

Caring for Creation

Small group Bible study and discussion questions

Aim: to help us think Biblically and practically about why and how Christians should care for the environment.

Format: the questions and discussion starters are based on the book *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living* by Nick Spencer and Robert White [1]. It was originally used one week after a talk from Robert White looking at the Biblical motivations for creation care (Chapter 3 of the book; see also [2]) as well as some of the science of climate change (Chapter 1) and its likely impact on people around the world.

The session is structured in four blocks, each with 5 to 8 minutes of leader introduction followed by about 10 minutes of group discussion (though some discussion parts could easily run for longer). We originally used it in a church context with one leader and half a dozen small groups. The four sets of discussion questions (for the small group facilitators) are repeated on a single page at the end of the document, along with the worksheet for the last block.

➔ Read Matthew 22.34-40.

Then read (and project or print) this quote, which is talking about those verses:

“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 vegetarian sandal brigade, and give our own time to more pressing matters.”

- Stephen Rand [3] quoted in [4] as a discussion starter
(see groupwork 3 for the context of this quote!)

➔ Discuss (groupwork 1) – based on quotation and Matthew 22.34-40

- Do you agree or not? Give reasons!
- If extra Qs are needed: does Matthew 22.34-40 really support this view?
- Another extra Q: Why do you think care for the environment has taken such a back seat in Christian thinking for the last few years?

● Part A: Why bother caring?

The first part of the session is based around a recap of the four Biblical reasons for caring for creation outlined in Chapter 3 of *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living* [1].

1. God cares for creation: so we should too.

Genesis 1 paints a picture of a hard-working creator God who is fascinated and delighted with the world he's building. But his involvement doesn't stop there. God's creativity in Genesis 1 is very different to an opening shot in a game of pool: he doesn't

just line it all up then stand back to see where everything rolls around to. The Bible describes a God who looks after his creation continuously, caring for it and intimately involved with its wellbeing. Towards the end of the book of Job, God asks Job a series of questions starting “Who does this...”, each time implying that God has, even though Job can’t. Listen to a few of them:

➔ **Read** Job 38.25-27 and 39-41.

God feeds his creatures and even waters the land where nobody lives. God cares about his creation: if we want to be Godly in our thinking and our behaviour, we will too.

2. God commanded us to care: it’s part of what it means to be human.

Here’s God’s first set of commands to Adam and Eve in Genesis:

➔ **Read** Genesis 1.26-31

➔ **Discuss (groupwork 2)** – based on Genesis 1.26-31

- *What does it mean for people to be made in God’s image? How can reflect his care and delight in his creation?*
- *What are God’s first set of commands for his people? What do you think it means to obey these commands today?*
- *Compare Genesis 1.28 (to Adam and Eve, God’s original design before the fall) to Genesis 9.1-2 (to Noah, the reality after sin has got into the world). What’s changed? Does this second description fit with how you see people relating to creation today?*

The difference in this last passage is really striking illustration of the way our relationship with creation is broken. Rule (or dominion) changes to a dictatorship of fear and dread.

3. We’re part of a community: care for neighbours means caring for creation.

➔ **Read** Matthew 22.37-40 (again)

You might remember somebody asking Jesus who is his ‘neighbour’: Jesus answers in Luke 10 with the parable of the Good Samaritan. We’re called to care for all our fellow-humans, even those separated by culture, geography or time (those still to be born). Of the 150 000 estimated deaths caused by global climate change in 2000, few are in the developed west; the highest mortality is concentrated in Africa [5]. Flooding, already one of the worlds biggest killers, will become more frequent as the world gets warmer and wetter; and again, it is not the developed west but poorer nations who will bear most of the death toll. Caring for our neighbours means taking seriously the impact of our behaviour on the rest of the world.

4. New creation: the Christian hope for future.

Luther said “*If I knew Jesus would return tomorrow, I would plant a tree today.*” He understood that God’s new creation will be a real material place, born from the world we live in now, and that caring for our world is intrinsically worthwhile.

➔ **Read** Revelation 21.1-5a

God’s new creation will be an amazing, perfected version of this one – God is “*making all things new*”, not “*making all new things*”. There’s a relationship between our current

world and the one to come, even though it will also be very different. The Bible uses the image of a seed growing into a plant to describe this continuity [1 Corinthians 15.35-38]. If we keep our eyes on this hope, we'll want to start caring for our world now just as we'll care for the new one in the future.

