

Chapter 8

ECOLOGY AND MISSION

by George Samuel

Preserving a healthy and balanced global environment is being considered seriously for the last one decade. Much interest is seen among many groups, irrespective of religious or secular affiliations, to protect the earth's ecological balance, especially in the recent half decade. Many who share the same concern are aware of the depletion of resources due to the rise in human consumerism and are thinking together of ways to carefully use the non-renewable resources hereafter. The indiscriminate use of technology has harmful effects on nature. It is alarming to both rural and urban people that the earth is fast becoming a place not suitable for human existence.

We have now come to the conclusion that unlimited development by use of science and technology is far from reality. Once we thought "by art and the hand of man, nature can be forced out of her natural state and squeezed and molded." (Francis Bacon) We need technology to solve these new problems. Now we realize that the use of more science is giving us only unsolvable problems setting a limit to the development that can be achieved. Hence the key word being used today in this connection is sustainability. Sustainable development, in a way, is the development required just to meet our needs (not greed) without harming the ability of other people to meet their needs. The 'other people' include, of course, even the generation yet to be born.

Christians, who are the people of the Kingdom of God, also are responding to these ecological problems, although they are looking forward to the final perfecting of the

kingdom at the return of Jesus. Some believe that such devastation of the earth's ecological conditions proclaim the second coming of Christ. Some may even say that it is pointless to prevent these as such things must happen before Christ returns. They are, it seems, not keen to preserve the earth until the return of Christ. Surely, the thought of improving the conditions is not entertained by such Christians.

We know that the present is made up also of what happened in the past. Those who lived in the previous generations did leave a lot of resources for our use and in a way all are thankful that they did not consume and deplete it all thinking of the imminent return of our Lord in their time. Their attitude to the use of resources might have been different. Or they did not have the technology to consume all at one time as we have now. Anyway we are left with what is at our disposal right now.

While we eagerly look forward to the return of our Lord, we also need to "occupy till He comes", exercising a responsible stewardship. It is important at this stage to discover our present relationship to the resources left. Surely, we should not plunder the earth's resources for commercial purposes. Bible is very clear on our relationships to nature and to God. Bible does not grant permission to use it for our self-chosen purposes which are apart from God. The earth to which all creation depend on for life, health and fulfillment belongs to God. Nature supplies what is necessary to sustain life. The first chapter of the Bible begins with the emphasis on how the world became God's world. The Kingdom of God is a present reality since the new creation in Christ has already broken into history. During this "in-between" period of the inauguration and the final perfection of the Kingdom, all of creation are awaiting transformation through the life of Christ.

RESPONSIBLE STEWARDSHIP

The Christian stewardship is to uphold God's rule over the entire creation. The Kingdom people under the reign of

God can exercise this responsibility. One needs to be under authority of self-seeking desires and powers, and the temptation was always to use nature for selfish purposes. Even after entering into the Kingdom, the same will continue as long as the power of self is stronger in us than the power of Christ. As these desires are crucified with Christ, we are given the potential to serve as the image bearers of God in upholding His rule.

When God is the creator of the universe and all in it, we cannot think of dissociating ourselves from the rest of the creation. The sphere of our stewardship includes the whole universe. When the life supporting capacity of the earth is threatened, we need to watch the way we exercise our stewardship. Our mastery over nature and our potential for development are to be seen in the context of our relationship with the creator and also with the entire creation. We are not exercising our stewardship if we plunder nature for selfish purposes and allow our mastery over nature to cause deterioration of life sustaining capacity. When we submit ourselves to God's reign and His will for life, we cannot subscribe to the greedy exploitation of nature for our own ends.

Attributing divinity to nature and worshipping it in the past might have prevented humanity at least to some extent from exploiting nature. When the view that nature is no more an object of worship but is an object of study was popularized, the cravings of humanity propelled by human sin led to irresponsible attitudes and wholesale abuse of nature. We cannot ascribe divine attributes to nature and deify it, as God alone is worthy of worship; all other things are only the works of God.

God the creator found all creation good (Ge.1:18, 21, 25). Man who was created in the image of God exercised his freedom of choice and disobeyed God. The image was thus defaced by that sin and disobedience. Due to the sinfulness of man, the 'good' of creation was despoiled of its goodness. The message of the Kingdom is that this defaced image is restorable in Jesus Christ.

As this repeated impact of human sin upon nature gave rise to greedy exploitation, the ecological issues are to be viewed in terms of spirituality, discovering the kind of spirituality that will help us to uphold God's rule over the creation. Indeed, we need spiritual strength to resist the communal abuse of nature.

