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EDITED BY DAVID S. KOETJE
FOREWORD BY RONALD J. SIDER

LIVING THE GOOD LIFE

ON GOD'S GOOD EARTH



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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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FOREWORD

What were they thinking? Why would a team of Christian scholars collaborate on a book that dares to give practical advice on what we should eat, what clothes we should wear, and even what kind of house we should live in? As Christians shouldn't they concern themselves with matters of the heart and the soul and leave the gardening tips to daytime television? And shouldn't they be more engaged with matters of the mind than how we spend our down time?

To be sure, there is a real danger that Christians forget or ignore their calling to spread the good news about Jesus worldwide. We can easily be distracted by falling back into the petty legalism that Jesus warned against, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices . . . But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness . . . you strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (Matt. 23:23-24).

In fact, the gospel that we are to bring to the world embraces all of life. It not only calls sinners to receive Jesus as their Savior, it also calls them to acknowledge him as Lord of all creation. Jesus announced: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*" (Matt. 28:18-20).

Jesus has much to teach us about the way forgiven sinners treat the poor and the oppressed (Matt. 5:3-12). Jesus has much to teach us about the way we are to seek and to sacrifice for a Kingdom that is yet to come in fullness but that is already among us. Jesus has much to teach us about living as seasoning salt and as light in this present dark world (Matt. 5:13-14).

This book shows the fruit of deep and careful reflection on what Jesus' call to discipleship really means for the way we live our everyday lives on God's good earth. Despite the distortions caused by sin, this world is still God's handiwork. It still carries God's own promise that "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom. 8: 21).

Paying careful attention to living the good life on God's good earth is not an abandonment of our Christian duty. And it is not a fallback into petty legalism. It is our labor of love

- for those who are in need,
- for those who will come after us should Jesus tarry,
- for the planet itself,
- and for the One who loves all these so much he died and now lives for them.

Surely this is an important, urgent topic for careful investigation by Christian scholars.

—Ronald J. Sider
President and Founder
Evangelicals for Social Action

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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND CREATION CARE

STEVEN C. BOUMA-PREDIGER AND BRET STEPHENSON

Susan Emmerich found herself in the middle of a mess. The year was 1998. Susan was living among a fishing community called the Tangier watermen and doing research for her doctoral degree on Tangier Island in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay. So far, so good. The problem was that pollution, disease, and over-harvesting had taken their toll, and there was only one fishery left—the blue crab. As a result, the people of Tangier Island were being pressured by a group of environmentalists, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF), to change their fishing habits. The watermen, meanwhile, had their own worries. They worried about their ability to put food on the table, and they worried about intrusion of outsiders into their way of life.

On both sides, tempers flared and emotions ran high. Some of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation folks were condescending toward the people of Tangier Island. Feeling powerless to reverse the decline of their fishery, the watermen, in turn, showed little respect for the environmentalist “outsiders” who used the abstract language of environmental science, who were clueless on matters of faith, and whose actions might seriously affect their livelihood. They were suspicious of the CBF, and for good reason. The impasse seemed insurmountable.

Like the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Susan was anxious for the watermen to become better caretakers of their environment, but she took a very

different approach. Susan immersed herself in the island culture. She lived at the same economic level as the majority of the islanders. She dressed according to the island's conservative standards. She attended worship services and taught Sunday school at the local Methodist church. She helped the women process crabs. In all these ways, Susan showed her respect for the islanders' way of life. Her genuine care won the trust and garnered the love of many of the island people.

But it wasn't all a piece of cake. Susan was ostracized by certain members of the island community. She even received death threats. The process of influencing the community to better care for their marine resources was fraught with difficulties and required a lot of determination from Susan and from the islanders themselves as they began to discern the Spirit's beckoning.

FAITH-BASED STEWARDSHIP

In the end, a faith-based stewardship initiative, launched by Susan and led by the people of Tangier Island, yielded a cleaner island and a healthier fishery. Realizing that all sides desired a healthy Chesapeake Bay fishery, Susan helped the environmentalists at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation appreciate the watermen's faith-based cultural values. Likewise, she helped the watermen more fully live out the biblical faith they professed.

What caused Susan Emmerich's success on Tangier Island? No doubt her unique combination of communication skills, personal integrity, and uncommon wisdom had something to do with it. But more important, Susan tapped into a biblical ethic of stewardship that the watermen already possessed. This ethic is squarely rooted in a biblical theology common to all Christians and central to the Christian faith. It is a way of being in the world that acknowledges God as creator and sustainer of all things (Gen. 1-2), that understands God's covenant to be with all creation (Gen. 6-9), that stands in wonder at the symphony that is creation (Ps. 104), that acclaims Christ as the One in whom and for whom the whole creation hangs together (Col. 1), and that proclaims the glorious vision not of the annihilation of creation but of God's redemption of all things (Rev. 21-22).

In short, the biblical ethic embraced by Susan and the Tangier watermen is rooted in a theology of the greatness of God and the goodness of the earth. It implies that discipleship is learning to live the truly good life on God's good earth. That this theology and this ethic are not more widely embraced by Christians who cherish the Bible is one of the central scandals of our time.

A CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

In this book we intend to show that Christian faith is not anti-ecological. Put more positively, we aim to illustrate how caring for the earth is integral to authentic Christian faith. And we aim to give plenty of practical guidance for living a life of ecological obedience and gratitude to God.

From where we live to what we eat, from how we use energy to what we grow in our yards, from what we do for work to how we spend our leisure time—in all these ways and more we are called as Christians to live our faith in our everyday life. Our goal is to provoke thought and provide insight, to empower action and foster hope, to challenge you to take seriously the call to discipleship in all you do.

