

### Going Green for God

Creation care is implicit in the Bible's message.



Everything is going green these days, from groceries to cars to...the Bible. With the release of HarperOne's *Green Bible*, it is important to remember that beyond green letters and clever marketing, the Bible has a powerful message about the earth and our responsibility for its care.

#### Scripture Focus:

Genesis 1, Psalm 104:1-30, Genesis 2:1-15, Colossians 1:15-23.

### Preparation Prior to Class

- Make a copy of the complete Bible study for each participant.
- Ask participants to read the article at the end of the study *before* class.
- The leader should read through each Part to see if extra materials or tools are needed.

### Study Outline

#### PART 1 Identify the Current Issue

- Background information on the current issue is read aloud by the leader or participant.
- *Discussion Starter* questions encourage conversation. (It is not necessary to address every question.)

#### PART 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

- Scripture helps the group reflect biblically and theologically on the current issue.
- *Teaching Points* focus on different Scripture passages, each point concluding with a set of questions.

#### PART 3 Apply Your Findings

- An activity or additional questions help make practical the ideas just discussed.

#### ARTICLE HANDOUT

“Meager Harvest,” by Telford Work, *Christianity Today*.

### PART 1 Identify the Current Issue

A recent study by the Barna Group found that nine out of ten American evangelicals would like Christians to care more actively for creation. So why don't we? Perhaps we perceive environmentalism as mainly a political cause. Perhaps we think other issues are more important. Yet, despite all this, what matters is what the Bible says about creation care.

*The Green Bible* highlights certain passages that the editors feel support the environmental cause. As with any specialty Bible, we must be wary of the distorting power of faith defined by issues rather than by Jesus Christ. Our goal in reading the Bible should not be to conform to a narrow agenda but to see the Bible in what Work calls its "incomprehensible fullness." We support creation care not by dividing the Bible into "green" and "non-green" verses but by understanding how the Bible's account of the earth relates to its message of hope, salvation, and redemption.

#### **Discussion Starters**

- Q** Assess your attitude toward the earth and environmental issues. What has influenced this view?
  
- Q** How many sermons or Bible studies have you heard dealing with creation care? What have you heard from other Christian influences? Is your church doing anything to protect the environment? What?

### PART 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

#### **Teaching Point 1: God's creation is good.**

*Read Genesis 1.* God is the master craftsman. When he makes something, it is not merely functional. At multiple points throughout the creation story, he reflects on his work and declares it "good," and, when he sees everything he has made, "very good."

The goodness of God's creation reflects his perfection. The God who creates perfectly also saves perfectly. Just as we have worth because God created us, so the earth has worth as a creation of almighty God. It is true that humans alone among the creations of God bear his image. However, the worth of his creation is not tied to its relationship to the human race; it stems from the unchanging fact of its source and owner.

It is one thing to acknowledge the goodness of God's creation. It is another to experience that reality. Consider the intricacy of the many intricately interrelated systems required

### PART 2 Discover the Eternal Principles (cont.)

for the human race to carry on: Water supplies, food chains, even our bodies are finely tuned to provide for our continued survival. If we truly appreciate what God has made, we will treat it as something of value.

- Q** Identify each time God comments on his creation. On what aspects of creation does he speak? What does he say?

**Teaching Point 2: God places us in his creation and allows us to enjoy it.**

*Read Genesis 1:26-30, Psalm 104:1-30.* We are stewards of God's masterpiece, called to both care for and develop his creation. We can be thankful that he allows us the privilege of enjoying the blessings of his work, trees that are "pleasant to the sight and good for food" (Genesis 2:9). He blessed his creation with fruitfulness that not only provides for the continued existence of life but also enhances it. It is for our benefit, as individuals and as a human race, that God set in place these life-giving systems. The Reformers said the chief end of humankind is "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." These begin now, on the earth.

This reality plays out in every verse of the Bible. Our relationship to God is central to all our other relationships. Who we are in Christ defines who we are in relation to others, to ourselves, and to creation. We live every moment in each of these relationships; they are reciprocal. We treat creation well because we love God, and we love God when we treat creation well.

