

Reading the Bible Through a Green Lens

The Bible is hardly a minor contributor on writings about caring for creation. In fact, the Bible turns out to be a powerful ecological handbook on how to live rightly on earth.

Since God creates and sustains all of creation, we should expect the Bible to call us to bring honor to what is God's—after all, God repeatedly calls his creation “good” (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Moreover, since the Bible professes Jesus Christ as the one through whom *all things* are reconciled to God (Col. 1:20), we should expect the Bible to decry creation's destruction, to call for its restoration, and to look forward to it being made right again.

The Bible presents a serious call to take care of the creation God has given us. But often we just don't do many of the things we know we should do. In many cases, there are reasons for this. It's important to identify the stumbling blocks that may prevent us from taking action, as well as any major pitfalls we'll want to avoid so that we don't get swallowed up along the path of creation stewardship. Having done this, we will be ready to put our beliefs into practice.

Stumbling Blocks to Creation's Care

There are quite a number of troublesome stumbling blocks in the way of creation-keeping discipleship that we have invented ourselves or have been devised by our friends or enemies. Here are some common ones along with comments that may help us in removing or avoiding these obstacles.

This world is not my home; I'm just passing through. (Translation: *Since we're headed for heaven anyway, why take care of creation?*) While it's true that people who believe in Jesus Christ receive the gift of everlasting life, everlasting life in Christ includes the here-and-now. Just as we take care of our teeth, our hair, our bodies, our possessions—clothes, automobiles, homes, and so on—as Christians under the rule of the kingdom of heaven so we take care of God's earth as part of God's rule today. The world we live in is much more enduring than our selves or our possessions. So shouldn't the care of creation also be a part of our here-and-now concern?

There are too many worldly people out there doing environmental things. (Translation: *If people who don't share my beliefs in God are working to save the earth, I know it can't be right for me.*) In Isaiah 45:1-6 we read that unbelieving Cyrus the Persian was anointed to do God's work. Often if God's people are unwilling or unable to do God's work, God sees to it that the work gets done anyway. So if there are some worldly people out there doing God's work, let's be glad for the help and not use this fact to excuse ourselves from our God-given task as stewards of God's creation.

I don't want to be an extremist or alarmist. (Translation: *I want to be considered normal and not some kind of prophet of gloom and doom.*) Gloom and doom are not necessary components of the message about caring for creation. Frightening ourselves into action is far less preferable than caring for creation out of gratitude and love for God. As for being called an alarmist, is it wrong to sound the fire alarm when a building is burning? In many cases today it may be necessary to sound the alarm.

I believe God gave us the job to do what we want with creation. (Translation: *I think the Bible says we have the right to destroy things that get in our way; that's what*

dominion is all about.) Many people have pointed to Genesis 1:28 to show that they have the license to do whatever they please with creation (i.e. air pollution, the loss of animal species). But dominion as outright oppression is not advocated or condoned by scripture. First, Genesis 1:28 gave the blessing and mandate to people *before the fall into sin*. Second, this passage must be understood not in isolation but in the context of the rest of the Bible, which shows that dominion means responsible stewardship. God gave humans a special role and responsibility as stewards of his creation. Having dominion over creation is an important aspect of being made in God's image, as we reflect his presence on the earth. Part of our human dignity is tied to God's entrusting us with stewardship over creation. When God gave humans dominion over creation, the intent was not for us to destroy creation, but to preserve and care for it so it could benefit all people and creatures for generations to come.

People are more important than the environment. (Translation: *We should care more about people than saving species of plants and animals.*) We often hear this rationalization for not saving living species threatened with extinction. But again we must ask, "What does the Bible teach?" Recall the account of the flood in Genesis 6-9. Who perishes? Who is saved? Are species less important than individual people? At the very least, care for living species cannot be disregarded because of the importance of people. Christ's redemption covers all creation, not just humans.

I disagree with what some environmentalists and scientists say will happen. (Translation: *If I work to care and heal the environment, I will be supporting people I strongly disagree with.*) The first thing to say is that doing what is right and what God calls us to do should not carry a litmus test for who is allowed to do it. Plus, we need to recognize that there are concerted efforts to promote doubt and uncertainty whenever it helps maintain sinful structures and institutions. Just as the tobacco industry is able to promote confusion and distrust of cancer research despite extensive evidence showing that smoking produces lung cancer and other health concerns, similar efforts have been used to discredit the science of climatology and its findings on global climate change. Promoters of doubt about the findings of climatology and environmental science have become experts in playing on the fears and apprehensions of the public. A major strategy for discrediting this science is to seek any contrary opinions, dress them up in scientific garb, and put them on display and in debate with the findings of science.

