

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 17

Volume 17 • Number 2 • April 1993

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

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Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



encourages members to love nature. They try to build a garden [p. 268](#) in their compounds and villages. A garden like the garden of Eden or Gethsemane is a right place for communion with God. By directing the mind into a beautiful garden, people will be reminded of the purpose of God's creation.

God wants to make this world a beautiful place to stay, and for us to participate in preserving the integrity of creation. Perhaps it will be easier to do so, if they want to hear Christ's calling: 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' ([Matt. 16:24](#)). It means that everyone who answers Christ's call must be ready to deny the desires of the flesh. People in Bali compare the body of a person with a chariot that is pulled by five strong horses. So the driver must control the five horses. One can control the desire of the five senses, when one lets Christ be the driver of his life, so that one can be motivated by love ([Ephes. 3:17](#)). God is love, Christ is love, and the fruit of the Spirit is love ([1 John 4:8](#), [John 10](#), [Gal. 5:22](#)). When love has become the motivation of our life, then we can have compassion for the creatures and the environment around us. It is only love and compassion that can teach us to love and to honor life. Life is very precious, and it can be found in all creatures in the environment. Life is the one thing that creatures possess in common. Life is a gift of God; it unites all creatures, so that they can live to love one another, in harmony and solidarity. It is only in this way that one can maintain and preserve the environment: following the order of creation as it is intended by God, the Creator, Preserver, and Sustainer of this universe.

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The Impact on the Environment of the Evangelization of the Native Tribes in the Paraguayan Chaco

Calvin Redekop and Wilmar Stahl¹

TRADITIONAL NOTIONS AND PRACTICES OF THE CHACO NATIVES

The Paraguayan portion of the Chaco Boreal is situated East of the Paraguay River and north of the Rio Pilcomayo—250,000 square kilometers of scrub forests intermingled with grass plains. In precontact days, a dozen different Indian tribes had adapted their cultural systems to this particular environment, with a rather diversified foraging economy. Organized in hunting bands numbering thirty to fifty individuals, they covered areas of approximately 100,000 hectares each, gathering a variety of some fifty different

¹ The senior author, Calvin Redekop, is a native of the United States while the junior author, Wilmar Stahl, was born in Paraguay and has lived there ever since.

roots, grasses, stems or fruits or plants, wild honeys, insects, fish, and a wide spectrum of animals from turtles to peccaries.²

Because mobility was important, personal property was kept to a minimum. Socially, egalitarian conditions predominated, with roles of stronger leadership limited to defense, economic initiatives, and management of the supernatural. Cultural mechanisms to keep the demographic balance included infanticide—letting an average of two children per nuclear family live—and group fission and migration by which one group established residence in a new area where food was more plentiful, even if only temporarily.

The Chaco forager/hunter knew himself to be a part of his surrounding habitat, needing to learn to live with plants and animals on the basis of an egalitarian relationship, much the same as he had to p. 270 relate to the other members of the extended kinship group. It was taboo to try to manipulate nature; it was unthinkable to hope to dominate climatic adversities. The annual seasonal cycle served as model for an optimal relationship to the environment: one needed to know it, to adjust to it, and to take advantage when the opportunity presented itself.³

For the Chaco natives, living objects have a core of spirituality, much like what Westerners would call ‘personality’. The Ayoreo, for instance, divide plants, animals, and humans into ‘kinship groups’ that descend from the same prototype of life (janibajay). The relationship to their ‘kin object’ therefore is much the same as to human relatives. The common denominator for the Chaco hunters is that knowledge about the ‘personality’ of natural objects allows a permanent exploitative relationship to them.

The diversified environment meant more than variation in diet: it meant a regulatory adjustment mechanism in a harsh climate. Diversification of the natural habitat thus was an important risk reduction factor, an insurance plan against unpredictable adversities, but also the preservation of relations between the people themselves.

The pragmatic implications of the sharing practice are obvious. One hunter might record a lucky strike today, but come home empty the next three times. Furthermore, when luck strikes on a broader scale, or when nature provides plenty of fruits without major effort, long neglected aspects of social life can be taken care of such as feasts, alliances, marriages, barter, and visiting.

