

The Stewardship of Creation

BY RUSSELL A. BUTKUS

Viewed through the lens of Scripture, the environmental crisis is best understood as creation-in-crisis, which elevates the significance of our situation to the very heart of God. We are called to have dominion over the earth; this does not mean to exploit, but to exercise care and responsibility for God's domain particularly in the interest of those who are poor and marginalized.

The earth and its natural systems are in serious jeopardy. Ecologists and other environmental scientists indicate that the earth's ecosystem, the parts of it where creatures can live, is at risk from:

- ♦ The reality of global warming and the very real specter of global climate change and its consequences for disrupting natural and social systems;
- ♦ Continued deterioration of stratospheric ozone and its resulting impact on human and planetary health;
- ♦ Deforestation, particularly of tropical rain forests, and the consequential collapse of biodiversity;
- ♦ Pollution of earth's systems (land, water, and air) through the creation of toxic, nuclear, and hazardous waste with the resulting accumulation of these in living organisms;
- ♦ Burgeoning human population growth, currently at 6.2 billion and possibly headed toward a cap of around 10 billion by 2050;
- ♦ Continuing depletion of natural resources through over-harvesting and over-consumption;

- ♦ The continued global disparity and maldistribution of socio-economic goods and services.

The environmental crisis is self-evident to anyone who is willing to engage the overwhelming scientific evidence. But what should we as Christians make of this scenario? Environmental degradation resulting from our activities is one of the major “signs of the times” (Matthew 16:3) that requires Christians to take stock and respond. Further, this crisis, which from a scientific view is a crisis of *nature*, is an opportunity for us whose lives are shaped by biblical faith to rediscover nature as *creation*.¹ The environmental crisis moves us to affirm the theology of creation resident in the biblical tradition. This theology reminds us that creation continues to unfold and therefore God’s self-disclosure in creation continues as well. The divine self-disclosure is available to us just as it was to the ancient sages and poets of Israel’s wisdom-creation hymns found in the Psalms and the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. We, too, have the capacity to be awe-inspired and marvel at the beauty and sublimity of creation. The environmental crisis raises a third observation. When viewed and interpreted through the lenses of biblical creation theology, perhaps the ecological crisis is best understood as *creation-in-crisis*, which elevates the significance of our current situation to the very heart of God.

Consider for a moment the scope and range of the crisis. It is global and universal. There is not a species, ecosystem, or human society on the planet that is unaffected; the entire ecosphere of the earth is threatened. Moreover, it is a crisis of geologic history, for we are witnessing a collapse of biodiversity the likes of which the planet has not experienced in the last 65 million years. By some estimates this process of extinction related to human activities may result in the loss of 27,000 species a year.

The ecological crisis is also a crisis of human history and society. We are shockingly aware that our whole consumer-driven manner of living upon the earth is unsustainable. We are forced to re-evaluate the social, political, and economic institutions that in large measure have caused this crisis. In other words, the dominant paradigms of human existence to which modernity gave birth are in the process of being subverted.

The good news is that within this milieu of crisis, Christians have responded. Many denominations have issued policy statements, declarations, resolutions, and pastoral letters to provide a theological foundation for Christian ethical response. Central to these writings is the idea that God has appointed us to be “caretakers and stewards” of creation. For example the American Baptist *Policy Statement on Ecology* (1989) states, “Our responsibility as stewards is one of the most basic relationships we have with God. It implies a great degree of caring for God’s creation and all God’s creatures.”² More recently the Catholic Bishops in the northwestern U.S. wrote, “Stewardship is the traditional expression of the role of people in

relation to creation. Stewards, as caretakers for the things of God, are called to use wisely and distribute justly the goods of God's earth to meet the needs of God's children."³ These and similar statements indicate that the stewardship of creation is a necessary and adequate foundation for a Christian environmental ethic. From this foundation we can then engage in conversation with the natural sciences, philosophical ethics, and the emerging discussions on the meaning of sustainability. What are the contours of stewardship within the biblical tradition, and how do they shed light on our work ahead as we grapple with the ecological crisis?

