

Green Revolution

Coming Together to Care for Creation

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Afterword by J. Matthew Sleeth, M.D.



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1

Incompatible Foolishness

Our Plan for the World vs. God's

The growing possibility of our destroying ourselves and the world with our own neglect and excess is tragic and very real.

Billy Graham, *Approaching Hoofbeats*, 1983

Drunken people should not go swimming.

I was in Corpus Christi, Texas, during the summer of my sophomore year to work on a government-funded fisheries research project, and I often spent weekends cooling off at a nearby beach.

While lying on the sand relaxing one Saturday, I noticed a commotion out in the surf. An older man, perhaps in his late fifties, was thrashing wildly in deeper water as a woman of comparable age struggled to tow him toward the beach. Not only was he flailing, he was also cussing up quite a storm. When the water was about knee deep, the woman let go of him so that she could catch her breath enough to start yelling back, but without her steadying grip, he promptly rolled face forward into the surf. Not quite sure what was going on, I ran down to see if they needed help.

The man had clearly been drinking too much and had apparently decided to go for a swim when his wife (the woman) was not paying attention. He made it just far enough to be in over his head before getting exhausted and going under. Providentially, his wife noticed what was happening at this point and jumped in to save him. Once they got into shallower water, however, he forgot to be grateful and instead was outraged that she wanted him to get out of the water.

As he continued to alternate between cussing and choking on seawater, his wife and I dragged him by the arms into a sitting position on the beach, where a concerned crowd had gathered. She kept thanking me for the little help I had given, to which he angrily declared that there was no problem and that he didn't need any help. "I'm a trained fighter,"

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he continued to rave almost incoherently, “and you’re lucky I didn’t just kill you with a single judo chop to the neck!” Snickers ran through the crowd at this assertion, and the drunken man looked ready to start cussing again, but instead, as he opened his mouth, his eyes rolled and he passed out face-first in the sand.

Lesson number one: drunken people think they know better; they do not. Lesson number two: drunken people think they are in control; they are not. Lesson number three: it’s a bad idea—even a dangerous one—to get drunk.

Our Wisdom

As a global society, we have become drunk on our own perceived power and wisdom. We pride ourselves for being civilized, educated, technologically advanced and increasingly developed. It is undeniable that we now know more about the intricacies of the world (we have even mapped the whole human genome), have developed more powerful tools (like commercialized air travel, cellular technology and precision-guided missiles) and are harnessing more of nature’s productivity and stored energy (through intensive farming, high-tech fishing and fossil-fuel mining) than at any other point in human history.

Yes, we are the most educated and most advanced generation yet to live on this planet. But being smarter does not make us wiser. And being more advanced does not mean we are more moral.

In spite of all our progress, we have lost the ability to live well and live sustainably. The wisdom of the world consistently promotes the seven deadly sins over the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes. We are promised fulfillment through the false gods of individualism, narcissism and consumerism. Our culture entices us to pursue personal pleasure by chasing after the hottest idols and buying the latest stuff, and the more we consume, the more intoxicated we become.

In our drunken state, we fail to realize and respect our limitations and those of the planet by continuing to ratchet up unsustainable rates of population growth, resource consumption and waste production. The result is that we have waded over our heads into troubled waters,

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stressing our global society and the planet beyond what it can bear. And we are starting to drown.

The claim that we are drowning is a strong assertion, but it also appears to be a fair one. Our global environment is in increasingly bad shape by almost all measures, even though some things such as forest cover and overall air and water quality have gotten better in parts of the developed world. Here are some snapshots:

