

# Learning from Creation

## A better approach to sustainability?

**James Hindson** questions whether living sustainably is enough

**D**on't get me wrong – I firmly believe that as Christians we are called to live lightly on the earth that God has given us. We consume and waste far too much. The encounter that Jesus has with the rich young ruler (Luke 12) is one of the most powerful statements encouraging Christians to live simply and trust God for his provision; lack of concern for physical stuff is a thread that runs throughout the New Testament and one that made the Christian faith attractive in the early Church (Acts 2.45).

The problem I have is that although I know that simple living is necessary, I have grave doubts whether it is enough on its own to bring about the ecologically sustainable and socially just planet God wants for us. If I am right, then the implication is that there must be something more that God has told us about how to care for his creation – something that perhaps we are missing at the moment, something that if we could discover would give us a distinct and radically Christian approach.

God's written word has a huge amount to say about simple lifestyles but I believe that a new approach to creation care can be gained through greater insights into what God's creation word has to tell us. We know, of course, that creation tells us about the existence of God, his power and his wonder – it clearly declares his glory. But more often than not we stop there – that's it. However, I believe that creation can tell us so much more if only we looked deeper. If we would only look at the way God has designed his creation to work we find key creation care principles that can bring about both the ecological and social sustainability God requires of us.

However, before we look at these principles I want to take a step back and look at how the world works at the moment in our human-designed systems.

Diagram One shows how things happen. Nearly everything is made this way. We take stuff from nature, make something from it that we use for a time and then throw away when we have finished with it. In short we

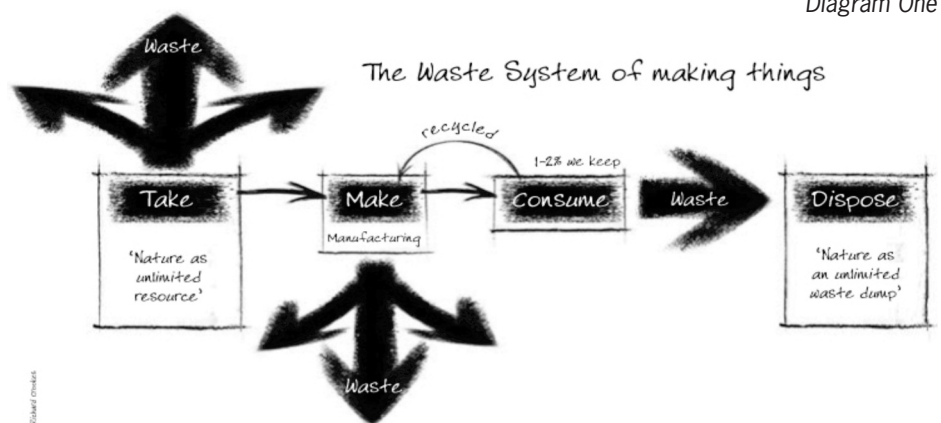


Diagram One

**'take, make and waste'.** It is a linear and highly destructive system. Just look around you as you are reading this article.

Almost everything you see, even some of the most simple items, has been designed and made using this system, usually without so much as a thought for God's creation. It is this wasteful system that is at the heart of our ecological crisis – with only around 10% of raw materials dug up or chopped down being made into something useful and 90% wasted it is a system that can't last much longer. It is also worth remembering that it is not only God's natural creation that is destroyed in this system – we know that people suffer too and so 'take, make and waste' is also at the heart of global social inequality.

This is not the way God designed the world to be.

The good news is that God has given us a different way – we just have to look at how God has designed his creation to work and learn from it. In summary, God's creation works using the powerful principles of 'borrow, use and return' – a complete contrast to the human designed 'take, make and waste'.

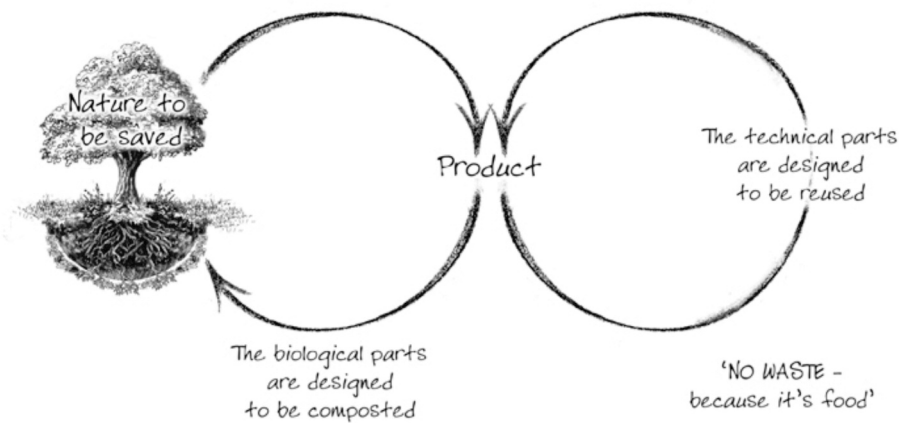
So what are God's principles for creation? Imagine sitting in your favourite natural place – for me this would be on a moss-covered rock in an oak and beech woodland somewhere! Look around you – how do you see God's creation working?

