

Using Biblical Teaching to Motivate Farmers to Maintain a Living Soil

In REAP (Rural Extension with Africa's Poor) our work is through local churches, emphasising an approach that we believe plays to the potential of the local church. While there is much potential that we see in the local church, we focus on four main factors in the area that we work, namely eastern Africa. These are the potential of the existing church structure, the use of the Bible to motivate people, the potential for extending teaching leading to behaviour change, and the potential for teaching that is relevant to the rural poor.

One of the greatest challenges in sustainable approaches to development is motivating people and in eastern Africa we have found the Bible to be a wonderful resource for motivating people to be responsible, and to make best use of the resources available. We use the Bible to both introduce and back up our technical teaching, and have found this particularly relevant to our Environmental and Sustainable Agriculture teaching. Once people have been stimulated through motivational teaching they are keen to learn about practical things they can do and we have linked the Biblical teaching with this practical. For the rural poor we promote teaching which as far as possible does not depend on purchased inputs, but which makes good use of available labour, a resource that is normally abundant for them as they seek to support many people on ever smaller pieces of land.

When talking about the soil, the starting point for our teaching is that God created the world, and everything in it, including the living soil!

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ... God called the dry ground "land" ... And God saw that it was good. Then God said "let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds. And it was so." (Genesis 1:1, 10-11)

We follow this up with teaching from the Bible that tells us that all that God owns all that he has made.

"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it; for He founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters." (Psalm 24:1-2)

"To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it." (Deuteronomy 10:14)

This includes all the land that we say we own, and the soil on that land is given us to use. This is very motivational teaching for anyone seeking to follow God's ways, and links with the holistic worldview of Africa. We are only God's Stewards, taking care of what He has made for our use. As stewards we are not only to make use of the soil that God has given us, but we also need to take care of our father's property. This is very clearly pointed out in the mandate given right at the beginning of the Bible in Genesis chapter 2.

"The LORD God took man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." (Genesis 2:15)

This verse is a very important one for us in discussing the problems that have arisen from a non-holistic view of economic development. This dual mandate is the basis of our relationship with all of creation and especially the basis of our agricultural production, the soil. We are mandated to make use of (work) it for production, but not just to exploit it but to care for it.

The balanced way in which God created the world is also important for us to think about. The Bible tells us that when God created the world he was pleased with it.

"God saw all that He had made, and it was very good." (Genesis 1:31)

This is a very important verse when we think about the living soil and our relationship to it. The natural living soil is indeed 'very good'. The soil that God gave us is very wonderfully made. God in His wisdom made it with the right structure and full of living things to keep it good, so that it will produce well:

"By wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations, by understanding He set the heavens in place; by His knowledge the deeps were divided, and the clouds let drop the dew." (Proverbs 3:19)

The basis of the practical teaching that comes out of this is that if we care for the soil in relation to the way that God made, it will ensure that it goes on producing well for our benefit. We need to care for the soil, by understanding the living soil and adopting practices that maintain the life in the soil, so that it continues to go on producing. The Bible has some very beautiful images about the potential of the living soil:

"You show your care for the land by sending rain; you make it rich and fertile. You fill the streams with water; you provide the earth with crops. This is how you do it: you send abundant rain on the ploughed fields and soak them with water; you soften the soil with showers and cause the young plants to grow. What a rich harvest your goodness provides! Wherever you go there is plenty." (Psalm 65:9-11 GNB)

If however we ignore the way that God has created the soil, and we only seek to use it and not care for it we can expect problems. The story of creation teaches us that we need to get a balance between making use of and caring for what God has given us in creation, including trees. We need to maintain the water catchments so that we have the necessary rain, and maintain the soil so that it can make good use of that rain. In short, we need to work with rather than against creation. This is a challenge we need to work through. It is addressed in many places in the Bible:

"When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, and when they pray towards this place and confess your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel. Teach them the right way to live, and send rain on the land that you gave your people for an inheritance." (II Chronicles 6:26-27)

"If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land." (Leviticus 26:3-5)

These verses are not easy ones for non holistic cultures, and they have many different interpretations at different levels of thinking. They are however very positive challenges to Christians. The way we use these verses in our teaching relating to soil is that we are not glorifying God our Father if we let the soil that he has given us in stewardship be washed away in the heavy rains and let erosion go unchecked. If we are working with God's creation, we are following God's decrees and teaching the right way to live. Greed and pride have in many cases led to the problems we are now facing in bringing dead soils that no longer reflect the wonder of God's creation. The life however can be restored by returning to God's way of doing things.

This teaching points out that caring for the soil is part of our relationship with God, our Father. The way that we care for His creation is a reflection on how we see Him and our relationship with him. We clearly recognise and accept that it requires work and effort on our part, but when we put in this work it is not meaningless toil but is productive so that the goodness of creation can produce the harvest we aim for. We also teach from the Bible on a balanced view of work. It is not something bad, but is seen in very positive light in the Bible:

"He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgement." (Proverbs 12:11)

"Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody." (I Thessalonians 4:11-12)

Caring for the soil also takes into account our responsibility to other people round about us. When we do not care for our soil, our neighbours also suffer. When we care for it, our neighbours benefit. This understanding also relates clearly to Biblical teaching:


"Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life. I am the Lord love your neighbour as yourself." (Leviticus 19:16 & 18)

"Do not plot harm against your neighbour, who lives trustfully near you." (Proverbs 3:29)

"Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:4)

By encouraging churches to use the Bible as a motivating force we have begun to play to the potential that churches have in terms of practical teaching. Once farmers are motivated they respond well to the practical teaching of how to prevent and cure soil erosion, how to build up the organic matter in the soil, how to incorporate trees into the agricultural system and therefore how to maintain or re-establish a living fertile soil. The motivation we emphasise is to work with God's creation rather than against it and to use the abundance of scientific understanding relating to the living soil to develop practical methods.

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