The Biblical Basis for ECHO and Agricultural Missions

William Carey, the “Father of Modern Missions” was a world class botanist. Among his many contributions to the country of India, in 1820 he founded the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India. For the next 80 years - until 1900 - that society acted as the de facto department of agriculture of India. Today, the Society continues to play “a crucial role in horticultural development and environmental restoration”.

The convergence of missions and agriculture is making a comeback. More and more mission agencies and cross-cultural workers are understanding the biblical basis for agricultural missions, the need for Christian engagement in environmental issues and the power of agriculture to convey spiritual truth.

The mission of ECHO is to “follow Jesus by reducing hunger and improving lives worldwide through partnerships that equip people with agricultural resources and skills”.

That mission of witness and agriculture takes place at the convergence of ten biblical themes. These biblical themes also provide the foundation for agricultural missions.

TEN BIBLICAL THEMES

The first biblical theme driving the mission of ECHO is the Stewardship of God’s Creation.

The Bible clearly identifies God as the creator of all things. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Gen 1:1)

God’s claim on His own creation is unequivocal. “I alone am God, the First and the Last. It was my hand that laid the foundations of the earth, my right hand that spread out the heavens above. When I call out the stars, they all appear in order.” (Isaiah 48:12-13)

Remarkably, God entrusts us with his creation. As the creation account unfolds in Genesis 1, we discover God’s lofty mission for humankind: we are to fill the earth and govern it.

“God said, ‘Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground.’ So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Then God blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it.” (1:26-28)

As humans made in God’s image, we look to our Creator for a model of good governance. We are to govern the earth as God governs us. God rules us in love, always seeking our best (Romans 8:28). We are to do the same in our care for God’s creation.
Our attentive stewardship of God’s creation is further described in Genesis 2. “The LORD God planted a garden in Eden in the east, and there he placed the man he had made. The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it.” (Genesis 2:8,15)

Stewarding God’s creation is not the deification of nature or the exploitation of the earth. Stewardship is cooperating with God in conserving and tending what He made.

British theologian, John Stott writes, “The earth belongs to God by creation and to us by delegation.”

It is sobering to consider the magnitude of responsibility entrusted to us by God to care for a world He created with such love and ingenuity.

The stewardship of God’s creation is a privilege and responsibility. It’s the first great commission given to humanity.

SECOND BIBLICAL THEME
The second Biblical theme that provides the foundation for ECHO and agricultural missions is that Creation Proclaims the Beauty and Majesty of God.

All of creation is a witness to God’s greatness. In the Psalms we read:

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” (Psalm 19:1)

“O Lord my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent…He set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be moved. O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures…May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works.” (Psalm 104; See also Isaiah 40:21-26; Psalm 148)

A thoughtful look at the world makes it so clear that there is a creator, that scripture teaches,

“Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” (Romans 1:20)

That is a very, very sobering statement. The witness of creation to God’s existence is so clear that all people are without excuse if they don’t worship the Biblical Creator.

According to scripture, the one who is the creator and sustainer of the world is Jesus Christ.

In Colossians 1 we read, “He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created
by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.” (see also Heb. 2:10)

This means that creation serves as …spectacular physical evidence of Christ’s reality and splendor.

As early as 354 AD St Augustine was reminding people of the power of creation to point to Christ. He writes:

“Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Read it. God, who you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead, He set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?” (St Augustine of Hippo, City of God, Book 16.)

The famous American preacher, Jonathan Edwards said something similar in the 17 hundreds. The point is that creation points us to a Creator that is majestic, creative and the origin of beauty.

**Creation was also intentionally designed to illustrate spiritual truth.**

Jesus intentionally designed the stars and the seas and the needs of plants and animals, and everything else in all of creation to illustrate spiritual truth. When he uses object lessons and metaphors from His own creation, he is revealing the purpose behind His designs.

For example, Jesus created sheep that are vulnerable and fearful. Sheep need a gentle, protective shepherd to care for them. Like sheep, we are fearful and anxious. God, the good shepherd, patiently cares for us. “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.” Psalm 23

Jesus created branches to bear fruit when they are connected to the trunk. He did this to visually remind us that ‘He is the vine; we are the branches. If we remain connected to him, we will bear much fruit. For apart from Christ we can do nothing.’ (John 15:5).

