

**THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR CREATION STEWARDSHIP**  
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**Fellowship Church**

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## Biblical Basis of Creation Stewardship

### Introduction

Over the past year, we believe the Holy Spirit has been moving within the hearts and minds of several leaders and members of Fellowship Church. This stirring also reflects a growing trend in the broader evangelical community<sup>1</sup> to reexamine the biblical role of humans in relation to the rest of Creation and the purpose of God's redemptive work for all Creation.

Doug Banister's sermon on Palm Sunday (March 2002) asserted that God's redemptive work through Christ applies not only to humans, but also to *all* of Creation. Doug spoke of the *shalom* that existed in God's perfect world before the Fall. Adam and Eve were in harmony with God, with each other, and with the earth. But this shalom was shattered by sin, and the couple became estranged from the earth. God then gave the Law to instruct His people in the way to restore shalom. Doug noted that:

“A surprising number of the laws teach the people how to live in harmony with the land, not to worship the land like everybody else did, but to serve the land and care for the land and not rape the land.”

Since the Law did not restore shalom, the cross was necessary to provide reconciliation of man to God and man to man. Doug addressed a third aspect of reconciliation:

“The third effect of the cross was to restore our relationship with the earth. God is actually, through the cross, restoring the earth to what it was intended to be like.”  
(Romans 8:18)

Doug continued to explore the implications of this for our relationship to the rest of Creation:

“People of the cross care about the earth. There is a Christian approach to Creation stewardship that we ought to think about and express.”

In closing his Palm Sunday sermon, Doug noted how a truly Biblical relationship with the rest of Creation might affect our witness to the world:

“I wonder what would happen if we became known as a community that in a Biblical, God-honoring way, cared for the earth . . . Why are people going to the New Age, to Eastern spirituality, to Indian spirituality? I think it is because we haven't had anything to say to people who care about the earth. And so the only thing they know to do is worship it. I wonder what would happen if we recaptured a Christian vision for the stewardship of the earth?”

The evangelical Christian community traditionally defines stewardship in terms of “time, talents, and money.” However, Doug's suggestion of a fourth dimension to stewardship - the earth - was an idea that resonated with many within our body and led to a number of conversations about humanity's role in relation to the rest of Creation. From this grew a proposal on our part for an

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<sup>1</sup> Evangelical Environmental Network; Christian Environmental Association; World Vision; Van Dyke et.al (*Redeeming Creation*); Bouma-Prediger (*For the Beauty of the Earth*), Francis Schaeffer.

## **Biblical Basis of Creation Stewardship**

adult elective, the goal of which would be to explore the “biblical perspective on environmental stewardship.” This elective ran for 12 weeks last fall and involved a total of about 30 different participants. This paper is an outgrowth of that elective and seeks to present the scriptural foundation to “care for Creation,” by addressing the following questions.

### **Who is at the center of things?**

Genesis 1 proclaims God as the Creator by whom all Creation is held together. Job 12:10 notes, “In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind.” In Job chapters 38-42, God addresses the question of who is at the center as He comes to His own defense in response to Job’s lament and complaint against God’s justice. With a barrage of questions, He turns Job’s eyes out from his suffering to the vastness of Creation. God reminds Job that he was not present when the earth was formed, that he has no control over the weather, and that he does not provide food for the wild animals. God then boasts with delight at the matchless strength of His Behemoth and Leviathan who cannot be tamed or captured by humans. God suggests here that the earth was not created exclusively for its usefulness to people, and therefore neither the Creation nor the Creator can be judged solely according to the standards of humanity.

Over time, the evangelical community has incorporated two humanistic (human-centered) notions into its Christian worldview: 1) the value of the rest of God’s Creation is derived from its usefulness to, or appreciation by, humans, and 2) the reason God created the rest of the universe was for the benefit of humanity. We believe Scripture clearly identifies God as the Lord of all Creation, for whom all things were created and from whom all things derive value (Col. 1:15-20).

We often embrace this mistaken notion that God created the universe for our benefit and that He therefore does not care what we choose to do with it. When we recognize that God is seated on the throne, in the center of all things, and that all creatures and Creation are created for God, we can more clearly understand God’s perspective towards His Creation.

