

Stewardship of Creation: A Christian Motivation in Human Development



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Introduction

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it”. Genesis 2:15

Stewardship is here understood as the ability to exercise moral responsibility to care for the environment in a sustainable manner. Significant aspects of this stewardship include the right to private initiative, the ownership of property, and the exercise of responsible freedom in the economic sector. Stewardship requires a careful protection of the environment and calls us to use our intelligence *“to discover the earth's productive potential and the many different ways in which human needs can be satisfied.”*¹

Stewardship is a Christian principle that relates to the use of God's creation. The earth does not belong to us to use selfishly, but as Scripture says in Psalm 24 verses 1-2; *“The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.”* Biblical Stewardship includes the preservation of what has been entrusted to us (1 Corinthians 11:2); wise use of what we have been given (Mathew 25: 14-27) and teaching and showing others to do the same (2 Timothy 2:2)².

God expects human people and their descendants to serve and *keep* the garden (Genesis 2:15). The word *keep* also means God's blessing, a blessing which nurtures all of our life-sustaining and life-fulfilling relationships—with our family, our neighbours and our friends, with the land that sustains us, with the air and water, and with our God. When we *keep* the Creation, we make sure that the creatures under our care and keeping are maintained with all their right linkages with members of the same species, with the many other species with which they interact, with the soil, air, and water upon which they depend.

We must show in our behaviour that all things created on earth are of concern to God and not just the spiritual realm. The fall of Man did not just affect spiritual things, and in the same way, redemption is not just a question of spiritual matters. Stewardship of creation is particularly good for Human Development because it relates to the use of land and thus agriculture, livestock and trees. It also relates to people's physical, emotional and spiritual well being.

Implication of our Stewardship in Training

Much training in Human Development is often seen as being technical alone and not related to things spiritual. However, if we recognise that the earth is the Lord's, we find that there are implications for the way we do things. When we work with rural farm families, we must view the soil as a resource given to us by God to care for it, and this is a motivation to look after it. It is responsible Christian stewardship not to let serious soil erosion wash away the good top

¹ John Paul II, *On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum (Centesimus Annus)* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1991), no. 32.

² RURCON Newsletter, No. 128 page 3. January to March 2005.

soil, rendering our land infertile or indeed destroyed. We should therefore train farmers on the basis of responsible stewardship to practice techniques such as compost making and manuring and not indiscriminate bush burning.

As Christian stewards, we must not be engaged in cutting down trees for quick or immediate gains and therefore cause environmental degradation. We should rather see the value of tree planting for various reasons. There is the stewardship of the way trees help to support the earth and maintain the environment. We should be responsive to anti-desertification measures such as over-grazing, tree planting and soil conservation. We must also have concern for the use of chemicals. Most agricultural and household chemicals are harmful to the environment God has given us to protect. Sustainability of the environment is a key aspect of Christian Stewardship. Sustainability has to do with the ability of a system to carry on present good practice in the future. Christian Stewardship shows practical Christian concern for future generations, and this too is a biblical principle. Proverbs 13:22 says that; *"A good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children."*

Christ in the New Testament clearly teaches that the Sabbath year is given to protect the land from relentless exploitation, to help the land rejuvenate, to help it get things together again; it is a time of rest and restoration. Thus in some Christian farming communities, the Sabbath principle is practiced by letting the land rest every second year, because the land needs that³. This was also the practice in most of African farming communities before the advent of modern agriculture. This is not restricted to agriculture but applies to all creation.

As human beings and animals are to be given their times of Sabbath rest, so also is the land (Deut. 5). Exodus 23 commands, *"For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lay fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild beasts may eat."* As to what they will eat in the seventh year, God's answer is in Leviticus 25 and 26: "I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years," Therefore "If you follow My decrees and are careful to obey My commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit."

Promoting Christian Stewardship

God has endowed us with reason and ingenuity that distinguish humans from other creatures. Ingenuity and creativity have enabled us to make remarkable advances and can help us address the problems of environmental degradation; however, we have not always used these endowments wisely. Past actions have produced good works and harmful ones, as well as unforeseen or unintended consequences. As we use the land, we need to heed God's call to exercise stewardship in a way that respects and protects the integrity of creation and to provide for the common good as well as for economic and social justice. Much of current agricultural development and teaching has been based on selfish motivation that of maximising gain for minimum effort, without consideration for the long term cost to our environment and the world at large. God made the earth in a balanced and integrated way, and yet our actions portray us fighting against the earth rather than protecting it. "That incentive grows even stronger when we appreciate that God has placed these gifts at our disposal because of his Love for us and so that we can better serve and please him"⁴.