Jesus created birds and wildflowers as a tangible reminder of God’s provision. Jesus explicitly said, “Look at the birds. They don’t plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your Heavenly Father feeds them. And aren’t you far more valuable to him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don’t work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. If God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers…he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?” (Matt 6:25-34) Flowers and birds created as daily reminders of God’s provision!

Jesus created plants to thrive when they are watered deeply. A shallow sprinkling leaves roots vulnerable and easily scorched. We thrive when our souls are thoroughly soaked by the water of God’s word. Sometimes we wonder why we feel spiritually dry. Yet we only take time for a quick sprinkling in the word once a week. Look at creation
and learn from it! “Those who meditate on God’s word day and night are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do”. (Psalm 1:2,3)

The soil needs rest and restoration after production. You can’t plant corn in the same field year after year and expect production to increase. It will decline. Soil needs to be intentionally restored by adding nutrients and giving it rest. Our need for rest and restoration is so fundamental, it’s included in the ten commandments. (Deut 5: 12-15)

These examples could go on and on. The point is that we are part of creation. The principles that lead to the restoration of soil, the principles that lead to the healthy growth of plants… these principles are intentionally placed in creation to teach us what we need to restore our soul and to thrive in our relationship with God.

THIRD BIBLICAL THEME
The third principle is that God Provides for His Creation.

God designed the earth to generously provide for the people he created. ECHO’s mission supports God’s plan of provision.

The Psalmist writes,
“You [God] send rain on the mountains from your heavenly home, and you fill the earth with the fruit of your labor. You cause grass to grow for the livestock and plants for people to use. You allow them to produce food from the earth - wine to make them glad, olive oil to soothe their skin, and bread to give them strength. The trees of the Lord are well cared for - the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.” (Psalm 104: 13-16)

God designed the earth to provide generously for us. Despite our abuse, there is still abundance, but that abundance is just a shadow of the vast generosity designed into creation. ECHO helps farmers recover that abundant provision God designed in creation.

FOURTH BIBLICAL THEME
The fourth principle found throughout scripture that drives ECHO’s work and agricultural missions is Compassionate Care for the Poor and Hungry.

This is a crystal-clear and consistent theme in scripture.

The message in Isaiah 58 couldn’t be stated more clearly,
“Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help... Feed the hungry, and help those in trouble.” (Isaiah 58:7-11)

Deuteronomy 15:10 “…open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor…” (Deut 15:10 ESV).
After Peter, James and John understood Paul’s outreach to the Gentiles, according to scripture “their only suggestion was that [Paul and Barnabas] keep on helping the poor, which, Paul writes, ‘I have always been eager to do’.” (Galatians 2:9-10)

Throughout scripture – from the beginning of the Bible all the way to the end of the Bible - God’s people are commanded to reflect the love and justice of God in practical love and justice for the needy.

A brief study uncovers 30 bible passages describing God’s compassionate care for the poor and our responsibility to join him in serving them.


[Tim Keller writes, "Doing justice is inseparably connected to preaching grace. This is true in two ways. One way is that the gospel produces a concern for the poor. The other is that deeds of justice gain credibility for the preaching of the gospel. In other words, justification by faith leads to doing justice, and doing justice can make many seek to be justified by faith."]

Feed the hungry. Help the poor. This is what scripture teaches.

FIFTH BIBLICAL THEME

The fifth biblical principle that is the foundation for agricultural missions is **The Holistic Breadth of the Gospel**.

If growing in our understanding of God’s heart for the poor is humbling, this next truth is exhilarating: The death of Jesus Christ on the cross and his resurrection from the grave accomplished more than we realize.

When sin entered the world, our relationships with God, others and the rest of creation were broken. Christ’s work on the cross brings restoration in all these relationships.

Scripture teaches that **all** things created and sustained by Christ are redeemed by Christ through his death and resurrection.

