

# A CHRISTIAN LOOK AT THE ENVIRONMENT

## Study 3. Am I my brother's keeper? (Genesis 4,v9.)

Lead in. During the week before this study, collect as many newspaper cuttings, articles, etc as you can about the environment and about poverty, and bring them to the group.

Read the following quotation from Stephen Rand.<sup>i</sup>

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?”

Jesus replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22, vv36-37.)

So there it is: Surely these verses offer conclusive proof that concern for the environment is only an optional extra for the Christian. At best, it might be a suitable interest for the biology field-course enthusiast; at worst it could reveal a theological wooliness verging dangerously on New Age freakishness. But at least we can be sure that if we wish to stick with the central concerns of Jesus, then we can safely leave the environment in the tender care of the of the vegetarian sandal brigade, and give our own time to more pressing matters”.

Do you agree or not? Discuss.

Bible Readings Leviticus 19, vv9-10; 25.vv1-12; Deuteronomy 15,v11; Matthew 22 vv34-40.

### Questions for discussion

1. The quotation above concludes “No! This view is not only sadly mistaken, but in fact dangerous for the cause of the Gospel at this pivotal time in human history”

In what ways is it dangerous for the cause of the Gospel to ignore the environmental crisis? Give reasons.

2. Read the passages from Leviticus. How does care for the environment and care for the poor go together in the agricultural practices we read about there? Can you think of any present-day examples where degrading the environment leads to, or increases, human poverty and suffering. Is there anything we can do about it? Look at the articles and cuttings people have

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brought.

How should we decide on priorities when there is conflict of interests between

people and other living things e.g. the removing of the nomadic Masai in east Africa from their traditional hunting grounds in order to create a reserve for endangered species of animals.

3. One of the problems is the increase of population in the world. How does loving our neighbour as ourselves impinge on this? Is there anything we can do about it?

### Prayer

1. Think of ways in which we have been indifferent to the needs of poor and deprived people everywhere, and have not recognised that their needs and care for our environment often go hand in hand. Ask for God's forgiveness

2. Recall some of the problems discussed and bring them to God, seeking His help in dealing with them, and asking for wisdom to live in such a way that we serve each other and care for His world in the way He wishes.

### Background notes.

1. Apart from the obvious need to relieve poverty in sustainable ways by caring for the environment, people are so concerned about the environment now, that it may well be a way to connect with them where they are, and thus arouse real interest in what Christianity has to say. Also, the Christian view which should affect lifestyles and aims in life suggests a way forward which is positive, and therefore it becomes relevant to people and can produce change. (see the story of Daniel at end)

2. Population is certainly a problem, but not the whole problem. It is not the countries with the highest populations that necessarily consume most of the world's resources. The world's population is almost 3 times what it was 40 years ago whereas the amount of fossil fuels, which are both polluting and non-renewable, burnt have increased many times more than that. Malaysia has a tenth of the population of Indonesia, yet it has cleared 40% more of its forest than its neighbour.<sup>ii</sup> Most of the population increase takes place in the poorest countries, which only control about 20% of the world's resources. The other 80% is controlled by the 20% of the population living in the richer countries, where expectations of increase in standard of living go on rising at a rapid rate. Obviously, consumerism is a big factor in the growing gap between rich and poor. Christian life-style is highly relevant here.

#### Daniel's Story \_\_\_\_\_ Stephen Rand<sup>iii</sup>

I was in Ethiopia at the height of the famine crisis of the mid-1980s. Parched, rocky ground gave testimony to the prolonged drought thought by many to be the result of climate change caused by deforestation. I remember the horror of famine; the sounds of awful wailing greeting the dawn as families woke to the loss of the weakest and the most vulnerable; the unbelievably wasted limbs of the babies too far gone to be saved.

But I also remember Daniel. Daniel was a Church leader, an evangelical Christian filled with a passion for the Church to be at the forefront of change. The Ethiopian "Kale Heywet" (Word of Life) Church had persuaded the Marxist Government of the time to give them 500 hectares of land. It was easy to see that the gift had not been generous. The area looked like a lunar landscape, bare, rocky, useless.

A dried-up ravine was the only sign of the river that had once run through the plot. The main road south from Addis Ababa crossed the site, people and animals trudging past, sometimes obscured by the dust stirred up by the occasional vehicle.

It looked hopeless. But Daniel had a vision. Local people had begun to terrace the land, and were being paid for their hard labour with food. Daniel proudly showed me the seedlings from the Church's nursery that were planted along the edge of the terraces to hold the soil in place, to allow grazing to return for the animals, and to provide fruit and firewood in a managed forestry scheme. "When these seedlings grow and the land begins to be productive again," said Daniel, "Then I will put up a sign by the roadside that tells everyone who passes that the Church is responsible.".....

Three years after my visit to that rocky Ethiopian landscape, Daniel came into the Tear Fund Offices in Teddington. He told me about his project. "You remember those six-inch seedlings that I showed you," he said. "Now they are thirty feet tall!". The land had been transformed into a productive place once again. The Marxist Government had been so impressed that they had given the Church another 500 hectare plot.

He went on to explain that there had been another sign of God's work. His land was in a largely Muslim area of the country. Missionaries had preached for twenty years or so without noticeable effect. But now the local people were asking questions about why the church had come to work there, providing them with food in exchange for their labour, and creating an

oasis of fruitfulness where there had previously been only desert. And Daniel was only too ready to tell them that it was because of God's love for them, a love that could not only see the landscape transformed, but a love that could transform their lives as well. As a result, some had made a commitment to Christ, and a Church had been established. Planting trees had been persuasive preaching.

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<sup>i</sup> RAND, Stephen. 2000. Love your neighbour as yourself. In: R J Berry (ed) *The care of creation*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press. p140 (By kind permission of IVP)

<sup>ii</sup>see: GREEN, Joanne: Tear Fund Public Policy Paper: Poverty and the environment; p32

<sup>iii</sup> RAND, Stephen: id. p144-146