

Cold Water in Jesus' Name

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Category: Creation Care

On a precarious slope, Etienne digs into the dusty soil with a small hoe, planting beans in hope of the rains. In recent years these rains have become unpredictable. Miles away, his wife is returning from the forest, a bundle of firewood on her head. She was up before dawn carrying water from the spring, her only source of water, nearly an hour's walk away. The young baby on her back is sick with intestinal parasites from drinking this water she has worked so hard to provide.

The global context may be lost on this family, but they live out its consequences on a daily basis. In the United States, frequent headlines warn of what is happening to the earth and its ecosystems, but because the impact on western life is minimal, the predictions are largely ignored.

I was among those who ignored the signs until I began working with 'Plant With Purpose'. Then I began to understand. To get beyond the symptoms of poverty we needed to address the health of the eco-system. So, for example looking on eroded mountains and silt-choked rivers in Haiti, we cannot give a cup of cold water without restoring the watershed. We are all dependent on a healthy world.

As 6.8 billion humans seek to satisfy their needs and desires on our planet, it will be no surprise that environmental stewardship is part of our global conversation. While climate change controversy is well-known, hundreds of lesser-known environmental issues are coming to a head. Ocean life is vanishing at an alarming rate. Fresh water is becoming increasingly scarce. And deforestation is reducing rainfall, soil fertility and water resources in many parts of the world.

Many regard this topic with suspicion, as a diluting of our commitment to the gospel. Yet from the very beginning, caring for the earth that God created has been a basic part of our role as humans.

In Genesis 2:15, Adam is placed in the garden to serve and protect it. Throughout the Old Testament we are reminded that 'the earth is the Lord's' and that our role is one of stewardship - temporary caretakers who will one day be called to account for how well we have discharged our duties. This is reinforced in Revelation 11:18 which talks about God destroying those who destroy the earth.

Some argue that it is arrogant to imagine that humans negatively impact the environment at a global level. Yet in Scripture we see a direct correlation between the behaviour of humans and the health of the whole earth. The ground is cursed as a result of Adam's sin. With the Flood, human sin results in the destruction of most life on earth, and what is spared is saved with the help of Noah.

'Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.' (Genesis 3:17) In much of the world we have sought to distance ourselves from the physical labour of producing food, but for hundreds of millions of farmers around the world, it is a fundamental and painful part of life.

Yet as the Psalms make clear, creation still gives glory to God. Psalm 104 emphasizes the delight God takes in the earth, as well as the special relationship God has with the rest of his creatures, independent of mankind. Like Job, hearing God's description of his world, we need to learn humility.

Paul tells us that creation is now groaning as if in childbirth, anticipating redemption and eagerly waiting for the children of God to be revealed (Romans 8:19,22). God's plan of redemption is intended to be good news for the whole of creation. Following in Adam's footsteps, we are called to be stewards of a world which still belongs to God. As God's children, we are a part of this good news for his creation, which until now has been suffering from our greed. As Christians, our environmental responsibility is awesome and humbling.

Yet it is more than an issue of obedience and humility. Environmental stewardship is also an issue of love for our neighbours. Among the poorest people in the world, there is no food from a supermarket or water in plastic bottles. When the rain doesn't come, people starve. When soil erodes, families go hungry. When water gets polluted, children get disease. When the trees are all cut, women like Etienne's wife walk for miles to find firewood. When the land is deforested, watersheds no longer function, causing rivers and streams to dry up. When the rain does come, deadly landslides ensue. For most of the people with whom I have worked over the last fifteen years, their soil and their water are almost their only assets. We need to play our role in preserving and sustaining these, so the ecosystems are not further degraded. Serving creation as a steward is central to serving those people.

Wilderness can be thought of as land which is simply unburdened by human beings. This ignores our role as stewards. God calls us to action, to contribute to and ensure the fruitfulness of his earth. We all interact with creation, and we can choose whether our interactions will be life-giving or death dealing. Our role as citizens of God's kingdom should inform this choice.

With the coming of God's kingdom, our engagement with the world has changed. We love our enemies and serve our neighbours. We still experience the effects of the curse, but we now strive to work with God's natural systems for everyone's good. In sustainable agriculture, weeds still grow and crops still fail, but we can work in such a way that we give back to creation, mimicking natural ecosystems. Agroforestry, permaculture, composting latrines and even recycling are examples where these principles are put to work.

When we study creation, we clearly see God's ability to work things together for good in the intricate ways that ecosystems fit together. Nothing is wasted and everything has its place. Everywhere, life springs forth from death, and resurrection is foreshadowed. Beyond merely seeking to reduce our footprint, we can seek to restore our relationship with the earth.

On a global scale, restoration is a monumental task. It won't and cannot be achieved this side of Christ's return. However, kingdom thinking can serve as a guide for our planning and our individual choices. At 'Plant With Purpose', we have seen restoration happen. Rivers and streams that had withered have begun to flow again as a result of upstream solutions. They have become powerful illustrations of God's ability to redeem and restore, both for us and for the farmers with whom we are striving to share Christ's love.

In industrialized countries, we have much to learn from our brothers and sisters in the rest of the world. I have been very impressed with the seriousness with which African, Latin American and Asian church leaders have embraced creation care. An environmental missions agency conference on 'God and Creation' in Kenya was filled to capacity with pastors and leaders from all over East Africa. Furthermore, it resulted in ideas and action. One Tanzanian pastor encouraged all the churches in his region to establish tree nurseries. Another suggested that everyone going through confirmation classes plant a tree. Since then over 500,000 trees have been planted, and an important water source which had become intermittent now flows steadily.

Paul reminds us in Romans 1:20 that creation reveals much about God. As such it provides a perfect starting point for a conversation about God's character from his Word. Rather than a competing focus, environmental stewardship is an integrated part of God's story of redemption.

Because the environment is a source of passion and of anxiety for many people, it opens doors for discussion and debate. Supporters of 'Plant With Purpose' have told me that simply talking of their support has provided the opportunity to share Christ with friends or colleagues. And conversations with poor farmers about the land and soil has given us the perfect opening to begin to integrate the gospel story into our work. After all, the Bible begins that story with creation, earth and soil.

Much of the world is suffering because of environmental degradation, or reacting in numb despair to

gloomy predictions. Both groups need the hope that comes from Jesus Christ. We have the hope they long for, a hope that speaks directly to the redemption of all of creation and reminds them that God loves the cosmos, and provides for our needs through the earth.

Our voice has too often been missing from the dialogue. This is because western Christians have tended to be dismissive of environmental issues. These issues have been considered a distraction from the centrality of God's message of salvation through Christ. Surely it is good news that God cares about all that he has created.

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