

Gospel, Land, Community: Creation Care in the Mission of God

By Mike Griffiths

KEY TEXTS: RUTH, 1 KINGS 21:1–29

Ordinarily, I would write a paper like this surrounded by as many reference books as possible, trying to bring harmony to different perspectives in the light of Scripture. But today, I am far away from the reference books, journals, and academic sources, and so am drawn more to conversations with villagers in rural farming communities devastated by sequential crop failure and crippling debt and now experiencing the debilitating effects of large-scale migration of young people. It is seeing this close interaction between the land, the community, and socio-economic practice that has provided much of the information for this reflection. Added to this are conversations with young church leaders, many also from those same rural communities, who seek ways to bring the gospel in relevant ways to communities and who are re-discovering the rich interplay between gospel, land, and community as they engage with those around them.

A TALE OF TWO FIELDS

There are two key texts for reflection: the narrative of the book of Ruth, and the account of the seizure of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21:1–29. In both of these texts land is bought and sold. The narrative of the first text is woven with romantic themes and the end result is redemption and the birth of a line of kings. In the second, the conflict is sharp and sudden, ending in death, land seizure, and a curse. At the heart of both narratives is the relationship between people and land, in the context of ancient community codes. For God's people, their identity, both as a wider community and family units, was defined by land; and their relationship with the land was governed by laws which limited the extent to which it could be transferred out of the family. God's people were defined by three relationships: with God, with the land, and with each other (you could argue a fourth here, the relationship with "others"—outsiders who were not part of the covenant). After the exile, and despite the subsequent return, later conquests by foreign powers, and the resultant scattering, the identity of the people of Israel became less defined by their relationship with the land, and more by their relationship with God, with each other, and with the sense of "otherness" and "apartness" from outsiders. Within the Christian community, the immediate understanding of the church as God's people on earth also led to a reduction of the importance of relationship with land, despite some periods of "empire" which sought to locate the Kingdom of God in a certain physical space. It is perhaps this weakening of the sense of identification with a specific place, a specific "land" as a key element of the identity of the people of God, that has also weakened our sense of relationship with creation, particularly within Christian circles. When land was central to being God's people, there was an incentive to protect, nurture and defend the land.

In these narratives too we find the intrinsic link between land and community. The way in which the land is seen as owned by God, given as an inheritance to be used for his glory, for the nourishment and flourishing of his people, and the protection and

sustaining of his poor and marginalized, is central to how the community governs usage and ownership of the land.

In our first narrative, famine threatens extinction of a family, and loss of family land. The laws and customs governing the use and transaction of land first allow Ruth to glean the harvest, and later on, allow her to marry Boaz as he lays claim to act as her kinsman redeemer. It is perhaps not too imaginative to assume that the "field" in question in chapter 4 of Ruth is barren and unproductive, with little agricultural value after prolonged famine. Yet, the social customs dictate kinsman redemption. Without this land, the family "had only themselves to offer as payment to a creditor in return for their survival" and so potentially faced destitution and even slavery.¹

The second narrative stands in contrast. A prime plot of land next to the palace is desired by the king, perhaps for a vegetable garden. But Ahab's motives are not to be trusted; expansion is on the way. All that stands between him and his desire is the recalcitrance of Naboth, who stubbornly clings to the old ways despite the offer of compensation. For Naboth, it is not about land as any place; it is about land as this place, this place where my fathers have lived and worked before me. Although many sold their land to make room for the palace (or were the lands seized?), Naboth remains quietly defiant. This is his family's inheritance, from God no less, and he will not part with it at any price. But the community fails. An underhand plot to falsely accuse Naboth succeeds and he is stoned and killed. The land is seized, but the king is cursed. When viewed canonically, it is hard not to see the book of Ruth positioned to present a sharp distinction between the "good old days" when the community system worked, and the "bad old days" when the kings seized, raped and consumed, as Israel was warned they would.

It is not difficult to find modern parallels. In our own neighborhood in a part of Southeast Asia, property speculation marginalizes long-standing community institutions, such as tea shops, where the community gathers and issues are settled. The owners will not yield the tired, lonely-looking, tiny family plot juxtaposed between two skyscrapers, but in the end they are tricked and betrayed by corrupt officials to make way for the property developers. Rural communities, devastated by repeated crop failures, are now so crippled with debt that they cannot afford seed to plant for the next year. Land is sold, young men move away to find work, and young women trafficked to neighbouring countries as brides or prostitutes.