### **What is God’s View of Creation?**

The Old and New Testament provide many examples of how God views the entire Creation:

1. The Bible states plainly, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it” (Ps. 24:1-2). God is portrayed not as an absent landlord, but as the owner of the earth who passionately claims, “The land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants” (Lev. 25: 23-24).
2. Even before humans were created, God endowed the rest of Creation with value by declaring it “very good” (Gen. 1:31) and views all He has made as worthy of compassion and concern (Ps. 145:9).
3. God intended that the land reflect *shalom*, and so established many Old Testament laws concerning the land and animals.
4. God brings curses on the land in response to disobedience of the covenant laws (Deut. 11:17; Lev. 26:14-35) and promises future judgement at the end of the age:

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<sup>2</sup> Evangelical Environmental Network; Christian Environmental Association; World Vision; Van Dyke et.al (*Redeeming Creation*); Bouma-Prediger (*For the Beauty of the Earth*), Francis Schaeffer.

## Biblical Basis of Creation Stewardship

“... the time has come for judging the dead, ... for destroying those who destroy the earth” (Rev. 11:18).

5. God unquestioningly reveals Himself through Creation (Rom. 1:20), as many of our worship songs declare.
6. God receives worship from the rocks, trees, and all that has breath (Ps. 150), and He powerfully draws us to worship Him out of awe of His glorious Creation (Ps. 8).

How then can we embrace the notion that God gave the earth to humans to use as we will? The Bible appears to state that the heart of God is concerned with our treatment of the earth. When we are reminded by Old Testament covenants and New Testament revelations that God still claims the earth as His own and takes a keen interest in it, we begin to discern the differences between cultural and Biblical understandings of humanity’s role in God’s Creation.

### What is God’s View of Humanity & the Earth?

Scripture clearly suggests that humanity’s relationship with the rest of Creation must be viewed simultaneously in two ways.

1. Of all living things created by God, humans alone are made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26-27). We are distinct and unique from other creatures. This distinction is highlighted by the command to “rule and subdue” the other creatures (Gen. 1:28) and by the delegation of authority from God to Adam to *name*<sup>3</sup> the other creatures (Gen. 2:19-20).
2. Humans are similar to other creatures, a perspective typically neglected by evangelicals and others. We are in an important sense simply a part of the whole order of Creation. Adam and Eve were not the first creatures created by God, nor were they alone created on the sixth day of Creation. They were created with all the land animals and were also made from dust (Gen. 2:7, 19).

Francis Schaeffer describes this paradoxical “dual nature” by emphasizing that the Judeo-Christian God is both infinite and personal.

On the side of His infinity . . . everything else is the creature and finite . . . dependent . . . equally separated from God in that He created them all. (B)ut on the side of his personality . . . man is separated, as personal, from nature because he is made in the image of God. That is, he has personality and as such is unique in the creation, but he is united to all other creatures as being created. (pp. 49-50)

Schaeffer builds on this perspective to make a strong case for man’s responsibility to value other creatures and treat them with respect and integrity:

Thus God treats His creation with integrity: each thing in its own order, each thing the way He made it . . . should we not treat our fellow-creature with the same integrity? (p.57)

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<sup>3</sup> The act of naming was evidence of lordship in the culture of the day, but also connotes intimate and particular knowledge of that which is named.

## **Biblical Basis of Creation Stewardship**

So, what then is the Biblical way for humans to “rule and subdue” (Gen. 1:28)?

### **What is Humanity’s Role in God’s Creation?**

A common evangelical belief sees humanity set against nature and that to “rule and subdue” means we should, or at least allows us to, “dominate and exploit” the earth. In fact, influential writers<sup>4</sup> and speakers over the past 35 years have convinced most secular environmentalists that Christianity is to blame for much of the environmental degradation that has taken place. Christians should accept that indictment as true to some degree.

We believe the differences between the Biblical *instruction* of the Word of God and the *behavior* of Biblically instructed people stems from two factors. The first is a misconception of what it means to rule “in the image of God.” Godly rulers exercise dominion, not domination or exploitation. They rule justly and demonstrate righteousness to all within their sphere of influence, thereby yielding *shalom*.

