

I want to tell you about my hero when it comes to Christian environmental stewardship, and I want to tell you about the practices and attitudes that undergird his commitment. His name is Philip Mote, and when I met him 15 years ago, he was working for the Climate Impacts Group at the University of Washington in Seattle. Phil is now the director of the Oregon Climate Change Research Institute. When I met Phil, I was an associate pastor in a Presbyterian congregation in Seattle in the USA, and he was a recently elected elder for stewardship.

In earlier years, most of the stewardship elders had focused on stewardship of money or spiritual gifts. Phil wanted to focus on stewardship of the environment. I had been a biology major as an undergraduate, and some of my most significant worship experiences had occurred in science labs and in nature, so I was excited to see what Phil would do. I partnered with him in a variety of activities, such as:

- seminars on the biblical basis for care of the environment;
- guest speakers about a variety of topics like wind power or safe household cleansers;
- a yearly transportation fair where congregation members brought their hybrid cars and electric bicycles, where we promoted public transportation and helped the congregation understand the significance of transportation choices;
- a monthly "bike/bus/walk/carpool to church" Sunday in summer;
- recruiting and nurturing a team of people to provide leadership in the congregation related to creation care.

As Phil and I worked on these activities, I became acquainted with him. He's an atmospheric scientist, and one of his areas of research at that time was patterns in the retreat and advance of glaciers worldwide. I heard him give public lectures several times, with a set of slides much like the ones Al Gore used in the movie *An Inconvenient Truth*. After the presentations, Phil would take questions from the audience, and he was so patient in his answers. There were always people present who didn't believe the climate is changing or who didn't believe the change in the climate is caused by human action, and he gently and patiently addressed their concerns.

Phil and I talked a lot about daily lifestyle choices. He taught me about the significance of

I An Inconvenient Truth. Director Davis Guggenheim, starring Al Gore, Billy West, George Bush. Released 2006. Paramount Classics.

transportation choices in releasing carbon. He rode his bicycle about 8 miles to and from work each day. I remember a number of conversations with him about car choice. Hybrids were new in those days, and we debated whether it's wiser to buy a hybrid or an older car that gets good mileage.

I learned that Phil was involved in an international organisation. In those early days of publicity about climate change, I could never keep the initials straight. Was it the IPPC? Or the IPCC? When the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change won the Nobel Peace Prize a few years ago, I was thrilled that Phil was being honoured for his commitment and wisdom. Now I never forget those initials!

BIBLE STUDY

A PRACTICE OF ENGAGEMENT WITH

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What did I learn from Phil about the Christian spiritual practices that undergird his commitment to care for God's beautiful earth? Phil's faith in Christ was deeply grounded in the Bible. He had

participated in Bible study groups ever since he'd been a student, had attended church regularly and listened to good sermons, and he read the Bible on

his own. A practice of engagement with Scripture is essential for any Christian who wants to care for creation, for at least two reasons.

First, we have to be convinced that God really did desire that humans till and tend the garden (Gen 2:15). We have to be convinced that the earth belongs to God (Ps 24:1), and that it has been lent to us to care for, not given to us to exploit. We need to read scriptures like Psalm 104, which celebrates the intricacy of this world God has made, and God's role in creating and sustaining it. Psalm 104 has been called the earliest environmental writing. Caring for creation is hard work, and we need a strong grounding in God's word to affirm that this work matters.

Secondly, caring about stewardship of creation will create conflict, and Christian character shapes the way we engage in conflict. We need a solid grounding in biblical principles of Christian character, such as patience, kindness, goodness, and a commitment to nurturing peace between people. I will never forget Phil's patience with the people who asked him aggressive questions. That kind of patience is nurtured by spending time in God's word.

SABBATH KEEPING

Another habit Phil engaged in, beginning with his student years, was keeping the Sabbath. Phil attended Harvard University as an undergraduate, and he said the academic pressure there was brutal. He also rowed as a student, which added additional pressure. He said if a Harvard student who rows can keep a Sabbath, anyone can. He carried his Sabbath practice into adult life, and every time he talked about it, I could hear his enthusiasm for the benefits of Sabbath keeping.

