

Stewardship of Creation

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Creation Care

Scripture

Genesis 1:26 God’s decision to let humans “have dominion” over the creatures of the earth.

John 1:1–3 The preexistent Word of God played a role in the creation of the world.

Prayer

God our Maker, you were acting in love when you created this world and everything in it. Along with our Reformed ancestor John Calvin, we believe every blade of grass and every color in the rainbow is intended to make us rejoice. May we recognize this joy. We thank you for giving us dominion over a beautiful, vibrant, vital, and valuable world. Help us to care for your creation in all its various forms. May we be good stewards of the resources you have entrusted to us. We pray in the name of Jesus, your Word made flesh. Amen.

Introduction

For centuries, Christians thought little about their responsibility for caring for the planet God created for them and the other creatures of the world. The biblical command to “have dominion” over the earth (Genesis 1:26, 28) was seen as a divine endorsement of environmental exploitation, and Christians wasted natural resources while polluting the air, water, and land. A shift has occurred in recent years. We now begin to see that we “threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.”¹ The good news is many people of faith now support efforts to be good stewards of natural resources. The Pew Forum’s Religious Landscape Survey (February 2008) showed widespread support for stricter environmental laws and regulations among Jews (77 percent), Buddhists (75 percent), Muslims (69 percent), and Hindus (67 percent), as well as members of mainline churches (64 percent), Catholic churches (60 percent), and evangelical churches (54 percent).

1. *Book of Confessions*, 10.3.

So what could it mean to be a “green Presbyterian”? We begin with *creation care*, the application of the biblical principle of stewardship to the environment we share with all living things. Caring for God’s creation has become a priority among religious people concerned about the earth, and there has been an explosion of environmental activity at the grassroots level. “We now have five thousand congregations that are responding to climate change by cutting carbon emissions in many different ways,” says Gretchen Killion of Interfaith Power and Light, a San Francisco-based group active in twenty-nine states that helps churches and religious organizations lower their energy consumption. She says, “Many of our members have installed solar panels and three or four even have geothermal” energy.

This broad-based, interfaith movement has practical benefits and can draw together people of diverse theologies. Roman Catholics and Native Americans are working together to preserve land and water, Muslims are making links between urban communities and sustainable farms, and Protestant churches are joining interfaith coalitions and taking steps to “green” their congregations by modifying their buildings, installing compact fluorescent lamps, using programmable thermostats, recycling paper, practicing conservation landscaping, and purchasing organic, fair-trade coffee—all of which are ways to be good stewards of God-given resources.

Hebrew Roots

The scriptural roots of this broad-based movement are found in the Hebrew Bible. Genesis 1:26 tells us God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” God’s decision to let humans “have dominion” over the creatures of the earth has traditionally been interpreted as permission to exploit natural resources. However, the wording is better understood in terms of caregiving. Since humans are made in God’s image, they are to treat nonhuman creatures as God treats humans, with love and respect. God has loving, respectful dominion over us, and this becomes the model for our loving, respectful dominion over the planet entrusted to our care.

In a powerful affirmation of the reign of God over all of creation, Psalm 24:1–2 says, “The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the

world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.” The whole world belongs to God, including all people, because God has created everything. The fact God has founded it on the “seas” and the “rivers” is a reminder that God brought order out of chaos when “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” on the first day of creation (Genesis 1:2). We affirm “the earth is the LORD’s” every time we work together to preserve land and water, make links between urban communities and sustainable farms, and take steps to “green” our congregations. We join God in bringing order out of chaos when we practice the three R’s of waste management: reduce, reuse, recycle. In so doing, we act as better caretakers of the precious resources that have been made available to us.

The prophet Hosea makes a connection between human sinfulness and the fate of the environment when he says, “Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel; for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:1–3, 6). The prophet makes clear that human wickedness—swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery (v. 2)—pollute nature and all the creatures that dwell in it. Because of human sin, the land mourns (the Hebrew word can also be translated “dries up”) and the wild animals, birds, and fish die away (v. 3). There is a strong connection between human activity and the fate of the natural world.

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Christian Fruits

The challenge to care for creation continues in the New Testament. John begins with words that link the Word of God to the created order: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:1–3). The preexistent Word of God played a critical role in the creation of the world and then “became flesh

and lived among us” as Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:14). His life was marked by “grace and truth,” with love and care for all people.

