

Jesus and the earth: the Gospel and the future of the environment.
8th February 2003, University of Gloucester

Picking grains on the sabbath. The Gospel and farming

*Peter Carruthers¹
John Ray Initiative*

At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ²But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? ⁵Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? ⁶I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

Matthew 12:1-8 (ESV)

This was one of six disputes, recorded in the Gospels, between Jesus and the Pharisees over the matter of the Sabbath. The others concerned healing. Here, Jesus applies the sabbath principle to farming and the land - and reveals why the Gospel is Good News for farming.

Principle

The Sabbath day was instituted as a day of rest - for family, workers and livestock (Exodus 20:8-11)². The sabbath day anticipated the sabbath year, a year for freeing slaves (Exodus 21:1-11), cancelling debts (Deuteronomy 15:1-11) and resting the land itself (Leviticus 25:1-7). Both anticipated the year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-55), a sabbath of sabbaths, in which in addition to all the provisions of the sabbath year, 'each was to return to his property and each to his family'. The Jubilee, in effect, placed strict limits on the growth of private wealth, as land could not be sold permanently.³

Sabbath and Jubilee protected and liberated those without a voice and without power – servants, the poor, domestic animals and the land itself. Jesus inaugurated

¹ Dr Peter Carruthers is Executive Director of John Ray Initiative, Chairman of Agricultural Christian Fellowship and a Trustee of Farm Crisis Network.

² Essentially, the (legitimate) work (ie of tending the land) of six days of the week was to cease on the seventh, reflecting the pattern of God's own work of creation.

³ The Jubilee emphasised the inalienability of family land (see 1 Kings 21.3). As land could not be sold permanently, amassing huge private estates was technically impossible (Wright, 1983).

his public ministry by announcing this Jubilee, the year of Lord's favour. And in the grain field story He drives the same point home, stating 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice'.

As Jesus says the disciples were guiltless. Picking the grain was acceptable⁴, and their doing so on the Sabbath was a breach of Rabbinic law, not Biblical law. In total contrast to the legalistic bondage of the Pharisees' sabbath, Jesus proclaimed the sabbath as a festival of freedom.

Sabbath and Jubilee gives us three principles for farming, which are reinforced by many other Biblical provisions (see also Carruthers, 2002).

- Sharing with the poor⁵.
- Caring for the earth.
- Restraint of power and wealth⁶.

Of these three, 'sharing' is most explicit in the story. The disciples, if not in actuality, are representative of the poor and hungry, with whom the good fruits of the earth should be shared. It is interesting that Luke's account suggests that the grain was barley, the food of the poor, rather than wheat.⁷

But the caring for the earth principle is there also, though perhaps less explicit.. The Son of Man, the 'Son of the earth', the 'Son of the soil', who proclaims Himself as Lord of the earth (ie 'one greater than the temple'), is also Lord of the Sabbath, the 'Lord of mercy' – a mercy that, as the Psalmist says, is over *all* His works (Psalm 145:9).

The Sabbath is a 'principle with a promise' – in two ways. The first is a conditional promise - of favour now. Agricultural prosperity depends first on obedience⁸ (not

⁴ "If you go into your neighbour's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbour's standing grain" (Deuteronomy 23:25, ESV).

⁵ The Old Testament agricultural economy, in general, shows a special concern for the vulnerable and the poor. Laws of tithing (Deuteronomy 14:28-29) and gleaning (Deuteronomy 24:19-22), for example, make provision for those without assets, protection or power (ie strangers, widows, orphans) – those who have no standing ground in the community (Breuggemann, 1977). Indeed, Deuteronomy 14:29 suggests that the success of future harvests depends on sharing with, and caring for, the poor and needy.

⁶ This principle of restraint, on the use of land, livestock and labour, on the concentration of wealth, and on expansionism, can be discerned in many Biblical themes and writings, in addition to the Sabbath and Jubilee provisions. For example, the taking of interest in loans was prohibited between Israelites (Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25:36, Deuteronomy, 23:19); there was strict control on what could be taken as pledges in security for loans and how (eg Exodus 22:26, Deuteronomy 24:6, Deuteronomy 24:10), the moving of boundary stones that marked out family land was strictly proscribed (Deuteronomy 19:14) (see Wright, 1983, pp 83-84).

