

# **BOOK REVIEW: CHRISTIANS CARING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: A HANDBOOK OF PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE**

[*Christians Caring for the Environment in Papua New Guinea: A Handbook of Principles and Practice*, compiled by the Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea, published by Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea, 2005.]

## **INTRODUCTION**

The book opens with the words of the statement of the World Council of Churches' Conference at Seoul, South Korea, held in March, 1990, to describe the condition of the globe, with its depleted resources: "The destruction of the planet has approached an order of geological magnitude. The soil is eroded, 70 percent of the reefs, where the fish breed, are gone, the rivers are polluted from mine tailings; the forests reduced to bare ground. The world's people are wounded."<sup>1</sup>

## **THE SEVEN DEGRADATIONS<sup>2</sup>**

In pursuing the theme of depletion of physical resources of the planet, the book begins with the presentation of the seven degradations of creation, as outlined by Dr Calvin B. DeWitt, in his article "Creation's Environmental Challenge to Evangelical Christianity". The seven degradations include alteration of earth's energy exchange, land degradation, deforestation, species' extinction, water-quality degradation, waste generation and global toxification, and human and cultural degradation.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Christians Caring for the Environment in Papua New Guinea* (Mt Hagen PNG: Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea, 2005), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

Some of these issues can be said to be those that Papua New Guineans have to grapple with. For instance, deforestation is the result of logging. Extinction of plant and animal species is taking place, as the result of loss of rainforests. Soil erosion is the result of failure in controlling water run-off. Water pollution is caused by industrial waste, due to mining, uncontrolled disposal of industrial waste, and sewage disposal. Marine degradation is the result of over-fishing, and pollutants carried by land water. Air pollution is caused by widespread burning of wood, and using different types of fuel.

### **THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF CREATION-KEEPING DISCIPLESHIP<sup>3</sup>**

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the theology of environment, based on the biblical teaching of God's creation, and mankind's creation-keeping discipleship. The evangelical perspective of God's creation comes from the analysis of the first three chapters of Genesis, which are held as relevant to the modern understanding of the environment around us. In this process, several principles of creation-keeping discipleship were developed: being disciples of Christ, being the second Adam, giving rest to the land that is due to it, as envisaged in the Sabbath, esteeming the blessings of God's creation, to be enjoyed in true stewardship, so that other generations could have the benefit of the same, seeking the Lordship of God in every area of life, restraining greed by accepting what God has provided with grateful acknowledgment, and exercising principles of true stewardship in practical ways.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL CARE BASED ON BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES**

The focus of the discussion also brings out the point that the churches are variously rooted in different cultures, and, hence, the approaches the church leaders take towards the environment are different. Nevertheless, it does not absolve us from accepting the relevance of biblical principles that help us live our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ in harmonious relationship with God's creation.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 18-19.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

## **THE SEVEN PROVISIONS OF THE CREATOR<sup>5</sup>**

The picture of harmonious relationship of man with nature is often seen in the Bible, as we find in Ps 8, 24, 33, 90, 104, 115, 121, and 145. This brings into focus another neglected aspect of evangelical Christians: to worship God as Creator, Governor, and Upholder of all things. We see humanity as individual human beings, created in God's image, with a responsibility of caring and exercising our delegated authority over the environment, but not autonomously. Calvin B. De Witt's article "Creation's Environmental Challenge to Evangelical Christianity" exemplifies "Seven Provisions of the Creator" that speak of the wonder and awesomeness of God's creation, as we find in a study of Ps 104. The provisions of God, as De Witt outlines, are the regulation of earth's energy exchange with the sun, biochemical and soil-building processes, our ecosystem's amazing recycling and transfer of energy, fruitfulness, as witnessed in the biodiversity and the responsive and adaptive physiologies of life on earth, water purification systems of the biosphere, distribution of vital materials for life on earth, and the ability endowed to human beings to live in accordance with the laws of nature.

## **THE BIBLICAL GROUND FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CARE<sup>6</sup>**

The theology of the environment also takes into account the story of the nation of Israel. It is observed that the creation aspect of God's relationship with mankind and all His creation is the basis of human behaviour, and what is acceptable and what is not. The laws, He gave to Israel to abide by, reveal God's care and concern for His creation.

The theology of environment also notes the affirmation made by the New Testament teaching on the sacredness of God's creation, and man's responsibility of loving care. In the gospels, we see God's care for individual members of His creation, small and great. This is clearly seen in the teaching of our Lord (Luke 12:7). This is also observed in the Old Testament's teaching on God's knowledge about His creation (Is 40:26). We also read in the gospels that Jesus is the Lord of Creation. The

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

incarnation of our Lord proves the falsity of ideas of the material world around us, which influenced the church to the point of neglecting the physical aspects of life.

We acknowledge the church's responsibility of balancing the spiritual and the physical in its service to God.

### **A STUDY OF THE BACKGROUND OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN PNG<sup>7</sup>**

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the key environmental issues for Papua New Guinea. These issues are considered against the background of the country and its culture. When contrasted with the modern approach of agriculture, with its emphasis on increased production and profit, traditional practices in agriculture are found to have had a positive impact on environment. But we are left with much environmental degradation already, by the encroachment of modern methods, and also some unsound practices of traditional agricultural methods. The result is that a considerable amount of resources are wasted in running a normal, traditional way of life. There is also over-exploitation of plants and animals, leading to the extinction of a number of species. PNG, therefore, is not isolated from general environment degradation. In fact, there is enough evidence in the country to show that, in the name of development, a lot of land resources are put at risk of degradation. This calls for sustainable development strategies in the country.

