



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 **The Stewardship of Creation**
(Moral Landscape of Creation, pp. 17-23)

Suggested Article:

📖 **Joyous Innocence**
(Moral Landscape of Creation, pp. 36-37)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Stewardship of Creation

As God's stewards we are not to exploit, but to exercise care and responsibility for God's domain particularly in the interest of those who are poor and marginalized. How do the contours of stewardship in the Bible shed light on our work as we grapple with the earth's ecological crisis?

Prayer[†]

Creator God, you have entrusted the earth to our keeping. Help us to give you a good account of our management: to keep the earth generously and thoughtfully, even as you keep us rich in Christian living. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Reflection

The evocative hymn in Genesis 1 sounds merely the first notes of the biblical symphony of praise to God as creator of heaven and earth. Already we hear this salient melody of creation theology:

- ▶ The creation has its origins in the sovereign, creative and sustaining power of God. It is centered on God, or is theocentric.
- ▶ Creation is not a singular event; it is an on-going process requiring the continual sustaining power and presence of God.
- ▶ Order is central to the creation. God brings order, moral as well as physical, out of primordial chaos. Moral behavior is required to maintain the harmonious working of creation.
- ▶ Creation, including heaven and earth, is a relational entity, a harmonious whole in which creatures fulfill their appointed places and functions within a grand design.
- ▶ As the primary author of its meaning and value, God fills creation with inherent goodness and beauty.
- ▶ God is transcendent yet also immanently present within creation. Moreover creation discloses both the nature of God and the human role within God's world.

We often describe this role as being God's stewards. In the Old Testament this term is linked with Israel's king, who ruled the chosen people as God's steward and so was accountable to God. This royal interpretation of stewardship helps us understand the declaration that we, being created in the image of God, are to subdue the earth and have dominion over its creatures (1:26-28).

"Image" and "likeness" suggest the statues that monarchs erect to remind their subjects of who is in power. So, our role is to be living reminders of the Creator who is the King of the universe. To understand "dominion" (from *radah*, "to tread down"), remember that Israel's king had covenantal responsibilities to care for those over whom he ruled. "Dominion, therefore, does not mean to exploit or destroy," Butkus suggests, "but to exercise care and responsibility for God's domain particularly in the interest of those who are poor and marginalized."

We also interpret "image of God" and "dominion" in light of



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the lordship of Jesus and the reign of God that he proclaims. The kingdom of God not only offers salvation to us but also points to the future renewal of all creation (cf. Romans 8:18-23). As stewards, therefore, we will participate in this salvific future of God by protecting, sustaining, and restoring creation.

As wise stewards, we will refine our knowledge of God's world through the natural sciences, environmental ethics, and a vision of sustainability. From that conversation we might learn:

- ▶ *We are called to care for the diversity of life.* A corresponding scientific insight is that life is a biotic community and everything is interconnected. So, we must care for the non-living aspects of creation (land, water, and air) that are essential for life.
- ▶ *We are special members of earth's biotic community, being given the capacity for conscious self-reflection.* This approaches the view that we have exceptional characteristics yet remain one among other species formed from the earth.
- ▶ *Creation is valuable in its own right independent of its instrumental value for fulfilling human needs.* However, our stewardship can never be merely environmental; it also addresses the links between human poverty and environmental degradation.
- ▶ *Stewardship must restore and maintain the entire creation in hopeful anticipation of God's coming reign.* This matches a vision of sustainability that incorporates both social justice and ecological restoration.

Study Questions:

1. How has the directive to subdue the earth and have dominion over its creatures (Genesis 1:26-28) been understood in a way that is harmful to, rather than caring for the environment?
2. Both Israel's ideal of kingship and the New Testament thought that Jesus is ruler over the Kingdom of God should reshape the way we think about dominion. What key changes do they require in our understanding of dominion?
3. Review the four points of conversation between the biblical idea of stewardship, natural science, and a vision of sustainability. Which points challenge or enrich your understanding of the Bible? Which points challenge some other (secular or new-age religious) approaches to the environment?
4. The beautiful Psalm 8 also links God's self-disclosure in creation with the human purpose and role in God's world. For the psalmist, why do human beings exist, and what is our role?
5. David J. Hetland's colorful window, *Teeming with Life* (the cover art of *Moral Landscape of Creation* which is discussed on pp. 36-37), highlights the exuberance of the first chapter of Genesis. Can you find echoes in Hetland's work for each salient feature of biblical creation theology outlined at the beginning of this lesson?

Departing Hymn: "Stars and Planets Flung in Orbit"

† Adapted from Plough Sunday liturgy developed by Peterborough Diocesan Council for the Countryside, Crick, England (www.crick.org.uk/rural).

