

# Caring for Creation

Part of our Gospel Calling?

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# 1

## Introduction

*Responding to the current environmental problems facing the planet and addressing the environmental impacts of our activities is not necessarily considered by Christians to be a valid concern or high priority when it comes to living out the gospel.*

However, Stella Simiyu and Peter Harris argue that it is both an important and an authentic part of the Christian life. As an experienced conservation professional working in Kenya, Stella introduces the major environmental initiatives being undertaken internationally, the prevailing worldviews of secular environmental organizations and the inextricable links between alleviation of poverty and human wellbeing. She also considers why Christians have often overlooked this important aspect of their calling by focusing exclusively on the needs of people, but ends with a challenge to Christians to move forward and make conservation an integral part of Christian mission.

Peter Harris gives further explanation as to why now, more than ever before, conservation and environmental action must be part of Christian mission and emphasizes the need for it to be rooted in right relationships, looking in particular at Acts 17. He draws on the practical experiences of A Rocha, an international Christian conservation organization, which he founded in 1983 with his wife Miranda, and which now has national organizations working in 16 countries worldwide.

*A challenge to  
Christians to make  
conservation an integral  
part of Christian mission*

# 2 The Word, Conservation and a Human Face: An African Perspective

*In Kenya, the conventional medical system provides for only 30% of Kenyans.*

The remaining 70%—approximately 21 million people—rely on traditional forms of healthcare. Most medicinal plants are still collected from the wild.<sup>1</sup> The dangers of overexploitation are more evident than ever before and as the population increases, forests decline and livelihood options become limited. Approximately 25% of the Kenyan population lives in the Arid and Semi Arid Lands together with 50% of the country's livestock. These areas are characterized by a fragile ecosystem, recurrent droughts, serious food insecurity, low productive peasant agriculture and endemic poverty. There is continuing land degradation and loss of soil fertility caused by population pressure and unsustainable farming methods. The main source of energy is natural biomass, contributing to deforestation, yet there are only limited efforts in reforestation activities.

Malaria affects 20 million Kenyans annually with an equally devastating impact on the people and economy. It is estimated that 26,000 children die annually under five years of age, 72 a day, from the direct consequences of malaria infection.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 170 million working days are lost each

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year because of malarial illnesses, yet only 22% of households use mosquito nets, while only 10% have more than one net. In the same vein, only 6% have at least one insecticide treated net and only 3% have more than one such net. Indeed, 41% of the children had fever in the two weeks preceding the National Demographic

and Health Survey (2003), 46% of whom were taken to a health facility where only 11% were given the recommended medicine, sulfadoxinepyrimethamine. Half (48%) of the children with fevers that could be symptomatic of malaria took only non-antimalarial drugs, primarily painkillers.<sup>3</sup> This is typical of the context in Africa, where the needs of conservation, poverty alleviation and sustainable development vie for priority against one another.

## The Global Context: The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment project report was released in 2005. It noted that most direct drivers of degradation in ecosystem services remain constant or are growing in intensity in most ecosystems.<sup>4</sup> The assessment also noted that approximately 60% (15 out of 24) of the ecosystem services evaluated are being degraded or used unsustainably, often causing significant harm to human wellbeing and representing a loss in a country's natural assets or wealth. There is a continual decline in the status of provisioning services of the environment, especially wild foods, timber, cotton, wood-fuel, genetic resources, medicine and fresh water. Furthermore, results also indicate a decline in the regulating and cultural services of the environment related to air quality regulation, climate regulation, water and erosion regulation, water purification and waste treatment, disease and pest regulation, pollination, and spiritual, religious and aesthetic values. The assessment found that 1.1 billion people were surviving on less than one dollar per day of income and 70% were in rural areas where they are highly dependent on the ecosystem. Inequality has only increased since the 1990s and 21 countries experienced declines in their rankings in the Human Development Index.<sup>5</sup>

Other alarming findings include an indication that an estimated 852 million people were undernourished in 2000–02, up 37 million from the period 1997–99; per-capita food production has declined in sub-Saharan Africa; and some 1.1 billion people still lack access to improved water supply, while more than 2.6 billion lack access to improved sanitation. Water scarcity affects roughly 1 to 2 billion people worldwide. In addition, half the urban population in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean suffer from one or more diseases associated with inadequate water and sanitation, and desertification affects the livelihoods of millions of people, including a large proportion of the poor in drylands.

In its projections, demand for food crops is expected to grow 70–85% and water withdrawals 30–85% by 2050. If the current operational framework is allowed to exist, then food security will not be achieved by 2050. Child under-nutrition would be difficult to eradicate and is projected to increase in some regions in some Millennium Ecosystem Assessment scenarios. Globally, the equilibrium number of plant species is projected to be reduced by roughly 10–15% as the result of habitat loss over the period of 1970 to 2050.