An environment that was erratically plentiful and scarce—be it for reasons of depletion, drought, or other natural events—would at first challenge the foragers to diversify, but eventually would force them to move on. The comparative advantage of a move was thereby measured on the basis of a scarcity/abundance balance; emotional ties to a region were thus practically non-existent.⁴ p. 271

² For more details, see Wilmar Stahl, *Escenario Indigena Chaqueño* (Filadelfia, Chaco: Asociacion de Servicios de Cooperacion Indigena, 1982). The 11 native tribes referred to here belong to three language families, i.e. Maskoy (Lengua, Toba, Sanapaná, Angaité, Guana); Mataco (Nivacle, Maca, Choroti, Manjuy), and Samuko (Ayoreo, Chamacoco).

³ For an extensive bibliography on the geography, history and population of the Chaco, see Walter Regehr, *Die lebensraumliche Situation der Indianer im paraguayischen Chaco* (Basel:Geographisch-Ethnologischen Gesellschaft Basel, 1979). For the bibliography regarding Mennonite-Indigenous relations, see Calvin Redekop, *Strangers Become Neighbors: Mennonite and Indigenous Relations in the Paraguayan Chaco* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1980). For the most extensive and intensive bibliography on the indigenous peoples, see Wilmar Stahl, *Escenario Indigena Chaqueño*, op. cit.

⁴ This is not to say that the natives did not have an emotional relationship to nature, rather that no special area had unusual significance. This suggests a ‘communal’ relationship to nature not comprehensible in a Western culture that sacralizes the idea of private property. The most extensive account of the native adaptation and relationship to the environment is found in Regehr, op. cit.

This explains the high mobility of the tribes, but it also implies adaptation to new environments, for in the Chaco, a move of 200 kilometers can mean a significant change in environmental resources requiring new knowledge. This highlights another important aspect of Chaco native culture: readiness to explore new environments, and cultural skills to adapt to new situations according to traditional patterns.

TRADITIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL NOTIONS AND PRACTICES OF THE MENNONITE MISSIONIZING CULTURE

The Anabaptist, Mennonite movement was originally a protest against prevailing institutions regarding religious and social practices, and was almost immediately suppressed by political and religious powers. Their persecution and decimation is a matter of record, in time, however, Mennonites began to be tolerated because of their economic contributions in hostile lands. As the rejected Anabaptists managed to gain a toehold on the lands of the secular owners, as well as the church, they proceeded to make the estates and lands profitable and fruitful.

It did not take long for European lords and princes to discover in these Anabaptists a useful source of financial advantage. A foremost Mennonite historian states that the 'Mennonites received toleration and special privileges from the landowners and the rulers because of their economic contribution. The special privilege grants issued by the Polish kings are noteworthy [in this regard]'.⁵

Recent research has explicated the nature of the means of escaping persecution by the Anabaptists, through environmental stewardship, broadly defined as caring for the Earth's natural resources including soils, minerals, energy, water, atmosphere, plants, and animals. In France, by 1533, Anabaptists were granted protection to settle on lands of nobles, princes and church officials as they developed livestock farming and innovative agricultural practices on marginal soils.⁶

These innovations included: combining crop and livestock farming, careful clearing, contouring, and draining of the land, the use of p. 272 mineral fertilizer (such as gypsum), introducing livestock manure as fertilizer, rotation of crops (consequently eliminating fallow land), developing new nitrogen fixing legumes, and feeding cattle rather than ranging them on open pastures.

Mennonite refugees in south Germany and the Palatinate closely paralleled the practices of the French, but because of different conditions, they originated the development of techniques for the utilization of liquid manure and new strains of potatoes and beets. Model farmers such as David Moellinger, Johannes Dettweiler, Valentin Dahlem, and David Kaegy became famous throughout German-speaking lands.⁷

The Mennonites in Friesland began to discover a new way to toleration: by draining the low-lying swamps and reclaiming thousands of acres of land from the sea, creating a low-land rural culture that survives to this day. As the Mennonite refugees fled to West Prussia for toleration as well as economic opportunity, the Mennonites succeeded in

⁵ Mennonite Encyclopedia, s.v. 'farm and settlement'.