What is the Sabbath? First and foremost, a day to stop. Stop working, whatever paid or unpaid work that might be. A day to rest in God's goodness. A day to enjoy what God has made rather than trying to shape our lives into a certain direction. A day to stop multi-tasking and worrying. Many Christians today are flexible about which day they choose for their Sabbath day. Some choose Saturdays, like Jesus did. Some choose Sundays so church can be included.

Some people who have to work on weekends choose a weekday.

In what ways does the Sabbath undergird creation care? When I did the interviews for my book on Sabbath keeping,² I heard over and over from people

who enjoy getting out in nature on their Sabbath day. People talked about walking on the beach, tramping, bicycling, sailing, throwing a Frisbee for a dog, and gardening – or simply sitting in a garden. When we stop working and stop producing, we are more likely to notice God's creation. And the reverse is true as well. Making an intentional effort to get out into God's creation is a great way to stop thinking about work.

In the Jewish tradition, the Sabbath is a day to pray thankfulness prayers, not intercessory prayers. Thankfulness prayers help us focus on what we have rather than what we don't have, and this is a significant connection between the Sabbath and creation care. The Sabbath is a day to be thankful, to enjoy what is, and to praise God for the beautiful creation. Having a day once a week when we focus on what we have already received, rather than what we don't have, infuses the rest of the week with an ability to consume less, and this helps our fragile earth.

Another Jewish tradition for the Sabbath is to refrain from using money or even thinking about money. Many Sabbath keepers try to avoid shopping

2 Lynne M. Baab, Sabbath Keeping: Finding Freedom in the Rhythms of Rest (Downers Grove: Ill: InterVarsity, 2005).

on the Sabbath, as a way to reduce engagement with the consumer culture that places enormous pressure on God's beautiful creation. This pressure comes in so many ways, including the damage caused by mining the minerals that make electronic gadgets possible, the pesticides that are used to grow cotton for our clothes, the arsenic that ends up in rivers after being used in the extraction of gold for jewellery, and the astonishing amount of energy used to produce almost everything we buy. Spending a day a week refraining to engage with money – even to think about it – reduces the strain on the earth on that day and can also help us curb our spending on the other days.

Many Sabbath keepers talk about the way the slow pace of the Sabbath spills over into the other days of the week. An unhurried pace is necessary to take the extra time to recycle, use non-damaging household cleansers, compost and so many other habits that enable us to care for creation a bit better.

In this busy world, we need all the help we can get to slow down, and keeping a Sabbath does help in that way.

I think Phil's greatest pleasure in keeping the Sabbath was having time with his three children.

Time to enjoy them as they are and time to enjoy being in nature together. Consumption can be fuelled by loneliness and rushing around, and the unhurried pace that is encouraged by the Sabbath spills over into family time and time with friends. Appreciating family and friends, and enjoying being with them in a relaxed way, can be one more way we reduce consumption.

FASTING

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Another Christian spiritual practice, fasting, can nurture creation care. Fasting has gained popularity in natural health circles, and it plays a role in most world religions. Therefore, it is important to articulate clearly what exactly is Christian fasting. The definition I've found most helpful for Christian fasting is this: Christian fasting is the voluntary denial of something for a specific time, for a spiritual purpose, by an individual, family, community or nation.³

3 This definition is adapted from that given by Bruce Wilkinson in Set Apart: Discovering Personal Victory Through Holiness (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 1998, 2003), 228. On pages 28–31 of my book, Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), I discuss the various components of this definition.

Phil has fasted numerous times, and notes that fasting has brought clarity to his prayers. Fasting is a practice that undergirds creation care in numerous ways like Sabbath keeping does.

