

Stewardship of Creation

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Steward is a biblical term that refers to a manager who is responsible for the goods and property of another. A steward is not therefore an owner, but one who has a responsibility to an owner to treat property with care and respect. *Stewardship* is a term that refers to the responsibility of a steward to manage wisely. The unjust steward was one who took advantage of his position to aggrandize himself (Luke 16:1-13).

Stewardship has come to be used in the Christian community in a broader sense for our

responsibility to manage wisely the goods and property that are in our possession. The assumption is that we do not really possess or own anything. Rather, the world, including us, belongs to God, and it is arrogant for humans to think otherwise. Therefore, we are not owners but stewards of all that comes into our arena of responsibility—income, assets, property, goods, time, talents, and our very selves. Religious stewardship is management as sacred trust.

In recent times, the concept of *steward* has been applied in its most original and fundamental meaning to refer to our human responsibility to care for the Earth itself (Gen 1-2). Our human failure to be responsible stewards of Earth has led to the current ecological crises threatening global climate stability, the ozone layer, and the diversity of plant and animal species. Ecological problems also include the pollution of air, the despoiling of land, the degradation of fresh water, and threats to the health of the oceans. The loss of forest and arable land in alarming proportions has tremendous implications for food security. Human population, now approaching seven billion, is placing stress on every ecosystem on Earth. As Christians, what is our responsibility?

Stewardship of Creation Is Our Human Vocation

The Bible is a good place to find guidance. The concept of *environmental stewardship* originates with the first of the creation stories, in which God gives humans dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the animals of the land (Gen 1:1–2:4). Traditionally, Christians have distorted the mandate to “exercise dominion” to mean that creation was made for human beings and that we have a right to dominate and exploit creation for our own wants and needs. This has led to incalculable abuses of nature.

What we now know is that the Hebrew word for *dominion* does not mean “to dominate” or “to exploit.” Rather, it means “to take responsibility for,” as a ruler would be responsible to assure the well-being of those in the realm. In this first creation story, human beings were created last,

not as the so-called “crown of creation,” but in order to exercise responsibility for the well-being of the garden Earth. According to Genesis 1, exercising responsibility as part of God’s creation is the main reason humans were created. Therefore, being stewards of creation is foundational to what it means to be human. Caring for creation is not an add-on, not a sideline, not related just to part of our calling. It represents our proper human relationship to Earth. This portrayal puts human beings squarely in a caretaker position in regard to environmental stewardship.

We Are Called “to Serve and to Preserve”

The second creation story goes even further in clarifying the concept of environmental stewardship (Gen 2:5-15). In this story, God put Adam and Eve in the garden in order “to till and to keep” the land. However, the words translated as “till” and “keep” may be misleading. The Hebrew word for “till” is a word used to depict the service that a slave gives to a master. And the Hebrew word for “keep” means to preserve for future generations. Hence, the mandate “to serve and to preserve” the land places human beings not in a hierarchical position over creation but in a position of service to it.

Just as the later Christian message depicts Jesus as a servant-king, so humans are challenged in this creation story to assume a similar role: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). Care for creation is to be exercised not to serve our own wants and desires but to serve the best interests and well-being of all Earth-community together, including ourselves.

All Creation for Its Own Sake

This stewardship role for humans as servants of creation is reinforced by the idea that creation was made for its own sake. After God created each part of creation, God saw that it was “good” in its own right—even before humans were created. Furthermore, in the first creation story, God mandated not just for humans but also for the animals to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” God wishes for all species, not simply human beings, to survive and to thrive. In Psalm 104, the psalmist celebrates creation and explains that the grasses were made for the cattle and the crags for the mountain goats; all of creation has been arranged by God so that all animals receive “their food in due season.” If we are to be good stewards of Earth, there is a foundational reverence we need to bear toward all of life for its own sake, because it is God’s creation and it is filled with God’s glory.

The biblical writers invite us to delight in creation, for delight is the right basis for our use of it. We will preserve that in which we delight! And we are called to love creation. We will care for that which we love! Even more, we are invited to love creation as God loves it: not in the abstract, but concretely in terms of caring for life. The biblical Sabbath regulations require that humans give rest to the animals every seven days; and in the seventh year they must allow the land to lie fallow, free slaves, and remit debts (Exod 23:10-11; Lev 25). As good stewards, we are called to take these kinds of actions in order to serve and to preserve Earth-community.

Stewards of God

Hence, all our actions of stewardship are to be done as part of our service to the larger will and

purposes of God. In some sense, we humans are partners with God in being responsible *for* creation. As humans, however, and not gods, it might be more appropriate to say that we are responsible

to

creation. Most fundamentally, however, we are responsible

to God

to care for creation. This is our vocation under God.