⁶ For an excellent treatment of the Mennonite innovations in France, see Jean Seguy, *Les Assemblies Anabaptists-Mennonites de France* (Paris: Mouton, 1977); for a similar analysis of the Anabaptists in South Germany, see Ernst Correll *Das schweizerische Täufernennonitentum* (Tuebingen: Mohr, 1925). Both books provide extensive bibliography on research on the topic.

⁷ See Correll, *op cit.* See also *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, s.v. 'farming'.

draining the flooded areas by creating an elaborate system of draining canals and dikes, with windmills for pumping water back into the North Sea.⁸

Because of these achievements, Mennonites were invited by Czarina Katherina in the 1780s to settle in the Ukraine of Russia, an invitation that included the promise of full religious freedom and toleration, and military exemption (something that was still not fully granted in Prussia). Though the environment was drastically different (treeless steppes), the same innovative techniques and dedication to intelligent work resulted in the development of a vast arid plain that included fruit orchards, the development of silk worm farming, forest shelter belts, new strains of livestock, new strains of wheat (especially “Turkey Red”), flour milling, and machinery manufacturing.⁹

The Mennonite settlements in North and South America reflected the innovations listed above. The amazing success of the Mennonites in establishing thriving agricultural communities in Canada, the United p. 273 States, Mexico, South America, and, above all, in the hostile Chaco, quickly won the respect of the denizens in all these lands.¹⁰

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGES AND CONSEQUENCES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Receiving toleration for the reclamation and development of the land had great consequences for the Mennonite tradition:

1. The attitude toward the land became deeply endowed with symbolic and emotional meanings, a means to achieve toleration and acceptance. It consequently also became an end because innovation had been so functional. Thus, environmental preservation and improvement became deeply ingrained in the Mennonite psyche.¹¹
2. A ‘way of life’ emerged, including settlement in close-knit communities, geographically contiguous farming families and villages. The social and economic elements consisting of family, community, and congregational life, became intertwined. Separated communities emerged, with membership in one demanding membership in the other; there was minimum interaction with the surrounding society.
3. Especially significant was the population increase of the Mennonite community. Historically, Mennonites—especially the Old Order and the Hutterite groups—have had some of the highest reproductive rates on record. The demands for more

⁸ For a bibliography and comprehensive description of the Mennonites in Prussia, see Horst Penner, *Die ost- und westpreussischen Mennoniten* (Weierhof: Mennonitischer Gesichtsverein, 1978), 103.

⁹ For the most extensive analysis of the social and economic life of Mennonites in Russia, see David G. Rempel, ‘The Mennonite Colonies in New Russia: A Study of Settlement and Economic Development from 1789 to 1914’, Ph.D diss., Stanford University, 1933

¹⁰ For representative bibliography and treatment of Mennonite social and economic activities in North and South America see: J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1975); J. Winfield Fretz, *Pilgrims in Paraguay* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1952); Fretz, *The Waterloo Mennonites* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989); Calvin Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969); Redekop, *Strangers Become Neighbors, op. cit.*; Redekop, *Mennonite Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); articles in *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, s.v. ‘farming’, ‘business’, and ‘economics’.

¹¹ The analysis of the Anabaptist/Mennonite relationship to creation has not advanced very far. See Calvin Redekop, ‘Toward a Mennonite Theology and Ethic of Creation’, *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 60:387–403.

land created competition for land and tension with their neighbors, whether in Russia, Canada, Mexico, or Paraguay, for example, and resulted in p. 274 the vast series of migrations and settlements into relatively unsettled lands in many parts of the globe.¹²

4. This land pressure also increased the more intensive utilization of lands. This included manufacturing related to agriculture, developing new technologies to enhance productivity etc., in a sense continuing the process of innovation during the persecution phase. But recent innovations and more intensive farming practices were also increased because of the prevailing 'modern' value of upgrading the standard of living, even though the Mennonite heritage traditionally emphasized non-conformity and simplicity of life.
5. Members of the communities entered non-agriculturally related professions and moved to urban areas, forsaking the rural, agrarian way of life. In this mode, the Mennonite impact on the environment approximates that of urban industrial America, and includes high goods and energy consumption with their attendant waste and pollution.

