

# **ToTill and To Keep**

## **Being Stewards of God's Creation in a Consumer Society**

**A four-session study guide for adults**

**by**

**Carol Lena Miller**

**Curriculum Overview and Contents**

*Session One: God the Homemaker*

*Session Two: Who Am I, The Average American?*

*Session Three: Justice-or just us?*

*Session Four: What now?*

This 4-session study curriculum provides a Biblically-based exploration of the Christian's call to care for God's creation in today's consumer-oriented world. It is intended for adult study groups, but could be adapted for youth study as well.

The curriculum uses several additional sources of information. To teach the curriculum, you will need:

1. Bible with footnotes and/or commentary
2. Newsprint or white board and markers to facilitate group discussion
3. Copies of the following resources available from the New Community Project. Contact NCP at 1-888-800-2985; [www.newcommunityproject.org](http://www.newcommunityproject.org); or email [carollenamiller@newcommunityproject.org](mailto:carollenamiller@newcommunityproject.org).
  - a. Drive the Car Fast flier
  - b. Paper Trail flier
  - c. The Be(e/a)tles Guide to Saving God's Earth pamphlet
  - d. The Average American flier

- e. What is Your Ecological Footprint? worksheet
- f. Turn Down the Heat flier
- g. It's as Easy as 1, 2, 3 ... 4, 5, 6, 7 flier
- h. Consuming Appetites resource sheet

4. **(optional)** State of the World 2004 published annually by Worldwatch Institute. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY. This book is probably available in your local library.

5. **(optional recommended reading for the class)** How Much is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture by Arthur Simon. Baker Books, PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI [www.bakerbooks.com](http://www.bakerbooks.com)

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## **Session One: God the Homemaker**

*God is a gracious homemaker, and the earth is our home*

### **Background**

We find two creation stories in Genesis. The first account tells of an orderly, synchronous creation, and a seventh day of rest. The second actually portrays a different order of creation, and centers on the garden of Eden and the rivers there. Woman comes much later in the second story, as a helper. At first glance, these are two very different accounts. Let's explore more closely.

### **I. Genesis 1:1 - 2:3**

Reading this first account of creation, we enjoy the rhythmic, poetic and repetitive nature of the verse. We find that God is the Creator of all things, and God creates a livable world. Though living beings procreate, none have the power God has to create out of nothing. However, not all power resides with God. God shares the power: At God's command, the earth brings forth

vegetation, and the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures. The sun and moon rule the day and night. God is not the only creating agent; Creation has the ability to respond. Humans are given the delegated royal responsibility of ruling the earth. We read in verses 26-30 that humans are made in the image of God, and we are the creatures through whom God manifests rule on earth. Encourage students to explore what it means that humans were created to "rule" the earth, with the knowledge that we are made in the image of God. (How would God rule? Are we to mirror God in our thoughts and actions?)

Throughout this creation story, we can see that creation is cosmos, not chaos. All has its place. There is a wonderful order and regularity to the cosmos, in which every creature, animate and inanimate, has its assigned place and function in a marvelous whole. This evokes aesthetic feelings of wonder and reverence. Finally, each day concludes with a statement from God, "...it was good." God is very pleased with the world, a world that is benevolent and peaceful.

## **II. Genesis 2:4 - 23**

While different in structure and vocabulary, this text has important similarities to the account in Chapter 1. God is the sole Creator of a good and purposeful world, and the role of the human is to care for the earth. In Chapter 2, God placed Adam in the garden in Eden. God provided food by creating trees and plants, and water in rivers. God put Adam in the garden to till it and keep it. Then, because man should not be alone, God set out to make a helper fit for him. So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air. ". . .but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him." So God created woman.

### **Biblical Study**

Divide into two groups. Assign one creation story to each group. After they read the story, ask each group to think about the following questions. Then ask the groups to share answers, based on their understanding of the respective scriptures.

1. What do these verses tell us about God's relationship to creation? How do you think God would describe the creation to someone else? (What is the worth of creation, in its own right?)
2. What do these verses tell us about humanity's relationship to creation? What are human beings to eat? What are the beasts and birds to eat?
3. Reflect on God's empowerment of creation. What does this empowerment signify? Why is it important? What parts of creation are empowered, and how?
4. How do you understand God's intention for humankind's dominion over the creation? What does God mean by "dominion"? Is it the same as

"domination"?

### **Questions for total group discussion**

Describe humans' relationship to creation today. In what ways do most people interact with the natural world? How is today different from 100 years ago? 1000 years ago? 100 years from now? What most concerns you about the way humans relate to God's creation?