- Over 1 billion people lack an adequate supply of water today, and this is projected to rise to 1.8 billion by 2025.
- Overall fish stocks are in their worst state yet, with three quarters of marine fisheries exploited unsustainably. The hardest-hit fisheries include previously ubiquitous species such as Atlantic cod and Pacific salmon.
- Other food production (through agriculture and livestock farming) is being stretched to the limit, and arable land is being lost on a constant basis, especially in Africa. As a result, food costs are rising and have resulted in the beginnings of a global food crisis.
- Developed nations may be getting cleaner, but that's largely because they are "exporting" pollution to the developing world, where exposure to these pollutants is responsible for 20 percent of human disease.
- An estimated 60 percent of all ecosystems are degraded and unsustainably used.¹
- Biodiversity loss is accelerating rapidly. Between a quarter and a third of all wildlife has disappeared since 1970, and a full third of all amphibians are threatened with extinction.²
- Deforestation continues at an estimated rate of 13 million hectares (32 million acres) a year, with most of it occurring in the tropics to make way for cattle grazing, soybean farming and oil palm plantations.³
- The evidence for human-caused climate change continues to grow, and predictions of sea-level rise and extreme weather events become more serious given the acceleration of melting ice at the poles.⁴

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- About 1 billion people live on less than one U.S. dollar a day and at least 2.6 billion (or 40 percent of the world population) live on under two dollars a day. These poorest of the poor are the most vulnerable to the effects of environmental degradation and climate change—effects that are being felt even now.⁵

It is clear that we are in a crisis and desperately need some solutions.

Developing more advanced technology is ultimately not going to be the easy answer that many are hoping for. For one, we already know and have what we need to make the world a much better place. Technology is merely a tool; it can be either helpful or harmful, depending on whose hands it is in. In the hands of a drunk, a car is a murder weapon instead of a blessing; in the hands of a drunken society, and in spite of some very good intentions, our best technology has consistently been co-opted to fight wars and exploit the earth instead of save lives and protect the planet.

Better technology is also not the right solution because the problem is not primarily a technical one.⁶ Instead, this is inherently a spiritual problem—the world is intoxicated on sin. A leading environmentalist and academician is reported to have confessed to a group of Christian leaders and scientists in 2007, “I used to think that the three greatest problems in the world were pollution, species extinction, and climate change. Now, I realize that they are pride, greed, and apathy; and scientists do not have the answers to these.”⁷

This diagnosis is neither new nor groundbreaking. It is a problem as old as the Garden of Eden, when the original human pair first disobeyed the Creator, favoring their wisdom and pursuing their plan over his. Ever since, human history has been replete with the same basic story line of God’s offering to rescue us back to the firm ground of his plan and of humans’ stubbornly reasserting our free will to do what we want and so reinforcing our bondage to sin, which always leads to death (see Rom 1:21-32; 6:15-18).

Yet we still find good reason to hope; not everything is completely bad. Yes, humanity is fallen and, yes, the earth has been cursed. But humans are still created in God’s image, and the earth still reflects his

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glory. There is enough virtue and progress around us and throughout history to reassure us that God has not given up on his creation.

Consider the international outpouring of aid that came from both Christian and non-Christian sources immediately after tsunamis ravaged parts of Asia in December 2004. Rejoice that, while the church was largely silent about issues of creation care, many non-Christians stepped up to give leadership in what has now developed into a robust global environmental movement.

The point I want to make is not that all has been lost, but rather that the overall trajectory of humanity apart from God is tragic and suicidal.⁸

Genesis tells us that Eve and then Adam ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden because it looked pleasing to the eye and was desirable for gaining wisdom. But look where our “wisdom” has gotten us so far. Like a drunken person, the world thinks it knows better, but it does not; the world thinks it is in control, but it is not. As a result, we have become dangerous not only to ourselves but to the whole creation.

Our prevailing plan for ourselves and this planet is not working. We need another way.

God’s Wisdom

Creation care ministry Restoring Eden puts out a bumper sticker that reads, “God’s original plan was to hang out in a garden with some naked vegetarians.” More than just being catchy, this statement effectively makes the point that things were created to be very different. God has another plan for the world besides the broken reality we see around us, and he is enacting this plan even now.

God’s alternative vision to our madness—a vision extending to all domains of life—is one of shalom, and his mission is the restoration of this shalom. This is the heart of our message.