The environmental impact of the Mennonite agrarian life that relied on animal and human power and low technology was until recent times relatively benign. It is generally accepted that wherever Mennonites migrated to areas that were less technologically developed, the indigenous societies were eager to learn from them, and to adopt their practices.¹³

Generally this has meant upgrading farming practices and techniques including livestock and crop improvements and technological advances to the Mennonite level: for example tree planting for silkworm raising in Russia, apple growing in Mexico, introducing soybeans in Brazil, water saving through building of lagoons in Paraguay, improved soil practices including fertilization in Pennsylvania.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS OF EVANGELIZATION OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE CHACO

Until the beginning of this century, the cultural life of the Paraguayan Chaco natives was relatively static and unimportant. The Chaco was p. 275 significant mainly as a strategic area in the ongoing conflict with Bolivia. Under the religious jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic 'Vicariato del Pilcomayo', scattered mission efforts, including experimental settlement of indigenous groups, had been conducted through the years. The Anglican church also initiated a mission effort in the Chaco in 1877. 'This mission, instituted by William Grubb, developed an impressive economic, cultural and religious community, but the mission did not create any [lasting consequences]'.¹⁴

When the Mennonites arrived, the native population consisted of isolated bands migrating in traditional patterns to exploit the sparse and varied nuts, fruits, and animals that had been their diet for centuries. A few clans did have herds of goats and sheep and

¹² For an analysis of the extremely high Hutterite population growth rate, see Joseph Eaton and Albert J. Mayer, *Man's Capacity to Reproduce* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1954); for the Old Colony Mennonites, see Calvin Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites op. cit.*, for the Amish see John A. Hostetler, *Amish Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

¹³ See Correll; Penner; Redekop, 1980; Seguy; *op. cit.*

¹⁴ See Redekop, 1980, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

planted some vegetables such as mandioca. The population was at an absolute maximum, having become stabilized, due partly to the practice of infanticide and the ravages of disease. It was continually augmented, however, by migrations from the south as resources allowed.¹⁵

A significant change for the bio-diversity of the Chaco area was the commercialization of hunting for exotic animal skins, feathers, and the like. For example, the Anglican Mission early began supplying guns and traps to increase the income of the hungry natives. As prices for these articles increased, the Indians intensified their hunting and trapping, going further into the hinterland to catch their animals.

Throughout their history, the Mennonites generally did not target the indigenous populations for mission work, so their cultural practices with environmental implications were only slowly and voluntarily changed. But when they came to the Chaco, they almost immediately decided that the indigenous peoples should become evangelized. 'When I first set foot at Puerto Casado I saw my first Indian—I said to myself, "We Mennonites are going to face a grave responsibility [and] an opportunity to preach to these wild people"'.¹⁶ Within six years of the time of the Fernheim settlement (1930), a mission program was initiated.

In spite of severe hardship, the Mennonites initiated the evangelization to the Christian faith: helping the indigenous people to learn to read and write by establishing schools in the villages, assisting the [p. 276](#) formation of congregations, helping them to manage their own religious and social organization, and initiating improved health standards and services.

But very soon it became clear that economic self-reliance was imperative, establishing individual family farmsteads that would allow for an alternative to the semi-nomadic life that was rapidly proving incapable of sustaining the population. Further, the natives assumed that the 'Mennonite Gospel' would also automatically bring them the comfortable life.¹⁷

Slowly, the awesome and foreboding awareness emerged that along with evangelization, the indigenous tribes would have to be helped to change their entire socio-economic-cultural system in order to become self-sufficient—a realization that all mission efforts have come to in almost all situations and times.¹⁸ An expanding settlement program emerged that has cost millions of dollars and many 'person-years' of humanitarian service to the Mennonites, both in Paraguay and abroad.

