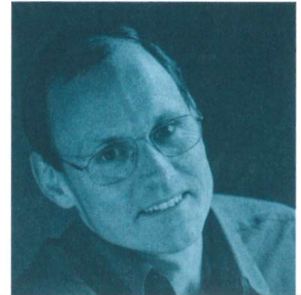


SINNING AGAINST THE EARTH?

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IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS WE HAVE LIVED THROUGH A PROFOUND EVENT IN THE HISTORY OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS. THERE HAS BEEN A RAPID SHIFT IN AWARENESS ABOUT OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE EARTH. It is amazing to think that the last general election was fought almost without reference to what we now call 'green' issues. Now they are top of the political agenda and part of almost any news feed. Awareness is also deep within ordinary people, who sense the enormity of the devastation that will be wrought by climate change. Al Gore, politician and presenter of the acclaimed documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, recently suggested that in 200 years time this generation would be marked out by historians, poets and songwriters. It is our privilege, he said, to live at a defining moment in history.

We have also just lived through the two hundredth anniversary of another movement, the abolition of slavery, which might similarly lay claim to have been a defining moment in history. These two movements bear an interesting parallel. Both are times in which public consciousness shifts deeply and permanently and a new awareness of sin dawns. We now know slavery and slave trading is and was wrong. There is no debate about that now. There was then. Something similar is happening with regard to our treatment of the earth. We are becoming aware of it in a new way. A whole new set of environmental 'sins' is emerging into human consciousness. At the same time, just as a new compassion dawned in the days of the slave trade, such that those perceived as commodities to be traded became valued as people, so in today's situation a new compassion is dawning for the earth and its creatures.

So how should we evaluate such movements and, in particular, can we be sure whether such a sense of wrongdoing in the wider society should be properly called a sin? I believe that the way to consider this is to ask whether movements such as the abolition of the slave trade and the environmental movement are genuinely works of the Spirit of God. If we can answer this in the affirmative then we can say that to do wrong in these terms is to do wrong against God. In what follows I will offer three signs of a work of God that can be considered.

But before I do so I realise that some will have an initial hesitation about identifying the environmental movement with a work of God. Many within churches have been hesitant about the environmental challenges that we face today and in the past we have tended to identify the work of the Spirit very closely with the

work of the Church. So we need to recall that it is in the very nature of theism that God acts in the world and the Bible teaches that God is not confined to working through the believing community. We remember the great delivery from captivity in Babylon. It was a rather different type of intervention than those we are considering here but it was clear that God's new thing was to be achieved through someone outside the believing community, namely Cyrus. Isaiah was brave enough to name God's intervention in his day (Is 44.28; 45.1,13). Dare we do the same? Perhaps that depends on our grounds for doing so.

So, as the first sign of the work of God, let's examine this new awareness of sin. The realisation that we are abusing the earth is no passing fad, even though some may hope it so. The dawning of environmental consciousness is now bearing down so hard on our oil-addicted, consumerist culture that there is a danger that people are overwhelmed by the scale of lifestyle and societal change required. Governments are setting up massive studies about promoting behaviour change. Some people are embracing scepticism as a psychological defence. But this will not go away. The challenge goes to the root of capitalism and it finds the Church deeply compromised. Authentic Christianity has always been deeply suspicious of materialist views of prosperity, yet since the time of the Reformation a change has crept upon the Christian community. It has been charted by people like Richard Tawney in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*.¹ He showed that early Reformers were aggressively critical of materialist attitudes, of money-making pursued as an object in its own right and of usury in particular. They were deeply aware of the saying 'You cannot worship God and mammon.' Yet over the centuries this saying of Jesus has died the death of a thousand qualifications. The Church has ended up trying to keep in favour with business with the result that it now fails to offer the prophetic voice that is required. There can be little doubt that the present focus on market exchange as the guarantee of true wealth is inadequate, or that the three primary capitalistic values of money, property and self-interest must be radically qualified if we are not to destroy the earth.

