

Some Christian principles for farming and food production

Dr Peter Carruthers

The call to care

God is revealed in scripture as God of compassion, whose care extends to all people and, indeed to the whole of His creation ('His tender mercy is over all His works', Psalm 145:9). Humanity, made in His image, is called to a comparable care and compassion. This is borne out repeatedly in Scripture, in both Old and New Testaments, and summed up in the simple commandment to 'love our neighbour as ourselves'.

Who is my neighbour?

Care and compassion are due to all. I *am* 'my brother's keeper' (cf. Genesis 4:9). God, after all, 'sends rain on the just and on the unjust' (Matthew 5:45). Jesus enjoined His followers to love not only their neighbours, but also their enemies. His own answer to the question 'who is my neighbour?' indicated that compassion should transcend both self-interest and cultural and racial differences (Luke 10:29-37).

Yet Scripture reveals a special concern for the vulnerable and the poor. Laws of tithing (Deuteronomy 14:28-29) and gleaning (Deuteronomy 24:19-22), for example, make special provision for those without assets, protection or power (ie strangers, widows, orphans) – 'those who have no standing ground in the community' (Brueggemann, 1977). The prophetic vision of Isaiah 61:1, the passage chosen by Jesus Himself to announce His ministry (Luke 4:18-19), sees the year of the Lord's favour as being marked by the 'binding up of the broken hearted' and the 'freeing of the oppressed'.

Care for the earth

Humanity, made in God's image, is also called to be like Him in compassion and care, in 'loving husbandry', in stewardship, for domestic animals¹ and for the whole of creation. This is evident in both Creation accounts. The 'dominion' mandate of Genesis 1:26 has the implication of wise rule (ie as of God himself); in Genesis 2:15, we see God placing the man in the garden to tend (or serve) and keep (or protect) it.

Stewardship enjoins us to regard the earth not primarily as *resource* (to be exploited for production), but as a *responsibility* (for which we are accountable ultimately to God). These principles are not only evident in Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, but also have been restated 'at various times in Christian history from at least the time of Iraneaus in the second Century, through Benedict and his rule, to John Ray in the seventeenth century and many people alive today' (Berry, 1999).

Restraint

The Bible does not proscribe economic growth, but it does prescribe measures to 'limit the growth of private wealth at the costs of injustice and oppression' (Wright, 1983) or, indeed, over-exploitation of the land. 'It is in this area that Old Testament economic ethics and laws are ... at their most radical and subtle' (Wright, 1983). Economic growth, through exchange and trade and through agricultural production is intended to be subordinate to the principles of love of neighbour and care for the earth, as above.

¹ Standards for the care of domestic animals are emphasised by commandments not to "plough with an ox and an ass together" (Deuteronomy 22:10) or 'muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain' (Deuteronomy 25:10), and, above all, by the inclusion of livestock in the keeping and blessing of the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11). 'Regard for the life of his beast' is a mark of a righteous man (Proverbs 12:10).

The principle of restraint, on the use of land, livestock and labour, on the concentration of wealth, and on expansionism, can be discerned in many Biblical themes and writings, but is most vividly portrayed in the 'Sabbath' and 'Jubilee'. The Sabbath was not only a rest for people, but also for livestock (Exodus 20:8-11), and, every seven years, a rest for the land itself (Leviticus 25:1-7).² The seventh was also a year for cancelling debts (Deuteronomy 15:1-11). The Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-17) emphasised the inalienability of family land (see 1 Kings 21.3), and, in effect, placed strict limits on the growth of private wealth. The Sabbath and Jubilee present a radical critique of the power structures behind the global food system.³

The market

The market is a 'blunt instrument'. Market forces unrestrained cannot assure either care for people or the planet.⁴ This conclusion arises not only from the applying the principles presented above, but also from much evidence from practical experience and observation from across the world. Environmental damage, for example, is widely recognised as clear evidence of market failure, as are the devastating effects of debt on the world's poorest countries. Responsible individuals and, in particular, good Governments will act to correct the excesses of the market.

Two forces are presently shaping the world food system - sustainable development (with its implicit concern for people and the environment) and trade liberalisation (with its implicit unrestrained market). These are inherently incompatible. In particular, the concentration of power and control of the world food system in the hands of a relatively few large corporations has serious implications for both producers (especially family farms) and consumers across the world. Giants may not always be bad, but they are big and sometimes unavoidably tread on little people!

Caring for the casualties of change

The ethical imperative to care for the poor, the vulnerable, the powerless and 'broken-hearted', urges us to a particular concern for those who have suffered in the recent crises in farming and those who seem likely to suffer as further changes occur or are enacted. These include some of who have lost businesses, livelihoods and their way of life, some who are deep in debt, and many who feel vulnerable, threatened, powerless and emotionally traumatised. A 'sister' to ATP, Farm Crisis Network (<http://www.farmcrisisnetwork.org.uk/>) contributes to meeting this need by providing practical and moral support to farming people in crisis.

² One reason for Israel's exile in Babylon was so that the land could enjoy the Sabbaths it was denied for nearly 500 years (Leviticus 26:33-35).

³ 'Sabbath sets a boundary to our best, most intense efforts to manage life and organise land for our security and well-being. ... Land sabbath is a reminder that (a) land is not *from* us, but is a gift *to* us, and (b) land is not fully given over to our satiation. ... Sabbath is for honouring land (Breuggeman, 1977).

⁴ On a related theme, theologian Hans Kung expressed the dilemma of progress as follows. 'The enlightenment itself shattered some of its own basic assumptions. There was progress in scientific research in all areas, but where was the contemporary moral progress that would have prevented the misuse of science? A highly efficient macro-technology developed which has spanned the world, but the spiritual energy which could have brought under control the risks of technology did not develop to the same degree. There was an economy which expanded and operated worldwide, but where are the resources of ecology or combating the destruction of nature which is equally worldwide? In the course of a complex development, democracy has been slowly established in many countries outside Europe. What has not been established is a morality that can work against the massive power interests of different men of power and power groups.' (quoted by Cray, 1995).

Doing justice

As Christians, we recognise that our neighbourly responsibility extends to those outside our own 'tribal' or national boundaries. Indeed we have a special responsibility to the world's poorest people and nations, and those who may be, in effect, casualties of the policies and actions of the rich nations.

Those with political power and influence need to recognise the close links between the food and farming policies of the world's wealthy nations and the fate of people, especially the rural poor, in developing countries, and enact policy measures to correct the imbalance and ensure that the wealthy share their wealth with the world's poorest.

Consumers can, wherever possible, buy 'fair trade' and exercise 'global responsibility' in their consumption patterns.

References

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About the author

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Websites

Agriculture and Theology Project	http://www.agriculture-theology.org.uk
Agricultural Christian Fellowship	http://www.agriculturalchristianfellowship.org.uk
Church Mission Society	http://www.cms.uk.org/
John Ray Initiative	http://www.jri.org.uk/