

# Defending God's

Steve Bishop asks "How far should we go?"

**E**nvironmental issues are rarely out of the public eye. One that has caught press attention recently is the Newbury bypass. The anti-bypass campaign has become a focus for civil rights as well as for environmental issues. There were 720 arrests and it cost the Highways Agency around £1.5 million in security.

However, compared with the States the campaign seems rather tame. There environmental groups are prepared to die, even kill, in defence of Mother Earth. Their motto is "earth first"! They engage in ecoterrorism such as spiking trees, sabotaging roads, dismantling helicopters and destroying bulldozers. For them the real terrorists are the polluters and desecrators of nature.

All this raises important questions for Christians. Should we be involved in environmental action? If so, how far should we go? Should we be involved in civil disobedience?

Some Christians would say that we should not be involved in environmental care. Many reasons are given, but as we peel them back they seem to be no more than excuses (see Excuses for non-involvement). For Christians, the guiding principles must be those of the Scriptures.

The problem is that there are no obvious chapters or verses to quote. We need to discern the whole direction and tenor of the Scriptures and one way of doing this is to study the creation, fall and redemption.

## creation

The Bible declares unambiguously: *The earth is the Lord's* (Psalm 24:1). It is this concept that is basic to a Christian environmental ethic. It is God's world he created it, he loves and cares for it.

God commissioned humans, as his image bearers, to rule and subdue the earth. The meaning of these words must, however, be understood from

their context. Subduing and ruling are to be done as image bearers of God, he is our role model: it is less exploitation and more leadership as servanthood. It is God's earth, it is not ours to do with it as we see fit; we are stewards and are accountable to God for our treatment of it. We are to serve the creation so that it can develop as God intends it. This involves caring for and defending the earth as well as developing and cultivating it.

But with the fall came sin. The first sin in some way affected the whole of creation. All environmental disasters can be traced back to the fall and to sin. Thus our stewardship becomes all the more difficult; it becomes a painful toil (Genesis 3:16).

Human struggle with the earth is taken up in subsequent chapters in Genesis. Cain's murder of his brother means that the ground will no longer yield its crop (Genesis 4:10-14). And the prophet Hosea takes up the same theme: sin results in the land mourning (Hosea 4:1-3).

However, the fall is not the end. God, the author, enters his own story. Throughout the Old Testament we have in the flood story and in the Jubilee legislation glimpses of God working to redeem his creation. But it is ultimately in Jesus that redemption is accomplished.

Jesus' work on the cross redeemed the whole of creation. Nothing is exempt from the reconciling power of the cross. There is the potential of reconciliation for all of creation (Colossians 1:20). The work that Jesus began on the cross he will finish when he returns. The fate of the earth will not be one of destruction but of renewal and transformation.

So there is a strong biblical basis for environmental care. But how far should we go in defence of God's earth? There are some basic steps that we can all take to fulfil our role as steward.

Firstly, we need to put our own house in order. How can we live more benignly upon the earth?

Recycle, reuse and repair where possible, and consume less. When tempted to consume ask yourself: Do I really need it? Why do I want it? How does it affect the environment, in the way it will be used and in the way it was produced? And will it promote responsible stewardship?

You can also get your local church involved. Consider joining with others to pray and study what the Scriptures say on environmental issues. You can also compile lists of resources and start a recycling scheme, or encourage people to use it if one is already available.