The second is a lack of awareness of, or obedience to, other Biblical responsibilities humans were given about our role in God’s Creation. These additional responsibilities further clarify God’s expectations of how we should relate to the rest of Creation.

1. Adam was instructed to “till and keep” the garden in Gen. 2:15. Some Hebrew scholars’ note that these words are just as easily translated “serve and protect.” This clearly puts the notion of “ruling and subduing” in a different light.
2. God also provided specific covenant commands to the Israelites to give their land a “Sabbath of rest.” (Ex. 23:10-11, Lev. 25:2-5) God even says that if they don’t give the land its rest, He will drive them off the land to provide for its Sabbath (Lev. 26:34-35). Elsewhere in the OT, God warns them against “defiling” or “polluting” the land (Num. 35:33-34), and often reminds them that the land is His, not theirs (Jer. 2:7).
3. Perhaps the clearest statement of God’s desire for how humans should treat Creation is in Ezekiel 34:17-18 where God asks:

“Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?”

We believe Christians are Biblically mandated to rule and subdue, but not to practice “domination and exploitation.” Rather, Christians are to act as God’s stewards in caring for the rest of Creation – which God values independent of its utility to us.

### **What is the Relationship between God’s Redemption & Creation?**

Scripture consistently portrays the earth as a central element in the grand story of God’s love, care, and redemptive purposes in this world. Genesis paints a picture of *shalom*, the blessed state of peace and harmony between God, humans, and all of Creation. It also describes humanity’s rebellion against God – an action with the consequence of a curse upon the Creation itself, including humans, livestock, wild animals, and the ground (Gen. 3). Overcome with regret, God wiped the earth clean through the flood, saving one faithful family and *two* of every living

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<sup>4</sup> The first to make this point is White (1967) in “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.”

## Biblical Basis of Creation Stewardship

creature. Following the flood, however, God established an eternal covenant never to repeat this. Though it is initiated with Noah and his descendents, Scripture teaches emphatically that the covenant also extends to *all* Creation. Specifically, according to Genesis 9:8-17, God's covenant encompasses: humans, both now and through all generations; every living creature...the birds, the livestock, and all the wild animals; all life on earth; and the earth itself.

“And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you *and every living creature* with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me *and the earth* . . . I will remember my covenant between me and you *and all living creatures of every kind* . . . Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the *everlasting* covenant between God and *all living creatures of every kind on earth*.’ So God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I have established *between me and all life on the earth*.’” (Gen. 9: 12-13, 15a, 16-17)

Finally, prophets such as Hosea announce a future covenant between God and all of Creation, including “the beasts of the field and the birds of the air, and the creatures that move along the ground.” The future fulfillment of this covenant implies a return to shalom – “bow, sword and battle” will be abolished from the land so that “all may lie down in safety” (Hosea 2:18).

These passages bear witness to the New Testament teaching of “total redemption<sup>5</sup>” – the concept that God's redemptive work extends through Christ to *all parts of the Created order*. John 3:16 teaches, “God so loved the *world*.” The word translated world is from the Greek word meaning *cosmos*, which carries the established theme of harmony, “beautiful order,<sup>6</sup>” or universe. We can interpret this as communicating God's love, not only for humans, but also for the entire universe and everything in it. It is a love for all created things and creatures, one so strong that God gave His only Son to redeem it from the curse of sin. Stated differently, Christ's shed blood provides not only the redemption of God's people from sin and death, but also brings about the redemption of all Creation and restoration of *shalom*. This is illustrated by the following references.

1. Paul echoes this powerful effect of the cross. Through Christ, God will bring “all things in heaven and earth together under one head” (Eph. 1:20).
2. Paul illustrates the need for redemption of creation when he reminds us that “the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Rom. 8:21).
3. What will release the Creation from its burden? Paul states, “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed” in hope that the “creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom. 8:9). The revelation of the sons and daughters of God represents the coming of the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>5</sup> Schaeffer's term.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cosmopolis.com/df/what-is-a-cosmos.html>

## Biblical Basis of Creation Stewardship

### What is the Future of God's Creation?

As Christians living in a fallen world, we can only “know in part” (1 Cor. 13:12). Our knowledge about what the future holds regarding the return of Christ is especially limited. Despite these limits, as evangelical Christians, we must seek to align our thinking about eschatology with the consistent message of Scripture about the purpose of God for all Creation. We have stated already that the cosmos – including the earth and every living creature (human and non-human):

1. Is created by God
2. Is cherished and cared for by God, acting *alone*, and through *human agency*
3. Eagerly awaits redemption through the death and resurrection of Christ

We believe it is Scripturally consistent, therefore, to expect that in the future, God will continue to act in loyalty and love toward *all* Creation.

