith-experience of Jesus crucified and risen.
- ☑ These studies are rooted in the conviction that we must also do justice to Jesus' dramatic announcement in Luke 4: 16-21 where he offers a framework for mission which includes recovery of sight for the blind, freedom for captives, good news for the poor, release for the oppressed and the wonderful year of Jubilee (to which we'll return in the fifth study).

We are proceeding therefore in the hope that our attempt to embrace a holistic view of mission, to look for a practical response to every form of human need, to grapple with a wide range of biblical material and to live as salt and light in our own community will justify the conclusion that creation care is relevant to both our understanding and our practice of the mission of Jesus. "Mission is God's turning to the world in respect of creation, care, redemption and consummation". (Bosch, *Transforming mission*, p 391)

2 Christians are people who care about creation and take their environmental responsibilities seriously.

Chris Wright writes appreciatively of such people: "*They choose sustainable forms of energy wherever 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. May their tribe increase.*" (Wright, *op cit*, p 412)



3 Christians need now to go one step further and to accept the care of creation as integral to the theory and practice of mission.

"The risen Jesus... claims the same ownership and sovereignty over all creation as the Old Testament affirms for YHWH. The whole earth, then, belongs to Jesus... The simple biblical affirmation, 'The earth is the Lord's' is a non-negotiable platform for both ecological ethics and missional confidence." (Wright, *op cit*, pp 403-404).

"The hundreds of millions of people living in the world's marginal agricultural lands, such as the countries of the Sahel regions, already face a desperate daily struggle to grow food. All their energies are consumed in the effort to produce a harvest of a staple crop such as millet. As global temperatures rise, this struggle is likely to become impossible as more frequent and longer droughts make crop-growing unviable. In poor tropical regions, the increased storms predicted from climate change will be an added threat."
(Information from *The Independent*, 3 December 2005)

C. Creation care is mission

One of the key purposes of these mission studies is to identify different aspects of mission which are enriched by a commitment to creation care and, in this first session, we present our core thesis – that creation care is real mission. In passing, it's worth making the point that, surely, this is an inescapable implication of the BMS mission statement which sets out to make Jesus known, to alleviate suffering and injustice and to improve the quality of life, especially for the world's poorest people.

In the course of our lives, we move naturally from a concern for our own world, to a concern for the world of our

children, to a concern for the world of our grandchildren, all of which feels like a responsible long-term view of the next 70 to 80 years. But the time has come to paint on a much bigger canvas. The challenge we face now is to demonstrate an active concern for “neighbour” from which we have removed every restriction of locality, race and time and to combine that concern with a commitment to the world itself, “the earth and everything in it.”

“I have, in recent years, increasingly become convinced that justice towards the earth (and for that matter towards the whole cosmos) forms an integral part of the mission of the church.”
(Jannie Du Preez, quoted by Wright, *op cit*, p 412)

Wright is at pains to explain why he believes creation care belongs at the very heart of our mission task for today – “a biblical theology of mission that flows from the mission of God himself... must include the ecological sphere within its scope and see practical environmental action as a legitimate part of Christian mission.” (Wright, *op cit*, p 413)

❑ **Creation care is an urgent issue in today’s world**

Christians have always sought to respond to the great ‘evils’ of the world and that which faces us now is the horrific suffering of the earth itself. “To be unconcerned about it is to be either desperately ignorant or irresponsibly callous.” (Wright, *op cit*, p 413)

❑ **Creation care flows from love and obedience to God**

The earth is the Lord’s and it must therefore be fundamental to the calling of God’s people that we exercise an active concern for the earth which bears the stamp of his ownership. The creation command of Genesis 1: 28 to “rule” over creation has been described as “the first missionary commission” (see Wright, *op cit*, p 415, quoting Loader). Such a command could never mean “exploit” because that would mean

exploiting God’s own creation which he sees repeatedly as “good” (Genesis 1: 9,12,18,21,25,31). Genesis 2: 15 makes it clear that we are to tend and to care for the earth. *Here’s a good evening’s discussion for any group!*

❑ **Creation care exercises our priestly and kingly role in relation to the earth**

The Genesis creation accounts use the language of kingship and priesthood in assigning roles of *authority* (kingship) and *service* (priesthood) to Adam. “So humankind is placed in a relationship to the earth that combines the function of king and priest: to rule and to serve.” (Wright, *op cit*, p 415)

If we are wondering what that might mean in terms of practical application, it might help us to take note of Psalm 72: 1-4 which prays for the coronation of the king, draws on the mountains and hills for inspiration and assigns to the king the responsibility of caring for his people. *How can we put that combination (‘king’ and ‘priest’) into practice today?*

❑ **Creation care tests our motivation for mission**

Many people have a worthy evangelistic and/or compassionate motivation for mission but a holistic motivation will be concerned for the redemption of the whole creation as much as for the salvation of human beings. Such a motivation “...flows from an awareness of God’s own heart for his creation and a



desire to respond to it.” (Wright, *op cit*, p 416 – see also pp 419-420)

☒ **Creation care is a prophetic opportunity for the church**

The Old Testament prophets believed they were applying the perspective of God to the pressing realities of their own day. They saw covenant disobedience as a direct cause of the impoverishment of the land and its creatures (Hosea 4: 1-4; Isaiah 24: 1-8; Jeremiah 12: 4) but they were no strangers to trouble as a consequence of their prophetic preaching (cf Amos 7: 12-13; Jeremiah 11: 21-23, 20: 1-6; 26: 1-9; 38: 1-13). If the Church today commits itself to tackle the ecological crisis of the world “*within its biblical framework of resources and vision it too may discover the experience of the prophet.*” (Wright, *op cit*, p 417)

☒ **Creation care embodies a biblical balance of compassion and justice**

We embody the compassion of unselfish love in our care for a creation which is not in a position to repay such concern. We embody justice because the defence of the weak against the might of the strong is central to our environmental action. “Biblical mission is as holistic as biblical righteousness.” (Wright, *op cit*, p 419)

Wright’s conclusion is well worth group reflection:

“...these points are built on the intrinsic value of creation to God and the self-standing mandate of God that we should care for it as he does. They do not depend on any other utility or consequence of such action, such as human benefit or evangelistic fruitfulness. We are to care for the earth because it belongs to God and he told us to. That is enough in itself.” (Wright, *op cit* p 419)

“The issue of global warming requires radical thinking and new solutions.” (Adam Macey, BBC Radio 4, ‘The Archers’, 21 February 2008)

D. The five marks of mission

In 1988, the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops produced what have become known as the “five marks of mission”:

- To proclaim the good news of the kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures in society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

These five ‘marks’ can be likened to five strands of a rope. Each strand may well be strong in itself but when all five are intertwined, the rope which results is infinitely stronger than any one strand. The five marks of mission belong together as a comprehensive expression of mission and creation care is right there among them.

Some questions about the fifth mark of mission:

- 1 What is there in the life of our church which demonstrates our corporate commitment to this mark?
- 2 How can we reflect such a commitment in our worship and prayer?
- 3 What more could we do to ‘live’ this mark?
- 4 Are there other groups or churches near us who are responding to this mark of mission, whom we could approach to join forces in positive action for the environment (‘co-belligerents’)?

For some practical suggestions for action by government, the local church and the individual, see the small group material associated with this study.

Books referred to in the course of this study:

Bosch, David J **Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission**, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1991
ISBN: 978-0-88344-719-2

Vidal, John, art **50 people who could save the planet**, *The Guardian Weekend*, 5 January 2008, p.17

Wright, Christopher JH **The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative**, IVP Academic, 2006 ISBN:978-0-83082-571-4