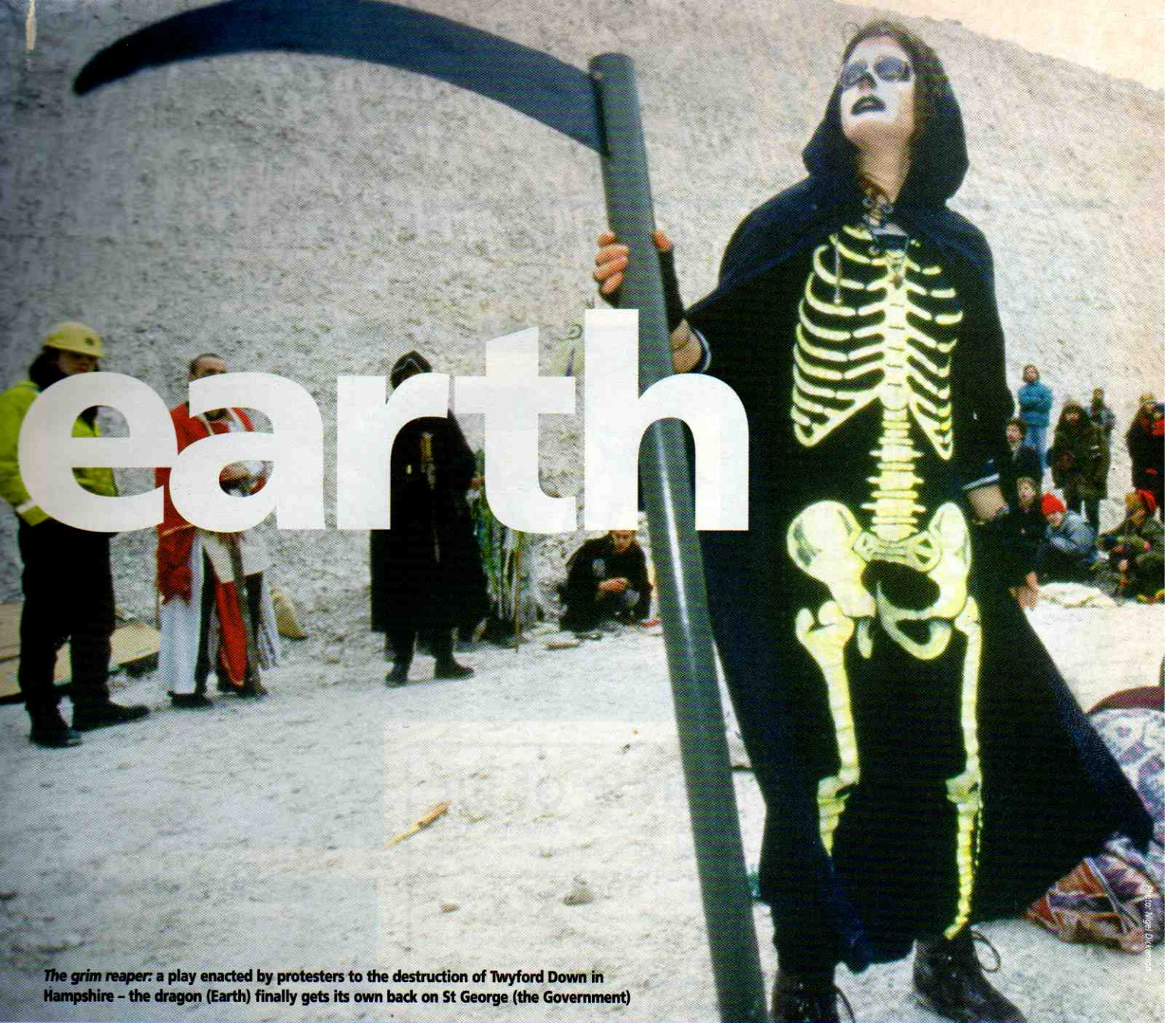
It is important, too, to educate yourself: but don't believe all that you see or read - every organisation has some axe to grind! And don't forget to use your democratic rights: vote in local and general elections, take up specific issues and lobby local government and MPs. The postage stamp is a powerful weapon.

## civil disobedience

Is civil disobedience, as seen in the Newbury anti-bypass campaign, an option for Christians? Many point to Romans chapter 13 as demanding unconditional obedience to government. Government is established by God to be God's servant, to do justice (Romans 13:1-5). And yet we are not called to blind obedience. Government is to be a servant, when it tries to become an oppressive master we cannot obey (Revelation 13). Without civil disobedience Moses would have died at birth; and in many countries the Gospel would not now be preached.

Civil disobedience for Christians consists of obeying God rather than human authority (Acts 5:29). A Christian then can engage in civil disobedience, but there are God-given constraints. It should be: a last resort; non-violent (harming neither people, animals nor property); an opposition of policies, not people; and done fully realising and accepting





*The grim reaper: a play enacted by protesters to the destruction of Twyford Down in Hampshire – the dragon (Earth) finally gets its own back on St George (the Government)*

## Excuses for non-involvement

- ◆ "The problems are far too complex and enormous for me to make a difference."

The size of the problems is irrelevant. We are not necessarily called to make a difference; God calls us to be faithful to him. He will look after the results.

- ◆ "Going green means being part of the New Age movement."

This is no more true than going door-knocking means being a Jehovah's Witness. New Agers do not have to have the monopoly on environmental care – after all, the earth is the Lord's.

- ◆ "Jesus didn't get involved in environmental issues, so neither should we."

Jesus never wore trousers, does that mean we don't have to? Jesus was a person of his time; the environmental problems that we face today were not a major problem 2,000 years ago in rural Palestine. Were he born in our time he would certainly have had things to say. He did get involved in his Father's world – his incarnation and resurrection are testimonies to that.

- ◆ "The earth will get worse and worse, there is nothing we can do about it, until Jesus returns and creates a new earth."

Such end-time fatalism is not supported by the Scriptures. The fate of the earth is not destruction but transformation. There will be a continuity between this earth and the new earth, in the same way as there is a continuity between our present bodies and our resurrected ones.

the consequences arising from it.

Involvement in campaigns is not 'off-limits' for Christians, but we cannot always accept our cobelligerents' world view and sometimes our policies could drastically diverge. Involvement must arise out of a commitment to the lordship of Christ over his earth and not from selfish reasons.

For the Christian, the root of all environmental problems is the fall; most can be traced back to greed and idolatry. Without tackling that problem we will, to an extent, be fighting a rear-guard action. Nevertheless, the defence of God's earth is part of our responsibility as stewards; but it is God first rather than earth first. ■

*Woman Alive* has 20 copies of *The Earth is The Lord's* written by Steve Bishop and Christopher Droop. If you would like a copy, send your name and address on a postcard to *Woman Alive/Earth*, 96 Dominion Road, Worthing BN14 8JP. Copies will be sent to the first 20 cards pulled from the postbag on 30 August 1996.