We are given, in Christ, the spiritual power to exercise our stewardship properly maintaining nature's capacity to serve its intended purpose. The fruit of the earth is to be the source of nourishment and strength to humanity and other living things. Our servanthood includes all aspects of maintaining the fruitfulness of the earth. We need to take action to prevent anything that destroys this fruitfulness. While we take from nature, we also need to remember to give back to nature what it needs to supply the needs of the future. Here we need to understand the intricate interrelationship with nature that will result in mutual fruitfulness - living in a way beneficial to each other. This does not mean that we have to tolerate unwisely those which are destructive to human race. Nor does it mean that we should be barred from working toward civilization and advancement of society. Our goal is the Kingdom and the authority given to us is service for all creation. The people of the Kingdom are invited to live under God's rule and to work against the threats of violence to nature.

"DOMINION" AND "SUBDUE"

Terms like "have dominion" and "subdue the earth" (Ge.1:28) can be interpreted according to the mindset of the interpreter. As man, a sinner, is also a fallible interpreter of God's word, man's greedy impulse to exploit nature has overtaken the responsibility of exercising stewardship. Nature was seen as something to exploit and use to satisfy man's desires. These terms are not to be interpreted to justify the exploiting activities. Such interpretation to dispose off nature for man's own ends is contrary to the message of the Bible. Actually, there is no demonstration that Bible is the cause for all the ecological problems which require global solutions. One must be careful when the

Bible is used to justify certain opinions or bring in such accusations.

The biblical understanding of nature and man's place in the universe encouraged the development of science and technology. When science and technology were used without paying attention to the moral, ethical and spiritual values given in the Bible, it resulted in disastrous ecological consequences. Merely looking at scientific development and constructing views as if God did not exist only produce more problems. Viewing nature as a mass of raw materials wanting to be exploited, liberating God from running the universe and detaching God from nature, denying God as creator, limiting God's relationship only to humanity, trying to locate God in the progress of man, considering biblical faith impotent to save the ecological crisis, denial of man being under the creator, the kind of belief in the second coming of Christ that negates the efforts to preserve ecological balance, plus other factors led to the present crisis as well as the confusion in handling the ecological catastrophe.

The factors that shaped our minds in this connection include the tendency to exploit nature for selfish commercial purposes and denying the interest in this world merely for the sake of salvation of souls.

BIBLICAL VIEW

The world and all in it were created by God for the sake of all life(Ge.1-2). God provided a congenial environment to meet human needs and sustain creation. Man is given the responsibility of serving and preserving the creation. The creation supplying what is necessary for life is to be considered as a gift from the Creator. Serving and preserving the earth is possible as a result of a life lived in relationship with God. Living in relationship with the creator is for the sake of the good of creation. God has fashioned all creation as good. But man's self seeking willfulness has destroyed it. Humanity was thus locked into a pattern of sin and rebellion which marred the creation.

God's redemptive work includes the setting right of these relationships. God's grace acts to restore the proper fellowship between God and man and all creation. The Kingdom people are invited back, as new creations in Christ, to their role of modelling and exercising responsible stewardship to uphold God's reign over all creation.

As long as man makes autonomous decisions about life and creation to accomplish his selfish purposes, the raping of nature to fill man's desires will continue. The cravings to use the mastery over nature for selfishness will result in more ecological problems.

Man's rebellion and distorted relationship afflict wounds on the creation (Isa.24:4,5; Hos.4:1-3). The self-seeking man has the potential to destroy the earth's fruitfulness and life supporting capacity (Jer.5:25). When the needs of others are ignored by depriving them of creation's fruits, it makes them poor, dispossessed and oppressed. Not only that Bible does not endorse this injustice but calls for doing justice. Those who are the victims of injustice are to be liberated and they should be given access to creation's gifts for nurturing life (Hos.10:13). The preaching of grace and the doing of justice involves re-establishing redemptive relationships. Liberty from oppression, whether it is human or non-human, can properly be understood when the relationships of God's action of redemption and God's work of creation are grasped (Isa.55:12,13). As redeemed people, we have the power and the possibility for safeguarding and preserving creation.

A life obedient and receptive to God's rule over creation emphasizes service rather than self-centeredness (Phil.2:5-11). The power of sin and death is defeated and that includes all those powers that try to exercise control over creation apart from God. Not only that man is set free from the cravings of simply utilizing nature for his own ends, he is also able to live in companionship with nature.