What are the basics of the biblical theology common to Christians and central to the Christian faith? It starts with God, with the amazing conviction that God is a community of love—one God in three persons. And we know this God who is Love preeminently in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The homemaking God of Genesis 1-2 pitches his tent among us (John 1:14) and takes on human flesh to redeem and transfigure our bent and broken world.

This God creates all things (Gen. 1) and covenants with the earth and its plethora of creatures (Gen. 6-9). Creation is not necessary but it is natural. It is fitting that a relational God would enter into relationship with creation. So while God is distinct from creation, God is also in intimate relation to creation, lovingly upholding and sustaining all things (Ps. 104). All things are what they are by virtue of their relation to God and to other existing things. And all things—the birches and the bears, the marmots and the meadows—respond to God in their own creaturely ways (Ps. 148).

We humans are earthly creatures made in God's image. In other words, we are both Spirit-enlivened dirt (Gen. 2:7) and called to represent God and rule as God rules (Gen. 1:26-28): with concern for the common good, with care for the most vulnerable, with justice and compassion (Ps. 72). Our unique calling to this task of bearing God's image implies not just dominion but also service. We are earthly creatures called to serve the earth (Gen. 2:15).

In speaking of who we are, we need to emphasize that we live in relationship to God, to other humans, and to the nonhuman world. Created by God, we humans are dependent on God and made to be in loving relationship with the God who is Love. Indeed, our hearts are restless until they find rest in God (St. Augustine). But we are also created to exist among and live in communion with other humans (Gen. 2:18). We are social creatures. Our humanity is co-humanity. Furthermore, we humans are made from the dust of the earth—*ʾādām* from the *ʾadāmāh* (Gen. 2:7). We are dependent upon

the earth—its nonhuman creatures, processes, and systems. So we are inextricably bound up not only with God and not only with other humans, but also with animals and plants, microbes and moles, the carbon cycle, symbiosis, and evapotranspiration.

We humans are not only related to other humans, we are embedded in a culture. We mature within certain family structures and learn certain languages. We inherit certain legal codes and assume certain economic practices. We take in not only certain kinds of food and drink but also certain artistic conventions and social customs. And we are embedded in particular places. We live immersed in distinct locales, we inhabit specific landscapes, and these places shape who we are, often in ways we do not realize.

NOT THE WAY IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE

This world of wonders made by God is, however, not the way it's supposed to be. It is bent and broken, warped and off-kilter (Gen. 3). Because of human disobedience, lack of trust, and pride, all creation does not yet sing God's praises undaunted, or delight in shalom. We are estranged from God, from each other, from our true best selves, and from the earth. Alienation stalks our every breath. The weight of inherited sorrow hangs on us like a sad song (Rom. 8).

And so God in Christ became flesh to redeem and to transfigure us and all creation. To do what we could not do by ourselves, God took on human form and made redemption possible. In Jesus, God defeats the powers of evil and we gain victory over sin and death (1 Cor. 15:57). In Jesus our bad debts are forgiven, and we are adopted into a new family (Rom. 4:25; Eph. 1:5). In Jesus our hurts are healed and we are reconciled with our enemies (2 Cor. 5:19). In Jesus we are ransomed from our captivity to self and liberated from the bondage of sin (Mark 10:45). In Jesus we are healed of our infirmities (Luke 7:22). In the life, death, and resurrection of our Messiah Jesus, the carpenter-rabbi from Nazareth, we see what God is really like, we learn of God's great love, and we attain life eternal.

The disciple John announces that this self-same Jesus, the Word, was “with God in the beginning” and “through him all things were made” (John 1:2-3). The apostle Paul says this same Jesus, the Lord of the cosmos, is the One in whom all creation coheres (Col. 1:17). This same Jesus, the Lion who is the Lamb, makes all things new (Rev. 21). And this same Jesus, the ruler and reconciler of all things, is the One for whom we hope and for whose reign of shalom we yearn.

This much, at least, is clear: the Christian faith, rooted in Scripture, provides more than ample reason to care for the earth. Indeed, as the Tangier

watermen learned, caring for creation is an integral dimension of Christian discipleship. Earth care is part and parcel of what it means to be Christian! At stake is nothing less than the loving care of the earth and its creatures, a proper understanding of God, and the integrity of our faith itself.

In the chapters that follow we attempt to flesh out this life of discipleship, this living the good life on God's good earth. Rightly understood, it is a life of freedom and of joy, a life in which all things flourish as God intends—a life of shalom.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What opportunities do you have to be a mediator and reconciler in the places where you live and work? How can you encourage people to work toward economic sustainability, social harmony, and ecological health?
2. If all things exist within the context of their relationships, which relationships are most difficult for you? Which ones give you joy? How do the things we buy relate us to other people and places? Does this have any moral significance?
3. How did Jesus rule? What does that mean for how we rule?
4. We can think of redemption in different ways: as God's gift of salvation for individual believers; as the gathering of a redeemed people, the church; or as God's work in Christ to redeem the whole of creation. Which of these resonates most with you? Why?
5. Why don't more Christians acknowledge that care for creation is integral to their faith? What obstacles prevent people from seeing Christianity as a religion that values the earth?

FOR FURTHER READING

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Wilkinson, Loren, and Mary Ruth Wilkinson. *Caring for Creation in Your Own Backyard*. Regent College, 1997.

RECOMMENDED DVD/VIDEO RESOURCE

Pohorski, Jeffrey. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Plight of the Chesapeake Watermen*. Skunkfilms Inc., 2001.

This Telly Award-winning documentary retells how Susan Emmerich recognized that the long-standing conflict between the watermen and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation revolved around the watermen's faith perspectives and how her faith-based stewardship perspective helped to resolve the conflict. 30 minutes. Available from Skunkfilms (www.skunkfilms.com).