1. The most obvious thing is that there would be no waste. Putting it another way, any waste you can see is actually designed as food for another part of the system. Nothing is lost – everything is in a cycle.
2. God's creation system also works without being toxic. In the woodland, I know that no part of the creation randomly poisons another part, unless it has a specific purpose in being designed that way. There are no 'unforeseen consequences' of toxic materials in nature.
3. Nothing happens in the woodland that reduces or harms the long-term diversity of creation. In fact, diversity is maintained and enhanced!
4. The woodland system only uses renewable solar energy and only as much as is needed, neither more nor less.
5. It is also beautiful and effective. Maybe not everything in the woodland looks beautiful to our eyes, but everything works beautifully and fits together.
6. Although the woodland might be damaged from time to time by fire or high winds, it is strong enough to recover – it is resilient and robust.
7. Finally, the woodland creation system generally produces enough food and shelter for all. It is true that there are lean times and times of plenty but overall there is enough.

You might be thinking, 'Yes, and so? We all know how wonderful God's creation is? What's the point?'

Diagram Two

The waste = food system of making things



Well – follow me with this leap of thinking. What would our world look like if we could make everything using these seven principles and the creation-designed model of 'borrow use return'? If we could redesign our human systems and the way we live our lives to follow these God-inspired principles, then it is possible to see how most of the critical sustainability problems could be solved. It would be a challenge but with our God-given ability to innovate and create surely we could rise to it? Diagram Two gives the picture.

The idea of 'no waste' is an especially powerful and challenging one and can be seen as an overarching creation care principle. In a 'borrow, use, return' system everything would be designed to go back to where it came from or to be used again. This would immediately have two effects. The first is that we wouldn't have to worry too much about 'having stuff'.

If the stuff we buy was made using God's creation principles then having things is not a problem in itself. I am not saying that we forget simple living and buy more stuff just for the sake of it, but that having things would not be a sin if they were made using God's 'borrow, use, return' principles. Isn't it fantastic that God has designed the way his world works to be able to provide us with abundance? He is not a God of limits!

More importantly though, 'borrow, use, return' means more of God's creation to go round. Wasting nothing gives us the resources to be able to improve the quality of life for the two thirds of people on the planet who currently do not have enough. One of the challenges with our current 'consume less' approach is that, putting it bluntly, we shall never be able to consume less of 'enough' to allow those without 'enough' to have more. This is an important lesson – our 'take, make, waste' is really broken beyond repair – we can try and make it less damaging, but fundamentally it is a bad system. With a

'borrow, use, return' approach we at least have an opportunity for something new!

At this point you might be thinking 'Well, that's a good idea, but is it possible?' The short answer is 'yes'. For a large number of products we know how to make them using these principles and in some cases some designers are putting these ideas into practice. It all hinges on creative, joined-up-thinking design. It's not that difficult with organic products, which can be designed to be composted or used again in some other product – old clothes being used to make paper for example. For products that have more technical components, such as electrical goods, 'borrow, use, return' is more complex but still possible and here the principle is 'design for disassembly', so that the technical parts can be switched from one product to another. Clever systems thinking needs to replace our current wasteful thinking, but it can be done.

### Our 'take, make, waste' is broken beyond repair

You might also be thinking, 'I don't waste much. I do my best and recycle; isn't that good enough?' The answer is 'no', but carry on doing both – they are necessary but not sufficient. Most Christians know that waste is a bad thing but don't always recognise when waste happens. We are usually careful about obvious examples of waste – such as food, water and energy – and not throwing things away before the end of their useful life. The real problem is that this personal waste is just the tip of a very large waste iceberg – we don't actually see around 90% of the waste that is produced in the world. When your mobile phone dies, for example, you just have one small product to dispose of. You don't see the trail of destruction it has caused to get to you! That little bit that we see as waste when we worry whether to recycle something or throw it away comes

right at the end of a long tale of waste woe. And it's not just physical waste either. Many products we purchase have also produced human waste along the way. There is no way that we can purchase an item of clothing for less than £5 and escape the fact that for it to be that cheap, God's creation and often God's people have been exploited somewhere.

Recycling is also not a bad idea, but it's not really what is meant by the idea of 'borrow, use, return'. Most recycling is actually down-cycling and a sign of failure that the product wasn't designed according to God's creation principles in the first place. It is far better to design the stuff we use properly, so that when it does come to the end of its life in one form it has been designed in a way to be food for another part of the system. Renewal and regeneration is the name of the game – not recycling.

Of course, not everyone is in a position to change systems. But for the moment just think how these seven creation care principles can be put into practice in your life – why not start with 'no waste' and 'nothing toxic'. Whether you own your own business, work in an office, teach in a school or work at home, see how these principles could be woven into every aspect of your life. How you will do it will depend on your own circumstances and the opportunities you have for doing something practical, but these seven creation design principles can be helpful no matter what you do – and they offer hope!

Until life is organised according to God's plan then living this way will be tough, as it sometimes is in other areas of Christian living. God never said that being a Christian would be easy and creation care living does require thought – but the simple question, 'How much of God's creation am I wasting today when I do this or buy that' is a good starting point!

Let's get rid of waste and start thinking and working like nature works – and as God intended! ■

James Hindson a member of CEL, worked as an environmental educator with the Field Studies Council – shamefully without really considering the impact of his faith on his behaviour (his words, not mine, Ed!) Three years ago, he set up his own organisation – sense&sustainability, to think more creatively about creation care.

If you want more information, then start with *Cradle to Cradle* by Michael Braungart and William McDonough (Vintage, 2009). They were the first proponents of the idea and the book is an inspiration. Others are working hard to put their ideas into practice. Websites to look at are: [www.worldchanging.com](http://www.worldchanging.com) and [www.treehugger.com](http://www.treehugger.com); they have plenty of up-to-date ideas about new ways of making and doing things.