

## **Hammer-Handle Piety and the Care of the Earth: Joseph Sittler on Ecology and Christian Faith**

**Bruce Heggen**

It is characteristic of the concreteness and specificity of the thought of Joseph Sittler that he should illustrate the biblical concept of righteousness by describing the purchase of a hammer at a local hardware store. He writes:

The man at the hardware store had a whole case full of hammers. All of them were within the formal statement of what a hammer is: a wooden handle with a piece of steel attached at one end. The function of a hammer is to hit things with - and all of them would presumably do that.

But one doesn't buy a hammer in the same way he buys a picture. I bought the one I did, not by visual selection, but by tactile instinct. I picked it up, got the ingratiating masculine heft of it, made a couple of tentative passes at the nail-heads in proleptic imagination. The thing was so justly balanced, proportioned, that it was a literal extension of my striking arm. As a tool it constituted so effective a transposition from vision to form as positively to invite pounding.

That hammer is an incarnation of a function. It is, in biblical language, righteous; it establishes a right relationship between the arm and the nail. IF the Lord God made hammers they would be righteous hammers in that sense (Sittler 1957, 394).

Bruce Heggen is a doctoral student in theology at the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University.

The biblical concept of righteousness insists on the right use or conduct of a thing or person, the right relationship between things or persons. In western Christianity this has come to be understood primarily in terms of the personal conduct of a human being, and the proper relationship between the human creature and the God of creation and redemption. According to Joseph Sittler this understanding of righteousness is too limited. He is convinced that Christian faith wants to say something about a human being's relationship not only to God, but also to the whole of the created order; and that in the saying, it will necessarily and appropriately shape and reorient the piety of those who profess Christian faith. According to Sittler the practice of Christian piety is derived from the scope of biblical doxology. When the praise of God involves the whole of creation then Christian faith is lived out in a way that will include concern for the well-being of the whole earth, and not only for one's own soul. That this is necessary is mandated by the crises of the time in which we live. That this is possible is demonstrated by Sittler's insistence that the whole of creation is the arena for the encounter with God's grace.

### *Doxology and Ecology*

Sittler notes that "Christianity proudly presents itself as a historical religion. The episodes that mark its emergence, the stories which convey its tradition . . . these are all historical data" (Sittler 1970, 176 f.). But because they are historical data they have forced a disjunction between an understanding of God's self-revelation in history and one of God's self-revelation in nature. This development has shown itself particularly in the

theological movements of neo-orthodoxy, "whereby the promises, imperatives, and dynamics of the Gospel are declared in sharp and calculated disengagement from the stuff of earthly life" (Sittler 1954, 369). Consequently, those who profess Christian faith "suppose that redemption is a historical drama which leaves untouched and has no meaning for and cannot be celebrated in terms of the care of the Creation" (Sittler 1970, 177). But Sittler insists that the drama of creation and redemption is not only played out in the arenas of history: God is the one from whom, in the words of the doxology with which the English-speaking world is perhaps most familiar, "all blessings flow;" God is, to cite John Calvin, "the Fountain of all livingness." Thus the whole of the created order is the object of God's love, God's judgement, and God's salvation.

The biblical documents concerning creation speak, then, first of the goodness of the whole creation. Biblical doxologies demonstrate that God is the "undeviating materialist": "God likes material; he made it" (Sittler 1954, 373). Psalm 104, for example, affirms the splendour of creation, the dependence of the creation on God and the delight which God finds in the creation. Even the great sea monster Leviathan is neither a creature of terror, nor created solely for utilitarian purposes, but for God's pleasure. The accounts of creation in the book of Genesis too, rather than being historical documents to be affirmed as such, testify to the goodness of creation and affirm the relationships within the created order and the relationship of the created order to God. Biblical religion does not claim that the earth is our mother. That, says Sittler, is paganism. But with St. Francis he affirms that the earth is our sister, fragile and fecund, requiring not human domination, but human care.

These biblical statements affirming the relationship within the created order and the relationship of the created order to God are for Sittler ontological statements.

Drawing on the work of Joseph Haroutunian, he speaks of an "ontology of communion": "We have no ontological status apart from communion. Communion is our being; the being we participate in is communion, and we derive our concrete selves from our communion" (Sittler, *Essays* 1972, 107). There is no being in isolation. To be is to be with; to be human is to be in relationship with God, with other human beings, and with the whole of the natural order with which the human being shares creaturehood before God.

