

Briefing 766

Theology of the Land

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Summary

Old Testament teaching is that the Earth is seen to be 'good' and humans have been given Dominion to cultivate and protect it. The New Testament assumes this relationship is so. People need a sense of place and a sense of God and this has been lost in the global community. The Church has done a good job in times of crisis. However, rural clergy are being given more and more parishes, and their visibility is reduced as a result. We need to consider how we reconnect with the Land in a realistic way for both modern urban and rural communities and how we build rural community.

This summary is based on the lecture given by Margot Hodson, Chaplain of Jesus College, Oxford, and Director of the John Ray Initiative. It was given at "Cherishing the Earth – challenges in food, farming and climate", the Agricultural Christian Fellowship Conference, held on November 17th 2008 at the Arthur Rank Centre, Stoneleigh, Warwickshire.

1. Terms and conditions

Margot began by considering the Land¹ in Genesis 1-2:

Eretz = Land or Earth

1:1 Created the Heavens and the Earth (*Eretz*)

1:10 God called the dry ground 'Land' (*Eretz*)

1:11 Let the Land (*Eretz*) produce vegetation

2:7 God created Man (*Adam*) out of the dust of the Earth (*Adamah*)

Conclusion: *Eretz* means both The Earth and Land, but does not mean soil.

Teaching on the Earth:

We can see a relationship between God, people and the Earth in Genesis 1-2. This is the well known triangle, first proposed by Old Testament theologian, Chris Wright². We can observe that:

- The Earth is created by God – much of Genesis 1 and 2 is an argument for monotheism.
- The Earth is seen to be 'good'. Greek influences on theology have led people at various times in history to see the Earth and the material world as bad, but this is not a Biblical view.
- Humans are given responsible rule (*Radah*) over the rest of Creation.

¹ For more of the theology of the Land see: HODSON, M.J. & HODSON, M.R. (2008) *Cherishing the Earth. How to care for God's Creation*. Monarch Books, Oxford. See <http://www.hodsons.org/cherishingtheearth/index.htm>

² Wright, C.J.H. (1983) *Living as the people of God*. Leicester: IVP p. 19.

- We are “To Cultivate and Keep”. The word for cultivate (*Avad*) also means to work, to serve and to worship (in the context of the Levites worshipping in the Temple). Keep (*Shamar*) includes the idea of protection or a covering, and is the same word as used in Numbers 6:24, “The LORD bless you and keep you.”

Conclusions on Relationships

- Humanity is given responsibility for the Earth/Land.
- Relationships between God, people and the Earth are crucial. So farming and the way we live in community are important.

Genesis 3: Cosmic Impact of the Fall

- The Earth suffered from human sin.
- The fall caused a breakdown in relationships between God, people and the Earth.
- The effect of our negative actions towards the Earth (Land/Environment) is a Biblical issue.
- This connects to our relationship with God and one another.

2. Land in Old Testament ethics

A number of ethical concepts can be derived from the Old Testament.

Land and Covenant

- We come from the dust of the earth (*Adomah*) and have a rooted relationship with it. We now see this globally in that we cannot survive without our planet. There is nowhere else to go.
- In the Old Testament ownership was widely distributed, and is not just given to the few rich and powerful people but is distributed to everyone in perpetuity.
- Our responsibilities were outlined in the Covenant Law.

Covenant - People and Land

- Relationships are characterised by Grace, a redemptive approach. The Old Testament is full of Grace.
- Israel is seen as an example nation.
- Land is seen as a gift from God. e.g. Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21) – sin was the selling of land or wresting it from a family by force. This means that land is a gift – not purely an economic commodity.
- Gifts of harvest. The seven fruits – wheat, barley, figs, grapes, pomegranates, dates, olives.
- Sabbath and Jubilee. Leviticus 25 commands that there should be: rest for land; return of land to original owners; freedom for slaves; and cancellation of debt.

