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Responsible Dominion

A Quick Focus

The Book's Purpose

- Propose a biblical perspective on stewardship of the earth
- Explore creative options for environmental use and management
- Supply reliable scientific data
- Evaluate and analyze environmental issues
- Debunk some of the popular assumptions about environmental issues

The Book's Message

When we consider environmental care and awareness, we need to take a careful look at today's sustainable development agenda which seeks to find creative ways to balance environmental conservation with humanitarian concern. Modern secular environmentalism is laced with values and agendas that are in direct conflict with human values.

But Christian stewardship must address both the human economy and the natural ecology. We must take seriously the biblical emphasis on the value of human life. There is an appropriate way to use God's creation to meet the needs of people.

Science and technology bring these two realities together and provide the tools for Christians to virtuously apply their lives to meeting people's needs by focusing on the utilitarian aspects of either creation without losing sight of either the real needs of human beings or the need to care for God's creation.



responsible dominion

// a christian approach to sustainable development

ian hore-lacy

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Six Main Points

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Stewards of God the Provider

The following prayer of thanksgiving, published by the Anglican Church of Australia, aptly describes the way a follower of Christ should view the natural resources God has entrusted to us. ***“Loving God, we thank you for this world of wonder and delight. You have given it to us to care for, so that all your creatures may enjoy its bounty.”***

This prayer reminds us that stewardship of creation is not the same as environmental stewardship or resource stewardship. Creation implies a Creator; we are stewards appointed by Him and responsible to Him. Environmental and resource stewardship may be purely secular enterprises aimed at sustainability and resource exploitation, respectively. Also, creation is a much broader concept than the environment, resources, or even nature. It includes everything that God has provided for human beings; ***“our human stewardship must have a strongly utilitarian aspect coupled with respect and thanks.”***

The starting point for understanding our role as stewards is to understand the Creator’s purposes for His creation. God is the provider. He gives us what we need to care for ourselves and for others. Human beings have developed a distorted view of “dominion” because of the sins of greed and selfish neglect. We are given the authority to use the world’s resources for the benefit of humankind; we are also to respect the biodiversity of the earth. This very biodiversity displays the glory of God.

To be stewards means to be accountable to God as the Creator and as the One with the right to be Lord over all. The last verses in Genesis 1 and the first part of Genesis 2 clearly communicate that other living things are provided to man for food and also that man is a servant or caretaker or steward over the rest of creation. God has freely given creation to man as a blessing; man in turn has an obligation of sharing that blessing with other people. Because man is created in the image of God, he is God’s representative to the rest of creation.

The Fall does not alter God’s commission to humankind; however, our ability to care for creation has become impaired, and the bounty of the earth now presents some obstacles to human use. Sin has distorted the notion of *dominion* and replaced it with *domination*, the notion that man is free to do as he pleases with nature and is accountable to no one. Paul clearly states in Romans 8 that all of creation has been affected by the Fall. The ultimate redemption of humanity will result in the restoration of the rest of creation.

Theology is a key factor in determining one’s perception of creation. The traditional view sees God as separate from the world and sovereign over it. Pantheism says that God is one with the created universe; therefore, creation is to be worshipped. Panentheism sees the universe as God’s body; God is incarnate in creation in the same way that He is incarnate in Jesus Christ. Therefore, sin is not seen as rebellion against the rule of God but against the created world, which embodies God.

Because the natural world reveals much about the nature of God (Romans 1:20), scientific study is appropriate and desirable for Christians. In fact, scientific study could be seen as a form of worship. Modern science can be traced to the efforts of Christian thinkers who reasoned that since God is a God of order, the natural world can be understood through human reason

God reveals Himself both through general revelation and special revelation. Science presumes the existence of order when studying the natural world.

Sometimes scientists step outside their areas of expertise and make pronouncements on many other aspects of reality (for example, declaring that science proves that God does not exist). Another example of flawed reasoning can be found in the thinking of some Christians who see science and Christianity as incompatible. ***“It is vital for Christians to have a right understanding of science, because to settle for less dishonours God and shows contempt for his creation.”*** Natural revelation and special revelation are complementary. However, science and technology must be used ethically and wisely.

“Young-Earth ‘creation science’ ... implicitly asserts that God is deceitful, having built into his work of creation conclusive evidence of a 4–5 billion year age of the Earth but expecting us to believe that it is only about 10,000 years old. A good deal of manipulation and misrepresentation of scientific evidence is required to make the case.”