Thus human self-identity is also derived from the affirmation of human creaturehood. Sittler is fond of quoting an old German maxim: *Ein Mensch ist kein Mensch*, one person alone is no person at all. This echoes the statement of the poet, e.e. cummings, "I am through You so I." The poet and the author of the aphorism are speaking of identity discovered in the matrix of significant human relationships. History, philosophy, psychology and the social sciences as well as theology have expanded this understanding of human identity to include the human creature in relationship to the contexts of human history. Sittler acknowledges that the "force and importance of the convulsive and disclosive historical events of this century are not to be discounted" as dynamic forces contributing to "contemporary man's fractured sense of self." But to see the human creature as historical and social creature only is insufficient for understanding the totality of human identity: "Social psychology is a true descriptive discipline. But not true enough. I am what I am not only as one with, among, and in self-forming transactions with men; I am who and what I am in relation to the web, structure, process, and placenta of nature" (Sittler, "Christological Reflection" 1972, 333).

Thus, beginning with the consideration of the praise of God and the affirmation of the goodness of the created order in the Psalms and in the Genesis account of creation,

for Joseph Sittler theological reflection is ecological wisdom. "The question of reality is itself an ecological question" (Sittler 1970, 174). Ecology, Sittler reminds his audience, "is defined as the science that deals with the mutual relationship between organisms and their environment" (Sittler 1961, 3). As such, it becomes a metaphor to enable theology to bear witness to the interrelationship of the whole of the creation that is celebrated in scripture, and also to respond more adequately to a student whose question Sittler is found of quoting: "How can anything mean unless everything means?" (Sittler 1970, 173).

It follows that if the whole of creation is the object of God's love, if the self-revelation of God is not only in history but in nature, and if the human creature is but one component of the whole network of an ecological ontology of being-in-relationship, then the whole of the creation is the provenance of God's redemption. Sittler makes the startling observation, "One finds nowhere else in the Bible that strange assertion which one hears almost everywhere else - that God is concerned to save men's souls! How richly, rather, is restoration there presented in terms of men's material involvement in the world of nature" (Sittler 1954, 373). That "God so loved the world" means precisely that. The world that God loves is not only the sphere of human interaction, but it is also the whole of creation. Thus Sittler concludes, "unless the reference and the power of the redemptive act includes the whole of man's experience and environment, straight out to its farthest horizon, then the redemption is incomplete" (Sittler 1962, 179).

Redemption of such breath and depth calls for an adequate Christology, a Christology not only of the moral soul, of history, of ontology, but also "a daring, penetrating, life-affirming christology of nature" (Sittler, "Christological Reflections" 1972, 183). The formula of Chalcedon affirmed the simultaneous presence of the

divine and the human in the man from Nazareth, Jesus Christ. Sittler wants to push the classic Christological statements to the farthest reaches of their potential and to do this he draws upon the boldest assertions of New Testament and Patristic theology. Thus, that the "Word became flesh" means that the *logos* assumed that fullness of humanity that includes the entire warp and woof of ecological interconnectedness with the whole of God's creation. The Pauline description of the Christian community echoes this organic relationship: the church, the body of Christ, is not an organization but an organism. When St. Paul writes that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (II Cor. 5:19) and that "the whole creation" groans and waits in eager longing and travail for the glory that is to be revealed (Romans 8:18-25); and likewise, when the author of the letter to the Colossians makes the bold statement that God has reconciled "all things" to himself through Christ (Col. 1:20); then *ho kosmon* and *he ktisis* and *ta panta* mean precisely "the world" and "the whole creation" and "all things," in spite of statements by exegetes that would limit these terms to the human community or the realm of the spirit. The scope of this Christic vision is further endorsed by the second-century theologian, Irenaeus of Lyons. Sittler cites Allan Galloway's exposition of Irenaeus' thought: "For Irenaeus, the Incarnation and saving work of Jesus Christ meant that the promise of grace was held out to the whole of nature, and that henceforth nothing could be called common or unclean" (Sittler 1962, 181). According to the early theologians, "the unassumed is the unhealed." When the incarnation of God in Christ includes the assumption of the whole web of creatureliness, then in Christ God has redeemed all that God has made.

This doxological and ecological Christic vision of creation and redemption is also eschatological. That is to say it includes awareness of the reality of limits, of finitude in relationship with what is infinite. There is the

One who has created, and there is that which is created. The creation is delimited by the Creator. Human identity as the identity of one created and redeemed in relationship with the whole of creation is shaped as well by this awareness of human limitations. This characteristic too is one that the human creature shares with the whole of the created order. The book of Genesis affirms that the human creature is created of the dust and will return to dust. Accordingly, Sittler writes, this eschatological awareness brings to the popular mind

what the earth sciences have always known - that the seeming tough life of the earth is bound into a delicate system by a million threads of inter-relatedness; that assumptions of inexhaustible resources and energies is a fateful illusion; that finitude is a cosmic fact before it is personal knowledge; that beginning, maturing, ending, or radical transformation is in the structure of things and not only a phenomenon of sentient life; that a kind of natural 'judgment' is built into the natural-actual as well as to the personal-historical. Ecological fact is but the eschatological operating as nature! (Sittler 1973, 13).