Land and Community

- The first city was built by Cain (Genesis 4:17).
- According to Jaques Ellul³ this signified a lack of trust and rebellion, and a rejection of the provision of creation and the Creator.
- So what does it mean to be in a Covenant community? Covenant communities concern not just people, but also relationship to the Land. Rejecting the Land and our relationship to it means that we are also rejecting God because the Land is his.
- People need a sense of place as well as a sense of God. There is a built in need to have a sense of place, and this has been lost in the global community. Will it be regained at a global level as the

³ Ellul, J. (1970) *The Meaning of the City*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Grand Rapids.

environmental problems begin to hit hard this century? This all leads to Earth being seen as a life support machine which is going to be switched off if we don't do something.

3. Isaiah and the perception land, nature and communities

There is a significant use of natural images in all sections of Isaiah:

- This shows how Old Testament people perceived nature.
- Images are used to develop theological themes (e.g. Heaven and Earth; mountains; deserts; vineyards; animals; and plants).
- These reveal an attitude to the material world.
- They also reveal a perceived relationship with human communities.

Theological themes

First Isaiah

- The Earth should be full of God's glory but it is under judgement.
- The consequences are war, drought, poor crops, briars and thorns.
- Nature is not seen as inherently sinful. Both domesticated and wild animals are usually seen in a positive light.
- The relationship between God, humans and nature has been abused.

Second and Third Isaiah

- There are images of rejoicing and fruitfulness (trees clapping hands etc.)
- The Earth/Holy Mountain is a dwelling place of God – full of Glory.
- This results from restored relationship of humans to God.
- A renewal of Creation results, leading to a restoration of human communities in harmony with the Land.

The Farming Ethic in Isaiah

There is a strong management/farming approach to land. The very interventionist approach to land implies the human role is as responsible stewards. Land and nature flourish where humans fulfil their role and God blesses this harmony.

Wilderness in Isaiah

Wilderness is seen as the place to meet God, and is not the place to work out day to day relationships with God. Wilderness is valued in its own right, and also the animals that live there – the intrinsic worth of nature and Earth.

Community in Isaiah

Human society must connect with God and seek redemption. Redeemed communities lead to social justice and to just relationships with nature. The future harmony is a domesticated one. Isaiah does not see the future as a return to living a nomadic existence, but sees domestication and farming as the ideal

4. New Testament Theology of the Land?

- There is some rural context in the Gospels, but the rest of the New Testament has a more urban setting.
- The New Testament assumed an Old Testament approach to Land and Community. It does not repeat what is covered in the Old Testament.

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- Relatively few passages in the New Testament are directly relevant to the theology of the Land. Two examples are Romans 8: Creation groaning waiting for Sons of God; and Revelation 20-21: Redeemed world: God and Humans; Settlement and Nature.

5. God, People and the Land Today

Relationship to the Land

- Modern rural communities are less rooted in the land. This is the case because there are few farming jobs and ownership does not always imply working the Land.
- There has been a shift in the rural population profile, with more suburban people and more double home owners in the countryside
- There are huge “Naboth” issues for farming families. They are often sitting on a fortune in land, but can’t make a living out of it. Farmer’s children often do not want to farm, but there are emotional implications in selling up – a duty to distant ancestors.
- Are government and farmers taking stewardship more seriously? More has been done in stewardship schemes, and many farmers have adopted these.

Community relationships

- Are rural people more ‘urban’ and ‘privatised’ in outlook? People don’t anticipate that moving to the country will mean becoming part of a community. They often want to escape people.
- Are rural areas places of ‘wilderness’ for urban dwellers? Is the countryside seen as a retreat?
- The presence of God is visible but less rooted. The Church has been doing a very good job in times of crisis (e.g. foot and mouth etc.). However, rural clergy are being given more and more parishes, and their visibility is reduced as a result.
- What is the vision for the church in this? Do bishops have a vision for rural ministry? (a conference attendee answered “no” at this point)

Concluding questions

1. How do we reconnect with the Land in a realistic way for our modern communities?
2. How do we build community as villages lose local services and new rural people increasingly have a privatised concept of rural life?
3. How do urban people respond to the theology of the Land in their urban communities
4. Is rural Britain ‘wilderness’ for urban dwellers? What is the danger of those with this concept acting as decision makers for rural communities?

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