In order to try and address these multiple challenges facing humanity and the environment, conservation initiatives have

*Conservation initiatives traditionally focus on species and ecosystems whereas Christian agencies focus on human needs*

traditionally focused on the species and ecosystems with an emphasis on biological diversity, whereas Christian agencies have focused on human needs with no consideration of environmental issues. In this context, the intrinsic value of nature has been fragmented from its utilitarian purpose, while economic benefits have been pursued at the cost of environmental benefits. In Africa, the biological diversity has been esteemed by environmental conservationists with total neglect of the needs of the people, while Christians have only concentrated on the resource value of the biodiversity and have neglected conservation.

## Environmental Conservation: A Changing Perspective

The philosophical basis for current thinking on environmental conservation has been derived from historical schools of thought that have defined and shaped the world of science. Science is underlain by a worldview responsible for its peculiar strength. Modern science is fragmented and often highly specialized because, in Western cultures, knowledge has tended to be compartmentalized, with a divide between science and the humanities, reason and feeling. In true practice, scientific thought has no place for the supernatural, and serious challenges arise when efforts are made to rationalize a spiritual dimension within scientific discourse.

In addition, according to science, the human being is no special creation. We are members of a species of life form, one of the many on a planet, which is one of several encircling a normal type of star, one of millions of stars in a galaxy, one of millions of galaxies in the universe. In this context, any person is just a unit within space. The human and everything else is moving uni-directionally through time and headed for extinction, though at different rates. Given that there is no long-term goal in evolution, in the sense that life has no externally defined purpose, there is no net unique purpose for a person. The human being is simply another animal, genetically similar to its closest relative the chimpanzee, sharing 98.5% of its DNA sequences.

The ultimate consequence of this thinking has been the alienation of human concerns within the traditional conservation community and a justified focus on the elements of nature, specifically species and ecosystems. Humanity is seen as the main culprit in the current crisis, having been responsible for much of the degradation, pollution and species extinction. Taken to the extreme, this thinking presumes that the world is a better place without humankind.

*Nature became the  
mythological paradise of  
a new type of religion*

The situation has been further aggravated by a recent and new romantic attitude toward nature, which was a reaction to ugliness and alienation stemming from the agricultural and

industrial revolution.<sup>6</sup> Nature became the mythological paradise of a new type of religion in the recent past, as people felt that they had fallen from grace and needed to become closer to nature to regain their souls. In this context, nature was elevated to a spiritual status; but as Hamilton notes, this romantic view of nature as opposed to a utilitarian one is distant, having been developed by a social class with excessive time on their hands and, in most cases, a surplus of disposable income.<sup>7</sup> Indeed it has stimulated the growth of interest in vegetarianism, herbal medicine, holistic medicine, eastern religions and paganism. This myth about nature has made its way into the various concepts of wilderness in the United States, the frontier in Canada and Australia, the forest in Germany and the countryside in Britain, and these sentiments ultimately led to the establishment of parks and reserves as pristine natural environments bereft of humanity's interference. The challenge, however, is that in most cases, those whose livelihoods are totally dependent on nature have other concerns and operate from a different paradigm.

Furthermore, until recently, scientific explanations of natural phenomena tended to be made in terms of rather simple causality, referring to one or at most only a few forces acting on a limited number of material components. However, the reality is that the world is full of chaotic systems, that is, systems which behave with some degree of regularity but whose exact behaviour is impossible to predict in principle. It increasingly became difficult to provide scientific solutions for the nagging and growing environmental crisis as simplistic solutions quickly became obsolete. For example, the chaos theory provides the reason as to why the world is both orderly and disorderly and hence why systems are unpredictable and not necessarily deterministic. Hence, the use of probabilities is employed to help define possible future scenarios. With the interconnectedness of our world which is assumed in the chaos theory, it is possible (in theory at least) for the flapping of butterfly wings in South America to trigger a hurricane in the North Atlantic!

*The world is full of chaotic systems whose exact behaviour is impossible to predict*

Fortunately, environmental perspectives have been influenced by the recent advances in science which draw attention to this interconnectedness of everything in nature. Nature and society are confirmed as integral parts of the same system and a more holistic approach is recommended, taking into account a larger number of variables—though in some instances this becomes too complex and difficult to conceptualize. Embedded in this thinking is the understanding that the environmental crisis is multifaceted and science alone cannot provide adequate solutions. There are often many hidden factors at play and no single solution that fits all, given the diversity of scenarios and

multiplicity of causal agents, including economics, population growth, social policy and dynamics, and poverty amongst others. As a result, the concept of sustainability has been promulgated with ecological, economic, social and cultural dimensions being emphasized as key considerations. It has become imperative in the conservation world to take account of these facets and sustainable use is now seen as a key component of any conservation effort and intervention.

## A New Paradigm: Conservation with a Human Face

A few examples of the new paradigm in conservation thinking include the three Rio Conventions (1992); namely, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification. All three broadened the environmental conservation paradigm, linking it closely to sustainable development with salient economic and social dimensions.