This 'new' evangelization included the procurement of land upon which to settle the Indians, the creation of procedures for settling equitably the various tribal and family groups, creating educational institutions, encouraging family organization and child rearing practices, and inaugurating health practices and hospitals. This implied the almost instantaneous introduction of a new culture—a technological civilization. It meant the

¹⁵ See Regehr, *op. cit.*, p. 49–60, p. 179–80; Wilmar Stahl, 'Mission und Indianersiedlung', *50 Jahre Kolonie Fernheim* (Jubilaumskomitee: Fernheim, 1980). Information on how disease affected the population before Mennonites arrived is very sparse, but Regehr maintains that death through disease increased after the white population entered the Chaco, pp. 209ff.

¹⁶ Redekop, 1980, p. 102; see also Stahl, 1980, p. 135ff.

¹⁷ Calvin Redekop, 'Religion and Society: A State within a Church' *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 1973, 47:339–357; see also Regehr, and Stahl, 1980).

¹⁸ Regehr, p. 284.

exchanging of a nomadic-communal culture that had obtained for centuries for a new way of living.¹⁹

Further, a vast set of new technical practices to transform the natives into agriculturists was required. This included land clearing, fencing in of crop lands, and the social regulations regarding land ownership and care; finding new sources for, and conserving, water; learning how to adapt to climate and weather conditions in crop growing and animal care; learning how to plant and nurture new crops such as cotton, maize, peanuts, and beans; developing and expanding traditional livestock herds to include cattle for meat and milk, and horses for power use; becoming adapted to modern machinery and technology p. 277 including pesticides and herbicides; educating and incorporating the Indian family farming units into the money and market economy.²⁰

This change to a new form of subsistence appropriate for the Chaco necessitated a total reorientation of the Indian culture. With the advanced methods that the Mennonites introduced, the Indians cleared areas of land that had been natural virgin territory. The development of more 'scientific' farming applications involved mechanical energy use, the introduction of herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers.

The obvious environmental impacts involved the destruction of the natural and primitive bush or campo environments in which exotic flora and fauna had existed for centuries. It meant the destruction of the wild life, from jaguars to exotic flamingos and endless varieties of parrots. It meant pollution caused by the burning of wood, methane from increased animal production, through chemical use, and so on. The impact of all these forces can only be estimated.²¹

But what has accelerated the changes and hence the impact on the environment more than any single other factor was population explosion through the eradication of infanticide and improved health care. With the Mennonite missionary teachings on the sins of infanticide, the indigenous groups terminated the practice and consequently dramatically increased their family size and reproductive rates. Along with this, the Mennonites initiated a health program that served to eradicate tuberculosis—a major killer—and other infectious diseases.²²

These two factors in combination have exploded the population. Table 1 provides a rough estimate of population growth.

According to Stahl, the birth rate is about 4% per year and with a mortality rate of 1.4%, an annual growth rate of 2.6% per year results. Stahl predicts the population will reach 21,000 by 1999. Even though large blocks of land have been provided, by now 110,000 hectares in p. 278

Table 1 Population Growth in Central Chaco²³

¹⁹ This is the term Regehr uses in his description, see p. 206ff.

²⁰ This program necessitated the formation of a number of organizations that included an association of the Mennonite colonies in the Chaco to support the actions, an inter-Mennonite missionary agency, and a settlement agency that was responsible for all but the religious actions.

²¹ The flora and fauna of the Chaco have been copiously described by Stahl, 1980, but an accounting of its decimation is not yet available, nor is any accounting of the environmental changes wrought by the Mennonite presence in the Chaco.

²² For example, both authors were present in the Chaco in the summer of 1972 when over 30 children died during a sudden outbreak of measles in the Indian settlements.

²³ Sources: Redekop, 1980; Wilmar Stahl, *En Busca de una Subsistencia Agraria*, op. cit.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Estimated Population</i>	<i>% Increase²⁴</i>
1951	3,500	
1959	5,000	50%
1966	7,070	40%
1975	9,609	37%
1983	13,000	35%
1991	15,000	15%

twelve agricultural colonies, there is continuing need for more land and more resources for the growing population.

This increased population is placing ever greater demands on the environment with more intense hunting of the little available wild life for food, more bush and forest clearing, more intensive planting of available land and grazing of pastures. Further, working for the Mennonites has continued to provide the indigenous people with more money to buy guns, which allowed them to hunt even more intensively for the depleted wildlife.

