

Book Review

Walking Gently on the Earth: Making Faithful Choices About Food, Energy, Shelter, and More

Lisa Graham McMinn and Megan Anna Neff

(Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010) 237 pages.

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For the most part, in Lisa Graham McMinn and Meghan Anna Neff's *Walking Gently on the Earth*, the reader gets what is advertised: informal teachings on how to make creation-friendly choices within a biblical framework. The authors use anecdotes to teach, which makes this a pleasant and entertaining read. The authors examine the environmental effects of such things as farming practices, energy sources, and population growth from sociological, anthropological, and theological perspectives.

The eight chapters written by Lisa Graham McMinn are preceded by anecdotes by Megan Anna Neff. Each chapter's message is underscored by pointing out how some environmentally unfriendly positions are inconsistent with Christian faith. They also provide useful ideas on how to act in accordance with a Christian environmentally sensitive ethos. Appendices describe a home energy and carbon footprint audit and a primer on traditional energy sources.

The authors are fairly open about their inconsistencies in applying sustainability and justice theory to practical daily life choices (e.g. choices favoring convenience or time savings). This tension at the personal level is well-illustrated on a larger scale in their chapter about renewable and non-renewable resources. Their explanations of

the cost/benefit ratios involved in determining the best solutions for our energy needs are well done.

A central theme of this book, "compassionate interdependence," is what people should strive toward—the common goals with love and compassion. The authors make the excellent observations that caring for people means caring for the earth (p. 17) and that environmental stewardship is implicitly Christian. Consequently, motivation for caring for the earth should arise from a desire to help people, to exercise sensible management practices, and to respect and be receptive to God. I really liked their integrative view of God as Creator and Redeemer; they declare that "... caring for earth is part of the gospel message of redemption" (p. 124).

McMinn and Neff promote small scale family farms. These farms make animals (raised for food) happy and comfortable while assisting less well-off people in gaining access to healthier and more justly-produced foods. For the authors, compassionate eating means: (1) eating locally, (2) combating farmer poverty by purchasing from fair trade sources, (3) eating only humanely raised animals, and (4) eating less meat and more produce.

Financial responsibility is encouraged through giving (tithing), living within one's

means (avoidance of debt), sharing and borrowing things, living out the three environmental “Rs” (reduce, reuse, recycle), using one’s shopping power to promote justice (buying fair trade), protecting ecological systems, and being content with a simpler life and fewer manufactured products.

Although they did a good job of explaining why various interested stakeholders do not agree on either the degree or the cause of global warming, their assessment did not convince me as a reader. When they pointed out the apparent conflict of interest among top scientists skeptical of global warming, they did not mention similar biases of leading proponents of the opposing viewpoint.

The final chapter provides very useful advice: do not be guilt-ridden about the discontinuities between theory and practice, but rather embark on incremental and gradual changes. They remind the reader of the overarching values espoused in the book: love, mercy, justice, and compassion.

In what ways could this work be improved? In their discussions on human population control, McMinn unequivocally states she is pro-life, but fails to explain the supreme place and value of human life and personhood in relation to the rest of creation. The authors encourage the reader to limit the number of children born into a family, but do not adequately discuss the moral issues

associated with birth control for the Christian. In their zeal for population control, they do not discuss the social and financial benefits of large families. A fair treatment of this topic would include a more thorough evaluation of the pros and cons.

The authors explain that humankind’s possession of the image of God obligates them to be representatives on the earth of God’s benevolence, justice, and wisdom. This is true, but is not a complete understanding of humankind’s bearing of God’s image. Humans are not only quantitatively different than other animals, but also qualitatively different. People have a unique relationship to God and the unique mandate of the Great Commission.

This book is a pleasant read that presents some very practical approaches to creation-friendly decision-making. It encourages believers to make changes in their personal setting; such changes, multiplied by other people, will have a positive ripple effect on the global community.

I was disappointed, though, by the nearly complete silence on the human need for a Redeemer, Jesus. A better approach would be to present environmental stewardship as part of a whole that includes tangible expressions of God’s love by meeting both people’s physical needs (e.g. hunger, poverty, environmental degradation) and their spiritual needs (through evangelism and discipleship).