LAND AND COMMUNITY

The intrinsic link between land and community cannot be overemphasized. Current research demonstrates the link between community longevity and various indicators of social capital.² In other words, communities where land stays with families tend to do better. Community systems for social protection are strongest

in rural communities. Probably the most inflammatory issue in Southeast Asia today is land-grabbing, where land long held in the hands of local families is bought or seized, and transferred to developers. Likewise, when the fertility of the land declines, communities struggle and migration increases, breaking up the inter-generational cohesion and frequently resulting in land sales. In rural communities, access to land and land ownership are by far the most significant factors in mitigating vulnerability to economic shocks and natural disasters.³ The lack of land tenure associated with urban migrants is a significant factor in the high levels of poverty and vulnerability in urban communities, as it results in frequent moves and a reluctance to invest in building strong social capital. (If I am going to move next week, why invest time in getting to know my neighbors?) In cities, particularly in the sprawling edges of Asia's mega-cities, building community spirit and social capital is challenging. Whereas in settled rural communities everyone is known, in the city you are less known, and many of the accepted norms of village life are absent. "Life as we know it" has been disrupted. This is not to glamorize rural life, or condemn urban life; rather, it is to acknowledge that residents of urban communities tend to be more mobile, less permanent, and more vulnerable to sudden economic shocks and natural disasters.

LAND AND CONFLICT

Conflict arises from unfulfilled needs or desires, or where threats or a sense of inequality or injustice prevent basic needs or wants being met. Herbert Kellman comments that "conflicts should be analysed as a process driven by collective needs and fears," or, I would add, by unfulfilled needs. "We live in a world ... where rapid population growth, diminishing resources, unemployment, migration to shanty towns and lack of education are steadily increasing the pressure along many social fault lines ... creating conditions ripe for more Rwandas and Bosnias."⁴ Profound inequalities at community level are associated with high rates of poverty, which in turn feed both a sense of unfulfillment and of injustice.⁵ At the heart of many conflicts are land and resource related issues,⁶ where competition for scarce resources is part of survival, and at times where larger geo-political and economic interests are at odds with the wants and needs of communities. In many parts of Southeast Asia, the critical socio-political issue of the day is the tension between economic growth and traditional land tenure, where land acquisition, by fair or usually foul means, for large, often foreign-owned industrial development, is resisted by local landholders and residents, often with violent consequences. The unfulfilled needs are frequently matters of survival, but at times they echo the Old Testament dream of "everyone shall live under his own vine and fig tree."⁷ The defense of ancestral land may be linked with the defense of culture, ethnic identity, and religion, as evidenced by long-standing armed conflicts in a number of Southeast Asian countries. Where attempts to broker peace agreements between government and minority groups are attempted, it is typically the resolution of land-related issues that is the key factor, for how can people return to their lands if such lands are mine-infested, despoiled, or have been seized for industrial development?⁸

The way in which the land is seen as owned by God, given as an inheritance to be used for his glory, for the nourishment and flourishing of his people, and the protection and sustaining of his poor and marginalized, is central to how the community governs usage and ownership of the land.

CREATION CARE, CONFLICT, AND COMMUNITY

So how do we relate the issues of land use and land ownership, to creation care, and, more significantly for this paper, to mission? For this, we need firstly to trace the relationships between certain concepts:

- Land security and community cohesion
- Creation care and land security
- Community cohesion and creation care

We can make three statements of relationship, and then trace the relationship between these three statements.

Firstly, as we have demonstrated, there is a clear link between land security and community cohesion. Not only does land security provide bedrock for community cohesion; community cohesion can diminish land insecurity, where common understanding of the value of land tenure by the community can lead to communal action to prevent land being lost by the community to outsiders.

Secondly, we can also trace the relationship between creation care and land security. One of the key triggers for land insecurity is lack of productivity; droughts, crop failure and natural disasters contribute to rising and unsustainable debt, frequently leading to land sale or seizure. Macro-agricultural practice of farming large-scale farms, and the pressure to use artificial fertilizer and pesticides to increase short-term yields, has changed the face of agriculture in many countries, resulting in disruption of communities and increased urbanization.

Thirdly, we can outline the relationship between community cohesion and creation care. Not only does community cohesion provide a strong base for sustainable agricultural practice and the conservation of natural resources; but where these are linked to more community-orientated land practice, they can support community cohesion.

The link to our mission, which we shall explore more fully below, is this: creation care is intrinsic to our work of mission when our desire is for transformed communities, shaped around the gospel of Christ and reflecting his values in how the members of a community relate both to each other and to the land. The crucial

Yet, even here, where so many live in tenuous circumstances, often surrounded by the detritus of city life, the understanding of creation care and community in our gospel work is relevant. The gospel, influenced by an understanding of God as the creator and humans as the custodians of creation, can be revolutionary for communities in terms of how they relate to their own physical space, and especially how that space relates to other communities.

difference between humanitarian attempts to build community and our mission to bring the gospel to communities and see communities transformed, is that we seek to see at the heart of transformed communities, not tradition or the idealistic notion of community, but God himself, the redemption of Christ, and the transforming power of the Spirit.