THE STEWARDSHIP OF CREATION IN BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Our notion of stewardship comes from biblical creation theology, distributed throughout the Bible but most visible in Genesis, the Psalms, and the Wisdom literature of ancient Israel. This body of theology, as it receives renewed attention by biblical scholars, has important implications in our attempt to interpret and respond to the environmental crisis. "The recovery of creation as the horizon of biblical theology encourages us to contribute to the resolution of the ecological crisis," writes Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. "New investigations in creation faith and its complement, wisdom theology, suggest that the environment is to be understood as a delicate, fragile system of interrelated parts that is maintained and enhanced by the recognition of limits and givens and by the judicious exercise of choices."⁴

Here are the salient features of biblical creation theology:

- ♦ The entire created order has its origins in the sovereign, creative and sustaining power of God. In other words, creation is centered on God, or it is theocentric.
- ♦ Creation is not a singular event; it is an on-going process requiring the continual sustaining power and presence of God.
- ♦ Central to the biblical notion of creation is the idea of order. God creates order out of primordial chaos. This order is moral as well as physical; it requires ethical behavior to maintain the harmonious working of creation.
- ♦ Creation, as heaven and earth, is a relational entity, a harmonious whole in which creatures fulfill their appointed places and functions

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- ♦ As the Creator, God is the primary author of the meaning and value of creation. The inherent goodness and beauty of creation is a consistent theme in ancient Israel's theology of creation.
- ♦ God is transcendent yet also immanently present within creation. Moreover, creation discloses both the nature of God and the human vocation within God's world.

Within the terrain of this theology, stewardship points to the purpose and role of humanity in creation. A beautiful example of this is in Psalm 8, a hymn of praise that links God's self-disclosure in creation with our vocation. Why do human beings exist, and what is our role? The psalmist answers by appealing to the royal model of stewardship (8:5-8).

The Bible contains twenty-six explicit references to the steward or stewardship. In the Old Testament the term is used in a technical fashion to denote a specific office or a vocation in society. According to Douglas Hall, "the steward is one who has been given the responsibility for the management and service of something belonging to another, and his office presupposes a particular kind of trust on the part of the owner or master."⁵ The term became linked with Israel's king, who ruled the chosen people as God's steward and so was accountable to God. This royal interpretation of stewardship helps us to understand the first chapter of Genesis.

The biblical text that most shapes—and perhaps clouds—our interpretation of stewardship is the controversial and widely misunderstood Genesis 1:26-28. This passage, part of the account of creation that scholars attribute to Israel's priests, must be read against the backdrop of ancient Israel's attitude toward kingship. It says that humans, created in the image (*selem*) and likeness (*demut*) of God, are to subdue (*kabash*) and have dominion (*radah*) over the earth. Two brief remarks are in order. First, "image" and "likeness" are used in a technical fashion here to refer to a statue or some other physical representation of themselves that monarchs erect to remind their subjects of who is in power. Genesis 1:26-28 says that human beings are living reminders of the Creator who is the King of the universe. As Eugene March insists, this "means that human beings have been given the responsibility of representing God in the midst of God's creation."⁶

"Dominion," from the Hebrew *radah*, meaning to tread down, also requires a brief comment. It is perhaps the most significant term here because in popular usage it suggests the domination of the earth. We should bear in mind that Israel's king had covenantal responsibilities to care for those over whom he ruled. Dominion, therefore, does not mean to exploit or destroy but to exercise care and responsibility for God's domain particularly in the interest of those who are poor and marginalized. This royal model of stewardship is retrieved in this passage from the Presbyterian policy statement, *Hope for a Global Future* (1996): "While dominion has been inter-

preted as a divine grant to prey on the rest of nature without restraints, we regard dominion to mean the entire stewardship of nature. . . . A careful exegesis of Genesis 1 does not suggest domination or despotism.”⁷

Another Old Testament image of stewardship is found in the Yahwist’s account of creation in Genesis 2, which Theodore Hiebert interprets in “Eden: Moral Power of a Biblical Landscape” in this issue. That image of our vocation provides a more organic and less monarchic interpretation of stewardship; it stresses our common bond with the rest of creation insofar as all creatures share the source of coming “out of the ground” (*ha adama*). “The whole account stresses the interrelatedness of creation,” notes James Limburg. “The plants, the animals and human beings are all made from the same raw material.”⁸ In this context our role in creation is not characterized by royal dominion but by the vocational activity of farming or shepherding. In Genesis 2:16 the human beings are to cultivate (*adad*) and care (*shamar*) for the garden. The language is clearly agricultural in context. The verb *abad* means to serve and it implies respect and even reverence for the landscape. On the other hand, *shamar*, meaning to keep or care, is an act of protection. The stewardship of creation, interpreted through the view of the Yahwist, implies that we should be earth keepers who care for and protect the only home we share with all life.

As Christians we reflect further on the royal stewardship of creation in light of our New Testament faith. The ideas of “image of God” and “dominion” found in Genesis 1 receive considerable development in the New Testament. Thus, *Hope for a Global Future* says, “Christ is the perfection of the image and the paradigm of dominion” that we should emulate. “This means to live out the image and the responsibility with nurturing and serving love.”⁹ Moreover, we interpret the stewardship of creation in light of Jesus’ proclamation of the Reign or Kingdom of God. In this time of environmental crisis, we remember that the Kingdom of God is the primary symbol of death and resurrection; as such, the Kingdom not only offers salvation to humanity but points to the future renewal and restoration of all creation. Interpreted through this horizon of faith, the stewardship of creation is the calling to participate in the salvific future of God and an anticipatory ethic that seeks to protect, sustain, and restore creation.