End with one or more of these readings (or recommend as home meditations):

*Psalm 19:1-4*

*Psalm 8:3-8*

*Micah 6:8*

*Proverbs 8:22-31*

*Psalm 51:10-12*

### **Closing Thought:**

"Creation is not just here for us to take care of. As anyone who has taken a walk by a stream or a hike up a mountain can tell you, creation is here to awaken and replenish our faith."

*-Paul Gorman, director of the National Religious Partnership for the*

## **Session Two: Who Am I, The Average American?**

### **Background**

This session will explore America's ecological footprint on the earth. After gaining some understanding of how BIG America is in the world, students will explore how much is enough.

Some suggested sources of information and statistics for this session include the following. (See the Curriculum Overview on page one for additional contact information.)

1. From the New Community Project

a. Paper Trail flier

- b. The Be(e/a)tles Guide to Saving God's Earth pamphlet
- c. The Average American flier
- d. What is Your Ecological Footprint? worksheet
- e. Turn Down the Heat Flier
- f. Consuming Appetites resource sheet

2. State of the World 2004 published annually by Worldwatch Institute.

3. How Much is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture by Arthur Simon.

### **Opening Discussion**

Reprint the following page of statements. Write the following numbers on the board in a random order (they are listed in the proper order to fill in the blanks): 60; 32,000; 30; 1; 95; 12; 50; 1,500; 300,000; 2; 18; 10, 1000 Then ask students to fill in the blanks below using the numbers on the board.

Environment.

Americans consume his or her weight equivalent in stuff every day, over times the consumption of a person in the world's poorest nations. If everyone lived like the world's consumer class (wealthiest 20% of world) we'd need 2 more planets like this one to meet our needs.

The earth's population is just over 6 billion people. US income per person per year is \$ . Vietnam: \$240

Americans use % of the world's paper (7 times more than global average). Paper comprises about 40% of municipal solid waste in the US; less than half is recycled. 80% of the world's people do not have access to enough paper to meet minimum requirements for basic literacy and communication.

37 million acres of forest disappear every year. Half the forests that once covered the earth are now gone. Rainforest is disappearing at the rate of acre(s) per second. 20% of world's wood harvest is used to produce paper.

Recycling one large stack of newspapers saves one tree. Recycling aluminum saves % of the energy used to make the material from scratch. Not recycling a can is like filling it half-full with gasoline and pouring it out upon the ground.

As of 2004, 1.5 billion people world-wide have no access to safe drinking water, and \_\_\_\_ million people die each year from diseases brought on by unsanitary water. Meanwhile, consumers across the globe spend an estimated \$35 billion a year on bottled water, most of it in countries where

safe drinking water comes from a household faucet.

Only 3% of the earth's water is fresh water. A dripping faucet can waste over gallons/day.

In America, producing, packaging and shipping a typical household's food creates 11 percent of the household's global warming emissions. On average, our food travels \_\_\_\_ miles from farm to table. "Factory farming" (mostly indoors with heavy antibiotics) is the fastest growing method of animal production worldwide.

An estimated 65% of American adults are over-weight or obese, leading to an annual loss of \_\_\_\_ lives.

Americans consume 25% of all fossil fuels. billion people around the world do not have access to electricity.

Americans own 35% of the world's vehicles. These contribute significantly to CO2 emissions (which contributes directly to global warming). The US accounts for 19.7 tons per person of carbon dioxide emissions, more than double that of Japan, the next closest emitter at 9.1 tons per person. US emissions rose % in the 1990's.

Mostly due to warming seas, approximately 27% of world's coral reefs are gone, up from only % in 1992. Pollution and mining also contribute to the loss of coral reefs.

Plants and animals are becoming extinct at a rate times the rate through the rest of history. We're living in the sixth great period of extinction on planet Earth, and the first to be caused by one of the creatures. One in four large mammal species is endangered and one in eight plant species.

Define "enough". How does "enough" get defined in our country?  
What/who are some of the voices telling us we never really have "enough"?

Order a copy of *The Average American* from NCP for each member of the class. Spend 5 minutes reading through this flyer. Ask the group to name things that surprised them or perhaps shocked them.

### **Biblical Study**

What does the Bible have to say about "enough"? Read and discuss the following scriptures and what they say in the context of this lesson:

Exodus 16:14-16; 31

Deuteronomy 8:2-3

John 6:30-35

Matthew 6:25-34

### **Exercise: What is Your Ecological Footprint?**

Ask each person to complete the worksheet, What is Your Ecological Footprint? Discuss learnings from this exercise.