Now What Must We Do About Creation?

Our ultimate purpose is to honor God as Creator in such a way that Christian environmental stewardship is part and parcel of everything we do. Our goal is to make tending the garden of creation, in all its aspects, an unquestioned and all-pervasive part of our service to each other, to our community, to God's world. The framework for our response can follow these three steps.

Awareness

In a time when so much calls for our attention—international affairs, local politics, our work or schooling, family needs, church commitments, and other busyness—we might only barely notice the natural and environmental aspects of creation in our surroundings. We must consciously make ourselves aware of what is happening in God's creation. Awareness involves seeing, naming, identifying, and locating different parts of God's creation. It means taking off blinders that we or society may put on us to keep us focused

on our pursuits in life. It means providing ourselves with enough quiet, reflection, and learning time that we can notice and identify a tree or mountain, bird or river. .

Appreciation

From awareness comes appreciation; we cannot appreciate something we are unaware of. At the very least, appreciation means tolerating what we are aware of. We may tolerate, for example, worms and hyenas. But appreciation can also involve respect. We certainly respect a large bear, but we can also develop respect for a lowly worm as we learn of its critical importance to the rest of creation. We can move, as well, from toleration to respect to valuing. The earth and everything in it has value because God made it so. As we become aware of the order of creation, we will see God's valuing of all his works.

Stewardship

Appreciation needs to lead to stewardship. Stewardship takes us beyond appreciation to restoration. We now work for the restoration of what has been degraded in the past. Beyond restoration, stewardship means serving. As we understand that God through creation is in so many ways serving us, we grow to willingly return this service with our own. This service includes loving, caring and keeping what God has given us to hold in trust. Our service in creation will eventually involve entrusting others with what we have served, kept, and restored.

Biblical Principles for Creation Care

So keeping in mind that many people today yearn to restore the integrity of creation, it can be helpful to read the Scriptures afresh, searching for their ecological insights on how rightly to live on the earth. The following eight biblical principles will help disclose the Bible's powerful environmental message.

1 The Earthkeeping Principle

As the Lord keeps and sustains us, so we must keep and sustain our Lord's creation. Genesis 2:15 conveys a marvelous teaching. Adam is expected by God to *serve* the garden and to *keep* it. The Hebrew word for *serve* (*'abad*) is translated as "till," "dress," and "work" in some recent versions of the Bible. But "serve" is also a possible translation, as in *Young's Literal Translation of the Bible*. God expected Adam and his descendants to meet the needs of the garden of creation so that it would persist and flourish.

God also expected Adam and his descendants to *keep* the garden. The word for *keep* is sometimes translated as "guard," "safeguard," "take care of," and "look after." *Shamar* indicates a loving, caring, sustaining kind of keeping. In the blessing of Aaron in Numbers 6:24, "The Lord bless you and keep you. . . ." the word for "keep" is the Hebrew word, *shamar*. When we invoke God's blessing to *keep* us, we are not asking that God would keep us in a kind of preserved, inactive state. Instead, we are calling on God to keep us in all of our vitality, with all our energy and beauty. The keeping we expect of God when we invoke this ancient blessing is one that nurtures all of our life-staining and life-fulfilling relationships-with family, neighbors, and friends; with the land, air, and water of the earth; and of course with God.

So too with our keeping of God's creation. Our relationship to creation must be a loving, caring, keeping relationship. When we fulfill God's mandate to *keep* the creation, we make sure that the creatures and other living things under our care are maintained so that they can flourish.

They must remain connected with members of the same species, with the many other species with which they interact, and with the soil, air, and water they depend on.

As God *keeps* people, so God's people should *keep* his creation.

2 The Fruitfulness Principle

We should enjoy but not destroy creation's fruitfulness. God's blessing of fruitfulness is for the whole creation. In Genesis 1, God declares, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky" (1:20). And God blesses these creatures with fruitfulness: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth" (1:22). God also says, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind" (1:24).

God's creation reflects God's fruitful work, giving to land and life what satisfies and sustains it. Psalm 104:10-13 expresses this beautifully:

You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

As God's fruitful work brings fruit to creation, so should ours. As God provides for all his creatures, so should we who are created to reflect God's image. As Noah cared for God's creatures when they were threatened with extinction, so should we. In Noah's time a flood of water covered the land. In our time floods of people in many places sprawl across the land, often displacing God's other creatures, limiting *their* potential to fulfill their blessing and God's command to be fruitful. To those who would allow a human flood across the land at the expense of all other creatures, the prophet Isaiah warns, "Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land" (Isa. 5:8).