I only learned that Phil fasts because I asked him about it when I was writing a book on fasting.⁴ In Western countries, most fasting has been done in secret, from a desire to obey Jesus' words in Matt 6:16–18: "Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." In Jesus' time, people put oil on their heads as a part of normal grooming, so Jesus is saying not to draw attention to your fast.

In Africa, Asia and South and Central America, Christians fast communally and they usually let

others know they are fasting. They interpret Jesus' words in Matthew 6 differently from Christians in the West. They think Jesus' words indicate that Christians shouldn't boast about fasting or exhibit pride. Christians in those parts of the world gain great support in their fasting by

doing it together. Some communities in Western countries are discovering the joy of fasting together. I've heard stories about home groups and even whole congregations who fast together.

When I was a minister in Seattle, I took a group of women to a Benedictine monastery for a few days every year. The sisters were enthusiastic Sabbath keepers. They wore special clothes on Sundays, decorated their church and the rest of their building for that special day, and enjoyed lavish and delicious food as a sign of God's abundance. They also fasted from meat every Friday, which of course is a long-standing Christian tradition. These sisters viewed their Friday fasts from meat as an expression of their desire to walk lightly on the creation in all they do.

Fasting from all food, or a particular food, can be a wonderful way to tread more lightly on creation. Raising meat requires considerable resources and can pollute significantly, so avoiding meat as a part of a fast makes sense. Note that if you never eat meat, you're not fasting. Fasting involves refraining from doing something for a specific period of time. If you never eat meat, that's a wonderful lifestyle

4 See footnote 3 for the bibliographical details.

commitment, but it's not a fast. One of the benefits of fasting is the surprise that comes from eliminating, for a season, something that is a part of our daily life.

Increasingly, people of faith and people outside the church are fasting from technology. That kind of fast definitely precipitates surprise. Some people are shocked at how lost they feel without their smart phone or computer. Others are surprised at how much different, or perhaps even richer, their lives are without a particular form of technology. One person told me about noticing the sound of birds when he set aside his iPod for a weekend. Others talk about the richness of conversations they engaged in while fasting from Facebook for a season.

Fasting from technology for a day, a weekend, a week, or even longer, can help remind us how rich life can be without constant engagement with technology. Fasting in this way can help slow down our next purchase of an electronic gadget. A Christian fast has a spiritual purpose, so for a fast from technology

to be a Christian fast, some particular spiritual goals must be articulated. A fast from technology can make more time for prayer and Bible reading. It can give us time to ponder the patterns of our lives so we can figure out how to honour God more fully with all we do and say. In fact, a fast from

just about anything can help us meet those goals.

I have talked with people who have fasted from shopping, jewellery, coffee, eating in restaurants, music, news media, and many other things. Each of those items use energy and resources. Even a brief fast reduces consumption, lightening the load we are putting on God's beautiful creation.

World Vision's "Forty Hour Famine" has been experienced by numerous school and youth groups in New Zealand. Students and young adults have the opportunity to fast for forty hours in solidarity with people around the world who have less to eat than we do. A part of the fast includes learning about food and hunger patterns around the world. I have spoken with numerous young adults who have been quite surprised by the impact of this experience. It makes them more grateful for what they have, and more aware of the justice issues involving food. It would be a simple matter to include some teaching about environmental issues related to food when engaging in the Forty Hour Famine.

5 Online: https://www.worldvision.org.nz/Portal/famine/default. aspx. Accessed 8 April 2013.

FASTING FROM TECHNOLOGY

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NURTURING CHRISTIAN CHARACTER AND HOPE

I remember so vividly the patience Phil Mote exhibited when talking with people who disagreed with him about climate change. I remember his clear and non-defensive answers. I don't know how much of his patience and lack of defensiveness came from his immersion in the Bible, Sabbath keeping, and fasting, but I suspect there was a significant connection. If we care about environmental stewardship, we will inevitably end up in conversations with people who believe evangelism and discipleship should have total priority over creation care, and we need to present our viewpoint clearly and with kindness. We will inevitably end up talking with people who disagree on specific issues related to creation care, and we need to have the kind of character that can engage peaceably with people who have different views. Patience and lack of defensiveness go a long way toward helping

us maintain a respectful attitude while speaking honestly.