But when we treat the earth as our own personal property, Calvin B. DeWitt notes in his book *Earth-Wise: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues*, we displace God's other creatures and "limit their potential to fulfill their blessing and God's command to be fruitful." That plants yield seed and trees yield fruit is necessary to our survival and available for our enjoyment. While he gives us dominion over his creatures, this dominion is in no way a license to selfishly exploit them.

- Q** List God's commands in the Genesis passage. To whom are they directed? Who and what elements of creation do they involve?
- Q** In the Psalms passage, what is the relationship between God and his creation? In what ways can we follow his example? In what ways can't we?

### PART 2 Discover the Eternal Principles (cont.)

#### **Teaching Point 3: God calls us to keep and sustain his good creation.**

Read Genesis 2:1-15, Colossians 1:15-23. In Genesis 2:15, God places Adam in the garden in order to “till [the earth] and keep it.” From the very beginning, creation care is a key component of our mandate. DeWitt notes that the Hebrew verb *shamar*, here translated *to keep*, can also mean *to guard, safeguard, take care of, or look after*. He notes that it suggests “a loving, caring, sustaining kind of keeping” and is the same verb used in the blessing of Aaron: “The Lord bless you and keep you” (Numbers 6:24).

Just as God “keeps” us by helping us to grow and flourish in our life-sustaining relationships with him and with others, so too must we “keep” the earth by maintaining the balance so each individual element can not only survive but thrive.

While God gives us dominion over the earth, it does not belong to us. In Colossians 1, we see that Christ is the “firstborn of all creation” and that “in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” The earth was created not only *by* Jesus but also *for* Jesus. Because we bear the image of God, we have a responsibility to keep his creation he has provided for our survival and enjoyment. By keeping the earth, we are demonstrating our love for its Creator by loving his creation. We are preparing it to present back to him as an offering, a demonstration that we love what he loves.

- ❑ How does the creation of man relate to the creation of plants and creatures in this passage? What does this say about our relationship to other living things?
- ❑ How does the Sabbath play a role in our keeping of creation?

### PART 3 Apply Your Findings

- ❑ What does it mean to have a biblical attitude toward creation care?
- ❑ How should the church respond to environmental issues?
- ❑ How can we properly care for the environment without becoming just another interest group?
- ❑ What actions can you take to live out a biblical attitude toward creation care?

— Study prepared by Laura Leonard, editorial assistant for Christianity Today.

### Meager Harvest

*The Green Bible* promises to deepen our understanding of creation care. Unfortunately, it fails to deliver.

By Telford Work

*Environmental crisis* is a cliché whose connotations of divine judgment we no longer notice. But the term is apt for what is happening to the earth today. Habitats are disappearing and species going extinct at unprecedented rates. Artificial chemicals in ecosystems worldwide are lowering sperm counts and upsetting the gender balance of newborn vertebrates, including humans. The situation is grave even if we table the contested issue of global warming. Pioneering evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson even set aside his longstanding differences with fundamentalists over human origins to pen *The Creation*, a plea for conservative Christians to embrace their responsibilities as stewards of God's earth. Ironically, Wilson is preaching to the choir: a recent study by the Barna Group found that nine in ten American evangelicals would like Christians to care more actively for creation.

Thus, the release of *The Green Bible* (HarperOne, 2008) seems timely. This "green-letter edition," says its publisher, "is the definitive Bible for the growing creation care movement." Its green ink highlights more than 1,000 passages chosen by *The Green Bible's* editorial team to demonstrate God's involvement in creation, the interdependence of its elements, its response to God, and how we are called to care for it.

*The Green Bible's* packaging almost parodies itself: soy-based inks, recycled paper, and a stylish, earthy cotton/linen cover made through a process in which "all air is purified before exhausting into the atmosphere and all water is purified and recycled." Surely this was a marketing necessity; the publisher could not afford the charges of hypocrisy that would follow if it printed *The Green Bible* the way it prints . . . well, its other books. But *The Green Bible* is not a self-parody. It's offered as a serious Bible, with introductory essays by an ecumenical mix of voices such as N. T. Wright, Desmond Tutu, Pope John Paul II, Brian McLaren, and Barbara Brown Taylor, and an epilogue with topical studies and an environmental subject index. All these resources aim to orient readers to Scripture's concern for the natural world, along with its calls for social justice and poverty relief.