Stewardship of creation involves not only caring for it but doing what we can to make sure it is available—and continues to be available—to people today and to future generations. We must be concerned about sustainability of resources and the continued availability of resources to meet human need. Sustainability provides a vehicle for balancing the caring for and the using of God's creation. The concept also has economic implications, especially in light of the many human abuses that have been part of the accumulation of wealth.



Finding Space on Earth

The issue of land use is often cast as an either/or proposition: conservation or consumerism, preservation or profits. To some environmentalists, any land that is not an untouched wilderness has been misused. Such a dichotomy is not useful. Land use covers a wide spectrum that includes the radical change caused by cities and roads, agriculture, rangeland, forestry, and recreation. Leaving the land untouched would not feed the billions of people on this planet; agricultural development is needed. Without the extraction and processing of mineral resources from the land, our lifestyle would be drastically altered. There is even disagreement regarding the appropriate uses for national park land.

We must apply several principles to the matter of land use if we are to move beyond the heated rhetoric surrounding this issue. The following principles follow naturally from our discussion of stewardship of God's creation. Since the major decisions regarding land use are made by government agencies, these principles concern government activity.

The first principle is that God has appointed governments to rule on behalf of their citizens. At certain points in the decision-making process, citizens are usually given opportunities to give input to the government. Since the presumption is that governments have the long-term interests of the people at heart, it is reasonable to give people the chance to respond to government plans and actions.

The second principle is that land use should be allocated according to the specific capacities of different pieces of land. Not all land contains mineral resources, for example. Others are especially suited to forestry or agriculture. We must not forget that God intended to sustain human life through a variety of natural resources. Biological diversity may be quite common in some areas but very rare in others. Some areas feature scenery that is uniquely spectacular. Land-use decisions should be reviewed periodically as more information becomes available about human trends and about other potential land uses.

In many places, we witness the disastrous effects of unrestrained utilitarian land use; erosion and degradation of the chemical composition of soil are just two such effects. On the other hand, a responsible utilitarianism is needed. The romantic notion that all land is sacred and is to be left untouched by humans is neither practical nor biblical. Further complicating the decision-making process is the fact that though some land uses can be determined for many years into the future, other uses cannot be limited

in this way. The discovery of mineral resources in certain areas should be factored into land-use decisions. In many areas, the best solution is to plan for multiple or complementary uses of the land. Some mining methods cause little disruption to the land surface.

The term *wilderness* has become emotionally charged, especially with certain conservation groups that see it as an ultimate value. However, we have discovered that *wilderness* can be difficult to define; also, a certain amount of human intervention and management is needed in order to preserve land in that state.

For example, what should be our response to infestations of non-native weeds? How should we respond to wildfires? In some places, such as Australia, the designation of some lands as wilderness has led to conflicts with aboriginal people who have a prior claim on the land. Is a certain amount of human use compatible with the concept of wilderness? If so, how is that use to be defined? How are wilderness areas to be managed? How will these management activities be funded? Would it make sense to fund some of these expenses through limited mineral development?

For the Christian, land is to be both cared for and used by human beings. We must maintain both goals and must strive for a balance rather than taking an either/or, all-or-nothing stance. The Old Testament, where most of the biblical statements about land-use are found, was written to a society of farmers and herders. The challenge for Christians is to find scriptural principles that apply to the world today.



The Fruit of the Earth

As in biblical times, the land is our main source for food and fiber. Agricultural production has increased steadily, and today the percentage of land surface used for agriculture is about the same as it was in 1960. Agriculture has certainly altered the landscape in the centuries of food production. As original vegetation has been replaced by farmland, much biodiversity has been lost. In some cases, other changes such as erosion and residue from pesticides have also occurred.

On the positive side, however, agricultural productivity has increased dramatically. There are six main reasons for this increase: crop breeding, fertilizers, irrigation, pesticides, mechanization, and better land management practices. Between 1961 and 2001, agricultural production grew at a faster rate than the population.

The oceans are another major source of food, and technological developments have led to overfishing in some areas of some species. Fisheries have mitigated this loss so that total catches from the oceans are now fairly stable.

Demand for forestry products has risen with the demand for paper and for lumber. Much of the timber being harvested in tropical rain forests is being done irresponsibly, and such practices are not sustainable. Planting quick-growing forests has had good results.