The colonies in Menno, Fernheim, and Neuland in their original settlements occupied over 150,000 hectares of land. Today, the amount of land controlled by the Mennonites has increased dramatically to over a million hectares. Since then more than 300,000 hectares have been cleared and seeded to imported bufflo grass. This has also impinged on the natural habitat of the local bands. The Mennonite population has obviously accelerated the utilization of the natural resources and the pollution of the atmosphere and the soils.²⁵

It is difficult to encapsulate the vast number of obvious as well as more subtle environmental impacts that have resulted from the factors discussed above. The following tentative list illustrates the problem:

1. Animal species originally plentiful now approaching extinction include the Ostrich, Jaguar, Puma, Armadillo, Tapir, Ocelot, Wild Pig, and many bird species. [p. 279](#)
2. Plant species, while still diverse, are also being depleted especially through the clearing of bush for farming.
3. Depletion and pollution of the atmosphere and land are obviously affected by the clearing of the forests. The wind and rain patterns and temperature will also be affected in ways that are not yet clear, not to mention the pollution caused by the massive fires needed to clear the cut trees. The increased use of high energy

The percentages are very disparate because the time spans are not uniform.

²⁵ For the most extensive analysis of the Mennonite integration with the Indigenous, see Wilmar Stahl, 'Integration der Mennoniten in Paraguay', in *50 Jahre Koloni Fernhiem* (Filadelfia:Kolonie Fernheim, 1980).

machinery and electricity will further increase the demands for energy fuels and accelerate the cutting of timber for the generation of electricity, as well as increase the air and ground pollution.

Had the Mennonites ignored the indigenous peoples as subjects of evangelization, the adoption of the 'technical culture' would probably have been postponed, and with it, the rapid population growth and the environmental demands.

On the other hand however, the adoption of 'technical civilization' was really only a question of time, for as Ellul has indicated, there is a certain imperative about technology: 'We are conditioned by something new: technological civilization'.²⁶ Even if the Mennonite evangelization of the Indians had not happened, we could still say with some assurance that the 'technical civilization' would have ultimately imposed itself on the natives, though much more slowly.

The Mennonite evangelization of the natives has had great impact on the environment of the Chaco. The most significant element of this disturbance has undoubtedly been caused by the sudden increase of the indigenous populations in the Chaco through the termination of infanticide and improved health care; the environmental pressure has been exacerbated by the invasion of the territory by the Mennonites themselves and the consequent impacts on the environment of their activities.

CONCLUSIONS REGARDING 'EVANGELIZATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT'

The concept 'environment' had some common meanings for both the Indigenous and the Mennonite groups. It meant a harsh and niggardly landscape from which to wrest a livelihood. It meant further massive amounts of hard work to get nature to yield its fruits and rewards. It meant a landscape that was often unpredictable, undependable, and alien. And finally, it meant an environment that was P. 280 'home', and that possessed a definite reality, a unique character, and a history all its own.

Naturalists and conservationists look for evidence to support the ideology that aborigines persist in an optimal harmonic adjustment to their environment, but pre-modern natives are capable of destroying the natural environment. This can be documented easily in the Chaco. A fruit tree that is cut so the fruit can be harvested, a beehive that is destroyed in the process of being exploited, or an entire flock of ostriches that is encircled with fire and eaten at a tribal feast are all environmental practices by indigenous peoples observed by Mennonite missionaries. These challenge us to look for a 'non-romantic' explanation of the human-environment equilibrium observed in native societies.

Still, the Mennonite evangelists in the Chaco also did not have any clear positive teaching regarding the preservation of the physical environment in their scheme of history. Indeed, one central emphasis that emerges in the Mennonite experience in the Chaco is that the physical world presented great hardships that had to be transcended. Recent fiction concerning the Chaco and the annual ceremonies commemorating settlement always express the theme of victory over great odds, of hardship and sorrow, but not with concern about how they have altered the environment.²⁷

²⁶ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological-Society* (New York: Random House 1964), xxix.

²⁷ See for example, Peter Klassen, *Kaputi Mennonita* (Filadelfia: Privately published, 1975); Martin W. Friesen, *Neue Heimat in der Chaco Wildniss* (Steinbach, Manitoba: D.W. Friesen and Sons, 1987).