**All things!**

Getting back to that passage in Colossians 1 that describes Christ as the Creator and Sustainer of the world, we continue reading that, 

“God was pleased to have all of His fullness dwell in Jesus, and through Jesus to reconcile to Himself **all** things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.” **All things!** (Colossians 1:15-20. See also 2 Corinthians 5:11-21)
Creation shares in the effect of humanity’s sin and **is redeemed and restored along with us.**

In Romans 8 we read,

“For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, all creation was subjected to God’s curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when **it will join God’s children** in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that **all creation has been groaning** as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering.” (Romans 8: 19-23. See also Isaiah 65: 17-25, 2 Peter 3:5-14; Revelation 21. Isaiah 49: God brings restoration).

All creation will be restored by Christ.

Our destructive relationship with creation is also restored by Christ.

Community Development leader and “Walking with the Poor” author, Bryant Myers writes,

“The goal of the Biblical story is the reconciliation and redemption of all things, on earth and in heaven (Colossians 1:19) with Christ as the head (Ephesians 1:10). Relationships are restored in all the dimensions distorted by sin:

- our relationship with God,
- our relationships with each other,
- and our relationship with God’s creation” is restored to a healthy relationship of godly governance and stewardship instead of deification or exploitation.  (Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, pg. 82, 341)

On the cross and through his resurrection, Jesus Christ brings restoration in all these areas:

- With God
- With others
- With and within creation.

That’s a breadth of restoration that is exhilarating!

**SIXTH BIBLICAL THEME**

The sixth biblical principle that provides the foundation for ECHO and agricultural missions is **Holistic Witness**.

The verbal proclamation of the gospel and the physical demonstration of the gospel go hand in hand. We speak it and we live it, relying on the Holy Spirit to transform people’s lives.
At the end of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul describes this interplay of word, deed and Spirit. Paul describes how Christ worked through him, “bringing the Gentiles to God by my message and by the way I worked among them (in the ESV “by word and deed”). They were convinced by the power of miraculous signs and wonders and by the power of God’s Spirit. In this way I have fully presented the Good News of Christ…” (Romans 15:18,19)

Peter also describes this full presentation of the Gospel that combines word and deed in 1 Peter 3:

“Have no fear…but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect [that’s witness through word], having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame [that’s witness through deed]. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.” (1 Peter 3:8-17).


The Apostle Paul instructs Titus to “teach the truth” and do “good works of every kind”. (Titus 2:7,8).

That’s holistic witness. We humbly and respectfully speak the truth and do good works of every kind.

Witness through word and deed isn’t sequential, it’s concurrent.
- We don’t do good deeds first and hope for an opportunity to explain our motivation later.
- We don’t give someone a gospel presentation first and then try to do good deeds to back it up.
- Instead, we are open about our faith and doing good at the same time.

A friend may only be able to handle small doses of verbal witness at a time. They need to hear the truth little by little. We can’t dump a whole pitcher of water into a cup that is too small to hold it. That creates a mess.

But we can’t be afraid to reveal our identity as followers of Christ.

Word and deed, hand in hand, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

At ECHO we do good deeds. We meet the urgent needs of the poor. And we talk about Jesus, unapologetically pointing people to Christ their Creator.

Word. Deed. Spirit. At the same time. That’s holistic witness according to scripture.
SEVENTH BIBLICAL THEME
The most famous verse in the Bible is a verse about the world. John 3:16: “For God so loved the world…"

That simple statement summarizes a central theme in the Bible: God loves the whole world. God is on a mission to restoration and redemption to people all over the world.

From the opening pages of the Bible, when God called Abram to become God’s means of blessing and redemption to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1) to the closing chapters of Revelation which describe a “great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” worshipping God in heaven (Rev 7:9,10), God’s love for people all over the world is clear.

ECHO shares God’s love for people worldwide. Our focus is intentionally beyond ourselves, our community and our nation, to the poor and hungry worldwide.

EIGHTH BIBLICAL THEME
Which brings us to the eighth biblical theme that drives the work of ECHO.

As we look around the world, we realize that - comparatively speaking - we are resource rich. We have an abundance of material resources. We have access to a wealth of agricultural knowledge and ideas. We have the privilege of sharing these resources with others.

A theme that reappears several times in scripture is this: We are blessed to be a blessing.