The Convention on Biological Diversity, for example, has three objectives: conservation of biological diversity; sustainable use of its components; and fair access and equitable sharing of its benefits. This has led to the development of a host of programmes linked to thematic areas and cross-cutting issues, as well as the adoption of the ecosystem approach as the main means of implementing the Convention.<sup>8</sup> The Convention has developed a Strategic Plan 2005–2010, the main objective of which is to ‘significantly reduce the rate of loss of biodiversity by 2010.’<sup>9</sup> In achieving this target, social, political and economic factors are key considerations and not externalities.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg in 2002, reviewed the progress in implementing the resolutions of the Rio Summit and developed the Johannesburg Platform of Action with priority areas for action being defined as Water, Energy, Health, Agriculture and Biodiversity (WEHAB).<sup>10</sup>

The Millennium Development Goals agreed on at the Millennium Summit in September 2000 make up an ambitious agenda for reducing poverty and improving lives. The eight goals represent a partnership between the developed countries and the developing countries, ‘to create an environment—at the national and global levels alike—which is conducive to development and the elimination of poverty.’<sup>11</sup> These goals,

which include reducing extreme poverty by half, halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education—all by the target date of 2015—form a blueprint agreed to by all the countries and leading

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development institutions. For each goal there is at least one specific target, along with specific social, economic and environmental indicators used to track progress toward the goals.<sup>12</sup>

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment has recommended that regional watershed-scale ecosystems be the focus of political and economic activity, and that local institutions be strengthened, while societies develop a strongly proactive approach to the management of ecosystems. Other beneficial responses recommended are the promotion of technologies that enable increased crop yields without harmful impacts related to water, nutrient and pesticide use and the restoration of ecosystem services and promotion of technologies to increase energy efficiency and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These global initiatives show an emerging trend toward holistic and integrated interventions and responses.

## Emerging Initiatives from the International Conservation Community

International conservation organizations have followed suit, having recognized that people and poverty are at the crux of the environmental crisis. For example, the mission of the Nature and Poverty Programme is to alleviate poverty by safeguarding and restoring natural livelihood resources in a selected number of countries.<sup>13</sup> The programme pursues this mission by means of three closely-related intervention strategies:

- Poverty alleviation—improving the livelihood system.
- Development of civil society organizations.
- Influencing policies and policy dialogue with their own strategies and intervention targets for poverty alleviation and natural resource conservation.

The aim of the first strategy, improving the livelihood system, is to safeguard and restore ecosystem quality in developing countries and to establish a sustainable production of natural products and services for disadvantaged populations. The intervention strategy is designed to have a lasting impact on development and poverty alleviation by improving the factors that determine living standards—health, food availability, access to natural resources, benefit sharing, security, autonomy and equity.

The programme also has the objective to influence public policies that have a negative impact on poverty and nature. These include legal policies (trade or intellectual property, as well as investment policies of the private sector

and financial institutions), processes (governance and transparency) and instruments (positive and adverse subsidies, certification, communication and learning).

Learning is important for innovation in the Nature and Poverty Programme and focus is placed on improving understanding of problem / content related issues, such as: the relations between ecosystem management, poverty, subsidy mechanisms, trade, financing systems, user rights and land ownership; enhancing the organizational capacity of implementing organizations and stakeholders, including synergy and cooperation; and a better understanding of strategies and policy tools for social change, such as policy analysis, dialogue, advocacy and empowerment.

From another perspective, the 'Painting the Town Green Report' has brought in a new dimension—people's feelings.<sup>14</sup> The report is provocative and challenges some age-old assumptions, particularly that information on its own can 'save the world.' The premise is that for too long the green movement has pumped out information, assuming it leads to awareness of threats and

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problems, concern and finally action. But most of the lifestyle decisions made by people are not determined by rational consideration of the facts but by emotions, habits, personal preferences, fashions, social norms, personal morals and values, peer pressure and other intangibles. Thus, to influence lifestyle choices,

environmentalists must connect with the heart as well as the head. They must provide a positive vision of a future that people will aspire to and want to be part of as we all sign up to hope rather than fear. This report has clarified and emphasized the need to communicate positive messages and success stories from the environmental sector, given the overdose of frightening statistics that drive most lay people into inertia as a result of hopelessness.

# The Human Face: A Christian Perspective

# 3

The Christian community, in contrast to many concerned with conservation, has focused all its efforts on addressing the needs of the people. Their primary motivation has been their understanding of the position of humanity in God's plan as the primary target of God's love. Christianity speaks of God being an infinite personal God who has spoken to us in ways we can understand. It says that God has given us knowledge about the universe and humankind that people cannot find by themselves, and has provided absolute universal values by which to live as well as grounds for the basic dignity and value of the individual as a being uniquely made in the image of God. Humanity in this context is a special part of God's creation and not just another species. Hence there is a real basis and genuine motivation for the focus on charity and people by Christian mission. Many verses resonate with this position. For example, Isaiah 58.6–10 says:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice,  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your food with the hungry,  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe him,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?...  
Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;  
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.  
If you do away with the yoke of oppression,  
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,  
and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noonday.