Many people have looked on the environmental challenges we face as technical issues and focus on 'Carbon reduction action groups' and the like. My belief is that such strategies will prove inadequate, because the challenge we face is ultimately a spiritual one. It has to do with the whole way that we see ourselves as human

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NOTES

1. RH Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism: A Historical Study* (London: Penguin, 1990 Repr, 1926).

2. See <http://bethechange.org.uk>

3. See <http://www.joannamacy.net/html/great.html>

4. NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007).

► beings and our relationship with the earth. Some environmentalists have noticed this. The organisation 'Be the Change' runs a series of seminars entitled 'Changing the Dream'.² They take their prompt from the wisdom of the indigenous peoples of Ecuador, who refer to our modern worldview as our 'dream' – it's as if the civilisations of the North are in a trance and sleepwalking their way into disaster. They say we need to 'wake up' and change the whole way that we see the world, for the sake of life. Joanna Macy, another highly respected voice, says that we need 'A Great Turning', 'a shift from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilization', which will consist in developing a new sense of the interconnectedness of all things and a new compassion for the earth and its creatures.³ The resonance with the Christian language of repentance in both these examples is highly striking (e.g. Rom 12.1–2).

Secondly, let's consider this new compassion that is dawning. I wonder whether you think it is right to love the earth and its creatures. Some may initially hesitate about this, but on reflection we would recognise that the natural world has properly evoked love from humans throughout human existence and that this has actually been a mainspring for faith. Creation presents to us an awesome spectacle (e.g. Ps 19.1–4). Our hearts naturally go out to the creatures with which we share the planet (e.g. Is 40.11). And this phenomenon has led thousands, even millions of people, to faith in God. So let us not be afraid of loving the earth. Let us rather mourn that our increasingly urbanised cultures are so cut-off from this source of inspiration and healing. The people of our busy, technological world need to know again the power of the saying, 'he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul' (Ps 23.2–3).

Thirdly, and arguably most importantly, this movement does draw on a clear vein of understanding within the Scriptures. Biblical spirituality arose from people who sensed God through nature. They deliberately tried to order their lives and their laws so as to reflect the natural order (Ps 19.7). They understood their covenant with God to be affirmed by the fruitfulness of creation and interpreted natural disaster in terms of giving God offence (Deut 28.1–6, 15–19). More than that, they had a dream. They had a dream of a new creation. Expressed in the ease and harmony of the Garden of Eden, in the rest and recreation of the Sabbath, in dreams of heaven (Ps 57.5, 11; 113.5; Is 40.22; 64.1, Ezek 1; Mt 3.16) and a world without violence (Is 11.1–9; Mic 4.1–4), this was hope for a

peace (Shalom) that would embrace all creation. I dare to imagine Jesus poring over the words of Isaiah 52, reading there of one who would come to bring 'good news', who would proclaim 'Shalom' and 'your God reigns' (v. 7), and recognising that this indeed was his calling. Much of Jesus' ministry was to do with the renewal of the natural world. From the calming of the storm, to the healing of the leper, this person was the very source of the Shalom that was breaking in on the world. He was the seed that would fall into the ground and die and bear much fruit (Jn 12.24). He would achieve the reconciliation of all things (Col 1.20) and his resurrection would be the very first act in the new creation.⁴

These are just a few signposts to the rich vein of biblical material that identifies the gospel with the renewal of creation and so calls the followers of Jesus to the goal of living at peace with the natural world as given to us by our gracious Creator. These three signs, a sense of sinfulness, the dawning of a new compassion and the resonance with biblical hope are the three witnesses of the Spirit of God at work among us. It is against this background that we can rightly discern the work of God among us today and identify as 'sin' those things that we previously did not recognise to be so. The time is coming when it will be hard to call yourself a Christian and live an earth-destructive lifestyle. That is a challenge to us all. ■