CREATION CARE, COMMUNITIES, AND THE MISSION OF GOD

The vicious cycle of crop failure, debt, migration, and subsequent land forfeiture is a well-known feature of life in many countries, often leading to whole communities losing lands, livelihood, and an entire generation of youth migrating away to seek work. The integral relationship between community stability, the fecundity of the land, and social cohesion is well documented. As crops fail, land tenure becomes insecure, and as the youth move away, the fabric of the community is damaged. I have had community elders beg me to send young people to their villages “because we need young people for our community activities.” In Ruth’s time, the cycle was broken because the community acted according to a tradition centered on God’s rule, recognizing the land as God’s gift for blessing. Hence, the binding strength of the community, and subsequent redemption, was rooted in God’s just rule.

It is interesting that the vision of Micah 4:1–5, describes the future kingdom of God as one where people live under the instruction and rule of God (v 2), in peace with each other (v 3), and “under their own vine and fig tree” (v 4), showing the close relationship between God’s rule, conflict resolution, and secure communities in which people live on their own land. And, I suggest, in exchange for peace, security and just rule, individuals also accept a lowering of economic aspirations, anticipating a “modest lifestyle of not having more than one’s own produce and a respect for the produce of others ... being ready to settle for one’s own vines and figs ... a break with consumeristic values.”⁹ In other words, the vision requires submission and relinquishment of greed for more than is needed, an echo of the days of wandering in the wilderness and being fed with daily manna.

Before we move too far and assume this requires a kind of communal, or even communistic, system, we need to emphasize that such an attitude can only be sustained by faith, by trust in a God who can and will provide in times of scarcity, requiring

and empowering us to behave in generous ways to those who don’t have enough, and restraining the urge to consume more than we need in times of plenty. At the heart of such community behavior is not a system or a code, but faith. This is not to say that communities without such a God-centered faith cannot practice such things. Rather, we believe that only God-centered faith can sustain this practice in the face of human sin and weakness and when the pressures become too great to resist. And as we also see from this passage and from the later sections of Micah, it is this type of God-centered faith community, practicing land-justice in the face of scarcity, that brings glory to God. Vinay Samuel argues eloquently that in the face of rapid change the gospel has power to reshape communities. “The break up of traditional communities with their stable and explicit codes of communication and behavior provides the individual with no principle ... it is precisely such situations that demonstrate the power of Gospel formulations of God’s involvement with individuals and communities.”¹⁰

THE PRACTICE OF GOSPEL, CREATION CARE, AND COMMUNITY

It is far too easy to approach the application of the Micah text in terms of a set of activities: for example, community forestry, community social protection, or organic farming. What is more challenging is to recognize the need for integration of theology with practice, with the result that *all* our gospel work is influenced by our understanding of creation care and community. This is relevant particularly to work in urban centres, where our relationship with the “land” is not so obvious. Yet, even here, where so many live in tenuous circumstances, often surrounded by the detritus of city life, the understanding of creation care and community in our gospel work is relevant. The gospel, influenced by an understanding of God as the creator and humans as the custodians of creation, can be revolutionary for communities in terms of how they relate to their own physical space, and especially how that space relates to other communities.

Here, substitute “land as space plus essentials such as water” for “land” as a fixed concept, and we can see how, without care and attention to dispose of refuse, without civic planning to ensure essential supplies, and without care to use only as much as is needed, conflict can result, threatening the life of the community. Again, the key is still faith in the God who can transform and be trusted; without this, we can only hope for moderate civic improvements, nothing more. We cannot reduce the application of this concept simply to a set of activities, but there are some approaches which can be helpful as we reach both urban and rural communities with the gospel.

- Looking at creation care in terms of strengthening community social protection, both in rural and urban communities
- Teaching and resourcing sustainable agricultural practice, including organic farming
- Community forestry
- Mangrove conservation
- Sustainable fuel alternatives, especially for cooking

- Recycling and waste disposal alternatives, especially for urban communities
- More rural economy related activities such as crop diversification and farmer credit to reduce land seizure and increase rural economic growth

Yet again, these are not ends in themselves, but we do all as part of our gospel work, with the crucial difference that we do not rely on human capabilities but on the divine Holy Spirit for transformation; and we have the goal not simply of better communities, but of holy communities bringing glory to God.

