

Guardening

by Calvin DeWitt

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Expectantly, she asked if I could speak to a future gathering about “The Garden in Biblical Perspective.” We were both attending a symposium on faith and environment at the University of New Hampshire. Earlier she had listened to me speak on a biblical perspective and had heard my definition of an *evangelical* as a person who believed that good news for the creation should not be selfishly kept. This intrigued her, and now she wanted me to share this good news with the Long Island Garden Conservancy. Though I did not know what I might present, I agreed.

The New Hampshire symposium attracted people whose energetic discussions filled the breaks between presentations. At day’s end, some college students asked me how knowledge, biblical ethics, and practice fit together. We talked well into the evening, hovering over a paper napkin on which I had drawn a triangle and written the words *Science*, *Ethics*, and *Praxis* at the corners. Each word had a corresponding question, I explained: How does the world work? What ought to be? Then what we must do? All three questions had to be asked simultaneously and interactively. Each must inform the other if we are to achieve responsible stewardship of God’s creation.

And now I had promised to speak to the women of the garden conservancy. What would I say to them? As the time came closer, I called up a Bible program on my computer and asked the program to search for the word *garden*. It showed me Genesis 2:15. Adam (the human), made in the image of God from *adamah* (the humus), was expected to cultivate the garden and keep it. On my screen appeared the corresponding Hebrew words: *abad* (cultivate) and *shamar* (keep). Clicking on the Hebrew words, I came to a verse in Joshua, “Choose you this day whom you will *abad*,” and to one in Numbers, “The Lord bless you and *shamar* you.” Think about that!

First, think about the word *abad*. Does it really mean “to serve”? I asked a seminary librarian friend to find a Bible whose translation of this word was “serve.” Three hours later, he called back, saying Young’s Literal Translation reads: “And Jehovah God taketh the man and causeth him to rest in the garden of Eden, to serve it and to keep it.” Excitement!

A rabbinical saying about Scripture study came to mind: “Turn it about, turn it about, turn it about, for everything you know is in it!” I “turned it about.” The word *serve* brought me to the word *service*, next, to *servancy*, and then: *con-servancy*! Might I speak about “con-servancy” to the Long Island Garden Conservancy?

That day on Long Island, we rediscovered gardens. We saw them fresh and new in the biblical light of service. Gardeners all, we came to discover ourselves as more than gardeners; we were the garden’s servants. We knew that, of course, given all our planting and weeding. Yet this discovery surprised us. Moreover, we realized that the master gardeners among us were the garden’s greatest servants!

Before our gathering, we knew about the garden's service to us: good food, beauty, flavorful herbs, useful fiber, healing remedies, pleasant microclimates, seeds for planting next year. Surprisingly, however, the Bible makes no mention of the service of the garden to us. Instead it addresses our service to the garden. The Creator of the garden apparently expects *us* to serve *it*. Does this mean, then, a reciprocal service? Must service given to us by the garden be returned with service of our own? So it appears! The service of the one is joined with the service of the other. Adding the prefix *con* transforms service into con-service—service with! Con-servancy!

Is a conserver, then, a person who never takes from the garden without giving back? Is serving at the heart of conservation? Must we all return Creation's service with service of our own? So it seems. We must never be just takers; we must be also givers: givers to the garden as it gives to us—under the loving and watchful eye of the Great Giver.

The con-servancy principle

We can call this “never taking from Creation without returning service of our own” the *con-servancy principle*. Our love of God our Creator, God's love of the creation, our imaging this love of God—all these join together to commission us as con-servers of creation. We become, as con-servers, children of God for whom creation looks with eagerness. We become imagers and doers of God's loving work in the garden and in all creation.

Other biblical principles join with the con-servancy principle to cultivate and keep us in our stewardship mission. Among these are principles of *fruitfulness*, *Sabbath*, and *earthkeeping*.

The fruitfulness principle

The garden is a fruitful expression of God's love for the world! Enjoying God's blessing of fruitfulness, the garden bears good fruit and good seed. The Bible's teachings on fruitfulness include the Hebrew concept of *bal taschit* (“do not destroy”), the story of Noah and the ark (Genesis 6–9), and the admonition against muddying the waters (Ezekiel 34:18). “Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you trample the rest with your feet?” asks Ezekiel; “Is it not enough for you to drink the pure water? Must you muddy the rest with your feet?”

Human beings are expected to use creation's gifts of good food and drink. However, we must not destroy the capacity of creation to bear good fruit and clean water! The most famous expression of this principle is the story of Noah and the ark. In this first endangered species act, the lineages of God's creatures are saved. The story also answers many troubling questions, the most troubling of which today is “Isn't it more important to save people than other species?” Pondering the story of Noah, we find the answer: “It depends upon what kind of people you are!”

The Sabbath principle

“When you come to the land that I will show you, the land must keep a Sabbath to the Lord. . . .” The importance of Sabbath in the week is well known—the importance of not relentlessly pressing ourselves—as we are reminded by the Ten Commandments. This Sabbath must be kept by us, our visitors, and the animals under our care. Beyond personal and household Sabbaths, however, there is another Sabbath, the Sabbath for the land. Thoughtful reading of Exodus 23 and Leviticus 25–26 gives us powerful reasons for not relentlessly pressing fields and streams, valleys and mountains, flowering plants and creatures of the sea. All things must have and enjoy their Sabbath rest.

The earthkeeping principle

Reflecting on the con-servancy principle with the women of Long Island, we found that the human being is expected not only to serve the garden but also to keep it (*shamar*). The blessing of Aaron employs the same word: “The Lord bless you and *shamar* you!” As we ask the Lord to keep us, the Lord asks us to keep the garden. Another Hebrew word, *natsar*, means to keep in a preserved state. Interestingly, God’s law is to be kept in both senses, *natsar* and *shamar*. The garden must be preserved and put into practice. God keeping us, and we keeping the garden in the *shamar* sense is a wonderful way of keeping. It is the kind of keeping we provide long-distance runners—not preserving them from the wear and tear of running but putting them through their paces and providing proper food and periodic rest. So too in our keeping of the garden. The garden is to be kept with dynamic integrity. It must be sustained and supported, even as it goes through the drama of the seasons, rains and droughts, seedtime and harvest.

Four principles then: con-servancy, fruitfulness, Sabbath, earthkeeping. The first and last of these, interestingly, are boldly printed on Chicago police cars: “To Serve and Protect.” What Chicago expects from guardians of the city and its people, the Bible expects from the gardeners of creation. Gardeners are guardians bringing good news to the creatures they serve and protect.

Reflecting with those students on the triangle sketch, we learned that guarding and gardening go beyond knowledge and ethics to embrace praxis, or practice. What we know about the world and ethics must be put into practice, or it does no good. Our Lord Jesus Christ, upon conquering death, was mistaken by Mary Magdalene for the gardener. What we have come to know is that Mary was not mistaken. Jesus *is* the gardener! Inviting us to behold the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, to bind up the broken, to pay the costs of reconciliation and restoration, Jesus asks us to follow, and in following, we share the sorrow and reap the joy of guarding and gardening—of “guardening”! In serving and keeping the garden of God, we experience the exhilaration of bringing good news to every creature!