Indeed, as prophesied by Isaiah in chapter 61 and confirmed by the Lord Jesus Christ in Luke 4.7–20, God has a special place for his people and the calling to Christian mission is clear. Isaiah 61.1–3 reads:

The mouth of the Lord has spoken.  
The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,  
because the Lord has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted...  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour  
and the day of vengeance of our God,  
to comfort all who mourn,  
and provide for those who grieve in Zion—  
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord  
for the display of his splendour.

Further, the Lord clarifies his standards in verses 8–9:

For I, the Lord, love justice;  
I hate robbery and iniquity.  
In my faithfulness I will reward them  
and make an everlasting covenant with them.  
Their descendants will be known among the nations  
and their offspring among the peoples.  
All who see them will acknowledge  
that they are a people the Lord has blessed.

But it is also true that Christians have not fully recognized that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. Christians have always esteemed creation because it is God's handiwork; however, their stance has been utilitarian rather than stewardly and they have not fully appreciated how totally dependant they are on the environment in meeting this mission. The fragmented thinking again rears its head here as there is no consideration for stewardship of natural resources. Yet in Leviticus 25 the Lord provided guidelines for stewardship of the land in instituting the Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee.

## The Sabbath Year

*Leviticus 25.1–5:* The Lord said to Moses on Mount Sinai, 'Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the Lord. For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the Lord. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards.

Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest.

As the Lord rested after creation, so is the land supposed to rest to allow restoration and rejuvenation. The Year of Jubilee was another command, now long forgotten. Yet this not only focused on restoration but also land rationalization.

## The Year of Jubilee

*Leviticus 25.10-13:* Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan. The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields. In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property.

## How Do We Move Forward?

The hallmark of the past generation has been the acceptance of dichotomy—the separation of values and meaning from reason, the separation of nature from people, and the focus on people as opposed to the elements of nature. As Christians we must not slip into this fragmented mode. We do this if we try to hold onto value systems and priorities given in the Bible while playing down what the Bible affirms about people, nature and God’s standards.<sup>15</sup>

The message to us is clear. There is need for new thinking within Christian mission. The option is not to abandon Christian charity and steer dangerously to traditional conservation thinking. The challenge is to bring Christian thought and motivation to bear on the current global crisis. Poverty is one of the key challenges, both as a cause and consequence of the environmental crisis, and cannot be marginalized. Simplistic models will not resolve current crises, but rather will aggravate the situation and only provide sticking plaster solutions.

A holistic, integrated but biblical approach to poverty alleviation and environmental conservation is desperately needed. The priority is not necessarily to form new conservation agencies but to integrate conservation thinking into our missions. Indeed we have to be creative in doing this. Releasing more resources for charity and conservation might be worthwhile, but new models of mission are also required. The challenge is to develop missions that are locally relevant, environmentally sensitive,

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thinking into our  
missions*

beneficial to local communities and honouring to God. We need to develop creative mechanisms to get a better portion of this world out of the poverty trap in a sustainable manner through strengthening ongoing initiatives or adding innovation to our current missions.

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The environmental crisis and poverty challenge are both linked to serious economic constraints. Are there ways of addressing the issues of economic empowerment and sustainable development in tandem with environmental conservation? The Brundtland Report states that we must look forward not backward, as solving

our environmental problems does not mean abolishing industry or returning to our cave dwellings with a tallow candle for heat or light. In fact, it notes that solving our environmental problems requires healthy industries and a healthy economy simply because it is when the economy is growing that we can afford to make the choices that are essential if we are all to live within the planet's ecological means. For when productive agricultural land in Africa or tropical rainforest in South America is turned into desert, it is not necessarily because the people there are ignorant, greedy or insensitive to environmental concerns. It is often because they are so poor that they must choose between destroying the land today and surviving tomorrow or dying from malnutrition today.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

The interconnectedness between people, poverty, environmental conservation, economic growth and sustainable development has been recognized by the mainstream conservation sector. What are the implications for Christian mission? In Africa, many initiatives are being developed, especially linked to developing a critical mass in the marketplace as a means of leveraging economic growth. But these often have no links to environmental sustainability. There are also serious challenges to biblically understanding the new face of missions. How do we bring true Christian models to bear in these circumstances? How do we secure the livelihoods of the rural poor in such a manner that allows them a sustainable future and yet builds their essence and dignity, thereby releasing their potential and purpose without compromising their sole resource, their environment?

*There are serious  
challenges to biblically  
understanding the new  
face of missions*

Genuine and lasting solutions from a Christian perspective can only arise out of the foundation of rock and not sand, hence a sincere and true worship. The Bible admonishes us to worship God in spirit and truth (John 4.23), not to

ignore the poor (Proverbs 13.31), but rather to pursue justice and righteousness (Proverbs 13.31) and to act justly, show mercy and walk humbly with the Lord (Micah 6.8). May the Lord give us grace and wisdom as we ponder these issues.