The redemptive activity of God brings forth the creation of "new heavens and a new earth" (Isa. 65:17; 66:22). Vio-

lence shall be absent even in the animal world (Isa. 65:25). According to the Bible, nature is a realm of probation. The earth is the scene of man's probational existence, and is good, but not heaven perfect. It is part of our probation to learn to get control over man's desires and maintain the fruitfulness of the earth preventing the communal misuse of nature. The way we live and serve in this probationary period on this planet needs to be a response to God's grace which is freely given to us in Jesus Christ. We will have to reorient our life and learn to do things differently in view of the mandates given to us under Christ's Lordship. Some may be accustomed to lifestyles of over consumption of resources; others may be in the race to catch up with them. We must have the willingness to risk changing the way we do things in order to honour both God and the creation. Grace and the love of Christ must motivate us in our responses to the call of serving and preserving nature.

The hope that does not disappoint us (Ro. 5:5) includes the release of nature too along with man from the servitude to decay (Ro.8:19-21). This shows that nature also is going to join man in the glorious freedom in which pollution cannot taint or decay, cannot touch or death cannot even smell.

THE MISSION

If mission can be defined as everything that God wants done in His world, the matter of maintaining the fruitfulness of the earth and preserving the creation is also included in it. God surely wants to get His work done through us, the Kingdom people. Our responsibility is both to announce the Kingdom and to participate in its manifestation. The top priority, of course, in our faithful obedience to the Gospel is to communicate its message relevantly and in meaningful terms by work and deed.

Although there are different missionary options in different places and in different times, the call for repentance to receive forgiveness of sins and to become new creations in Christ cannot be replaced with and by other options or

priorities. Each one may be able to justify his way of expressing his obedience to the Gospel. Some may even interpret a lot of activities for preserving the ecological balance as God's programme for His people. Maintaining ecological balance, at this stage, attracts our attention and influences us to determine our priorities. It may not be out of place to call missionaries also as "earth keepers". But earth keeping is only one of the priorities, although it appears that the task is irreplaceable. It should not be viewed as a substitute for presenting Christ relevantly to all people everywhere; it is rather a consequence of it, as the Kingdom people are given the power to model and exercise responsible stewardship to uphold God's reign over all creation. We do not have, in Christ, the potential and the possibility for safeguarding the earth.

We need to be faithful to the demands of our age in the responsible uses of our limited resources.

As the kingdom people, we have the responsibility to respond positively to the present ecological crisis. While we await eagerly the return of our Lord, we have to give guidelines for action to prevent the indiscriminate use of technology and depletion of non-renewable resources. As we try to safeguard the earth and its fruitfulness it should be done without neglecting our essential vocation of "preaching the Gospel and discipling the nations" (Mt. 28:18-20).

The proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom and restoration of God's intended purposes in people's lives and in the world have different dimensions. The essence of the Christian faith is our living relationship with the risen Lord. This restoration of relationship is in the spiritual dimension between man and God. As man is rightly related to God, the re-establishment of the other relationships, namely, between man and himself in the psychological dimension, and between man and the environment in the ecological dimension, will be made possible.

When Paul says "I am crucified to the world and the world is crucified to me" (Gal.6:14), the implication is that all the attractive things of the world were killed long ago and

desires of man that lead to the raping of nature can be crucified. Here the message of the cross is relevant also for preserving the ecological balance. It is made possible, by this crucifixion, to keep man's desires as his servants, the desires that try to have mastery over him. As the believer is buried with Christ, and also is risen with Christ (Rom. 6:4,6,9), he can look upon the exploitative desires as dead and unresponsive, and share the new life in Christ which helps also to maintain ecological balance.

When Paul says "I am crucified with Christ, it tells the possibility for crucifying man's ego so that one can be dead to his selfishness. The temptation for selfish exploitation can be resisted by becoming unresponsive to the desires for ego inflation. The resurrection power is available to allow the power of Christ to be stronger in us than the power of self. We can declare the availability of God's power to preserve the earth and maintain its fruitfulness.

We live in expectancy of the total redemption, transformation, and glorification of this world in God's coming Kingdom – salvation of the soul and body of the "groaning creation" (Ro. 8:19). Our salvation also has to do with humankind's, relation to nature. It is something that depends on our relation to God in Christ and has to do with eternal life. At the same time it also has to do with human life here on this planet now. So we cannot ignore the problems connected with ecological issues. Our invitation to participate in the manifestation of the Kingdom during this 'in between period' demands the practical outworking of our salvation in day to day life, preserving the eschatological dimension.

The promise of our Lord, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself and where I am there you may also be" (Jn.14:2) is going to be fulfilled. This hope of the Lord's coming gives us a goal to look forward to, and it surely is a motivation "to occupy" till He comes (Lk.19:13). In any case, this does not prevent us from fulfilling the many responsibilities entrusted to us including that of preserving the earth's fruitfulness until His return.



CONTRIBUTORS

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