The eschatological awareness of the human bond with the "intercalated bundle of all that is" has, according to Sittler, a "transformative force" that may not be underestimated. Ultimately it leads each of us to the question the answer to which will shape Christian piety and inform Christian ethics: "Granted that as a creature bound to and fragile in both nature and history I must die, how shall I live?" (Sittler 1973, 20).

### *Christian Piety and the Care of the Earth*

Human identity comes not from living alone but from living in relationship with others and with the earth. But

as the nature of that relationship changes, human self-understanding changes correspondently. There was a time when the intimacy of the human relationship with the rest of the creation was more apparent and human self-understanding reflected that, although not necessarily explicitly, "The theatre of my self-hood is not identical with my self-hood; but actual and symbolically heavy changes in the theatre work profound effects upon the self-defining process, and its formal statement" (Sittler, "Nature and Grace" 1964, 254). One need not look far for examples of these "actual and symbolically heavy changes": nuclear physics and biological science disclose that "the basic structures of nature have been made malleable" to human purposes ("Nature and Grace" 1964, 253). Urbanization and technology increasingly separate the human being from the earth by concrete, machines, microchips and air-conditioned homes and work spaces. Sittler suggests that the human being in our time is *Homo operator*, the quintessence of which is the pilot of the modern aircraft:

Every natural reality that makes his plane go and holds it up arrives to his sense and procedure via gauges, indicators, lights, and meters. . . The point here has nothing to do with the value, trustworthiness, or even the necessity of such instrumentation of natural fact. The point is rather to enforce the truth of the argument that technology as such, and quite apart from one's assessment of its promises and perils, profoundly changes *Homo operator's* sense for the world (Sittler, *Essays* 1972, 102 f.)

- and thus for one's sense for one's self as well.

One might come to conclude that a theology and poetry that reflect an eschatological self-understanding derived from awareness of the human creature's place as one of



many in the ecological web woven by the Creator would mandate an ethic of return to simplicity. This is not necessarily so: Sittler reminds us that when the human creature has exercised "dominion over" the earth while living within nature as a fellow creature, the fecundity of the earth has been enhanced and more fully mobilized by "more and more subtle application of the powers of reason" (Sittler, "Nature and Grace" 1964, 253). Furthermore, theology and piety as such simply do not know enough about the inner technicalities of the web of existence to readily prescribe simple solutions to complex problems (cf. Sittler 1985).

Nevertheless, in faith and piety the Christian can address those who investigate and advise from the perspective of a multitude of disciplines - nuclear physics and agricultural economics, biochemistry and banking, behavioral psychology, entomology and diesel mechanics - with the insistent reminder that the earth is the Lord's, and that we who are human do live in complex organic relationship with the rest of creation. Nor can the breadth of these disciplines be underestimated. Whereas Sittler is concerned that social psychology for example should include awareness of its relationship to the web and placenta of nature, ecology as "the eschatological operating as nature" will itself have a role in the critical address of the psycho-social structures of history (cf. Hefner, 342-346). And the Christian will seek ways to live out this fundamental reality in his or her own life in communion with the whole of the created realm.

For Sittler such Christian piety is neither a spiritual escape from this world into the next nor a romantic return to a supposedly simpler time. Instead, the living out in daily life of the practical wisdom bespeaks a righteousness that is not a private morality divorced from earthly reality, but is earthy and seeks to discern the proper use of that which God has created.

This earthy piety further distinguishes between the use of things and the enjoyment of things. Sittler writes, "to use a thing is to make it instrumental to a purpose, and some things are to be so used. To enjoy a thing is to permit it to be what it is prior to and apart from any instrumental assessment of it, and some things are to be so enjoyed" (Sittler, *Care of the Earth* 1964, 95). This distinction cannot be stressed too greatly in our pragmatic and utilitarian world. Wine for example is to be *enjoyed*, not *used*. "Where it is enjoyed it adds grace to a truth; where it is used it induces and anesthetizes a lie" (Sittler, *Care of the Earth* 1964, 96). So also the Psalmist claims that God made the great sea monster Leviathan not for whale bone and whale oil, but "for the sport of it."