# 4 A Whole Gospel for a Whole World

*We live in a web of largely unseen relationships, whole and broken, recognized and denied.*

At their core is relationship with God, acknowledged or not, and the ongoing discussion with Christ at its heart. Acts 17 is only one of many New Testament passages that are fundamental to these relational questions and it helps us to take an unflinching look at the implications for our own lives and the life of our communities.

In western society at the beginning of the twenty-first century, all kinds of beliefs are abroad, both expressed and unexpressed. Even so, it is the lack of a coherent explanation of how we have arrived at this point of crisis and the absence of a compelling motivation to change the way we live which is

robbing the effort to create a sustainable world. Sustainability is an important idea that increasingly gives us a way of measuring the impact of our way of life on the communities we live in and on the wider creation, but it is proving to be inadequate as a life-changing credo if our continuing

*Sustainability is inadequate as a life-changing credo if our continuing lifestyle choices are to be observed*

lifestyle choices are to be observed. The comprehensive global studies on biodiversity which have been painstakingly compiled by a myriad of different organizations (to which A Rocha is happy to contribute) are an essential part of understanding what is happening as we see widespread species extinction taking place. However, from the reception such studies receive both in media and policy-making circles, it seems that wider human society is well able to ignore data which pose an inconvenient challenge to the way we have become accustomed to living at the expense of the poor and the planet. The hope that education in itself is sufficient to bring about change was part of a nineteenth-century developmental myth that should have lost its grip on our imaginations long ago; and yet because education and legislation are the principal levers in a horizontal and secular society, they remain centre stage on the platform of environmental campaigning. Even so, we need to be clear that there is now no shortage of solid science, and no lack of research consensus, about the environmental crisis which is overtaking the earth, God's



handiwork.<sup>17</sup> Whatever we consider to be capable of bringing about change, we do know more and more about what does need to change—even if it is asking too much of mere information to be, of itself, transformational.

## The Genetically Modified Church

It might seem paradoxical for a quintessentially activist organization like A Rocha, which unapologetically takes its character from such a notoriously pragmatic theological stream as evangelicalism, to give time and resources to the task of theology and so to working out what it is that Christians really think and believe about environmental questions. But all of us live according to what we believe; for Christians the challenge is to do exactly that. However, in order to begin to do so, we need to be entirely sure of what we are called to believe. The difficulty is that for the most part we belong to what could be called the GM (genetically modified) church. Our churches are GM because the DNA of materialistic and individualistic societies, in itself inimical to a Christian understanding of all our relationships, has been patched into the church's view of life, producing a gospel that is a long way from being authentically Christian or biblical. An understanding of the gospel which focuses exclusively on the personal significance of Christ's death and resurrection for individual believers is not just incomplete: such a sub-biblical view of Christian good news robs the gospel of its true meaning even for the people it seeks to reach. The gospel, as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4.4, is about the glory of Christ. It confronts us, as it did those who encountered Jesus in first-century Palestine, with the question 'Who is this?' rather than pointing to the questions 'Who am I, what do I need, and what is in this for me?' which are more typical of cultures like our own—cultures profoundly influenced by humanism and the Enlightenment. As a result, even though the core beliefs of the Christian faith and the texts that inform them are before our eyes, we simply have not appropriated them in a way that does justice to what they are about. This is either because we do not think they are important, or more seriously because they lay such a sharp axe to the root of the cultural tree which shelters and sustains us that we cannot easily open our lives to their challenge.

*The DNA of materialistic and individualistic societies has been patched into the church's view of life*

The reality of a broken world needs to shape our understanding of the mission Christ gives to his people, which is to seek its redemption. The continuing creation-blindness of the church is deeply problematic for those who claim to recognize biblical authority, as evidenced by Gordon Fee's unsurprising account of research that showed that only two of a hundred consulted ser-

mons on Romans 8 made any attempt to look directly at Paul's teaching about creation and redemption.<sup>18</sup>

Just as Scripture itself always extends the implications of the gospel of Christ, who is Lord of creation, to the redemption of creation itself, so the reality of his care for his broken and groaning creation calls us to show the love of Christ in practical ways to bring about its healing.

It is interesting to see this kind of theology being articulated for the first time by quite conservative evangelical leaders—it takes courage to say, as Duane Litfin, President of Wheaton College, Illinois, did when talking to the *New York Times* in February 2006, 'The evangelical community is quite capable of having some blind spots, and my take is that [climate change] has fallen into that category.'<sup>19</sup> He was one of eighty-six evangelical leaders who early in 2006 signed their name to a call for action on climate change, saying, 'millions of people could die in this century because of climate change, most of them our poorest global neighbours.'<sup>20</sup> Though this call to action is a step in the right direction, and it is entirely reasonable and eminently pragmatic to appeal to human suffering as a reason for using creation rightly, it is still only

*Right relationships are crucial if we are going to find a true motivation for change*

part of the biblical imperative. We care for creation because we love the Creator, not simply because we will suffer if we do not, although it is true we will! As Stella Simiyu illustrates, environmental degradation hurts poor people the most. Once again the key question is one of right relationships, which

are crucial if we are going to find a true motivation for change. We must hope it will soon be realized that it is only a short step from this right compassion for suffering humanity in an abused creation, to the fully biblical realization that we need to respond to the suffering of creation itself, which Paul talks of in the language of 'groaning.' It is now thought, for example, that climate change will be the biggest driver of species extinction in this century, which is something we should care about if we understand biodiversity to be the handiwork of a loving God who calls us into a renewed relationship with him that governs our relationship with his handiwork.