⁷ Luke (6:1, AV) states that the Sabbath was the 'second first', which Edersheim (1883, republished 1993) argued referred either to the first or the second Sabbath after the second day of Passover. The barley harvest was inaugurated by the feast of First Fruits, shortly after Passover. The wheat harvest came later, at Pentecost.

⁸ "And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today ... Blessed shall be the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock" (Deuteronomy 28:1,4, ESV).

management), including honouring the sabbath⁹ - “them that honour me, I will honour” (1 Samuel 2:30). This is a key issue for us Christians at this time, not just in farming, but in all of life.

The second promise is of transformation in the future. Sabbath and Jubilee themselves anticipate the Messianic age. Sabbath both looks back the rest of creation and forward to its liberation (Moltmann, 1985). And a central part of that vision is of a restored and transformed agriculture¹⁰, a world in which “they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree” (Micah 4:4), and ‘sheep may safely graze’!



Problem

We can, of course, find glimpses of that age to come, of ‘Shalom’, in encounters with creation, and in farming itself – in the cycles of sowing and harvest, in the birth of lambs and calves. As the rhyme says, ‘you are nearer to God in a garden’ - perhaps because it represents God and man working together - and farming is gardening on a big scale!

But it is not all good news. If we find glimpses of Shalom in our farmed countryside, we also encounter distortion – in polluted watercourses, in scarred landscapes, in animals treated as machines. The red mark on the lamb’s head (above) shows that it was tested for FMD. It survived, but millions did not. Indeed, the burning pyres were a powerful symbol and sign of our failure in the second farming principle - to care for the earth, of our treatment of the earth primarily as a

⁹ “Then the land shall enjoy its Sabbaths as long as it lies desolate, while you are in your enemies’ land; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its Sabbaths... the rest that it did not have on your Sabbaths when you were dwelling in it” (Leviticus 26:34-35, ESV). See also Nehemiah 13:15-19.

¹⁰ “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when the ploughman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it” (Amos 9:13, ESV).

resource rather than a responsibility, of our wasting rather than caring for the garden.¹¹

The land mourns (Joel 1:10, NRSV). Farming has always impacted the natural environment, but modern industrial agriculture has enabled the process to proceed with a vengeance! A conservative estimate by researchers at the University of Essex of the external environmental and health costs of farming in the UK put the bill at around £2 billion per year. A comparable figure for the US is £13 billion (Pretty, 2002).¹²

Farmers are dismayed (Joel 1:11, NRSV). The Joel situation is true in other ways! Farming in Britain has gone through a series of crises, a severe drop in income and dwindling direct contribution to the national economy (compared with public expenditure on farming), and a mass exodus of its workforce.¹³

Across the world farmers have become the victims of forces beyond their control, and many have gone under. That there are huge disparities across the world between those who have a surfeit of food and those who go hungry is well known. There are also huge imbalances in the world food system - a diminishing share of the consumers expenditure reaches farms and oligopolies of powerful buyers range against thousands of 'must sell' sellers. Just two examples.

- **Bananas.** "Bananas are the 5th largest agricultural commodity in world trade. A 40lb box leaves a plantation in Costa Rica at \$4.50 (in Ecuador at \$2+), and retails in UK supermarkets for \$27. Three companies dominate Costa Rican banana trade – the same three control c. 70% of all world trade in bananas" (<http://www.agriculture-theology.org.uk/articles/CorporatePowerPeopleLand.htm>). Banana production is also very damaging to the environment.
- **Supermarkets.** "In the UK, the Competition Commission recently identified a complex monopoly situation for the purposes of the 1973 Fair Trading Act on two matters - the pricing practices of the supermarkets and their relations

¹¹ The slaughter, in 2002, of more than 6 million animals in less than 8 months was symptomatic of the reduction of livestock to mere commodities to be used and disposed of at will. It may not at all reflect

the attitude or practice of individual farmers, but it is characteristic of a system – a system that demanded that we do it this way, a system that many farmers themselves feel locked into. Few animals were *suffering* from the disease and a majority were probably not even infected. None was killed for food.

¹² Many of agriculture's impacts on the natural environment, such as the removal of hedgerows and the decline in farmland birds, are well known. While there are signs of a slowing of some negative effects, farming's burden on the environment remains considerable. At the same time, farming has shaped, and manages, most of our land and natural environment, and farmland is the main context in which many of us encounter and experience God's creation.