So often we make our plans and ask God to bless them. Instead, we are called to discern the plans of *God* and then to ponder how we can bring our lives into conformity with them.

According to the Scripture, God wills for creation to thrive in all its diversity. God wills for air, sea, and land to bring health and well-being to all creatures. God wills care for the vulnerable. God wants there to be peace and justice in the land, for humans and non-humans alike. We need to see anew the purpose of our lives within the context of God's larger purposes for the world and to exercise our stewardship in the context of this more embracing vision.

The all-embracing vision of God for creation is violated, when there is injustice by humans against humans. The biblical authors know the close relationship between the ways people exploit Earth and the ways people exploit the poor. In the Bible, when people are oppressed, the rest of creation suffers too—the land languishes and the grains fail (Jer 2:7; Isa 24:4-7; Joel 2:2-20). We are called to steward resources not only in ways that generate sustainability for Earth's resources but also in ways that sustain life for the poor and vulnerable. In biblical terms, we are to act out of God's compassion for "orphans and widows." We are called to care for the least and the lost—human and non-human alike—just as Jesus "came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

Yet there are pitfalls here, and we need to face them if our vocation as stewards is not to end in the arrogant and paternalistic role of the privileged few exercising control over the world and "the poor" to serve their own interests. If the task of stewardship is to serve as a sacred trust on behalf of all Earth-community, we must be willing to go beyond our own wants and desires in order to see creation through the compassionate eyes of the God who empowers the weak and makes common cause with the most vulnerable. It is only as servants of Earth community that we avoid paternalism.

Our Oneness with the Rest of Creation

Fundamental to such a wise and humble exercise of stewardship is the experience of oneness with the Earth-community we serve. God's covenant with Noah and all creation affirms that all living creatures are in solidarity with each other in covenant with God (Gen 9:8-17; Hos 2:18). This experience of creation's oneness is affirmed by the admonitions throughout Scripture for all creation to worship God: "Let the sea roar and all that fills it; let the field exult and everything in it. Then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy" (1 Chr 16:29-34). All parts of creation together—human and non-human creatures and the rest of the created world—are to "praise the name of the Lord" (Ps 148).

There is a wonderful scene in the book of Revelation that portrays this common praise. John the seer says: "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth, and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them singing, "blessing and honor and glory and might to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be forever and ever" (5:13). What a vision! We are in solidarity with all creation; and if we do not care for Earth-community, the whole creation will not be able to celebrate together in praise of our creator.

Moreover, we are also called to be at one with future generations to establish and maintain a sustainable life on Earth—to leave creation healthier and more resourceful than it was in the previous generation. There are some Christians who claim that we do not need to worry about the future of Earth because Jesus is about to come to deliver the saved *from* Earth. Others claim Jesus will come and rescue Earth from any problems we may cause for creation. Others see personal salvation as so important that heaven is all that matters; Earth is but a brief pilgrimage for individual souls. There may be some truth in some of these beliefs, but in no way do they begin to tell the whole biblical truth.

The Bible says unequivocally that God's purpose is to restore all creation. The whole notion of incarnation—God becoming flesh (John 1:1)—is that the divine movement is not an escape from Earth but a movement toward embodiment in creation. Jesus became flesh to bring "new creation" (Gal 6:15). Paul testifies to this vocation when he claims that "the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains" ready to "be set free from its bondage to decay," as it "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (Rom 8:18-25) who will care for each

other and for Earth. We are called now to be those children of God who exercise stewardship in relation to all creation.

There is an affirmation of creation in the biblical writings that cannot be denied. The vision of the end-time in the book of Revelation is that God will come to a renewed heaven and Earth and will dwell here among people (21:1-27). The vision of the New Jerusalem is a vision in which nature is in the midst of the city. In this vision, the river of life flows right down the middle of the city streets; it is clear as crystal and it is available to all, free of charge, so that none may be deprived of fresh water. And the tree of life is thriving on either side of the river; and it yields fruit twelve months of the year, so that no person will be hungry. God will dwell here with them and will wipe away every tear from their eyes. As we lean toward the salvation of God, this is the vision that we as stewards are called to live out in our lives and to foster in others.

Implications for Our Life and Times

In our modern culture, we have been ruthless and unjust stewards of Earth. We too often place profits above people; we put security for ourselves above security for all; and we act as if the world is there for our use alone. Much of our contemporary global economy is based upon the most efficient ways to strip resources from the land and to pay the lowest wages without regard to the health and well-being of workers. We have reduced land and people to commodities that serve financial markets. We have pursued a standard of living without regard to its impact on nature and people. Furthermore, ecological disasters have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable people—third world countries, the poor, people of color, the sick, and the elderly. These also happen to be the ones with the least resources to respond. We have a responsibility to discern our immoral and destructive ways, confess them as sins, and turn to a new way of living.