So while we are expected to enjoy creation and its many fruits, we may not destroy the *fruitfulness* that creation's fullness depends on. Like Noah, we must preserve and care for God's many species whose interactions and relationships with each other and with land and water make up the fabric of the biosphere. We must let the profound admonition of Ezekiel 34:18 echo in our minds: "Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?"

3 The Sabbath Principle

We must provide for creation's sabbath rests. In Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, God commands us to set aside one day in seven as a day of rest for people and for animals. This sabbath day is given to help us all get "off the treadmill," to protect us all from the hazards of continuous work, to help us pull our lives together again. It's a time to worship the Lord and enjoy the fruits of his creation, a time for rest and restoration. In Exodus 23:12, God commands, "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed."

The same chapter in scripture says that the land also must have its time of sabbath rest. Nothing in all creation must be relentlessly pressed. "For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your

people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard” (Exodus 23:10-11).

Does this command create a problem for people? Leviticus 25:20-21 says, “Should you ask, ‘What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?’” God’s answer: “I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years.”

God was instructing people not to worry but to practice his law so that the land would be *fruitful*. “If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit” (Leviticus 26:3-4).

In the New Testament, Jesus clearly defines for us the meaning of sabbath in our lives: the sabbath is made for those who are served by it—not the other way around (Mark 2:27). The sabbath is made for people and, through them, for all the rest of God’s creation. The sabbath year is given to protect the land from relentless exploitation, to help it rejuvenate, to give it a time of rest and restoration.

This sabbath is not merely a legalistic requirement; it’s a profound principle. That’s why in some farming communities the land is allowed to rest every *second* year, because that is what it needs. The sabbath is made for the land—not the land for the sabbath. The sabbath law is therefore not restricted to agriculture but applies to all of creation. It affects our use of water and air, as we discharge our exhaust, smoke, sewage, and other things we “throw away.” God speaks strongly on this issue:

But if you will not obey me, and do not observe all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and abhor my ordinances...and you break my covenant... your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste. Then the land shall enjoy its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate...then the land shall rest, and enjoy its sabbath years. As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your sabbaths when you were living on it.—Leviticus 26:14-15, 33-35

These are harsh words from the holy Creator who is concerned for his creation. But God’s promises of blessing are equally powerful for all who will listen:

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day...then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth...”—Isaiah 58:13-14

4 The Discipleship Principle

We must be disciples of Jesus Christ—the Creator, Sustainer, and Reconciler of all things. No question about it—the Bible calls us to be disciples, or *followers after* someone. But we are not to be disciples of the first Adam, who neglected to serve (*abad*) and keep (*shamar*) the creation. We must not follow those who choose to go their own way and do their own thing.

Instead, the Bible tells us, we must be disciples of “the last Adam,” Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:45). In John 3:16 the New Testament teaches that God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son—to bring true life, to make things right again. “For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (1 Cor. 15:22).

All who follow Jesus follow the example of the one who makes all things new, the one who makes all things right again (Rev. 21:5). Colossians 1:19-20 puts it this way: “God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

Who is this Christ we are to follow? He is the one *in whom* and *for whom* all things were created (Col. 1:16). He is the one *through whom* God made the universe and *through whom* God redeems his people (John 1:3; Col. 1:16, 20; Heb. 1:3).

God reaches out sacrificially to make things right again. Jesus Christ, the final Adam, undoes the damage done by the first Adam and his followers. While Adam’s followers bring death and degradation, Christ brings life and restoration (Rom. 5:12-17). The children of God work as followers and disciples of the final Adam. People who are happy being Christ’s servant stewards are the people for whom the whole creation is eagerly looking (Rom. 8:19).

We must, then, be disciples of Jesus Christ. We walk in the footsteps of the one who reconciles all things. We are disciples of the last Adam, not the first. We work to reconcile all things to God in Christ.

5 The Kingdom Priority Principle

We must seek first the kingdom of God. Our culture today proclaims, “Seek first a job (money, success), and all other things will be yours as well.” It is tempting to yield to this message and to follow people whose highest priority is to gather up immense material gains. But Jesus advises us to seek first the kingdom of God and God’s rightness; then everything else we need will be given to us as well (Matt. 6:33).