### **Closing Thought:**

Pray together The Lord's Prayer

## **Session Three: Justice-or just us?**

### **Background**

This session will explore the impact of ecological injustice across the world upon the human condition. After the last session we have some understanding of America's consumption patterns, and thus our impact on the earth. Some call this pattern of unfair distribution of goods "ecological injustice"-we do not fairly share fruits of the earth. In fact, the earth cannot sustain our level of consumption (even for the 20% of the world population currently partaking); the earth is in decline, and will reach an ecological crisis point by the year 2050, according to the 2002 Living Planet Report by the World Wildlife Fund. How shall Christians respond?

### **Opening Questions for Discussion**

Provide some background for any students who were not present for last week's discussion regarding America's consumption patterns and our impact on the earth. Initiate this week's discussion by asking the class the following questions:

1. Why do Americans (along with other wealthier nations) have so much of the earth's bounty at their disposal? Have we been "blessed" with these goods by God (has God made a choice to bless some and not others?) Is this abundance a matter of chance? Is it related to our military and economic power?
2. Does every person in the world have a right to enjoy the earth's bounty?
3. Where does God fit into the material abundance of some and the scarcity experienced by others? What is God's role in the distribution of the earth's goodness-does God create the goods, with no further role? Is God at the distribution point making decisions about who gets what? If so, what is the criteria? What would the criteria be in a world that was just, fair, and peaceful?

### **Biblical Study**

Assign each scripture below to a student to read aloud:

*Psalm 24:1*

*Matthew 25:35-40*

*Luke 6:20-31*

*Micah 6:8*

After reading the scriptures, revisit the questions above. What is God's desire for the way the earth's bounty is used by all of humankind?

Romans 1:20 states "Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made." Paul says the people know God through creation. How would you describe God's "eternal power and deity" in the context of the creation?

### **Discussion**

How do we feel about the future? Optimistic, pessimistic? Is it possible for us to limit our desires and begin striving for more justice? Why is this difficult?

Studies have shown that happiness does not necessarily track with gross national product-in the US, for example, the share of people describing themselves as "very happy" declined from 35% in 1957 to 30% in the mid-1990s, despite a doubling of income per person. Meanwhile, there is a growing toll of wasted resources in prosperous nations-material that is discarded, time spent in traffic gridlock, health damaged by overeating, etc. What is the way of the cross, to joy and salvation? Does this challenge what it means to be a Christian? Based on his example and teachings, how does Jesus tell us to live?

### **Closing Thought:**

Reflective Reading on following page, "Consumption and Poverty" (Make three copies and ask three students to read.)

## **Consumption and Poverty**

**from Earth Odyssey by Mark Hertsgaard**

**One:** If humans have despoiled their local environments through history, it is not necessarily because they have been ignorant, selfish, or apathetic; most of them simply have not had the luxury to place long-term considerations ahead of their daily struggle for survival.

**Two:** Since the rise of settled societies some eight to ten thousand years ago, the majority of the world's population have lived in conditions of grinding poverty. They have had few possessions, suffered from miserable living conditions, and have been forced to spend most of their limited resources on obtaining enough food to stay alive.

**Three:** The most striking thing about automobiles, televisions, and other technological marvels taken for granted in modern societies is how new and unusual they are for our species. No other generation has enjoyed the sheer ease and freedom from want that WE do.

**One:** The paradox is that these blessings have been achieved through an unprecedented degradation of the natural systems upon which future generations must depend. Our dilemma is that, on one hand, more and more scientific evidence suggests that the consumption levels now prevailing in wealthy nations are ecologically unsustainable and that extending such a standard of living to all six billion humans on the planet will threaten the very survival of the species.

**Two:** On the other hand social forces have been set in motion that will not be contained. Electricity, telephones, running water, automobiles-once humans experience these things, they want more of them, no matter the ecological cost.

**Three:** The human species has been divided into rich and poor since at least the Agricultural Revolution of ten thousand years ago, but the issue is taking on new resonance at the dawn of the 21st century. As humanity seeks to create an environmentally sound future, no challenge will be more fundamental, or more difficult, than bridging the ancient gap between rich and poor.

**One:** (prayer) Let us pray. Oh Lord, grant us strength to break our addiction to consumption. Grant us spiritual depth to seek life's meaning where it may truly be found, and grant us courage to be true vessels of peace and love in the model of Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Session Four: What now?

### Background

This session will focus on specific actions the students can take to change their lifestyle to be more friendly to the earth and to our global neighbors. See the following resources from the New Community Project:

- a. The Be(e/a)tles Guide to Saving God's Earth pamphlet
- b. Paper Trail flier

- c. The Average American flier
- d. Drive the Car Fast flier
- e. Turn Down the Heat! Flier
- f. It's as Easy as 1,2,3...4,5,6,7 flier

### **Biblical Study**

Scripture Focus: *Matthew 19:13-26*

Ask a student to read the Matthew passage aloud. Discuss the word "perfect" in verse 21: The word "perfect" means full development, growth into maturity of godliness. See commentary for Matt. 5:48 ("Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect") and Phil. 3:12 ("Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.") The word "perfect" does not refer to sinless perfection. Old Testament characters described as blameless or wholly devoted were obviously not sinless. Although a number of Hebrew and Greek words are translated "perfect," the thought is usually either completeness in all details, or to reach a goal or achieve a purpose. Ultimate perfection, i.e. perfection in soul, spirit, and body, Paul denies he has attained, but will be realized at the time of the resurrection. For the Christian nothing short of the moral perfection of God is always the absolute standard of conduct, but the Scripture recognizes that Christians do not attain sinless perfection in this life.