#### Verdant Verses

The real hook, of course, is the green-lettered biblical text. It mimics the wildly successful red-letter edition of the Bible that Louis Klopsch, the enterprising and philanthropic editor of the *Christian Herald*, invented just over a century ago. That edition's red ink symbolized "the new covenant in my blood" of Luke 22:20. How will swapping blood for chlorophyll color our reading?

I took *The Green Bible* to church to find out. Our text was John 1:19–51. This passage's green verses were puzzling: John the Baptist's appeal to Isaiah 40:3–5 as "one calling in the desert," and his declaration that Jesus is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." But *desert* is imagery for an obstacle standing between God's glory and the nations. And *world* means the whole fallen order, not simply the biosphere. Readers who project contemporary environmentalism onto these terms will be misled.

Lest this sample seem unfair, let's start at the beginning, in one of the greenest books of all. The first chapters of Genesis feature a lot of green ink, including every word of chapter one and almost all of chapter two (though, oddly, only the first of Eden's four rivers, and not 2:24's concluding testimony to human family life). Yet the verdant primordial narratives of Genesis 1–11 blacken into the patriarchal narratives of Genesis 12–50, whose few green passages stand out peculiarly. They are 12:10 on famished Abram's journey to Egypt; 15:18–19 on God's covenant of land to Abram; reiterations of that promise in 26:3, 28:4, and 35:11–12; Jacob's confession that God is at Bethel in 28:16–17; and finally, Joseph's handling of prosperity and then famine in 41:47–49 and 41:53–57. While these passages implicitly affirm the interdependence of all creation, they do not have creation care in view. They teach us that land in Genesis is basically a matter of tribal inheritance and wealth, neither for exploitation nor conservation, but residence and development. Countless other highlighting choices will either puzzle or confuse readers.

The two testaments' central concerns—covenanted

### Meager Harvest by Telford Work (cont.)

Israel, anointed Jesus, and missional church—are pushed aside by the green passages that testify, or are made to testify, on environmentalism’s behalf. Yet if the editors narrowed their criteria or applied them more strictly, much less of *The Green Bible* would be in green, and that would give the false impression of biblical indifference. There is a strong biblical case to be made for creation care, but one would not be able to discern it from the passages highlighted in green. And despite the publisher’s intent, spending time with *The Green Bible* makes me more aware than ever of the gulf separating ancient Israel from the Sierra Club, and warier of forcing environmentalism, anti-environmentalism, or any other contemporary agenda into passages of Scripture.

#### Ripening and Cultivation Needed

The strongest part of *The Green Bible* is the introductory essays. While their quality is uneven, some stand out as insightful theological affirmations of creation care—particularly those of John Paul II and N. T. Wright. These do the book’s heavy lifting. Indeed, they bear nearly its entire intellectual burden.

And that’s a problem. Proponents of creation care might benefit from an unlikely mentor—American fundamentalism. What powered fundamentalism’s success was a four-volume collection of essays called *The Fundamentals*. Addressing a variety of related issues, written by leading pastors and scholars, published by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, and underwritten by oil magnates Lyman and Milton Stewart, *The Fundamentals* did the intellectual hard work and won the visibility that established fundamentalism’s size and self-respect. Green Christianity’s midwives will need to commit similarly massive intellectual and promotional resources to their vision if they hope to be taken seriously as a Christian movement. A ready audience awaits careful thinking about creation care. The same Barna Group study that found widespread environmental concern among Christians also found that only about a third of active churchgoers have heard churches teach or preach on environmental issues. They are “green” in a second sense—they need experience and training. While *The Green Bible* demonstrates some of the same

immaturity, its best essays show that excellent work is already being done that deserves further development and greater exposure.

Of course, fundamentalism would not have been what it was without the *Scofield Reference Bible*, whose marginal notes convinced millions of readers that dispensationalism was biblical, and whose phenomenal sales kept Oxford University Press solvent during the Great Depression. However, *The Green Bible* isn’t even a reference Bible that trains readers to see its agenda in Scripture. It leaves readers on their own to figure out the relevance of passages both green and black. It offers no study notes beyond the New Revised Standard Version’s critical notes, and its concluding “Green Bible Trail Guide” merely offers unremarkable thematic verse lists and questions for Bible study groups. This is not a study Bible, let alone a “definitive” one.