³ Ibid. 2.

⁴ Peter Batchelor, *People in Rural Development*, 1993, Pg 37. Paternoster Press

Our responses to environmental change should reflect our interdependence and common responsibility for the future of our planet. It is important for nations to measure their own self-interest against the greater common good and contribute equitably to stewardship of creation. True stewardship requires changes in our actions; both in moral behaviour and technical advancement. The Christian tradition has always urged restraint and moderation in the use of material goods, so we must not allow our desire to possess more material things to overtake our concern for the basic needs of people and the environment. Technological innovation and entrepreneurship can help make possible options that can lead us to a more environmentally sound energy path. Changes in lifestyle based on Christian values can ease the way to a sustainable and equitable world economic systems in which sacrifice will no longer be an unpopular concept.

The Earth is for the Common Good

If the earth is to be a place for the common good, then this has a number of consequences. It calls us to extend our concern to future generations. Passing on the problem of global climate change to future generations as a result of our delay, indecision, or self-interest would be easy. We simply cannot leave this problem for the children of tomorrow. As stewards of their heritage, we have an obligation to respect their dignity and to pass on their natural inheritance, so that their lives are protected and, if possible, made better than our own.

Issues of Population Growth should be addressed from the broader perspective of a concern for protecting human life, caring for the environment, and respecting cultural norms and the religious faith and moral values of peoples. Population is not simply about numbers, but about precious human life whose dignity must be respected. Discussions on the Environment should not be an opportunity for affluent advocates from the developed nations to blame the problem on population growth in poor countries. Reports show that, the industrialized countries have emitted more greenhouse gases that heat the earth than have the developing countries. Rich countries of the North have to acknowledge the impact of their materialism instead of simply calling for population and emissions controls from people in poorer nations. Our Christian Stewardship in population issues is the promotion of "authentic development," which represents a balanced view of human progress and includes respect for nature and social well-being.⁵ We should promote a respect for creation that encourages policies that foster the education of women and men rather than government incentives for birth control that may violate local cultural and religious norms.

In a special way, the common good requires solidarity with the poor who are often without the resources to face many problems, including the potential impacts of environmental change. Our obligations to the poor in our midst and future generations stretches across space and time. The Bible commandment to love our neighbour invites us to consider the poor and marginalized of other nations as true brothers and sisters who share with us the earth intended by God for the enjoyment of all. Whatever the extent or severity of the deteriorating environment, the poor, the vulnerable, and generations yet unborn will be worst affected. The migration of diseases for instance could further challenge the presently inadequate health care systems of nations in Africa. Droughts and/or floods, it is feared, will afflict regions (especially Africa) already too often hit by famine, hunger, and malnutrition. Because the number of days with high heat and humidity are likely to increase, heat stress impacts will also increase, especially among the elderly, the sick, children, and the poor.⁶

⁵ John Paul II, *On Social Concern*, ch. four. This chapter of the encyclical gives a more complete definition of the concept of authentic development.

⁶ IPCC, *Climate Change 2001: Impacts, Adaption and Vulnerability*

Many of the poor countries in Africa live in degrading and desperate situations that often lead them to adopt environmentally harmful agricultural and industrial practices. While our friends in the North live in affluence, those of us in Africa often have too little. In many cases, the heavy debt burdens, lack of trade opportunities, and economic inequities in the global market add to the environmental strains of the poorer countries. Industrial nations must do more to stem the tide of this advancement.⁷ As Christian Stewards, we aim at encouraging the kind of development that is within the reach of the majority. We avoid practices that lead to one person progressing at the expense of others⁸.

Conclusion

As Christians, we are grateful for the gift of creation and we must therefore work towards ensuring that we raise the moral issue of the urgency of the environmental crisis. As individuals, as institutions, as nations we need a change of heart to preserve and protect the planet for our fellow creatures and generations to come⁹. As Christians Stewards, we should see the earth in a different light from others involved in human development. Our perspective shares the concern of many environmentalists but in a different way. Christians have sometimes being accused of emphasising the first half of Genesis 2:15, which talks of exploiting the garden without emphasising the taking care of it. This is unfortunate because, Christians should be the most responsible citizens of the earth, believing as we do that it was given to us by God and we are only stewards.

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⁷ *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1993), 27.

⁸ Peter Batchelor, *People in Rural Development*, 1993, Pg 3. Paternoster Press

⁹ *Ibid.* 38