Fresh water suitable for drinking is plentiful in some areas; in others, supplies are near critical levels. There are challenges of distribution, but improvements have been made in the areas of pollution reduction and recycling.

Selective breeding and genetic manipulation of food crops have produced new strains that have greatly increased yield and nutritional quality. Plants have developed that can withstand harsh environmental conditions such as drought and poor soil; other plants resist insects and viruses. Genetic manipulation has been a controversial issue, but **“on the whole the risk is no greater than for conventionally bred varieties.”**

God has certainly provided an abundance of food for human beings, and through technological advances there is more than enough capacity to feed an increasing population. However, human institutions often get in the way of production and distribution. Alleviating poverty will take the combined efforts of people around the globe, and Christians must be a part of the solution.

“Christians can have a vision of the global economy where the deficiencies are worked on constantly, where justice is constantly improved, where opportunities expand (especially for the poorest) and where exploitation in the pejorative sense of that term is curbed.”

Mineral and Energy Resources

Much of the discussion of resources in recent decades has centered on the concept of limits. The issue is not whether there are limits but rather the assumptions that usually accompany the statements about limits. The fact is that **“human-kind has bumped up against limits since the dawn of time”** but has responded to those limits in many creative and constructive ways. Therefore, even though limits may be factual, they should not inevitably lead to a doomsday attitude.

An example of faulty assumptions can be found in much of the discussion about sustainable development. The assumption is that if a certain resource (such as uranium or fossil fuels) is nonrenewable, its use cannot be compatible with sustainable development.

There are three possible responses to such an assumption:

1. First, the word *development* in “sustainable development” implies a dynamic process for meeting current needs.

2. Second, if use of such resources were to cease, the resources would cease to be resources at all.

3. Third, the current use of such resources **“sets in train an economic dynamic which both regulates the rate of use by price mechanisms and ensures substitution as or when abundance declines, so that it will never run out in any absolute sense.”**

4. A fourth point is that nonrenewable resources need to be used in order to create access to renewable resources.

MINERAL AND ENERGY RESOURCES

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A resource is not a resource until someone has found a way to use it. For example, many mineral deposits were not considered resources until technology devised economical means of mining the ore and processing it. Low-grade seams of ore were not viable resources until developments in mining technology enabled people to collect and transport the ore economically. Aluminum was not a viable resource until 1886, when the Hall-Heroult process made possible the reduction of aluminum oxide to usable metal. Increases in processing and manufacturing efficiency, including the recycling of resources, have made great contributions to sustainability.

Economic factors of supply and demand also have an effect on mineral and energy resources. Costs can determine how much is invested in exploration, in ever-increasing efficiencies, in finding alternative sources, and in other related activities. Throughout history, doomsday predictions have been proven wrong. Often it has been those very same gloomy predictions that have been the impetus to finding creative ways of averting crises.

“Abundance, scarcity, substitution, increasing efficiency of use, technological breakthroughs in discovery, recovery and use, sustained incremental improvements in mineral recovery and energy efficiency~all these comprise the history of minerals and mankind. There is in fact a great abundance.”

For the Christian, efficiency and avoidance of waste are not just economic necessities; they are also ethical principles. *“Environmental limits require a properly informed and deliberate response in the context of stewardship.”*

Coal, natural gas, and petroleum are plentiful on the earth, and increased efficiency and wise management can ensure their continued availability for many years. Uranium is also plentiful, and nuclear power is increasingly seen as a desirable source of electrical power. *“The power of the atom epitomises the abundance of God’s provision.”* Technological advances make nuclear power more and more attractive.

The bottom line is that in the matter of mineral and energy resources, God has provided abundantly. *“The limits, most evident in widespread poverty, are due to human failures in proper stewardship of the planet and its resources. It is human sin which causes war, exploitation and waste.”* As stewards, we are responsible to creatively develop new ways to utilize and distribute these resources.

“Outright rejection of particular aspects of God’s provision would seem to be niggardly and faithless. It implies that we know better than God what is good for his creatures and that it is very careless or even negligent of him to let us have access to the Earth’s resources.”



Energy Choices

Much of the discussion of energy applies to energy used to generate electricity, although those discussions also have applicability to other energy uses. *“There is wide consensus that in this century we cannot depend primarily on burning fossil fuels, as we have been.”* Other options need to be considered.