Commonly held evangelical perspectives emphasize the discontinuity between this world and the “new earth” to come. These perspectives often view the physical/material world as riddled with evil, and assert that it will be utterly destroyed with the Second Coming of Christ. Scripture, however, reflects both discontinuity *and* continuity between the present earth and the future earth. We believe that a greater emphasis should be placed on the continuity of the present physical earth and the future earth.

First, imagery used throughout Scripture states that Christ's return will bring about a “new heaven and a new earth,” where the “first heaven and first earth had passed away” (Rev. 21:1). Interpretations of this passage are taken to mean that the earth will be destroyed and replaced. This passage can be interpreted as “new in quality” or “new in order” rather than new in physical reality. Interpreting it in this way is supported by a parallel concept applied to human salvation: upon accepting Christ as our Savior, we (like the earth) become “new creations” where, according to 2 Cor. 5:17, the “old has gone and new has come.” Humans who receive the salvation offered by God are in fact new creations; but (like the earth in the future) they are invited to a process of renewal, transformation, and submission to God, by the power of the Holy Spirit– meanwhile experiencing the same basic physical reality.

To suggest that the earth will be made new in quality (e.g. renewed) rather than new in physical reality (e.g. replaced) does not directly address the challenges posed by traditional interpretations of 2 Peter 3:10, which states that the day of the Lord “will come like a thief... the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.” However, even this text does not necessarily imply the earth's complete destruction. According to Stephen Bouma-Prediger, the Greek verb in question is *heurethesetai*, which means, “to find”. He writes, “In other words, the text states that after a refiner's fire of purification, the new earth will be found, not burned up” (Bouma-Prediger, 2001: 77). The implications of this suggest again that God will *transform* the earth in the future, not destroy it.

Revelation 21 also supports the concept that God will redeem the earth rather than destroy it in the future. The imagery used in Revelation describes Christ's return as the City of God returning to earth from the sky: “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven”

## **Biblical Basis of Creation Stewardship**

(21:2). We see the image of shalom – of things in the proper order: “There will be no more death or mourning, or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (v.4). This is a distinct renewal in the physical reality which we now know, and which we cannot fully understand.

We believe that Creation is important; it is our home, now and perhaps always. Thus we question the assumption that the earth will be destroyed upon Christ’s return, and the subsequent conclusion that we have no responsibility to care for the earth. Scripture affirms a clear calling to humans to actively care for the earth, and to be stewards of that which is created and cherished by God, *regardless of what will happen in the future*. We may debate the future of the earth, but we cannot debate God’s love and care for the Creation. In Francis Schaeffer’s words: “On the basis of the fact that there is going to be total redemption in the future, not only of man but of all creation . . . God’s calling to the Christian now, and to the Christian community . . . is that we should exhibit a substantial healing here and now, between man and nature . . . as far as Christians can bring it to pass.” (pp. 68-69).

### **How Do These Scriptures Affect Fellowship Church?**

Based on these Biblical principles demonstrating God’s enduring love and concern for all Creation, what should Fellowship Church’s response and future actions look like? We encourage the elders to discuss the relevance of these teachings and what direction should be set for FC.

Here we suggest some possible positive actions that the elders and staff may choose to undertake.