Some generalizations are possible. The native technology commanded a low energy supply, and technological adaptations and development were not a priority to the aborigines. The hunter's paradigm of adaptation was flexible enough however to adjust with minor selective cultural changes. Thus the conquest of the environment came slowly via increased knowledge about the intrinsic and extrinsic spiritual qualities of organic life on Earth.

Mennonites and the indigenous peoples are becoming aware of environmental limits and fragility, and are beginning to address the issues. The land and the wealth it contains—earlier thought to be limitless—is now seen to be finite. Thus the Mennonite colony administrations have begun to introduce regulations such as preserving 'windbreaker strips' of trees in the clearing of forests in order to slow down the unrelenting winds and to forestall undesirable climatic and weather implications.

The indigenous, who are aspiring to the 'better life' that the [p. 281](#) Mennonites are enjoying, are slow in seeing the implications of the environmental changes that their transformation is introducing. It is hard for them to understand why the environment should be a concern when they are living better now than when they depended upon the unpredictable environment in its untended, harsh, and wild state. Further, it is very difficult for them to understand that they are actually affecting changes in the environment. As far as they can see, burning the campo grasses each fall has not killed the grass growth in the following spring. This observation reflects the classic sociological or ecological postulate that the activities in the one realm can affect the environmental, social, and even philosophical aspects of culture, even though these influences may not be understood by the people themselves.

Ironically, it is becoming clear to Mennonites and to the more insightful Indians that helping to 'develop' the native population may not be an unmitigated blessing. Not only does development cause cultural dislocations, but it also creates the increasing need to control the environment in order to eke out an existence. Harnessing the potential of nature for human well-being was not understood as being diametrically opposed to the concept of cooperating with nature and the idea of partnership with the bio-diverse world. However, in isolated cases, Mennonites and Indians are beginning to suggest that there was a greater harmony between humanity and nature before the Mennonite evangelism began.

Mennonites learned by experience that evangelization is not possible without taking cognizance of, and responsibility for, the material well-being of the target peoples. All the missionary organizations in the Chaco have discovered that converting a person to Christ meant converting the family and the clan, and beyond that, taking care of the new converts, since 'saving the souls' did not solve all the problems of material existence. For when the population was suddenly expanding because the natives had accepted the teaching that it was wrong to kill extra children, evangelizing the individual meant taking care also of the burgeoning family and the entire clan and all the economic and social problems involved.

Evangelization of the Chaco denizens is teaching the Mennonites as well as the other missionary groups (and will hopefully teach the natives sooner or later), that the creation was created by God in such a way that every part is integrally related to every other part—thus supporting the first law of ecology—'everything affects everything else'. Evangelization can no longer be seen as a 'spiritual' effort, unrelated to other aspects of creation. This truth will demand that [p. 282](#) Mennonites and the Indigenous recognize the interrelatedness of evangelization and material life, that the bringers of the 'good news' and the recipients are partners in affecting a larger project that involves the environment (creation).

CONCLUSIONS

Wendell Berry has said that ‘the first principle of the kingdom of God is that it includes everything in it, the fall of every sparrow is a significant event’.²⁸ The awareness of the interrelatedness of everything through the Creator God was present in the Judaic tradition, but so was the ‘desacralization’ of nature through domination over it.²⁹ The Platonic separation of the spirit from the material with the transcendence of the spirit, further proved devastating for the creation. The traditional mission to the ‘pagan’ societies followed in this frame of thought—it was assumed that the spirit of humankind could be addressed and changed quite apart from its physical and material aspects, and that the human sector was somehow separate from (and dominant over), nature.