The Lord said to Abram, “…I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing… in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen 12:1)

We’ve been blessed by God SO THAT we will be a blessing. All these resources aren’t just for our benefit. They aren’t for us to hoard. They’ve been entrusted to us so that we will share them with others.

In case you think that is an isolated verse, we find this theme again in Psalm 67
May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
that your way may be known on earth,
your saving power among all nations. (Psalm 67:1,2)

In the New Testament, Peter picks up on this same principle when he stacks descriptor after descriptor on top of each other to show how good God is to those who believe in Christ and then he explains that we’ve experienced God’s goodness so that we will share it with others.

“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9)
At ECHO we recognize that we’re blessed with an abundance of resources so that we will share them with others.

**NINTH & TENTH BIBLICAL THEMES**
Two final biblical principles that provide the foundation for ECHO and agricultural missions are **Equipping the Saints and Humble Partnership in the Gospel.**

Echo’s work is an equipping role. We train others to train others to keep training still more. We “equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12 ESV)

Training is a multiplication process. Jesus modeled that when He intentionally invested in 12 disciples and a core group of women. Paul modeled that. He described training to the fourth generation in 2 Timothy 2:2

“What you [Timothy, second generation] have heard from me [first generation – Paul heard directly from God, but also Ananias (Acts 9) and Barnabas (Galatians 2:1)] in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men and women [third generation] who will be able to teach others also [fourth generation].” (2 Timothy 2:2)

We train others in the information we have and we tell them to pass it on – to train still more.

**We provide this service with humility.**
Our first mission objective is that “Those interacting with ECHO see the openness and humility of Jesus, rather than competitiveness or arrogance.”

We try to follow the command of scripture: “Don’t be selfish; don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.” (Philippians 2:2-4)

These are the **ten Biblical themes** that provide the foundation for the mission of ECHO and agricultural missions.

A phrase we often use is that our mission **strategy** is based on **scripture**, informed by **statistics**, and developed under the guidance of the Holy **Spirit**

**Global Need**
These two simple yet staggering statistics inform our work:

- Globally, 795 million people are undernourished\(^1\), and the majority of the world’s 400 million small-scale farms\(^2\) don’t produce enough food to feed their families.

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\(^1\) The State of Food Insecurity in the World. 2015 report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, pp 8, 26

\(^2\) Coping with the food and agriculture challenge: smallholders’ agenda. 2013 report by Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, p 15
To get a sense for how many people are undernourished, imagine if you traveled from the northern tip of Canada and walked south touching the hand of every person in Canada, every person in the United States, everyone in Mexico and in all of central America. If you personally greeted everyone in the Caribbean and kept going south meeting every person in Columbia and Brazil until you reached the South Atlantic Sea, every single person you touched would be undernourished. That’s going south for 9000 miles and every single person is hungry. That’s the size of the hunger problem in the world today. (That population equals approximately 800 million people).

Yet it’s the productivity of small scale farmers that research indicates is a key factor in reducing global hunger and alleviating poverty. When the productivity of small-scale farmers goes up, hunger goes down.

The Holy Spirit has used this scripture and global realities to create our response to the world.

**ECHO’s Response to God’s Word and Global Needs**

- We empower the undernourished with sustainable hunger solutions.
- As followers of Jesus Christ, we are committed to demonstrating the compassion and care for the poor that is described throughout the Bible.
- We reduce hunger and improves lives worldwide through partnerships that equip people with agricultural resources and skills.
- We equip the global church to be a holistic witness for Christ.
- We identify and disseminate best practices in sustainable agriculture and appropriate technology.
- We provide training and resources to development workers and missionaries working directly with small-scale farmers and gardeners in more than 170 countries.

Dr. Austen Moore, a Research Specialist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, recently wrote:

“I wanted to let you know how impressed I am with the work of ECHO in understanding and addressing needs and realities of development workers. I come across ECHO materials all the time here in Malawi but also in our other countries where we work, and thought you’d like to know. In fact, I saw a copy of your Agricultural Options for Small-Scale Farmers book in the office of the Minister of Agriculture for Liberia on a visit last month. You guys truly have a good thing going.” (March 8, 2017)

That’s who we are and it all begins with God’s Word.