Personal happiness, joy, and fulfillment are not what we seek first of all in life. Instead we seek the kingdom of God and strive to sustain and renew God’s creation. In seeking God’s kingdom, we discover that happiness and joy are *by-products* of our stewardship; fulfillment comes as a *result* of seeking the kingdom.

Who will inherit this kingdom? Those who seek it as their first priority. Its inheritance is not for people who arrogantly exploit their neighbors, the land, and earth’s creatures for all they are worth. Nor is the inheritance for those who carelessly and knowingly destroy the earth. Seeking God’s kingdom first is our calling, our vocation. We affirm this calling whenever we pray as Jesus taught us: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done *on earth*. . . .” (Matt. 6:9-10).

6 The Contentment Principle

We must seek true contentment. The fruitful and beautiful creation did not satisfy our first parents and succeeding generations. Even though God promised not to forsake or leave them, people chose to go their own way—grasping more and more from creation for selfish advancement. In our day we feel the effects of this relentless pressing of land and life to produce more. This relentless pressing is what is so seriously degrading God’s creation today. Our prayer should be that of Psalm 119:36: “Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to selfish gain.”

If accumulating the goods of creation is selfish gain, then what is godly gain? Godly gain is doing the work God would have us do in the world. In 1 Timothy 6:6 we learn that “there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment.” Contentment means aiming to have the things that

will sustain us while not pressing beyond that. An Amish saying based on this passage goes like this: “To desire to be rich is to desire to have more than what we need to be content.”

Why is it important not to pass the point of contentment? In the words of 1 Timothy 6:11, by not passing this point we can “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.” Hebrews 13:5 puts it this way: “Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’”

Being content helps preserve creation’s integrity. All the things we use, all the things we make, everything we manipulate, everything we accumulate derives from creation itself. If we learn to seek godly contentment as our great gain, we will demand less from the land. We will leave room for God’s other creatures. We will be responsible stewards, caretakers, keepers of creation. We will regularly allow creation to heal itself and perpetuate its fruitfulness, to the glory and praise of its Maker.

7 The Praxis Principle

We must practice what we believe. Scripture admonishes us to act on what we know is right. Merely knowing God’s requirements for stewardship is not enough. Merely believing in God is not enough, for scripture tells us that even demons believe in God (James 2:19). We must practice God’s requirements, or they do no good.

The failure of God’s people to act on what they know is right is well-documented—and challenged—in the pages of Scripture:

They come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear your words, but they will not obey them. For flattery is on their lips, but their heart is set on their gain. To them you are like a singer of love songs, one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; they hear what you say, but they will not do it.—Ezekiel 33:31-32

Why do you call me, “Lord, Lord,” and do not do what I tell you?—Luke 6:46

Studying the Bible to learn God’s requirements for creation care brings us directly to the question *Now what must we do?* The challenge before us now is to move forward and put what we know and believe into practice.

8 The Conservation Principle

We must return creation’s service to us with service of our own. This principle encircles all the others. The root meaning of the word *conserve* is *con* + *serve*, which means “to serve with.”

As we considered the earthkeeping principle, we noted from Genesis 2:15 that Adam was expected to *serve* the creation and to *keep* it. The Hebrew word *abad* (“serve”) in this passage occurs 290 times in the Old Testament, and it is most often translated as “serve”—as in Joshua 24:15: “Choose this day whom you will serve... As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

The various Bible translations of *abad* in Genesis 2:15—“serve,” “till,” “dress,” and “work”—relate to worthy service. God calls us to give the garden of creation our caring service.

We already know from experience that this garden serves us. It serves us with good food, beauty, herbs, fiber, medicine, pleasant microclimates, continual soil-making, nutrient processing, and seed production. The garden and the larger biosphere provide what ecologists call “ecosystem services” such as water purification by evaporation and percolation, moderation of flood peaks and drought flows by river-system wetlands, development of soils from the weathering of rocks, and moderation of local climates by nearby bodies of water. Yet Genesis addresses *our* service to the garden. The garden’s service *to us* is implicit; service *from us* to the garden is explicit.

Like Adam, we are expected to return the service of the garden with service of our own. This is a reciprocal service, a “service with.” This reciprocal service defines an engaging relationship between garden and gardener, between the biosphere and its safeguarding stewards.

So we can call this “never taking from creation without returning service of our own.” Our love of our Creator God, God’s love of the creation, and our imaging this love of God—all join together to commission us as *con-servers* of creation. As *conservers*, we follow the example of the second Adam—Jesus Christ (see 1 Cor. 15:22, 45).

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