FROM STEWARDSHIP TO SUSTAINABILITY

The stewardship of creation is the foundation and framework for a Christian ethical response to earth’s environmental crisis. Yet before we act, we must refine and enlarge our understanding of stewardship in conversation with additional sources of human wisdom, particularly the natural sciences, environmental ethics and the emerging vision of sustainability. Here are five points we might learn from that conversation.

The Christian ecological vision must draw upon the organic model of stewardship. This interpretation of stewardship recognizes the inextricable

relatedness of life and seeks to preserve and sustain this balance. As stewards we are commanded to respect and care for the richness and diversity of life and promote the flourishing of human and non-human forms of life. This corresponds to the scientific insights that life is a biotic community of interdependence and that everything is interconnected. The stewardship of creation must include the non-living components of creation (land, water,

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and air) that are essential for life and consequently must be preserved.

The stewardship of creation must recognize that humans are special, being members of earth's biotic community who are given the capacity for conscious self-reflection. This distinctiveness has two aspects: on one hand, with a God-human relationship we represent

the divine as God's responsible steward; on the other hand, with a human-earth relationship we recognize that we share the same organic source with all living creatures. This corresponds to the view of some philosophers that humans have exceptional characteristics yet remain one among other species and evolved from earth as all life did.

The Christian vocation of stewardship requires that we value creation in its own right independent of its instrumental value for fulfilling human needs. "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31), and our valuations must follow suit. However, the Christian vision of stewardship can never only be *environmental*. It also must address the systemic links between environmental degradation and the social injustice and economic poverty that have become institutionalized at local and global levels. The Christian steward must respond to the suffering of all creation and seek to expose the intrinsic link between the oppression of people and the oppression of all creation.

The stewardship of creation must include developing general norms for ethical behavior. Some work in this regard has already been accomplished. A good example is the Roman Catholic pastoral letter on the Columbia River that outlines ten "Considerations for Community Caretaking."¹⁰ But more needs to be done in this area. For each environmental problem summarized in the introduction of this essay Christians need to develop the necessary general norms for ethical response. Here is an example: the stewardship of creation would require us to engage in ethical action aimed at the reduction and eventual elimination of those human practices responsible for producing

global warming and global climate change. These general norms of stewardship would then need to be specified and applied according to regional and local circumstances.

The stewardship of creation must be defined by a vision of sustainability. From the vantage point of biblical stewardship, sustainability means the practice of restoring and maintaining the integrity of creation in the hopeful anticipation of the coming of God's Reign.¹¹ Sustainability unites the work of social and ecological justice. Essentially it is an ethical practice grounded in the hope of God's final renewal and restoration of creation. The stewardship of creation informed by the practice of sustainability is an ethic that says life, together with all that supports and sustains it, is fundamentally good.

NOTES

1 An important distinction exists between the concepts of nature and creation. There is no concept of nature in the Old Testament. *Nature*, derived from the Greek worldview, is by scientific definition a self-sustaining system replete with its own internal laws. *Creation*, a biblical-theological concept, recognizes that creation is not self-sustaining but is continually dependent on the presence of God.

2 *American Baptist Policy Statement on Ecology: An Ecological Situational Analysis*, General Board of the American Baptist Churches (1989), 3. (www.abc-usa.org/resources/resol/ecology.htm)

3 *The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good*, An International Pastoral Letter by the Catholic Bishops of the Region (2001), 7.

4 Walter Brueggemann, "The Loss and Recovery of Creation in Old Testament Theology," *Theology Today* 53 (1996): 188.

5 Douglas John Hall, *The Steward*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 32.

6 W. Eugene March, *Israel and the Politics of the Land: A Theological Case Study*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 88.

7 *Hope for a Global Future: Toward Just and Sustainable Human Development*, Presbyterian Church USA (1996), 62-63.

8 James Limburg, "The Way of an Eagle in the Sky: Reflections on the Bible and the Care of the Earth," *The Catholic World* 233:1396 (1990): 151.

9 *Hope for a Global Future*, 63.

10 *The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good*, 13-17.

11 Russell A. Butkus, "Sustainability: An Eco-Theological Analysis," in *All Creation is Groaning*, eds. Carol J. Dempsey, OP and Russell A. Butkus (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 161.



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