Shalom is the Hebrew word for peace. Meaning more than simply the absence of conflict, however, it is about right relationships between God and everything else, where wholeness and flourishing occurs without opposition. Such shalom was present in the Garden of Eden, and its complete restoration is what we eagerly anticipate in the kingdom of God.

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In the words of author Mark Gornik, “Shalom is God putting back together a broken world. . . . Shalom is not just the wolf and the lamb co-existing but the wolf and the lamb finding their rest in one another (Isaiah 11:6-7; 65:25). Shalom is more than physical safety for the child playing near the cobra’s nest; it is the child and the cobra successfully playing together.”⁹

In Genesis 3 we read the tragic account of how shalom was originally lost and relationships were fractured through the fall of humanity and the subsequent curse on creation. Ever since that point, God has been in the business of reconciling all relationships to himself. This mission was fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and will culminate when he returns in glory.

Because shalom was lost from all of creation, it must now be restored to all creation, human and nonhuman. Right relationships must be restored between God and us, within our relationship to ourselves, between us and each other, between us and nature, and within nature itself.

Bad or inappropriate relationships exist because there are injustices. A key part of restoring these broken relationships to wholeness is fixing the injustices that perpetuate them; there can be no peace without justice. This is why creation care is also inherently a justice issue. Injustices have been committed against God, the earth and one another, and these wrongs must be righted if there is to be any true and lasting shalom.

Not too long ago I got an e-mail from a missionary couple living on the Peruvian coast, asking for help dealing with the industrial pollution coming from fishmeal factories in their community. They describe a situation that lacks justice, peace and wholeness:

An urgent issue is controlling the industrial pollution from the fishmeal factories. At the end of every “run” they flush their tanks with harsh chemicals and dump everything directly into the bay. Our local bay is almost barren of animal life. We especially notice the difference in invertebrates compared to the neighboring bays around us. Controlling this pollution is important for protecting

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the health and integrity of our community. However, there would be strong financial and political elements opposing it. Perú already has laws prohibiting this pollution, but corruption effectively cancels enforcement.¹⁰

Our deep brokenness and desperate need for reconciliation are glaringly apparent in environmental issues like this.

In this case, those responsible for the fishmeal factory are unjustly degrading the environment, harming the community and ultimately pursuing material profits over God (it is cheaper not to properly dispose of their industrial waste, even though it is also wrong). All three levels of human relationships—with God, one another and creation—are being violated. This is not how God intends us to live, and there can be no shalom under these circumstances. As Francis Schaeffer wrote, “If I am going to be in the right relationship with God, I should treat the things he has made in the same way he treats them.”¹¹ We must value what God values and so treat this good creation in a way that honors him as the Creator.

If we take this one step further, we get back to the root cause of the environmental crisis because, as the Christian theologian Cornelius Plantinga Jr. points out, whatever opposes God’s intentions and violates his shalom is sin.¹² This was true when Eve and Adam ate the forbidden fruit, and it is true of bad environmental stewardship today. In other words, dumping untreated toxic waste into a bay in Peru is not just bad because it breaks the law; it is also sinful because it works against God’s design and desire for the world.

All Things

When we think of the need for shalom in the world, it is easy to think first and mainly of human concerns, such as the war in Iraq, Sudan’s Darfur crisis and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We rarely think of “environmental issues” like pollution, deforestation and a scarcity of water. But Jesus Christ is the Lord of all, and he is bringing peace and reconciliation to all levels of relationships through his blood shed on the cross:

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He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. . . . For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col 1:15-17, 19-20)

We serve a big God who is in the business of reconciling, through Christ, the entire created order back to his shalom. Nothing less. Working for world peace does not mean focusing first on human wars and thinking about “the rest” later. Everything needs reconciliation and, in God’s plan, everything gets it together.

Moreover, if we were to focus all our efforts on eradicating wars, there would be no human peace—no right relationships within humanity itself—unless the environment were also taken into account in the peacemaking process.