#### Hybrid Vehicle

What is *The Green Bible*, then? Despite its worthwhile intentions, its packaging, assumptions, and interpretive shortcuts suggest it’s not the biblically rigorous project on creation care we need, but a hybrid of two things: an ideological fashion accessory, and a vehicle for promoting conventional progressive environmentalism.

This charge will seem unfair to some, if only because I seem to be pointing out the speck in my brother’s eye. After all, the Bible is *already* a fashion accessory. It is available in every shape, size, and price range to suit a dizzying variety of target markets: Bibles for men, for women, for newlyweds, for parents, for children, for teens, for various ethnicities—and, of course, Bibles fashioned for us academics. In my circles, basic black is the rule, red letters gauche, and utility its own elegance. First-year students marvel at my bilingual Hebrew and Greek editions, and majors admire my voluminous Bible reference software. And I can’t say I mind it when they do. Why should I begrudge Prius-driving disciples the same satisfaction?

Likewise, the Bible is a vehicle for many agendas. Gideon Bibles are made for personal salvation, and unashamedly

### Meager Harvest by Telford Work (cont.)

so. Many confessional Bibles—the *Scofield Reference Bible*'s publishing heirs—are designed to propagate their camps' theological stances. The Bible seems better suited to these ends than to single issues such as creation care. Confessional Bibles teach a whole tradition of biblical interpretation, and Gideon Bibles aim to make disciples who will be whole-Bible readers. Like tour buses, these vehicles orient readers to more and more of the Bible itself. But single-issue Bibles aren't even tour buses; they're express trains. They expose us only to what lies on the way to their terminal destination. They conform the Bible, and then readers, to their narrow agenda.

*The Green Bible* is hardly the first to do this; it is not even the first to do it in color. The Jesus Seminar both exploited and subverted the red-letter effect in its *Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (Polebridge, 1993), coloring Jesus' words from red to black according to how historical a group of biblical critics thought they were. *The Promise Bible* (Tyndale, 2001) highlights all of God's promises to us in the Psalms, Proverbs, and New Testament, conveniently ignoring our covenantal obligations in return. Robert H. Schuller even published a *Possibility Thinkers Bible* (Nelson, 1984), with "positive verses for possibility thinking highlighted in blue." (Resurrection passages: highlighted. Crucifixion passages: not highlighted.) Vehicles like these disperse our fellowships into scattered interest groups who represent the various causes and subcultures that rise, clash, and fall in a democracy. The satires practically write themselves: a pink- and baby-blue-letter *Pro-life Bible*, an olive drab *Soldier's Bible*, a purple *Swing States Bible*. These are no longer the Word of God for the whole people of God, a whole congregation, or even a whole person. Are they even Bibles?

#### The Final Word

*The Green Bible*'s destination, its rhetorical finale, is a section called "Where Do You Go from Here?" It includes action items for households and churches, tips for getting started in Christian environmentalism—which, it must be said, looks basically like secular environmentalism plus

some prayer and Bible memorization—and a list of religious and secular organizations devoted to environmental advocacy and poverty relief. This project nurtures not disciples, souls, or even better readers, but devotees to a predictable set of causes, along with a hefty "green premium" for the publisher. For Scripture, this is too meager a harvest.

Nevertheless, *The Green Bible* is a Bible after all. Buried in its introductory material is Bruce M. Metzger's preface to the NRSV, which licensees are obligated to include. There, one reads,

*The Bible carries its full message, not to those who regard it simply as a noble literary heritage of the past or who wish to use it to enhance political purposes and advance otherwise desirable goals, but to all persons and communities who read it so that they may discern and understand what God is saying to them.*

In all of *The Green Bible*, these uncelebrated words encourage me most. Few will find them. Yet those who do might be moved, not away from environmentalism or any otherwise desirable goal, but toward the Bible's incomprehensible fullness. That fullness will finally put to shame *all* our commentaries, our forewords and afterwords, our footnotes and indexes, our trendsetting and target marketing, and yes, our colorizing.

~ Telford Work is associate professor of theology at Westmont College and author of *The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Deuteronomy*.