### **AN ANALYSIS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN PNG<sup>8</sup>**

Several pages are devoted to the detailed analysis of various factors affecting the environment in PNG. The workshops covered the themes: the land and the people, forests, mines, marine resources, and freshwater resources. These environmental issues of PNG are analysed under the headings of (1) Significance, (2) Degradation, (3) Restoration.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-66.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 67-132.

*The Significance of Resources.* Under the significance of rainforests, we learn quite a deal about the dependence of Papua New Guineans on the forests for livelihood and cultural life. We are given a good description of the way of life of the people. The significance of the atmosphere is portrayed in detail, showing its link to the basic requirement of good health. We learn about the “greenhouse gases”, and how important they are in capturing sun’s energy, and in the maintenance of the earth’s surface temperature, and of the atmosphere around it, at a constant level. Change in the levels of these gases is linked to the now-dreaded global warming. The significance of marine resources is highlighted in PNG’s rich coral reefs, and the extensive mangrove ecosystems. The country is also blessed with a wide range of rivers that cover 14 percent of the land.

*The Degradation of Resources.* The cause of the degradation of rainforests is man himself. While deforestation is a global issue, it has now become a major concern for conservationists in PNG. Measures must be taken to control the damage done to the forests. As for the soils, degradation and loss of fertile soils continues. The often-experienced landslides are due to the fact that much of the vegetation on the sloping land has been removed. Degradation has also taken place on various tracts of mangroves. As a result, there is substantial damage to the ecosystems along the coastline, especially along the Hanuabada and Matuka region. There is, in addition to all this, a degradation of freshwater resources. Though it is unlikely to reach the levels of degradation, evident in Europe and Asia, a process has already been set in motion by the dumping of waste from industry, mines, and communities. Measures must be taken to control this.

*Restoration.* A number of measures have been taken by governments and community agencies across the world to restore sustainability in agriculture, conservation of land use, and water resources. Organic fertilisers, such as animal manure, compost, and “green fertilisers”, which are plants that enrich the soil with nitrogen, are used in several countries. The practice of burning of plants is discouraged, because it prevents recycling and compost making, and destroys certain useful plant nutrients. This is one measure of control, of which PNG farmers should

take note, about which necessary steps should be taken to make people aware of the problem. Water-flow management on the sides of the hills is highly recommended as a possible innovation in agriculture, not only to prevent soil erosion, but to reign in the flow of water for increased use in agriculture. Research is recommended as a possible step towards implementing sloping agricultural land technology.

Although PNG is not a major contributor to global problems of pollution, it is recommended that the country should facilitate environment awareness among adults, besides making school curricula accommodate environmental issues, in regards to atmospheric pollution. PNG could be a major user of ethanol as a fuel if it is to exploit the possibilities of growing sources of sugars and starch. A wide range of possibilities exists in recycling of waste in our societies. People should be taught about waste disposal for recycling.

For restoration and sustainability of marine resources, four areas are suggested for consideration: relevant research, laying down regulations and implementing them, coordinated efforts for moral leadership in community and government levels, and public awareness through education.

### **NEED FOR RESPONSE<sup>9</sup>**

Individuals and churches have to respond with action plans for sustainability of all the country's resources, and ensuring environmental restoration. Four attitude-related actions are suggested. They are: loving God's creation, repentance on past failings, rethinking of priorities, and being good stewards of God's creation, through our way of life.

The book closes with the Goroka Declaration on Christians and the Environment, May 2003, which calls on all Christians and concerned people to work towards godly, just economies; to work for responsible public policies; and to affirm the biblical care of creation, "knowing that

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 133-138.

until Christ returns to reconcile all things, we are called to be faithful stewards of God's good garden, our earthly home".<sup>10</sup>

### **FORMAT AND PRODUCTION OF THE BOOK**

The book is the result of consultation meetings held in Goroka in May, 2003, and April, 2004. The team consisted of a number of pastors and teachers, representing different regions of PNG, led by the team leader, the General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of PNG, Mr David Kima. While acknowledgment was made of their contributions, and of the work of Graeme Swincer in bringing together the contributions of participants, it is not made clear who wrote the entire document. It would be of help to students and researchers if the writer's name, as the compiler, or editor, is highlighted on the facing page, and if segments or chapters of the book are the result of various contributions of the participants, that, too, must be made clear within the text under each heading. If the material is all one conglomerate of all the contributions, then the editor's name could suffice, with a note about the workshops and participants, and with due acknowledgments made elsewhere.

The footnoting would be helpful if superscripted numbers are used instead of symbols. This will enable students to be specific in noting their citations in their papers.

### **LAUNCHING OF THE BOOK**

The book was launched under the auspices of the Evangelical Alliance of Papua New Guinea at an official function held at the PNG University of Technology on September 31, 2005. One of the team members, Kirine Yandit, gave the keynote address at this gathering. Kirine highlighted the theology of the environment that is based on the positive affirmation of biblical teaching that God is the creator of the universe, and He has

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 139-141.

pleasure over all that He created. “God cares, and God is concerned for the welfare of the whole universe, man and nature.”<sup>11</sup>

### **THE ROLE OF THE EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE**

In making the book available to the public, the churches of the Evangelical Alliance, an organisation led by David Kima, came together for discussions on matters, such as environment conservation and Christians’ responsibility. In doing so, the churches have shown a willingness to deal with problems in the country, serving as positive role for the churches of PNG.

John Yejerla  
Papua New Guinea.

---

<sup>11</sup> Kirine Yandit, “Keynote Address: Christians Caring for the Environment in Papua New Guinea”, *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 23-1 (2007), pp. 89-96.