The Darfur conflict in Sudan is a tragic example of this interconnectedness of environmental issues with peace and the interdependence of sustainability and societal well-being. Since 2003, reports of horrendous atrocities have poured out of the troubled Darfur region: over 200,000 people dead, thousands raped, children forced to fight as soldiers, two million residents displaced. The appalling statistics increase. Meanwhile, the Sudanese government has been defiantly complicit in the violence, and the international community has been characteristically weak in its response. Peace is nowhere to be found.

Watching and reading about this war with growing sadness and frustration, I always assumed it was an ethnic conflict, which it is. But I was surprised to find out just how large a role environmental issues play. During 2007, many of the major news networks reported on the potential discovery of a huge underground lake in the Darfur region. The great excitement around this discovery was that there was hope it could help end the war.

**Dispatch: Jonathan Kindberg, M.A. candidate
(2009), Wheaton College Graduate School**

Shalom and the Holy Land

Israel, where *shalom* is used for both greetings and farewells, has seen little shalom either in its social or in its environmental contexts over the past sixty years. This past summer, I saw firsthand what this lack of peace entails, for both land and people.

For three months I lived in a Palestinian refugee camp in the occupied West Bank. When I arrived, the camp was in the midst of a water cut that had already lasted two weeks. The Israeli government controls water in Palestinian refugee camps, and cuts are frequent during the hot summer months. Every Palestinian home has a set of reserve tanks on its roof. These are full when there is water. But when the water supply is cut, the tanks gradually empty until there is simply no more water.

During my stay, Israelis celebrated forty years of the reunification of Jerusalem while Palestinians mourned forty years of oppression, occupation and loss of their land and water. In the West Bank, story after story and scene after scene of suffering assailed me. I witnessed haunting rows of stumps—all that remained of hundred-year-old olive trees that the Israeli military had cut down to crush morale in the territories. I walked on the future path of another part of the “separation barrier,” a wall that separates thousands of farmers from their fields and has destroyed thousands of hectares of arable land. I listened to the stories of Palestinian youth who can’t find enough water to wash their face in the morning, while they watch Israeli settlers play in swimming pools nearby.

Palestinians are considered the most water-deprived

people in the Middle East.^a According to World Vision, they receive only 33 to 40 percent of average water requirements set by the World Health Organization.^b The reason for this shortage is not a lack of water, but a lack of fair distribution. Israel monopolizes the aquifers underlying the West Bank and uses 95 percent for itself, leaving the remaining 5 percent for Palestinian use.^c

Simon Awad is a Palestinian Christian and the executive director of the Environmental Education Center of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. This center, based in the West Bank, actively works for environmental justice. For Simon, “the environmental situation in Palestine is damaged because there is no control of their own land.” He states that the environment “is a gift of God that we should save for the next generation.” In the West Bank, where politics, power and the environment collide, the occupation stands as a barrier to shalom, for both the land and the people.

^aHarald D. Frederiksen, “A Proposal: Return Palestinian Water Rights If Not Land,” *Middle East Policy* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 72-78.

^b“Water for Life in the West Bank,” World Vision (November 8, 2006) <www.worldvision.org.uk/server/php?show=nav.883>.

^cFrederiksen, “A Proposal,” p. 72.

At the root of this conflict is competition for natural resources such as water and land—made worse by drought and desertification—between Arab nomads and black African farmers. Ban Ki-Moon, secretary-general of the United Nations, wrote, “Darfur’s violence began with the onset of a decades-long drought. Farmers and herders came into conflict over land and water. If this root problem is not addressed—if the challenges of poverty alleviation, environmental stewardship and the control of climate change are not tied together—any solutions we propose in Darfur will at best be a temporary Band-Aid.”¹³

In this tragic example, we see that peacemaking is about more than

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just ethnic reconciliation and the laying down of arms. It's also about environmental justice and stewardship of natural resources. This is the main point in the secretary-general's article: "The basic building block of peace and security for all peoples is economic and social security, anchored in sustainable development. It is a key to all problems. Why? Because it allows us to address all the great issues—poverty, climate, environment and political stability—as parts of a whole."¹⁴ When the planet is not at peace, people are not at peace either.