#### ***A. Informed Teaching***

1. Make Creation stewardship the fourth cornerstone of stewardship teaching and thought in addition to stewardship of our time, talents, and treasure.
2. At least once a year, devote a Sunday to creation care and possible responses or actions, e.g. many evangelical churches now devote a Sunday to celebrating God and His Creation in April.
3. Make Creation Care a component of MLI classes (already taught in the freshmen class this year).
4. Develop teaching models and experiences for children, youth, college and young adult ministries. An age appropriate explanation of how we can reflect God’s care for creation with practical activities like planting trees, cleaning up a vacant field, adopting a street, etc, should be incorporated.
5. Dedicate an article in *On the Journey* to stewardship of Creation.
6. Commission a group to develop a study guide and activity suggestion that can be used by small group leaders for a short-term study and project (this group would be glad to form the core of this effort).
7. Form an Environmental Taskforce or a Taskforce on Caring for Creation, to take the lead in performing and evaluating some of the activities below. Plus use them to develop an environmental mission statement and objectives to help establish guiding principles.
8. Provide a two-hour class for elders, pastoral and key administrative staff like Steve Luper, and selected leaders on this subject. Brainstorm activities the church could engage in.

## Biblical Basis of Creation Stewardship

### *B. Lead by example*

Several positive actions could demonstrate the church's leadership and commitment to resource conservation and environmental care. Listed are some visible actions we could start, in addition we should add to the list as the body responds over time to the teaching and direction of the church leadership.

Overall we should strive to practice a philosophy of “reduce, reuse, and recycle” in the day-to-day operation of the church.

1. Perform a KUB energy audit to determine ways to reduce energy consumption.
2. Assure that a computerized energy management system is utilized to provide temperature set backs during non occupied times. Train maintenance and church staff on appropriate settings during use times.
3. Provide a visible recycling program for paper (e.g. gather and recycle bulletins and other mass information materials) and aluminum cans.
4. Put recycling hints and educational hints into the bulletin each week. Like, “The amount of non-recycled aluminum cans thrown away in one month in landfills is enough to rebuild the entire fleet of commercial airlines.” (*Race to Save the Planet: Waste Not, Want Not*)
5. Be intentional about church purchasing decisions. Use hot and cold paper cups instead of Styrofoam<sup>7</sup> cups, use paper plates instead of plastic, buy copy and printer paper that contains 30% recycled materials, and buy only Energy Star compliant electronic equipment and computers/monitors. Review vendors and ask them to use recycled paper in printing. Ensure energy efficient lighting fixtures and bulbs are used.
6. Encourage users and staff to turn off lights in unused parts of the building. Put motion sensors in restrooms to turn off lights automatically.

In addition, Fellowship should intentionally seek to engage in local and international outreach by

1. Encouraging the task force to combine efforts with other congregations and environmental initiatives. Look to see how to impact secular environmental activities by having more Christian involvement to show God's love for Creation and to provide a witnessing platform to those who worship Creation instead of the Creator Himself.
2. Organizing a mission trip focusing on creation restoration in a foreign country where both its people and their natural environment are severely impoverished.

Finally, other possible actions include:

- Provide environmental stewardship resource materials and books in the church library.
- Encourage and pray for Christian leaders to arise in key policy and decision making places
- Encourage vocational teachers and educators to include creation care in their curriculums.
- Maintain and enhance the grounds beatification program. Extend program to the other parts of our property to show God's beauty outdoors.

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<sup>7</sup> The decomposition rate of Styrofoam has not been determined, i.e. it is likely to never decompose in a landfill.

## **Biblical Basis of Creation Stewardship**

### **IV. Conclusion**

These main points conclude our paper:

- God is at the *center*, not humanity.
- God values *all* Creation.
- Humans are entrusted with a *special role*: to be responsible for Creation, serve it, protect it, and rule righteously and justly over it.
- *All Creation* is eagerly awaiting future redemption.
- Our *eschatology* provides reason to care for the earth.

We believe that Fellowship Church can practically encourage the body to live out the Biblical call to care for Creation – the earth and all its inhabitants.

### **Additional Resources**

Bouma-Prediger, Stephen. *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic 2001.

DeWitt, Calvin. *Caring for Creation: Responsible Stewardship of God's Handiwork*. Baker Books, March 1998.

Schaeffer, Francis. *Pollution and the Death of Man*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossways Books 1970.

Van Dyke, F., Mahan, D.C., Sheldon, J.K., and Brand, R. *Redeeming Creation: The Biblical Basis for Environmental Stewardship*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press 1996.