

Environmental Stewardship

A Biblical Foundation for Green Behavior

By Mark R. Smith, Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville (NJ)

Executive Summary

- Humankind is part of Creation.
- God sees Creation as Very Good.
- Humankind was given “dominion” over the earth and all living creatures. This dominion includes both the right to control it, and the responsibility to care for it.
- Christ’s redemption is for “us” – which includes all of Creation.
- Creation itself will someday be set free from bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.
- Creation must be shepherded in such a way as to preserve sustainability.

Introduction

As human beings, we are part of God’s Creation. As descendants of Adam, we are also responsible for dominion over God’s Creation. We are stewards of the environment.

It is also clear that we can do a better job of preserving the planet that has been entrusted to us.

While it is clear to many that we must do something to address the destruction of our ecosystem, the Biblical basis has not always been clear. This document lays out the Biblical foundations of our responsibility and God’s will for us and our planet and fellow inhabitants.

Humans and Creation, Goodness and Creation

then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground,
Genesis 2:7¹

Mankind is part of God’s Creation. The Hebrew word for man is “adam” (thus the name Adam for the first man). The Hebrew word for “ground” is adamah. In this play on words, we find that God views humankind as part of His Creation, not separate from it.

This theme of man’s belonging to a family that includes all of the earth is found in many places in scripture. Psalm 104 says: “Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.” (verse 24) Job 12:7-10 says “But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.” Someday we will all be together again: “as a plan for the

¹ All Bible verses are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation.

fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:10).

It is clear that humankind is a part of creation. As we will see shortly, humankind has a special role in creation.

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.
Genesis 1:31

And God’s Creation is Good! Not just Good, but Very Good! We are blessed with a quality environment, a nice place to live, good neighbors in the animals and sea creatures.

And God remains concerned for His Creation today. After the flood receded, God promised Noah “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” (Genesis 9:9-10). Note that the covenant is not for man alone, but for all creatures and the earth itself. We are reminded of this on a regular basis – with a rainbow.

This continuing love of and nurture for creation is also found in the New Testament. In Matthew 6:26-28 we learn through Christ that God provides for His birds and His flowers. In Romans 8, we learn that all of creation will share in what is to come.

It is clear that God loves His Creation, and that humankind is an essential part of that creation. But what responsibility does humankind bear for Creation?

Dominion and Stewardship

²⁷*So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

²⁸*God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’*

Genesis 1:27-28

Mankind was brought forth to be in charge of Creation, in the name of God. Some have interpreted that to mean that we may do what we wish with Creation – that we may exploit it to our own ends. To that end, why bother keeping the earth clean, the air clean, the water clean, and use resources wisely?

Rights come with responsibility. The word “dominion” in the text above comes from the Hebrew word “rdh” or “radah”, which is translated variously as “have dominion, rule, dominate”, “tread”, or “rule/dominate”. The word is used 19 times in the Old Testament where the meaning is clear, describing a position of leader over subordinate (master over slave, king

over people, or one nation over another). In all cases where the rule is described qualitatively, the implication is that of a benevolent rule where the ability to direct is linked to the requirement of the ruler to care for his subjects. Gentleness is emphasized.²

So in addition to our special place in charge of creation, we have a responsibility to protect creation. Indeed, our responsibility is almost parental. In Genesis 2:19-20, Adam is called upon to name all of the animals. In Baptism, we echo the responsibility aspect of naming a child or adult as a Child of God. On behalf of God, we (the parents or the baptized adult, and the congregation) take on the responsibility over the spiritual life of the child or adult. This aspect of naming as a mark of responsibility is found in other parts of the Bible as God names Israel and all creation (Isaiah 40:26) and the stars (Psalm 147:4). It continues as the shepherd names his sheep (John 10:3 – by the way, *we* are the sheep in question). Naming causes responsibility and a requirement for nurturing.

We call this responsibility “stewardship”. We speak of stewardship of the church – by which we mean managing our assets and protecting them so that they are available to meet the ends of the church. We are called to be stewards to our gifts (1 Peter 4:10) and to the gospel itself (1 Corinthians 4:1). We are also called to be stewards to the earth.

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.
Genesis 2:15

We as humankind are charged with dominion over all of the earth and every living thing. Dominion implies a relationship of control *and* responsibility. That responsibility is stewardship. So how does Christ fit in?

Christ, Redemption, and Creation

¹*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

John 1:1-4

¹⁵*He [Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

Colossians 1:15-20

² This paragraph borrows heavily from “The Responsibility of Royalty: Genesis 1-11 and the Care of the Earth” by James Limburg of Luther Northwest Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota 1991.

Christ's redemption is for us. That "us" is a very broad term – it includes all of creation.

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.
Romans 8:18-25

Here's the really good news. As we read in the passage above, in times to come "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay". It's just a matter of time, a matter of "patience".

1 Corinthians 15 adds that all things are "put in subjection to God". Ephesians 1 echoes the idea that all things will be "in God".

In Christ we, and the creation that we shepherd, will be one in God. It's just a matter of time. In the meantime, what should we do about creation?

Sustainability

³For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; ⁴but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. ⁵You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. ⁶You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound labourers who live with you; ⁷for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food.
Leviticus 25

The Hebrews understood sustainability. The rotation of crops and the need for fields to rest was written into the Levitical code.

If we use up our resources, we won't have them in the future. A simple concept, but not so easy to follow in practice. Today we understand the simple concept of crop rotation – to allow the natural processes to work on a field for a season so that it will have properly balanced nutrients for the growth of food. We have even learned how it works and are able to supplement the process with natural and manmade fertilizer.

But we push too hard. Today, we sow our fields every year – all seven. We need to learn that perfection in our economy at the expense of our ability to sustain it is a short-term gain – an empty promise.

Or, as I have often said at work: “You can’t pull a rabbit out of your hat unless you’ve put some rabbits into it in the first place.”

We’re running out of rabbits. As we all know, rabbits are self-replicating. It just takes time and balance.

Modern Voices

Man is free to seek his life within the purpose of God: to develop and protect the resources of nature for the common welfare,

Confession of 1967, 9.15

(PC(USA) Book of Confessions)

33 But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.

34 Ignoring God’s commandments.

35 we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,

36 accept lies as truth,

37 exploit neighbor and nature,

38 and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.

39 We deserve God’s condemnation.

A Brief Statement of Faith, 10.3

(PC(USA) Book of Confessions)

We are the generation of choice. We still have a choice to halt the destruction, the ravaging of the earth. We are the generation that could stand in harm’s way and be those who preserve God’s Creation for future generations.

Rev. Joan Campbell, General Secretary, National Council of Churches of Christ

To be effective, education and action on environmental issues must begin at the congregational or parish level. These groups can assess local needs or problems and hopefully work in ecumenical collaboration toward solutions.

Mrs. Annette Kane, Executive Director, National Council of Catholic Women

One of our reformed principles is that as individuals and congregations we should be working to bring about Shalom – the fullest possible, sustainable life for all persons everywhere.

Understanding the issues of eco-justice is primary to doing this.

Rev. Dr. William R. Phillippe, Executive Director, General Assembly Council, PC(USA)

Acknowledgements

Much of this document was inspired by and or provided by the following articles:

Biblical Views of Nature: Foundations for an Environmental Ethic by Marcia Bunge

Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice – Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1993)

Quotations on the Environment – www.webofcreation.org

Evangelical Environmental Network & Creation Care Magazine – Scripture Resources – www.creationcare.org