Lyndsay Moseley of the Sierra Club became aware of the link between faith and the environment when she encountered a low-income community outside Knoxville, Tennessee, whose drinking water had been contaminated by the illegal dumping of lead, arsenic, diesel fuel, and PCBs. She joined a coalition that demanded clean water for the neighborhood, and, in the course of that successful

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effort, she “began to understand that God’s call to care for creation is the same as God’s call to love our neighbors.”² Being a green Presbyterian is one of the ways we can follow Christ’s call to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The New Testament also contains stories about slaves and stewards, people who have been given responsibility to care for the property of their master. “It is required of stewards that they should be found trustworthy” (1 Corinthians 4:2), says Paul. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus speaks positively of slaves who are “faithful and wise” (Matthew 24:45), “trustworthy” (Matthew 25:21), and at work when their master arrives (Luke 12:43). In all these cases, slaves and stewards are not owners of property themselves, but are caring for the land and resources of their master. So too we are challenged to be faithful, wise, trustworthy, and hardworking stewards of the wonderfully fruitful earth that God has entrusted to our care.

Finally, Paul writes, “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:19–21). Paul believes the whole creation—plants, animals, birds, fish—has a part to play in God’s drama of salvation. Jesus has come to save the human race, and now the “children of God” will play a role in rescuing creation and enjoying a new era of healing, peace, and justice. In this restoration, humans will return to their role as good stewards of God’s creation, and the world will become a more fruitful and healthy place.

2. Lyndsay Moseley, ed., *Holy Ground: A Gathering of Voices on Caring for Creation* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2008), p. 11.

Churches can be both faithful and green by taking actions rooted in God's mandate to care for creation.

Faith Communities and the Environmental Movement

The greening of religion, though long overdue, is really quite natural. More surprising is that secular environmental groups are now reaching out to faith communities. A Sierra Club report highlights faith-based environmental initiatives in all fifty states, "spiritually motivated grassroots efforts to protect the planet." One line is particularly striking: "Lasting social change rarely takes place without the active engagement of communities of faith." Think of the civil rights movement in the United States, Solidarity in Poland, and the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa. Social change does not stick without the glue of religion.

We've reached a critical point when the secular environmental movement needs the involvement of the faith community if it is going to succeed nationally and internationally. This partnership could be the next step in the expansion of creation care and the growth of green spirituality. But are religious people ready to enter into this marriage? The responses are mixed. Moseley has been working since 2005 to develop partnerships with people who have spiritual reasons for protecting the planet. Coming out of a deeply religious and politically conservative home in Tennessee, she is eager to build strong relationships between the Sierra Club and people of faith, based on trust, intersecting values, and a willingness to work together.

Nevertheless, not everyone sees the coming together of religious communities and secular environmental groups as a marriage made in heaven. It will take time for evangelicals to overcome their suspicion and distrust of environmentalists, although there is clear movement in this direction. Jack Graham, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, is unsure about the main causes of global warming, but he strongly believes that Christians should not abuse the earth. He recently led his 7,000-member Texas church through an energy audit that led to changes in its consumption, resulting in savings of \$1.1 million.

Other faith groups want to make sure their distinctive mission is not diluted by environmental partnerships. "We hear regularly from secular groups who want to partner with us," says Killion. "These groups have important information to share, and we need it to do our work. However, we strive to be theologically based and not

to be an environmental organization.” Killion wants the message of Interfaith Power and Light to remain faith-based, rooted in the mandate to care for creation found in most mainstream religions.³

The greening of religious communities is a positive development on the spiritual landscape. It is understandable that secular environmental groups would try to enlist these new converts to save the planet. However, Christians and other people of faith are deeply rooted in their religious traditions, and they are understandably

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wary about any mixed marriage that threatens to dilute their beliefs. It is certainly good that environmental groups have found religion, but they will have to be patient as they court the affections of “green” Presbyterians and other believers who are committed to caring for God’s creation.

Spiritual Practice

Embark on a forty-day “carbon fast,” to reduce your personal carbon footprint. Include removing a light bulb at home, turning off computers and televisions at night, and eliminating unnecessary short car trips. Daily, give thanks for what you have been given, and pray for guidance to be a wise steward of your resources.

3. Henry G. Brinton, “Green, meet God,” *USA Today*, November 10, 2008, p. 11A.

Questions for Reflection

What does it mean to be good stewards of natural resources, and how can stewardship of the earth be practiced in communities of faith? What kind of environmental activity is appropriate for congregations?

“Creation care” is a broad-based, interfaith movement that has practical benefits and can draw together people of diverse theologies. Where do you see possibilities for connections? How does care for God’s creation intersect with love of neighbor?

Where do communities of faith and secular environmental groups have intersecting values? Are there dangers in Presbyterians becoming green?

According to a Sierra Club report, “Lasting social change rarely takes place without the active engagement of communities of faith.” How does the glue of religion make social change stick?