If caring for creation is part of living under God's new Kingdom, it will have implications for our evangelism. The Stephen Rand quote from the start (about creation care not mattering) actually finishes like this:

"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." [3,4]

➔ Discuss (groupwork 3) – the gospel and care for creation

- *In what way is it "dangerous for the cause of the gospel" for the church to ignore care for the environment?*
- *Look at Mark 10.17-23. Why does Jesus give this particular guy this command?*
- *What is the principle behind it? What are God's priorities? (Compare this to Mark 12.29-31, Mark's account of the greatest commandments.)*
- *What are the implications for how we use our environmental resources?*

● Part B: Need for vision

This (quite brief) part, looking at our need for a broad vision, is based on the beginning of Chapter 4 of *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living* [1].

When we start to think about the practical "how" of creation care, it's important to have a big picture view of where we are going, a vision that holds our different responses together. Seeing that will help us make joined-up changes: so we don't install energy-efficient bulbs then fly to New York for the weekend, or drive an hour each way to a farmers' market. More importantly, it helps overcome the sense of "too much effort for too little reward." The actual environmental reward from reducing my individual car use is quite small, but in the context of shaping a world with less fuel burnt and more time with those near me, it's worth making the effort.

- ➔ **Homework:** Isaiah 40-66 is a breathtakingly broad picture of God's restoration of his people Israel. Read through some of it – Isaiah 58 might be a good place to start – and look at how God will restore their home, their society, their relationships with each other and with him. Much of this vision points towards God's new creation: how can we begin to live it now?

● Part C: Practical vision

The worksheet for this discussion has several areas, for the group to fill with ideas:

- Individual – things we can do by ourselves, divided into:
 - Easy wins (eg turning down the thermostat)
 - Investments (more costly initially, eg changing to a green energy supplier)
- Community – things we aim for with those near us (eg how our choices about where to live and work affect our travel and our time with friends and family)
- National (and global) – changes to how our country or global society operates (eg taxation policies on fuel or air travel, the role and behaviour of large companies, relationship with poorer nations)

Encourage people to think big (what are we aiming for) as well as immediate and practical (what can I do now). Examples may help: Chapters 6 and 7 of *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living* [1] are a good source of ideas, as is the short Tearfund booklet *For Tomorrow Too* [6].

➔ **Discuss (groupwork 4) – what's next?**

- *What are our visions in each of these areas? Try to think big as well as small!*
- *How can my behaviour, or our behaviour as a church, head towards it? Is there something individual or communal we can do which helps move in the direction of a bigger change?*
- *What am I going to do differently next week?*

● **References**

- [1] *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living*. Nick Spencer and Robert White, SPCK, 2007.
- [2] *A burning issue: Christian care for the environment*. Robert White. Cambridge Papers 15(4), Jubilee Centre, December 2006. Available online at: www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge_papers
- [3] *Love your neighbour as yourself*, Stephen Rand, in *The Care of Creation*. R J Berry (ed), IVP 2000.
- [4] *Am I my brother's keeper?* in *A Christian Look at the Environment* (part 3). Dena Burne, JRI. Available online at: jri.org.uk/resource/bible.htm
- [5] *Impact of regional climate change on human health*. J A Patz, D Campbell-Lendrum, T Holloway and J A Foley. Nature 438, 17 November 2005.
- [6] *For Tomorrow Too: Living responsibly in a world of climate change*. Booklet from Tearfund, March 2006 (3rd edition).

Mark White
mark@celos.net
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(version 2)

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Discussion questions for group facilitators

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- If extra Qs are needed: does Matthew 22.34-40 really support this view?
- Another extra Q: Why do you think care for the environment has taken such a back seat in Christian thinking for the last few years?

➔ Discuss (groupwork 2) – based on Genesis 1.26-31

- *What does it mean for people to be made in God's image? How can we reflect his care and delight in his creation?*
- *What are God's first set of commands for his people? What do you think it means to obey these commands today?*
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(There is a worksheet to go with the last of these discussion blocks.)

Individual

Easy Wins

Investments

Community

National (and global)