THE PRACTICE OF GOSPEL, CREATION CARE, AND COMMUNITY (2)

Despite being unable to give details of names and locations, I would like to give two illustrations of how this practice of gospel, creation care, and community is bringing change to two communities in a very isolated part of Southeast Asia. One is of a young community development worker who chose to live in a village in the area he had been assigned to. Although his project mostly focused on rehabilitation for disabled persons, he began to develop a demonstration plot for organic farming, using indigenous micro-organisms, and used this to discuss creation care and develop community livelihoods which were more sustainable. Through this, he was able to bring together people in his village, and indeed, was able to bring reconciliation between two factions in the village that had been at enmity for years. This particular people group has long been hostile to the gospel, and especially to those who come and aggressively proselytize. But, after a few years, the village asked this young man, "Please come and explain to us about Christianity. Please come and do a Christmas event in our village. We know you don't just come and preach and then go away again like the others. You really care about us and come and stay with us." Part of the transformation is in the way that the village is now more aware of those on the margins, like disabled people, as well as the restoring of relationships and a more responsible approach to farming and creation care. This has led to a desire to know more about the God and the faith that underpin these changes.

In another part of the country, on a small island where the Christian population is probably less than one tenth of one percent and traditional beliefs are quite hostile to anything "foreign", a small, struggling church embarked on a modest programme of child care, rehabilitation for disabled children and adults, and organic farming as a way to bring blessing to the marginalized. Now after a few years of faithful service, community members are less afraid to come to the church for the rehabilitation services and to see how the organic farming is conducted. Here, organic farming is used to help marginalized people's livelihoods become both environmentally and economically sustainable. The church is seen as an agent of blessing for communities, as one young single mother of a disabled child put it, "nobody cares about us, or our children, or our future, except you. So we want to know, how we can become Christians."

CONCLUSION

I hope this short paper demonstrates that our perception of "creation care" as being largely a matter of personal practice is too limited. Creation care does of course include how I dispose of my rubbish, how I live responsibly, and how I seek to minimize the damage I cause to the environment around me. But in our context, creation care is also about how we, as part of our mission, seek to bring God's just rule to community life, changing the way that people relate to God, to each other, and to the land. This inevitably involves more than simply building corporate co-operation for proper waste disposal, and surely extends to the thorny issues of land, debt, social protection, and sustainable farming and resource use. To this end, it is encouraging to see how initiatives started by local churches in Southeast Asia in response to these issues have resulted in significant opportunities to contribute to building community social capital, reduce conflict, and share the Good News of the God who creates, saves, and redeems. In practical terms, our practice of creation care as mission includes, but extends beyond, personal behavior to wider issues of land and community land use; this in turn is part of the outworking of our desire to see communities rooted in faith in God, with practices reflecting that faith.

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NOTES

¹ Dewi Hughes, *Power and Poverty: Divine and Human Rule in a World of Need* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 69.

² Ei Ei Thu and Mike Griffiths, "Strengthening Community Based Social Protection Practices for Child Protection" (paper presented at UNICEF/SMERU Conference on Child Social Protection, Jakarta, September 2013).

³ Mike Griffiths, "Vulnerability Profiling," Social Policy and Poverty Research Group, <http://www.spprg.org/sites/default/files/Vulnerability%20Profiling.pdf> (accessed 8 April 2014).

⁴ Herbert C. Kelman, "A Social Psychological Approach to Conflict Analysis and Resolution," in *Handbook of Conflict Analysis and Resolution*, ed. Dennis J. D. Sandole et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 171–183.

⁵ Mike Griffiths, "Inequalities and Poverty at Community level," *Bulletin of the Social Policy & Poverty Research Group* 2 (2013).

⁶ "Burma's Ethnic Challenge: From Aspirations to Solutions," Transnational Institute, <http://www.tni.org/briefing/burmas-ethnic-challenge-aspirations-solutions> (accessed 8 April 2014).

⁷ For a reflection on the use of Micah 4:1–5 in relation to land issues, see Walter Brueggemann, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 91–110.

⁸ Geoff Myint, "Bridging the HLP Gap: The Need to Effectively Address Housing, Land and Property Rights During Peace Negotiations and in the Context of Refugee/IDP Return," Displacement Solutions, http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs15/DS-Bridging_The_HLP_Gap-en.pdf (accessed 8 April 2014).

⁹ Brueggemann, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, 91–110.

¹⁰ Vinay Samuel quoted in Chris Sugden, *Gospel, Culture and Transformation* (Oxford: Regnum, 2000), 79.