### **Discussion**

Review the scripture and discuss what it means to "Be perfect". Consider where we are and what happens if we continue on the current path. Write the following questions for everyone to see; give the students 5 minutes to think about and/or write down responses, then discuss.

1. What are the consequences to us and our spiritual and physical wellness if we continue to increase consumption? What are the potential consequences to the creation?
2. Is it possible to "go back" to a place with fewer things, less fossil fuel consumption, smaller homes, fewer cars, etc.?
3. How does technology fit into this? With technology's help, will we be able to live successfully on earth forever? (Consider alternative energy sources, cleaner automobiles, more energy-efficient appliances, buying "green", etc.)

If the group is concerned about the impact upon the economy if we consume less, point them to resources discussing this issue,

and the economic feasibility of using more efficient energies, sustainable production of goods, etc. (For example, see State of the World 2004, Chapters 2 and 5.)

### **Thou shalt not...**

Create Ten Commandments for humanity's relationship with the earth. Give the class a few minutes to jot down ideas about what God would tell us to do or not to do in regard to being stewards of God's creation. Make a list on the board or newsprint.

An additional exercise would be to list 2-3 action steps under each "commandment" to serve as examples of ways to live out that mandate in every day life.

### **OR**

Using the following major categories, ask students to brainstorm what they can do to be good stewards of the earth. Think about individual families, then your church. (Use resources listed at the beginning of this session for reference.) Write responses on newsprint to leave up.

- Reduce / Reuse / Recycle
- Household Energy Consumption
- Food (Eating and Drinking)
- Water (How do we impact clean, fresh water supply)
- Transportation

To give an example of the positive impact a group like this can have in restoring God's earth, do the following calculation:

The average household uses about 4000 kilowatts of electricity per year. The generation of every kilowatt of electricity on average produces one and a half pounds of CO<sub>2</sub>. Studies show that about 20 percent of household energy usage is for heating hot water. Therefore, in its hot water consumption, the average home is responsible for the production of 1500 pounds of CO<sub>2</sub>. Assuming that showers use half the hot water in the average home, this activity alone produces about 750 pounds of CO<sub>2</sub> per year. Therefore, cutting the shower time by half in a household could reduce CO<sub>2</sub> production by 375 pounds. Multiply this by the number of households represented in the class. Then multiply by the number of families in the congregation. How much CO<sub>2</sub> was saved in each instance?

Would you like to bring a challenge before the congregation regarding stewardship of the earth in congregational or family life? Resources for such an effort could include:

The Drive the Car Fast campaign in which members are asked to reduce car use on a particular Sunday, finding other ways to come to worship

The If a Tree Falls.... program of reforestation in Central America (a great Bible School or Sunday School project)

The Write for Life postcard campaign to lobby your government to permanently protect the coastal plain of the Artic National Wildlife Refuge - for the Gwich'in people, for the caribou, for one of the most pristine places in the northern hemisphere.

An environmentally-related Learning Tour to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska or to Central America

The wood-conserving stove project of the Church of the Brethren's Global Food Crisis Fund in Guatemala (see [www.brethren.org/genbd/witness/careforcreation.htm](http://www.brethren.org/genbd/witness/careforcreation.htm) or call 1-800-323-8039).

The Grounds' Keepers program in which someone visits your congregation to assess the earth-friendliness of your church and home buildings, grounds, and lifestyle. You will lower energy bills and lessen your impact on the environment!

Contact the New Community Project for more information on these efforts.

If you have not already done so, distribute to students copies of the resource fliers listed at the beginning of this session.

### **Closing Thought:**

Pray aloud: "We give you thanks, most gracious God, for the beauty of earth and sky and sea; for the richness of mountains, plains, and rivers; for the songs of birds and the loveliness of flowers. We praise you for these good gifts, and pray that we may not only use them for our sustenance, but protect and keep them for their own sake and for future generations. Grant that we may continue to grow in our grateful enjoyment of your abundant creation, to the honor and glory of your Name, and for our neighbors' good, now and forever. Amen."

*Study Guide by:*

*Carol Lena Miller*

*New Community Project*

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