¹³ Recent figures show that about 20,000 jobs are lost from agriculture each year. In 2001, UK agriculture employed 2% of the workforce and contributed 0.7% Gross Value Added to the National economy. In 2001, farming's total income, at £1.71 billion, had fallen to its lowest level in more than 25 years. In contrast, public expenditure on farming for 2001 was £4.75 billion (c 1.5 billion of which is FMD compensation etc).

with suppliers'. Twenty-seven practices employed 'gave the five major buying supermarkets substantial advantage over other small retailers'" (<http://www.agriculture-theology.org.uk/articles/CorporatePowerPeopleLand.htm>).

These three issues – economic injustice, environmental damage and concentration of power – are the defining issues for world agriculture. Against the three Biblical principles, global farming is weighed in the balance and found wanting. Instead of keeping the sabbath, we have, as Breugemann (1977) put it, a 'sabbathless society'¹⁴.

Practice

How do we respond to this? How do we apply the sabbath principle to farming and the land now? How do we realize the Kingdom of God at least in measure in this age?

I'd like to answer this, first, with an example of sabbath transformation in practice – not quite in farming, but close! The full story is in the book 'Care of Creation' (Drake Emmerich, 2000).

Sabbath Transformation - Tangier Island

Tangier Island in Chesapeake Bay is a community of about 650, 80% of whom consider themselves Christians. The Island's economy depended on oysters and blue crab fisheries. Damage of the oyster reefs from over-harvesting and disease led to reliance entirely on the crabs. These also became overexploited, compounded by pollution from farms and towns along the edge of the bay. The watermen's incomes dropped and anxiety increased. Environmentalists began to push for strict controls leading to bitter conflict with the islanders.

Susan Drake Emmerich, who worked with the Au Sable Institute in Wisconsin, spent three years on the island. She realized that most of the islanders did believe there was a scriptural requirement to steward the environment and its creatures, including their catch species. This provided a bridge to help them understand the environmentalists and *vice-versa*.

A defining event took place at a joint service of the both churches on the island. Susan spoke on biblical environmental stewardship and loving one's neighbour. At the end of the service, 58 watermen men bowed in tears and asked God to forgive them for breaking the fishery laws and committed themselves to a stewardship covenant.

¹⁴ Landed people are tempted to create a sabbathless society in which land is never rested, debts are never cancelled, slaves are never released, nothing is changed from the way it is now and has always been ...Sabbathless existence is for coveting without limit, because there are no more covenanted brothers and sisters" (Breuggemann, 1977, p 65).

From that time, watermen began bringing back their rubbish rather than dumping it overboard. Some spoke emotionally in church of their conviction of sin after throwing metal cans overboard or taking undersized crabs. Government officials, scientists and environmentalists were stunned.

Last October, 11 farmers and landowners from the Chesapeake Bay watershed, having visited the island, acknowledged the impact *their* practices were having on their neighbours to the south and have entered into a similar stewardship covenant – to be faithful stewards of their land (Press Release 29 October 2002, Susan Drake Emmerich, SDEmmerich@Yahoo.Com).

Tangier Island. Basis of Stewardship Covenant

- ❑ Caretaking (Godly stewarding of creation).
- ❑ Maintaining the fruitfulness of the catch species.
- ❑ Practising contentment.
- ❑ Allowing for a Sabbath rest for the creation.
- ❑ Loving one's neighbour and not polluting the bay.
- ❑ Obeying the law of God; and, therefore;
- ❑ obeying the civil laws, especially fishery laws.

Source: Drake Emmerich (2000)

There is still opposition to the covenant and the setting is unusual. But it gives us a glimpse of how things might be. It challenges Christian farmers and landowners to consider their ways and see care for the earth not as a burden but an opportunity. It gives us hope for healing of the land under the transforming power of the Gospel.

There were also certain key elements in the Tangier story which point the way for us – reviving principles, repentance, healing of relationships, making right decisions, moving beyond words to practical demonstration and action. It demonstrates the principle that God honours those who honour him.

What can we do?

Prophecy. It is essential, first, to get our thinking right. This was what Jesus was doing in the grain fields. It was the first stage in the transformation of Tangier Island. And it is a core aim of the John Ray Initiative. Like Jeremiah, who was called both to “break down and to build up” (Jeremiah 1:10), the prophet challenges the accepted norms and takes us back to our roots. He revisits and restates principles. The prophet also interprets the times, by measuring reality against ideals, and sees the ‘long view’ setting present crises in the context of future destiny. He both persuades and warns.

