

‘God’s involvement is very practical’

Farming on Biblical grounds

What does the Bible have to say about agriculture? And what does that mean for modern Dutch farmers, many of whom are Christians, and how they work with nature, the landscape, and biodiversity? Judith Westerink provides some guidance in the brochure *Good Farming*.



Text Roelof Kleis

Judith Westerink, a researcher into Biodiversity and Policy at Wageningen Environmental Research, is a Christian.

Ten years ago, she set up a network for Christian researchers, policymakers and farmers seeking to reflect on what the Bible means for the agriculture of today. ‘What do we read about agriculture in the Bible, and how can we apply that to the farming of today? How does God see it?’ She integrated these questions into a Bible study guide called *Good Farming*.

What prompted you to write this guide?

‘Astonishment. For me it goes without saying that as a Christian, you take good care of nature and treat the environment with care. It amazes me that there are so many problems related to the environment and biodiversity in the agriculture sector. The newspapers are full of it. How can that be, when so many farmers are Christians? I started rooting around and talking to other people about it. Eventually I thought, I should start writing this up.’

Does the Bible contain a lot of agricultural knowledge?

‘The Bible was written in the context of an agricultural society. The prophet Isaiah said that farmers got their knowledge from God. Being a farmer is part of being human. It is all part of the divine plan that there are farmers and that includes their expertise. God’s involvement is very practical, right down to the level of your farming methods.’

Give an example?

‘Take what is called the Sabbatical Year. God decreed that farmers should let the land lie fallow every seventh year. Weeds should be allowed to grow then, so that wild animals could benefit from them. That is very useful for restoring the ecology and the soil fertility. I can really see the point of a rule like that.’

And what does it mean for the modern farmer?

‘That’s exactly what we need to figure out. That’s the tricky part. It would be a big step in our society to shut down a

farm every seven years. I don’t see that happening. But maybe we could try leaving one seventh of the land fallow for a year on a rotating basis. The EU agricultural policy’s set-aside scheme was good for biodiversity. A lot of arable farmers now include some form of fallow period in their rotation system.’

You write that God took pleasure in making Creation so diverse. Are modern farms destroying biodiversity?

‘Yes, though not deliberately. Individual farmers make decisions, but they are also stuck with decisions that were made before their time. They are stuck with the way the farm was handed down to them by their fathers. They are stuck with their bank loans. They are stuck in a system. You can’t just blame it all on that one farmer. We play a role as consumers too, by buying discounted meat for instance.’

Good Farming targets farmers. Intensive farming destroys biodiversity. Surely that's not Biblical?

'I want to turn that around. I would expect to find biodiversity on a Christian farmer's land. You make it an individual matter by focusing your question on the individual farmer. I'm saying: neither our farming methods nor our eating habits are remotely in line with Biblical values.'

Are Christian farmers thinking about this?

'The environment was always seen as a leftie subject but that is changing. The churches are giving more thought to the environment and the climate. More and more Christians are making the connection between their love of nature and their love of the Creator. This can be a new idea for Christian farmers, to think about how you run your farm from the point of view of your faith.'

'IT IS PART OF THE DIVINE PLAN THAT THERE ARE FARMERS'

'YOU CAN'T BLAME IT ALL ON THAT ONE FARMER'

The book is called *Good Farming*. What is a good farmer?

'As I understand it from the Bible: a good farmer who has respect for the Creator lets the soil rest, takes good care of his animals, nurtures biodiversity and is part of a community.'

And are we non-farmers that community?

'We, the consumers, are. We all have our opinions about farming, but we don't talk to farmers enough. We consumers have got to do our bit as well. Buy organic and local, for instance. Make sure the farmer gets a fair price for his or her

products. Take responsibility. You can do all sorts of things to help farmers be good farmers.'

What is your aim with *Good Farming*?

'For people to use it and start thinking about it. For it to deepen their relationship with the Creator and with Creation. For that to lead eventually to a change in behaviour. Which might be a drop in the ocean, but it's something.' ■



'Neither our farming methods nor our eating habits are remotely in line with Biblical values.' Photo Guy Ackermans