

## **“Creation: Called to Care”**

Statement, Church of the Brethren 1991 Annual Conference

### **ABSTRACT**

Why should Christians care about the environment? Simply because we learn in Genesis that God has promised to fulfill all of creation, not just humanity, and has made humans the stewards of it. More importantly, God sent Christ into the very midst of creation to be “God with us” and to fulfill the promise to save humankind and nature. God’s redemption makes the creation whole, the place where God’s will is being done on earth as it is in heaven.

God’s promises are not mere pledges. They are covenants. And covenants are agreements between people and between people and God. The covenants with Noah and Abraham and the New Covenant mean that people of faith are responsible for their part in renewing and sustaining the creation.

This statement helps us to see the degradation of the earth as sin, our sin. We, the people who have accepted the redeeming love of God, have broken the covenant to care for creation. The challenge in the paper is to confess our sin, to take seriously our role as stewards of the earth, and to work for the renewal of creation.

The needs of the world are apparent. The call is clear. The most motivating aspect of this statement is the claim that stewardship of the creation is a matter of faith.

### **Part II: OUR THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING**

#### **Section D: Land**

In the people of Israel’s experience with the land, we find a model of the promise and peril in humanity’s relationship to creation.

The Hebrew Scriptures are a record of the relationship between Israel, creation, and Yahweh. Relationship to creation focuses around the land. Hebrew Scripture scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann goes so far as to say, “The Bible itself is primarily concerned with the issue of being displaced and yearning for a place...land is a central, if not the central theme of biblical faith” (*The Land*).

God as creator is considered in the biblical tradition to be the sole owner of the earth. At the heart of creation faith is the understanding that “the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me” (Lev. 25:23). “The earth is the lord’s” (Psa. 24:1). Yet while no individual Israelite was to imagine that they possessed any land in their own right, God gave the land to Israel as a whole (Deuteronomy 1:8). Certain families within Israel used the land allotted to them (Joshua 13 ff.) but only on condition that all members of the tribe or family might share in the income derived from the land. Any monopolizing of land was, therefore, a serious failure in worship

Continually, the prophets warned that the land has seductive power. The temptation is to cling to it, possess it, manage it, rule over it, and own it to treat it as though it were one’s own domain rather than to cherish it and as stewards hold it in trust as Yahweh’s gift. The gift of land to the people of Israel was conditional upon living within that land as if it

were Yahweh's and they were Yahweh's people. But because they forgot this, choosing instead to possess the land as if it were their own, they lost it. That is the judgment announced by Jeremiah.

Israel's relationship to the land can symbolize humanity's relationship to creation. Saving that creation and our place within it can come only by treating it as God's gift rather than our possession. We need to confess that Western Christianity has been extremely weak in proclaiming a gospel of a humble and nurturing love for creation. Part of the reason may be that we have strayed far from this conviction of divine ownership of the land, of equal sharing of all families in the use of it.

Biblical creation ethics is essentially sabbath ethics, for the sabbath is the law of creation. According to Exodus 23:10-11, in the seventh year Israel is to leave the land untouched, "that the poor of your people may eat." In Leviticus 25:1-7, the law of the sabbatical year is repeated, so that "the land may celebrate its great sabbath to the lord," The sabbath rest for the land every seven years contains God's blessing for the land. Moreover, the sabbath rest is a piece of deep ecological wisdom and sharply contrasts with the destructive practices of much of modern industrialized agriculture.

Biblical passages frequently suggest that humanity's rebellion against God results in the land itself suffering, mourning, and becoming unfaithful. Our modern culture has all but lost this vision of the land. Jeremiah 2:7 refers to the unfaithfulness and sins of humanity expressed in the destruction of the environment. It says, "I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when you came in you defiled my land..." That's exactly what we have done.

Contrasted with the wondrous pictures of creation's intended harmony and wholeness given in the Scriptures, environmental ruin is a direct offense against God the Creator. Indeed biblical insight names human sin as the cause of our deteriorating environment. Selfish lives alienated from God's purposes and love quite literally cause the land to mourn and the whole creation to be in travail. "How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither?" asks Jeremiah (12:4). The biblical answer carries promise for the renewal of the created order, continually springing fresh from the resources of God's grace. Just as God responds to human sin and rebellion with the invitation to new life, the response to the degradation of the earth is the concrete hope for restoring "shalom" and, in the words of the Psalm, the renewing of the face of the earth (104:30).

Though Brethren theological understandings have not referred explicitly to the preservation of the earth, Brethren practice has tended in that direction. A community of believers who would live in harmony must seek a redemptive relationship with their environment. By nurturing the earth, the Brethren achieved prosperity that set a trend for Brethren for generations. Doing the Creator's will in a faithful community requires a recognition that the created world in which humans move and have their being is not irrelevant but is the very context in which faithfulness to God is expressed.