Pray and repent. Especially the prophet calls the people prayer and repentance. Jesus was implicitly urging the Pharisees to change their minds. An act of repentance was the defining moment on Tangier Island. In our present situation, we

desperately need a movement among Christians in farming that takes seriously the call of 2 Chronicles 7:14¹⁵ - and indeed in our nation.

Care - for the casualties. A core element of the sabbath is the showing of mercy, the binding up of the broken hearted. Farm Crisis Network is a partnership between the Agricultural Christian Fellowship and the Arthur Rank Centre. It started after 5 men visited Germany in 1993. I was one of them. It is now a network of 229 volunteers, working in 20 groups across the UK, providing practical and moral support to farming people in crisis.

Influence - where you have influence. In the 19th Century Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect not only prayed, they also used their political influence to change things - with great effect. Christians in influential positions in wider society have a both a privilege and a responsibility – but they have to be prepared to pay the price.

Decide. Making decisions means first evaluating the options out there against the principles. A relatively easy step for most of us is to buy fairly traded goods (eg bananas, tea and coffee), to avoid factory-farmed livestock, and where possible to buy local. Christians in farming need to grapple with what is Christian farming in terms of husbandry practices.

Demonstrate. The sabbath principle in practice has power beyond words as we saw in the Tangier Island story. Churches can become examples by using only fairly traded products and consciously connecting to what they are eating, drinking and buying. We need Christian farms and farming centres that act as demonstrations.

Separate. For some, radical separation has acted as a beacon of light in the darkness. In the US, Mennonite farming communities are examples of good husbandry and care of the land, and appear to achieve very high yields.

Healing the land

This phrase has been much used in recent years, in all sorts of ways. But it is important to get a Biblical view! As 2 Chronicles 7:14 makes clear, healing the land is dependent on repentance, not management! But there is also an intimate link between healing the land and the healing of relationships. Central to the Sabbath principle is a restoring and ordering of right relationships in all directions – between God and people, among neighbours, between people and the earth.

In the Biblical understanding, the land was polluted by broken relationships, especially broken covenants – by idolatry, adultery and murder. Land could then still be ‘polluted’ even if we managed, through human effort and ingenuity, to restore fully its ecology. From God’s viewpoint, the biggest environmental problem is human sin – which is why the Gospel is good news for farming and the land. The

¹⁵ “When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:12-14, ESV).

healing of the land and the earth is ultimately invested in the “revealing of the sons of God” (Romans 8:19-22) – which is why that, in a sense, the evangelist makes the greatest contribution to the future of the environment!

Sabbath Transformation - Almalonga

Is there Good News for farming and the land now? My second example of ‘sabbath transformation’ is the town of Almalonga in Guatemala. This features in the ‘Transformations’ video (1999, The Sentinel Group, gateway@dircon.co.uk). Here a revival which resulted in the majority of the 19,000 residents professing Christian faith also led to a transformation of the community’s farming, with phenomenal increases in productivity.

As in Tangier, there was opposition - not only to the revival, but also to the way it has been presented to the world. The jury is out as to what exactly happened and how, but the story is a powerful sign of power of the Gospel to transform the land, and a foretaste, surely, of that which is to come.

Closing comment

Our overall theme is the Gospel and the future of the environment, and my particular concern has been to show that Gospel is ‘good news’ for farming and the land. Our calling is nothing less than the pray and work that God’s kingdom come and His will be done on *earth* as it is in heaven. But we can be confident that the future does not ultimately depend on us - for the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath!

References

- Brueggemann, W. 1977. *The Land*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Carruthers, S P. 2002. Farming in crisis and the voice of silence. A response to David Atkinson. In: *Ethics in science and environmental politics*, 2002, 59-64.
- Drake Emmerich, S. 2000. The Declaration in practice. In: Berry, R J (Ed) *Care of Creation*. Leicester: IVP.
- Edersheim, A. 1883, republished 1993. *The life and times of Jesus the Messiah*. Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers.
- Moltmann, J. 1985. *God in Creation. An ecological doctrine of creation*. London: SCM Press.
- Pretty, 2002. *Agri-culture. Reconnecting people, land and nature*. London: Earthscan.
- Wright, C J H. 1983. *Living as the people of God. The relevance of Old Testament ethics*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press.