Time to Choose

It boils down to two opposing visions: the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God. We have to choose which one to live by.

We live in a world that is trapped in idolatry, lured by the siren calls of materialism, individualism and narcissism, and pursuing almost every other voice except God's. We, along with the planet, are paying the price for our disregard of how life was originally created to flourish.

We even live in a church that can be so enmeshed with the dominant culture that the two are hard to tell apart. Peter Harris, the founder of A Rocha, speaks of this problem:

While environmental people are worried about genetically modified organisms, we Christians should be worried about whether we belong to a genetically modified church. I worry that the DNA of the deeply materialistic and individualistic societies that we live in has become so patched into our reading of what it means to be a Christian that we are not talking the biblical gospel any longer.¹⁵

Yet God is still calling to us, though it can sometimes be hard to hear his voice in our cluttered lives. He offers a vision of shalom that is neither practical nor trendy, but it is both timeless and true. By following him, we find peace, redemption and healing for ourselves and for the world around us. His plan gives us answers to the problems we have created—environmental and otherwise—and shows that there is a better and more sustainable way to live.

Uplink: Will Samson, author of *Justice in the Burbs*

There's an old saying in advertising: you should be willing to eat your own dog food. If you sell a product to others, you should believe in it enough to use it yourself. This has always been the call of the gospel. Jesus didn't tell us to go far and wide speaking *about* the cross. No, he told us to *take up* our cross and follow him—to act on what we believe.

But I often get hung up at about this point, the place where I am supposed to step out and walk my talk. It all seems a bit too bold, a bit too audacious. Could it really matter?

In our community we are planting a garden at the cross streets between a white neighborhood and a black neighborhood, where there have been racial tensions for more than one hundred years. What kind of people would be bold enough to think that a community garden could heal divisions and to believe that God could help change a city through tomatoes and Brussels sprouts?

When I work in Appalachia, seeking to improve conditions for those affected by mountaintop-removal mining, it seems nothing short of crazy to hope that my presence—the presence of a Yankee raised far from the hills of eastern Kentucky—could bring healing among a southern rural people who have been struggling with poverty for generations. This is a people whose economic conditions have only grown worse as their resources have been taken and sold,

transferring the profits to out-of-state corporations while they are left to live with the coal sludge and the devastating air pollution. Is it rash—or, worse yet, careless—to believe my work there will make any difference? Things in Appalachia have been getting worse for more years than anyone can count. What kind of boldness could keep me going back?

How about when I perform more basic tasks, like recycling, switching to compact fluorescent bulbs, composting or shopping for local meat and produce? Can I really make a difference? Isn't the problem much bigger than anything I could help solve?

And then I remember the story that I am a part of, a story that started with Abram and his wife, Sarai. Despite their advanced age, they were told they would have a son—and that son would start a new nation. Crazy.

I remember that I am part of a story about God incarnate, whose miracles were all, save one (the cursing of the fig tree), about the restoration of creation—a king who, himself, would go beyond the point where everything was lost, only to claim the victory.

My mind moves through stories of the early Christian martyrs, so moved by Jesus that they risked life and limb to follow. Saints like Francis of Assisi were willing to follow Jesus' call to the rich young ruler, sell everything they had and follow him. And we know

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modern-day saints, like Matthew Sleeth and Shane Claiborne, who have bet it all on the bold and adventurous claim that we are collaborators with Christ, participating as the hands and feet of Jesus in restoring and redeeming the world for God.

And I begin to hope. Maybe I will not live to see the world perfected. We still exist in that space between what has been and what will be, the space where Paul reminds us that “all

creation groans” as we wait for the earth and our bodies to be restored. But as I look back on all God has done and as I look around at all the God is doing, I realize I have the chance to participate with the King of creation, to get my hands dirty in the restoration of creation.

Now that’s something I could believe in. And this is exactly what Ben is laying out in these pages. So, want to join us?