We can be entirely familiar with a whole series of Christian affirmations, and yet our immersion in our own cultural priorities and values and the ongoing struggle between what Paul in Romans 8.7 calls 'the sinful mind' and the 'mind controlled by the Spirit' can make it extremely hard for us to see in practice what the implications of those Christian commitments really are. As we look at the question of what our relationship is to the wider creation and to all who live by its goodness (or suffer from its distress, as we in the wealthy world usually do not), we need to open our minds and hearts to the Spirit's

word from the apostle's preaching so that we can be changed. We could look at many passages, but the summary of Paul's sermon in Athens as recorded in Acts 17 is one key text to which we need to give renewed attention.

## Local Observations

Before considering Paul's sermon, I would like to add a few personal observations to set this in a context we may recognize. My wife, Miranda and I now spend over half the year travelling, usually in around fifteen different countries each year, as we endeavour to encourage this world-wide movement of Christians who are persuaded that creation care is a normal part of discipleship and mission. As we do so we are ever more conscious that truly we live in fragmented times. The hoped for joining-up and connection that cheap travel, internet, free phoning and new technologies have promised us seem to have delivered the phenomenon of distance more than the global community that was envisaged. All the statistics show the rich becoming richer and rarer, and the poor becoming poorer and more numerous. It was David Kilgour, Canadian Secretary of State for Africa and Latin America, who pointed out six years ago, 'It is a telling reality that the assets of the world's richest three billionaires exceed the combined GNP of all the least developed countries and their 600 million nationals. The global community has a long way to go when three billion people live on less than \$2 per day.'<sup>21</sup> Thanks to NASA, we know that climate change, which is probably now one of the greatest drivers of poverty worldwide, continues to accelerate, and last year, 2005, has just been declared the globe's warmest year since records began.

*The statistics show the rich becoming richer and rarer, and the poor becoming poorer and more numerous*

Never has it been more important to understand and live according to the connections born out of relationship with the God of heaven and earth, which a Christian understanding of the world implies. But never has it been more difficult as two examples can show us. First, it is easy to see that increasing institutional complexity, facilitated by information technology, serves to mask the connections to which such a call to profound relationship should be making a difference. Legal and political fictions can make it extremely hard to find out who is responsible for what in global culture and trading—and questions of responsibility and rights have never been more difficult to determine. Second, there is rapid urbanization: for the first time, 2005 saw over 50% of the world's population living in cities, in comparison with 30% in 1950. It is the cities of the poorer world that are absorbing almost all the world's population growth.<sup>22</sup> The demands made on those who work have led to a social architecture that makes personal relationships incredibly difficult to sustain (for example, here

in Canada—a country renowned for its quality of life—the average commute for 15 million Canadians is now over an hour). By contrast, an intention to make profound local connections can lead to remarkable understanding—from the A Rocha case book one particular story comes to mind. The Arabuko-Sokoke Forest is a forty kilometre-long fragment of the remaining east African coastal forest which used to extend a thousand times that length from Somalia in the north to Mozambique in the south. As time was given by A Rocha team members to learning the causes of the final destruction of the last fragment, the true needs of local communities emerged. Most of the wood was being

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cut to fund secondary school fees. Of those children who earned the grades to continue education, 90% were unable to do so for lack of funds—tragically so, as education is a key way for families to find their way out of the grinding poverty that is endemic to the region. So prescriptive solutions that

policed the forest, or educational programmes that extolled the undoubted importance of its habitats in global terms, were never going to succeed without taking account of the primary needs of the communities which lived around and from the forest. A solution has therefore been found in a programme called ASSETS, which brings in tourist revenue from the forest through ecotourism and is then directed to providing school fees for local children.<sup>23</sup> It is crucial to notice the depth of local relationship and involvement—to recognize all of the connections—before work like ASSETS can be undertaken. At a superficial level, it may seem that there is no connection between school fees and the fate of the Sokoke Scops Owl, but there is.