Our Stewardship of Creation Today

So what does this mean for us in the twenty-first century? Clearly, it means that we need to embrace stewardship of Earth-community at a collective and a personal level. We need to change the system and we need to change our personal behavior.

The Collective Trust. First, we need urgently to act collectively as stewards in our responsibilities to creation at the local, state, regional, national, and global levels. We need to support laws and policies and systems that promote the health of the environment—promoting cooperation with global treaties, strengthening legislation that secures clean air, safe water, and productive land; advocating for policies that reduce energy consumption and assure species diversity; placing limits on land use and on waste; and investing in environmental technologies. In addition, we need to reverse the process of economic globalization toward the use of local products and services. We need to find ways to encourage the greening of business and industry. We need to redirect the whole economy toward technologies, industries, and services that foster a sustainable lifestyle for the Earth-community. Commitment to *ecological justice*

demands that we attend especially to the poor and vulnerable, the ones most affected by ecological degradation. This collective transformation of society is crucial, for if Earth-friendly treaties, laws, policies, and common practices are not in place, the changes we make in our personal lifestyle will be much less effective than they might be otherwise.

Also, as congregations committed to stewardship of creation, we can collectively renew our beliefs and actions to bring about a reformation in the church as an institution—transforming our worship and directing our educational programs toward creation-care, making our buildings and grounds Earth-friendly, observing best environmental practices at coffee hour and meals, and teaching our children to be Earth-keepers. We can incorporate environmental stewardship into the full identity and mission of our parishes, such that care for creation becomes part of the ethos of our life together. Thereby our congregations can become flagship communities that serve as witnesses in the towns, cities, and regions in which we are located.

The Personal Trust. Second, we need to become responsible stewards in our personal behavior, particularly in relation to that which is directly in our care. Each of us has a small piece of creation for which we are directly responsible, namely our living space—an apartment or house and perhaps some land. We are called to see our responsibility for this parcel of creation as part of our vocation as God’s stewards. Consider this: your living space is connected to virtually every environmental problem we face—the emissions from your furnace, the food in your refrigerator, the coal from the electricity you use, the water that goes in and out of your house, the products you purchase that are shipped from a distance, the treatments you give your lawn, the gas in your automobile, among other things. The choices we make about these everyday matters have a direct impact on the well-being of Earth and Earth-community. We *can* make a difference, every single day. We have it in our hands to make daily choices that can lighten our negative impact on Earth and help to restore God’s creation. What is more, these same practices can be extended to our places of work. We are stewards of our own local environment as a sacred trust.

There is a concept of *environmental tithing* that is relevant to our vocation as stewards of creation. Most people are familiar with the biblical concept of tithing, the giving of a “tenth.” The biblical tithe has been used as a marker of responsible stewardship. This tenth is given back to God—to the church, to the poor, to other causes deemed expressions of God’s will—as a symbol that the whole belongs to God. We can also apply the tithe to the stewardship of our personal resources of Earth. Can we reduce our electrical use by ten percent? Can we reduce the gas for heating by ten percent? Can we reduce the water we use by ten percent? Can we eat ten percent less food that comes from a distance? Can we eat fewer meals with meat? Can we travel ten percent less than usual? Can we invest a tenth of our financial resources in funds that contribute to sustainability? Can we set other goals to reduce our impact on the environment by a tenth—or more? And if we can, could we then contribute the money saved toward further efforts at restoring Earth? Tithing is just a beginning as we contemplate all we can do on a daily basis at home, at work, and in society to foster and maintain a sustainable world.

Our Spiritual Discipline

Making these choices as God's Earth-keepers may involve sacrifice on our part as we seek to live a simpler lifestyle and walk lightly on Earth. In our Christian life, the key to making our world sustainable is viewing our change of behavior and our sacrifices as acts of love and kindness toward all creation—toward other people; toward other creatures; and toward the well-being of land, sea, and air. In doing these things as part of our spiritual discipline, we exercise our vocation as stewards of creation not out of fear, guilt, shame, outrage, or despair. Rather, what makes this journey sacred is that we act with a gratitude nourished by the fountain of God's grace, an inexhaustible source of "living water" that will sustain us for a lifetime of loving creation, and that will enable us to be stewards of creation with hope and joy!

For further resources on various Christian views on the stewardship of creation, see the 26 articles in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives—Past and Present*, edited by R. J. Berry (New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2006).