And earthy piety gives attention to the ordinary and the specific. Within the cosmic sweep and ecological complexity of creation and redemption, earthy piety is able to see the biblical doctrine of righteousness incarnated in a hammer handle. Richard Wilbur wrote his "Advice to a Prophet" in response to the thundering generalities of a preacher who left his listeners helpless and unmotivated:

When you come, as soon you must, to the streets of  
     our city,  
 Mad-eyed from stating the obvious,  
 Not proclaiming our fall but begging us  
 In God's name to have self-pity,

Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and  
     range,  
 The long numbers that rocket the mind;  
 Our slow, unreckoning hearts will be left behind,  
 Unable to fear what is too strange.

Nor shall you scare us with talk of the death of  
     the race.

How should we dream of this place without us? -  
The sun mere fire, the leaves untroubled about us,  
A stone look on the stone's face?

Speak of the world's own change . . . We could  
believe

If you told us so, that the white-tailed deer will  
slip  
Into perfect shade, grown perfectly shy,  
The lark avoid the reaches of our eye,  
The jack-pine lost its knuckled grip

On the cold ledge, and every torrent burn  
As Xanthus once, its gliding trout  
Stunned in a twinkling. What should we be without  
The dolphin's arc, the dove's return,

These things in which we have seen ourselves and  
spoken? . . . (Wilbur 6 f.).

Sittler comments on the poem: "The force of this poetic image is in its absolute concreteness. The poet does not speak of the care of the earth in general; he speaks of the loosened pine, the stunned trout, the burning river" (Sittler 1983, 127).

The Christian gives attention to the concrete and the specific within the scope of the cosmic not because she ought, not because he has a vocation as a benevolent caretaker of the earth rather than as an abuser of limited resources human and otherwise, but because it is *here* that one encounters the grace of God. Even the wisest of pieties cannot be mandated for long. To insist on ecological righteousness under threat of destruction may be a correct interpretation of the judgement of God, but it will leave us wearied and despairing at the overwhelming scope of the task at hand. But even

Aquinas affirmed that *Gratia non tollet naturam, sed perficit*: "Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it." For Sittler that means that "the only theater vast enough for a modern playing out of the doctrine of grace" is "ecology, that is, the actuality of the relational as constitutive of all that lives" (Sittler 1970, 180). Christian faith affirms that it is through *one man* that the redemption of *all things* is accomplished. Christian piety provokes the concrete experience of the grace of that redemption in the righteous encounter of one person with a specific element of the ecological web of which all things are a part, whether that specific element be a fish, a stone, a hammer in a hardware store or another person.

For the earthy piety derived from an ecological and eschatological Christic faith is not only practiced in order to meet a supposed requirement of righteousness, nor does this piety merely enable one to fulfill one's own self-identity in relationship with another. But grace comes to one in the joy and the challenge of righteous encounter with another element of the creation, for *grace created*, the "ecological matrix" of Psalm 104 and Genesis 1, is "the grace that inheres in the world by virtue of the fact that it is a creation of a gracious God." And *grace uncreated* is the "incandescence and concentration" of that grace in the historical event and material specificity of God's participation in human experience in the incarnation of grace in the man Jesus (Sittler 1970, 178 f.). For Sittler "grace is understood ecologically as built into the whole constitution of the world of nature, society, and the life of man with fellowman" (Sittler 1970, 180); and salvation is ecological "in the sense that it is the restoration of a right relation which has been corrupted" (Sittler 1970, 177). Thus in the gracious and righteous use and enjoyment of all that is made, each encounters the salutary grace of God and each participates in the care and redemption of the whole of creation.

**Bibliography**

Hefner, Philip, J. "The Creation." In *Christian Dogmatics* I. Ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, pp. 265-358.

Sittler, Joseph. "A Theology for the Earth." *The Christian Scholar* 37 (September 1954), 367-374.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Hammer, the Incarnation, and Architecture." *Christian Century* ( March 27, 1957), 394-5.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Ecology of Faith*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Called to Unity." *The Ecumenical Review* 14 (January 1962), 177-97.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Care of the Earth and Other University Sermons*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Nature and Grace: Reflections on an Old Rubric." *Dialog* 3 (Autumn 1964), 252-256.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility." *Zygon* 5 (June 1980), 172-181.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Essays on Nature and Grace*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Scope of Christological Reflection." *Interpretation* (July 1972), 328-387.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Dogma and Doxa." In *Worship: Good News in Action*. Ed. Mandus A. Egge. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1973.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Spirituality and Discipline." *Word and World* 3 (Spring 1983), 123-128.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Creating a Rhetoric of Rural Values," taped lecture from "A Time to Choose: An Ecumenical Event on the Future of the Family Farm Agriculture in Wisconsin," Madison, Wisconsin (March 8-9, 1985). Wisconsin Conference of Churches, 1985.

Wilbur, Richard. *The Poems of Richard Wilbur*. New York and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1947-1983.