We could tell similar stories of how the resident A Rocha Lebanon team came to understand and address the complicated causes of the destruction of the Aammiq wetland in the Bekaa valley, or how the UK team in Southall built on the ministry of Dave and Anne Bookless as they engaged with all the many vested interests around the Minet site. What was an extraordinary contemporary metaphor for urban injustice now demonstrates the possibilities of redemption, as a country park has taken shape on a waste ground that was apparently an irredeemably polluted dumping ground. Only local belonging and involvement can lead to the development of true initiatives that reflect the Lord who ‘made all his works in wisdom,’ as Psalm 104 teaches us. It follows that we destroy them in our foolishness. Here as in so many other ways, the incarnation of Jesus is the model for mission.

## A Case Study in Acts 17

Our reading of Acts 17 as a helpful case study needs to take place in the light of these challenges. It is powerful not least because of the many parallels that have often been noted between first-century Athens and twenty-first century western realities. Like the West today, Athens was a cosmopolitan, pluralist, novelty-minded cultural crossroads. The Koine Greek spoken widely across the region, and the *pax Romana* which contributed social stability and possibilities for easy travel created conditions on a small scale for the kind of hegemony that we now see in globalization. Paul was seeking a hearing among many others doing the same, but for a gospel that made unique claims. He begins straight away by emphasizing the major human enterprise of religion that he sees on every side, but by denying the point of the exercise:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else (Acts 17.24–25).

Paul's understanding of God the Creator, the Lord of heaven and earth, leads him to see the futility of any religious attempt either to bring something of value to God in sacrifice, or to somehow privatize or capture God by what we do. We need to understand this well in our own times, because the biggest challenge to a biblical theology of creation remains our insistence on putting ourselves at the heart of the story, rather than doing as Paul does here. It is the old enemy, idolatry, in a particularly invisible, or where visible then seductive, form. Our approach to Christ cannot be to ask 'What is in this for me?' or, even worse, 'Well, what can I do that will persuade God to bless me?' Rather, we understand who we are through the lens of our primary relationship to the God who has created and sustains not just us, but everything on earth.

It may seem paradoxical or even over-negative to sound a cautionary note at a very encouraging time when, at last, a good number of Christian leaders are engaging seriously with the distress of the creation. In the UK at least, many really believe that these concerns have finally become a mainstream element of evangelical thinking. However it is vital that we take to heart the emphasis of Paul's preaching if we are not to be left with a kind of dry pharisaism or simply another trendy moment in the ongoing drama of popular Christian

culture. To include climate change in the list of preaching topics, or to make sure the church vehicles are all dual-fuel, will be worth nothing if it is simply an add-on to an essentially pragmatic programme that seeks to deliver for people what they need most, or, even worse, if it is taken on as good tactics, a shrewd move in the struggle to find relevance.

Paul's emphasis not only saves us from the idolatry of the human, however 'spiritually' it is framed; it is also the way out of the hopeless log-jam which has afflicted evangelical thinking for over one hundred and fifty years as it has endeavoured to find the way to embrace social action in a framework of eternal priorities. This issue has been a frequent element of the churches' arguments over the last hundred and fifty years of debate, and there are many resources that can be consulted to chart its development.<sup>24</sup> The heart of the gospel question has been reconstructed as, 'What is most important for people, their eternal salvation or their well-being now?' By extension this question has served to starve Christian environmental initiatives of resources in recent

*Polarity between the needs  
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opposition to each other*

years, as a polarity between the needs of people, and the needs of the wider creation, has set them in opposition to each other, or has ranked them in importance.

However, these dilemmas only mean something in the framework of a basic assumption that the gospel, and so the agenda for mission, is fundamentally about human efforts to meet human needs; but such an assumption derives from humanism, and not from the biblical starting point. Jesus' ministry—and so Paul's preaching—was founded on a call for our response to the living God, which then led to the priority of proclaiming (and proclamation is understood far more widely than simply preaching) the character of God, the lordship of Christ, and the nature of his kingdom. The gospels answer the questions, 'Who is Jesus and why did he live, die and rise again?' and they leave us with the question, 'If he is the Lord—of creation, of all life, of human society, of who we are in our most intimate identity—then how do we literally come to life in recognition of that lordship?'

The starting point of the answer is in the possibility of right worship by the redeemed community, the body of Christ in all its astonishing diversity and paradoxical unity, and it is that worship that gives identity, meaning and direction to all our activity thereafter. An approach concerned to know 'the God who...' immediately subverts all the false distinctions of a programme of human effort to meet an artificial hierarchy of human needs. These hierarchies, and much that follows from them (including a disastrous hierarchy of Christian professions which is as alive and well in the most democratic of Protestant circles as in the most formal of catholic historic churches), are



almost invariably based upon an unbiblical and ancient dualism. The material world (seen at best as irrelevant and at worst as potentially dangerously distracting), and the immaterial (known in shorthand as ‘spiritual’ and understood in some way to be the ‘eternal’ component of human experience), are set against each other in what becomes an inevitable showdown that can only lead us to abandon the times and places in which we live, with all their uncomfortable and distressing realities, in favour of ill-defined future hopes of an idealized form.