The main criteria for using any energy resource continue to be cost and safety. The issue of safety also includes environmental effects, and dealing with those effects always has cost implications. So the search for new energy sources focuses on supplying low-cost electricity safely and with low environmental impact. Many of these efforts are concentrating on renewable energy sources.

Wind is the fastest growing resource for electricity production, but it is not without its challenges. It has proven to be an unreliable resource, and it cannot match the pattern of demand. Environmental issues have also been raised relating to the aesthetic impact large groups of wind turbines have on a landscape.

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Solar energy has proven useful in some direct applications, such as providing hot water, but it has not proven reliable in generating electricity. As with wind power, solar energy must be paired with other forms of electricity production in order to contribute to society's power needs.

If renewable resources are not the final answer, then we must find resources that are most abundant and least polluting. Nuclear energy has great potential because uranium is so plentiful; however, there are still challenges in the areas of recycling or disposal of nuclear wastes. Nuclear energy currently supplies 16 percent of the world's electricity.

"Nearly one-quarter of primary energy needs are met by coal and 38% of electricity is generated from coal." Coal is our most abundant fossil fuel source. Though many people have minimized its importance for the future, new "clean coal" technologies make this option more promising.

Natural gas will continue to be a popular choice because of its versatility and because it has less carbon dioxide emissions than coal has. Recent developments in gas turbines make natural gas an efficient source of electricity generation. However, the price of this resource can fluctuate widely, making some people reluctant to rely on it too heavily.

Fuel cells, which convert hydrogen to energy, show promise; however, they are still in the early stages of technological development. At present, producing hydrogen for fuel requires expenditure of much energy from other sources.

For all energy options, significant expenditures in technological development are necessary in order to be able to use energy resources efficiently. And in many cases, the supplies of such resources face security threats.

Energy production faces challenges in disposing of wastes and in avoiding wastes. There is a middle ground between the extremes of avoiding any and all hazards and producing great amounts of energy for human

use. All energy sources, including renewable ones, produce some wastes (for example, in the manufacture of wind turbines and solar panels). Improvements have been made in reducing the environmental impact of coal-fired electrical plants and in disposing of nuclear wastes.

Another major factor in energy decisions is the way costs are calculated. Beyond the operational costs, there are safety issues. These may include the number of accidents incurred by companies producing the power, air and water pollution, occupational diseases, and so on. Many countries weigh such factors when making large-scale decisions about energy options. In 2001, a major study was done in Europe, primarily comparing the costs of using coal and nuclear energy. ***"The report shows that in clear cash terms coal incurs about ten times the cost of nuclear energy."*** Other studies have documented the environmental impact of various fuels. Christians have an opportunity to influence policy when energy issues have clear ethical implications.

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Contested Ground

Views on resource and environment issues run from negativity, anger, and pessimism on one side to positive improvement and optimism on the other. Often the view one brings to an issue can color one's reasoning about how to address that issue.

Today, conventional environmental wisdom is being challenged on several fronts for many reasons. First, many western environmental "experts" are much more ideological and less open to alternatives. Second, these leaders often find themselves at odds with third-world leaders, who are very open to planning for development in environmentally effective ways rather than avoiding all development. Third, there has been measurable improvement in environmental quality in the West in the last three decades. Nevertheless, doomsayers of the past such as Paul Ehrlich and Julian Simon are still treated as gurus in spite of the fact that their major claims have been soundly discredited. ***"Never mind the facts, certainty is the key."***

What is the Christian's responsibility in such contested matters? The situation requires careful scrutiny of the facts without regard to ideological rhetoric. Christians, who hold to the truth that man is created in the image of God, should reject ideological positions that consider human beings to be a plague upon the earth. Likewise, Christians should avoid going to the other extreme and assuming that since God has given human beings dominion over the earth, we can do with it what we will.

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“Christians are disciples of the one who said, ‘for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth’ (John 18:37). Very often truth in relation to environmental care and resource use is hard to discern, but it must be sought. We need humility and wisdom in this, as well as science.”

We are responsible as stewards. And though God has abundantly supplied the earth with resources, wise management and waste avoidance are required. Claims from all sides should be considered thoughtfully and carefully.

As Christians, we should publicly contend for positions~when we have opportunity~with grace and charity, without accusing opponents of having evil motives. We must also have the humility to acknowledge that no one, not even a Christian, has the answer for every question.



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