That kind of character is nurtured by Christian discipleship, which is in turn nurtured by the habits we engage in. Bible study, Sabbath keeping and fasting are three habits

that undergird creation care by growing Christian character. In order for us to grow in Christian character, we must make choices to draw near to Jesus Christ. These three practices I saw modelled in Phil's life also undergird creation care in other ways: Bible study by helping us learn about God's priorities with regard to creation, Sabbath keeping by slowing us down and helping us enjoy what is rather than wanting more, and fasting by helping us experience life without various things that we're used to.

Numerous other Christian spiritual practices help us develop Christian character and undergird a commitment to caring for creation. Spiritual practices that involve the body, like walking the labyrinth or praying while walking, help us link our bodies and our spirits, and thus affirm connections between God's creation and Christian discipleship. Christians are often disconnected from their bodies. Perhaps appreciating God's creation might begin with growing in appreciating our bodies by using them in a spiritual practice.

Many kinds of contemplative prayer – including centring prayer, *lectio divina* and *examen* – slow us

down in similar ways to the Sabbath, giving us a freedom from frantic consumption. That freedom often carries over into the rest of the day or week. In addition, contemplative prayer puts us in a posture of receptivity to God's will and God's purposes, and helps us be available to serve God in whatever way the Holy Spirit calls us. This receptivity and openness to serve builds Christian character and enables us to perceive God's specific call to us, which may include the call to engage in specific acts of creation care.

Spiritual practices make one more significant contribution to the development of Christian character and to a commitment to steward God's creation. Spiritual practices nurture hope. In the midst of the oppression of Christians by the Roman empire, the Apostle Paul wrote, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom 15:13). The disciples in Rome who read

these words, perhaps in a cave underground or some other hidden place, must have had many moments of despair at their situation.

Despair is all too common among Christians who desire to see God's creation well cared-for. I experience deep sadness

all too often when I think about the implications for human flourishing of many forms of environmental degradation. The poor always suffer disproportionately from environmental damage. The rich can move away from a toxic waste dump. The poor have fewer options so they end up raising their children in a toxic environment. The rich can buy a new place to live when their home is threatened by sea level rise; the poor have to stay near the sea and suffer. And God has always demonstrated a deep

Christians who care about our fragile blue planet need to rest in the hope that comes only in Jesus Christ, who lovingly brought the world into being and who is in the process of reconciling the world to himself. Christian spiritual practices help us make space for the God of hope. Christian spiritual practices help us receive love, help us learn to trust, and give us the power to obey God in a world that presents so many challenges. All of these help us as we strive to steward this beautiful earth that was given to us to till and tend.

concern for the poor.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, and may you engage in spiritual

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practices that undergird your desire to honour God by caring for our fragile planet.

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CHRISTIANS IN COMMUNITIES; CHRISTIANS AS COMMUNITIES

ANZATS 2013

THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND ASSOCIATION OF THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS WILL BE HELD AT LAIDLAW COLLEGE IN AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND 29 JUNE TO 2 JULY 2013.

THE CONFERENCE WILL INCORPORATE THE ANNUAL GATHERINGS OF NZATS, ANZABS, PPTNZ AND STAANZ.

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KEYNOTE SPEAKERS:

PROFESSOR NANCY T. AMMERMAN Dr. Ammerman is professor of Sociology at Boston University. In Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and their Partners (University of California Press, 2005), she describes the common patterns that shape the work of Americans' diverse communities of faith. Prof. Ammerman is currently engaged in research exploring how religious belief and action are present in the stories people tell about their everyday lives.

FR JUSTIN TAYLOR SM Now based in Rome Fr Taylor is a New Zealander who was Professor of New Testament at the Ecole Biblique et Archéologique Française in Jerusalem. He is author of The Origins of Christianity (1998) and Where did Christianity Come From? (2001).