

Loving our future neighbour: Earth-keeping as Christian witness

John Stott London Lecture 11/11/21

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This handout contains the John Stott quotations used in the lecture.

Note: Page numbers given as "JSOCC" are from the volume *John Stott on Creation Care* (Berry, R.J. (Sam) with Meitzner Yoder, Laura S. 2021. London: Inter-Varsity). Available from [IVP Books](https://ivpbooks.com/john-stott-on-creation-care), <https://ivpbooks.com/john-stott-on-creation-care>.

In 1977, Stott's first creation care sermon "God and the Environment" preached at All Souls, centered on Psalm 104, noted that "many of us have a good doctrine of salvation and a bad doctrine of creation. Some of us don't have a doctrine of creation at all. We're not interested in the works of the Lord, but we ought to be." [JSOCC 31]

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A talk prepared for the 2003 InterVarsity Urbana Conference expanded this theme:

"Since both creation and redemption are termed 'the works of Yahweh' it is evident that we should hold them together and not acquiesce in their separation. ...God's mighty acts in creation and redemption are to be made known throughout the world. We are not to be afraid to bear witness to the Creator as well as to the Redeemer. Just as the apostle Paul did when confronted by the philosophers in Athens, we are to hold together in our evangelistic witness the Creation and the Cross; the God who made us and who has redeemed us in Jesus Christ. If either is omitted, our gospel has been truncated." [JSOCC 147, 150]

[Stott] saw such dualism as impeding our earthkeeping: "We need as strong and biblical a doctrine of creation as we do of redemption. Then we would care for creation more conscientiously than we usually do." [JSOCC 151]

The above quotes are from: Stott, John. 2003. Unpublished manuscript. Notes from seminar, 'Caring for creation', written to be presented at InterVarsity Urbana Student Missions Conference 2003. Lambeth Palace papers. Used by permission of the Executors of John Stott's Literary Estate.

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Stott was quite clear about the ecological dimensions of mission and the integrity of Christian witness. In his 1983 Foreword to *Under the Bright Wings*, the early story of A Rocha, Stott anticipated a question some

readers might be asking: “But can ecological involvement properly be included under the heading of ‘mission’? Yes, it can and should. For mission embraces everything Christ sends his people into the world to do, service as well as evangelism. And we cannot truly love and serve our neighbours if at the same time we are destroying their environment, or acquiescing in its destruction, or even ignoring the environmentally depleted circumstances in which so many people are condemned to live. As by the incarnation Jesus Christ entered into our world, so true incarnational mission involves entering into other people’s worlds, including the world of their social and environmental reality.” [JSOCC 182]

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His 1977 sermon put it this way: “God is said in this psalm [104] to rejoice in his works, so his people ought to rejoice in them also. And I don’t hesitate to say that every Christian ought to be interested in natural history, ...We ought, ...to study nature in order to be able to praise God for His works. ...We can’t worship God adequately if we don’t study His works in order to worship Him who has created them.” [JSOCC 31]

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In *Christian Mission in the Modern World* in 1975, Stott wrote “that in God’s vocabulary our neighbor includes our enemy, and that to love means to ‘do good’, that is, to give ourselves actively and constructively to serve our neighbor’s welfare.” [JSOCC 84]

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Stott often quoted Psalm 145:4: ‘One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts.’ [JSOCC 150, 157]

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The phrase “future generations” was referenced twice in the 1972 statement on human environmental responsibility developed by the Research Scientists’ Christian Fellowship, and published by UCCF, now nearly 50 years ago:

First, “We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. The Christian’s mandate is for the whole of (hu)mankind. It is not sectional and it includes **future generations**. This limits us severely but constructively.” [JSOCC 165]

And second, “Governments will need great reinforcing in their resolves to do good because every government is tempted to find favor by taking more out of ‘nature’ than is necessary at the expense of **future generations**. Christian opinion is needed to help to create a *whole* attitude to natural resources that will enable governments to do what in their responsible moments they would like to, but dare not, because of

popular greed. ...The existentialist mood of living only in and for the present has to be fought here.” [JSOCC 167]

The above quotes are from: Research Scientists’ Christian Fellowship Conference statement (1973) ‘Man has a positive responsibility to manage nature’, *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, 25(1), March, pp. 3–4 (available free online at: <<https://asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1973/JASA3-73Complete.pdf>>).

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In a 1977 sermon, Stott detailed God’s ongoing provision for birds and beasts -- not only food and water, but also, importantly, shelter, and places to breed, and to rest on migrations, rhythm of days and nights and seasons, and sport or play, and of course their life and breath itself. He noted the familiar verses of Psalm 104:24-25, “the earth is full of your creatures; the sea is full of them also” and says this about “Leviathan, ...[mentioned] here...[as] a general word for monsters of the deep of different kinds. God has formed them to sport in the sea. Did you ever know that God was concerned about Leviathan’s sport? That He made provision for Leviathan to enjoy playtime in the ocean? The sea is depicted as a divinely supplied playground for all its creatures.” [JSOCC 28]

In a 1988 sermon, Stott referred to Psalm 104’s Leviathan as “the divine pet”. [JSOCC 118]

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What does our care of creation have to do with the lived-out nature of Christian witness? Stott often gave this simple reason: “God intends . . . our care of creation to reflect our love for the creator”. [JSOCC 62, 63, 207, 210, 212]

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In his book *Issues Facing Christians Today* (2006), Stott noted that Christians have a distinctive contribution to make to ecological action in the public sphere, because acknowledging God as Creator and looking forward to the day when it is made new “give us an appropriate respect for the earth, indeed for the whole material creation, since God both made it and will remake it. In consequence, we must learn to think and act ecologically. We repent of extravagance, pollution and wanton destruction.” [JSOCC 177]

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The Commitment’s [Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle, 1980] section on evangelism links the broader work of the church to lifestyle and witness of ordinary believers:

“The church is not yet taking seriously its commission to be his witnesses ‘to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1:8). So the call to a responsible lifestyle must not be divorced from the call to responsible witness. For the credibility of our message is seriously diminished whenever we contradict it by our lives. It is impossible with integrity to proclaim Christ’s salvation if he has evidently not saved us from greed, or his lordship if we are not good stewards of our possessions, or his love if we close our hearts against the needy.” [JSOCC 106-107]

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In *Issues Facing Christians Today*, Stott noted that “At the root of the ecological crisis is human greed”. [JSOCC 178]

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Speaking about Matthew 5 through 7, Stott said, “Jesus did not give us an academic treatise calculated merely to stimulate the mind. I believe he meant his Sermon on the Mount to be obeyed. [page ix]... [What should] human life and human community look like when they come under the gracious rule of God[?]... Different!” [page 4]

This quote is taken from: Stott, John R.W. ([1978] 1984, 2000) *Christian Counter-Culture*. Leicester: IVP. (Republished by IVP in 1984 as *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* and revised, with additions, in 2020. Quotation from page ix and page 4 of the 2020 edition.)

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In 2006, Stott noted that “the environment has, once again, become an important agenda item at world summits. Yet it is easier to sign treaties than to live lives that are consistent with good trusteeship of God’s world.” [JSOCC 176]

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Let’s conclude with this prayer, written by John Stott (*Christian Basics*, 1991):

“Almighty God, you created the planet earth, you make peace, and you love justice. Give your own concern for the environment to those who are destroying it, your peace to the violent places of the world, and your justice to the deprived and the oppressed. And show us what we can do to forward your purposes of love, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” [JSOCC 258]