## ‘Us and Them’

Paul goes on to understand people as therefore being in an inevitable relationship with each other (v 26). In Europe there is a vivid ongoing debate about the enlargement of the European Union. In 2004, ten new countries joined the Union, and in the French press at least, the argument revolved around the assertion that to have left these new member states outside the Union without economic opportunity would bring security risks to their wealthy neighbours, and to include them might provide economic benefits derived from creating new and neighbouring markets. We are so used to a completely self-interested form of political reasoning that it does not seem abnormal, but it is light years away from a political philosophy and practice that is posited on a common Creator for all people. ‘We are God’s offspring’ says Paul to the motley multi-racial, multi-religious crowd listening to him, and there is no basis for Christian ‘us and them’ thinking at all.

We are all in an inevitable relationship with each other, regardless of race or religion or place—not because our lifestyles all impact each other’s, as they do, but because we share the same Creator. Furthermore, says Paul, it is of significance where and when we live. The text gives us an emphasis here—although people are to ‘inhabit the whole earth,’ God determines ‘the exact times and places where they should live.’ Paul encourages us to see what it might mean to live different lives than our own and to understand that the whole point of those lives is also that their conditions of time and place exist for them to be able to reach out for God and find him. We are not separated by our different places; we are united in them as we look for God’s purposes within them. Paul’s message is that wherever we are, and whoever we are, we owe our existence to a loving God, and we discover our meaning in finding relationship with him. At the very least then, our human relationships should recognize a mutual identity and work so that the physical conditions for life can promote the true humanity of knowing the Creator. Life itself, as a created gift given to be

*We are all in an inevitable relationship with each other because we share the same Creator*

lived in particular times and places, is going to speak to us of the Creator, if we can hear it. It may be helpful to consider a few questions that can help us embrace our contexts, to challenge the disconnects and distractions that the breaking of time and place can bring to our discipleship. We may want to ask ourselves if we have even just one true involvement with the material world. Do we plant any thing, make anything, build anything, paint anything? What is our involvement with our local community, and what are its rhythms? Is travel becoming for us a black escapist hole that can ruin the meaning of church community and undo the enduring fabric of relationships? Finally, we may want to ask ourselves if we have any involvement with a problem that is

intractable. Are we working with anything that we know cannot be fixed, but can only be lived in faith, in relationship to Jesus the redeemer?

*As human communities  
live sustainably,  
surrounding environments  
will flourish*

We should learn to be automatically suspicious when we hear arguments in conservation circles that assume an auto-

matic conflict between the well-being of people or human society, and the conditions under which the wider creation can flourish. Stella Simiyu has been one of the A Rocha leaders to teach me that only as human communities live sustainably will their surrounding environments flourish. Her Kenyan experience, from the early unfortunate ‘people versus nature’ experiments in national parks—where people were displaced so that large mammals could flourish—lies behind the passion of her statement, ‘We cannot afford not to invest in environmental conservation, because this is how we enhance the ability of the rural poor to have options, and provide ways of getting out of the poverty trap.’<sup>25</sup> We should be instantly sceptical if we hear Christians arguing that pragmatic choices must be made between ‘saving souls’ or feeding the hungry—or between feeding the hungry and looking after ‘the environment.’

For the Christian, our discipleship is understood as our right collective life lived as a worshipful response to the living God who, as Paul preaches in Acts 17, ‘made the world and everything in it...the Lord of heaven and earth...who gave all people life and breath and everything else.’ We should be suspicious, if not for any other reason, because Paul finishes his sermon with the proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, rooted in his humanity to emphasize the point. ‘God...commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead’ (vv 30–31). This resurrection was, of course, the first manifestation of the eternally material—the resurrection of the body. We affirm it frequently



but we so often miss its force as a paradigm for our understanding of the material world in which the body of Christ, God's people, is the first fruit of the new creation, in which the priesthood of all believers is lived out amidst a common created humanity and a marred and groaning creation.

Truly, as Paul wrote elsewhere in the letter to the Colossians, in Christ all things hold together. Let us learn to live within what is held together in him.

## Useful Websites

A Rocha ([www.arocha.org](http://www.arocha.org))

Convention on Biological Diversity ([www.biodiv.org/](http://www.biodiv.org/))

Millennium Ecosystem Assessment ([www.millenniumassessment.org/en/](http://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/))

Millennium Development Goals ([www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/))

Painting the Town Green Report ([transport2000.org.uk](http://transport2000.org.uk))

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- 12 The goals are available at [www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/)
- 13 The programme combines the resources of Friends of the Earth Netherlands, the IUCN Netherlands Committee and the World Wide Fund for Nature Netherlands, with funding from the Policy Framework programme for Theme-based Co-financing (TMF) of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

- 14 Contributing partners include Transport 2000, WWF, Friends of the Earth, Green Alliance, Sustain, Passion for the Planet Radio, GrownUpGreen. The report was sponsored and published by FirstGroup and Intertype. For a full copy of the report, see 'Library,' Transport 2000, [www.transport2000.org.uk](http://www.transport2000.org.uk).
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## Blurb

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