But the basic unity of the spiritual and the material is recently being rediscovered with the help of the ecological movement.³⁰ Thus, the ecological movement has contributed to what is becoming a slogan of late in Christian circles: ‘The kingdom of God is a vision of things as they ought to be in the entire cosmos, human and nonhuman; it is an order in which all things are in right relationship’.³¹

According to J. J. Kritzinger, Christian theology has no alternative but to rethink its traditions, to undergo a paradigm change. He approvingly quotes Ghilleen Prance, who writes: ‘We should not be going into the interior of the Amazonia unless we have a welldeveloped theology of stewardship that equals that of those to whom we take the gospel’.³² The Commission for World Mission and Evangelism stated that the problem of missions and environment must p. 283 be solved in a fundamental way by recognizing that ‘The reasons for this abuse [of nature] are rooted in a turning away from the living God, the free reign of human greed, the misuse of power, the presence of fear and ignorance, and deception that hides the truth of creation’s suffering’.³³

How would the environment in the Chaco be different if indigenous peoples had been evangelized according to the vision of a ‘Kingdom of God’ in which all things have their right relationships? The answer would have an ecological dimension—respecting the material facets of creation as part of God’s work, along with the human. But this is a deeply ironic answer, for it forces us to conclude that it is impossible to start all over because it is too late.

All the institutions of western civilization are so saturated with environmental abuses that the Gospel would have to be freed from these contaminations to evangelize the ‘pagans’ in a way to allow for a harmony between the material and spirit world. Is this possible? Probably not. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, recognizing the cultural setting of the Gospel, ‘We have this treasure in earthen vessels’ ([2 Cor. 4:7](#)). Therein lies the ultimate ecological dilemma—there is no way for the Christian message to be incarnated or understood disembodied from specific cultures, and almost all cultures have lost their

²⁸ Quoted in Calvin Dewitt, ed., *The Environment and the Christian* (Grand Rapids, Mich. Baker Book House, 1991), 110.

²⁹ See Loren Wilkenson, ed., *Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1980), 203ff.

³⁰ J. J. Kritzinger, ‘Mission, Development and Ecology’ *Missionalia*, 19:1, p. 11–13.

³¹ Gordon Zerbe, ‘The Kingdom of God and Stewardship of Creation: in DeWitt, *op. cit.*, 90.

³² Kritzinger, *op. cit.*, p. 15. Indeed, Christian missionaries should by definition have a view of creation more in line with God’s plan than any non-Christian tradition to which they go with the Gospel.

³³ *Ibid.*, 16.

ecological world view. So, maybe one cannot start over after all? Perhaps not. But the Christian faith tells us that 'with God all things are possible'. The Christian faith confronts us with the reality of the Kingdom of God as a central orientation, where God's rule is to be obeyed.

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Environment and Youth

Chris Seaton¹

Many young Christian adults in Britain today find themselves in an invidious situation. Their culture seeks serious answers to questions like, 'How should we understand the environmental crisis and what can we do about it?' The world view of their peers is dominated by the subtle (but apparently green) philosophies of the New Age movement like relativism, reincarnation, and pantheism. Yet their churches provide them with few answers and warn them away from the Green Movement, fearing that it is completely contaminated by New Age ideas. Little wonder, then, that the church in the United Kingdom is losing thousands more teenagers each year than it is attracting.

In the midst of this dark picture there are some bright lights. One such light is Revelation Church in West Sussex. It was formed in 1983 from a youth group of eighteen teenagers and now has over 500 regular attenders in six congregations. The average age is currently twenty-nine years.

The Bible provides many instances of young people whom God has anointed to offer leadership and example to the church, Joseph, Samuel, Mary, Timothy, and Ruth being but a few. Indeed, to Timothy, Paul wrote, 'Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers' ([1 Tim. 4:12](#)). Such an example has been set by the Revelation Church and many other local churches and groups associated with the 'Whose Earth?' project in 1992.

Revelation Church did not become actively involved in environmental action until one of its leaders, Chris Seaton, was asked to write a book for young people on the subject early in 1991.² Soon after this, the church became involved in a Spring Harvest initiative in association with TEAR Fund called 'Whose Earth?'. This project was established to educate young people about the biblical teaching on the creation and provide practical ways in which they could respond to the Bible in their lifestyles and in community action.

¹ Taken from a paper prepared by Chris Seaton and Lowell Sheppard.

² *Whose Earth?* (Crossway Books, 1992). While the book is neither intended nor endorsed as the official book of the 'Whose Earth?' project, it carries much of its theology, heart and ethos.