Stewardship of Creation

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Psalm 8
Discuss Gen. 1:1-2:4a	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss Gen. 1:1-2:4a	Discuss Psalm 8
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2 and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To identify key themes in biblical creation theology.
2. To understand the notion of “dominion” within the contexts of Israel’s ideal of kingship and the New Testament teachings about the Kingdom of God.
3. To connect the biblical idea of stewardship with our knowledge of God’s world drawn from natural sciences.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Moral Landscape of Creation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and the suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Near Anchorage, AK, Philip Yancey pulled off the highway to look at what many other motorists had stopped to observe, a pod of silvery white beluga whales that was feeding just offshore. “I stood for forty minutes, listening to the rhythmic motion of the sea, following the graceful, ghostly crescents of surfacing whales. The crowd was hushed, even reverent. We passed around binoculars, saying nothing, simply watching.... Just for that moment, nothing else—dinner reservations, the trip schedule, my life back in Chicago—mattered. We were confronted with a scene of quiet beauty and a majesty of scale. We all felt small. We stood together in silence until the whales moved farther out. And then we climbed the bank together and got in our cars to resume our busy, ordered lives, which somehow seemed less urgent. And it wasn’t even Sunday.” (Philip Yancey, “Of Whales and Polar Bears,” in *The Best Preaching on Earth*, ed. by Stan L. LeQuire [Judson Press, 1996]: 163-166.)

Prayer

Invite members to share personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for members to pray silently, and then ask members to read together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Emphasize the passage’s symmetry by reading aloud from a modern translation in this way:

(Reader #1) Genesis 1:1-2

(Reader #2) Genesis 1:3-5

(Reader #3) Genesis 1:6-8

(Reader #4) 1:9-13

(Reader #2) 1:14-19

(Reader #3) 1:20-23

(Reader #4) 1:24-31

(Reader #1) 2:1-4a.

Reflection

The lesson has three parts. In the first part, themes of the salient “melody” of biblical creation theology are identified. Ask members to recall images and ideas from Genesis 1 that relate to each theme.

The second section enriches our understanding of stewardship. Some people blame the current environmental crisis, at least in part, on human beings obeying the declaration to “subdue” the earth and exercise “dominion” over its creatures. This is a misinterpretation of Genesis 1:26-28 and a distortion of the biblical idea of stewardship. To move toward a better interpretation, remind members that the king in ancient Israel ideally was to be God’s steward. Furthermore, Jesus, as the one who reigns in God’s kingdom, should be our model for a steward who has dominion over the earth (cf. 1 Timothy 6:15-16; Revelation 1:4-6).

Four points of conversation between the biblical notion of stewardship, science, and a vision of sustainability are introduced in the final section. Like any conversation, there are two voices and potentially a difference in point of view. The italicized statements use concepts drawn from the scripture reading and the wider biblical theology of creation; the sentences in plain text echo the ideas of science. Do members find harmony or tension in each part of the conversation?

Study Questions

1. Members may share what comes to mind when they hear the words “subdue” or “dominion.” Some may describe events from recent or earlier history.
2. The king is a servant of someone who is greater, God. The king’s economic and political agenda, therefore, is ‘set’ and not up to his individual whim; his desires should be evaluated by whether they meet the needs and requirements of his subjects. We are not without guidance: we can find rich models for the ideal king in the psalmists’ and prophets’ descriptions in the Old Testament and, more concretely, in the life and teachings of Jesus.
3. As challenges to their understanding of the Bible, members may mention that: (a) environmental science enriches the notion of “diversity of life” beyond the brief, representative list of creatures in biblical creation accounts; (b) science highlights the common origin of humans and other creatures, an idea that is in tension with some interpretations of the creation accounts; (c) we rarely explore what is good (from God’s perspective) about features of the creation that are either harmful or simply not useful to us; (d) we should study the two-way links between human poverty and environmental degradation. Some biblical challenges to other approaches to the environment might include: (a) the biblical call to exercise stewardship even over features of the creation that are unattractive and not useful (in any obvious way) to us; (b) the need to preserve the specialness of human beings’ role in the creation; (c) the call to be more than mere *environmentalists*, which means to be concerned with human poverty and social justice as well.
4. The psalmist answers by appealing to the royal model of stewardship (Psalm 8:5-8). Note that Yahweh (“LORD”) is called “Sovereign” in verse 1, so God is the psalmist’s model for the true King.
5. Notice that God (represented by the dove with nimbus and cross) is the central element in the image. The brooding stance of the dove might suggest a continuing presence of God to the creation. Despite the wild diversity of creatures, the image is filled with balance of objects and colors; the mosaic-like background also suggests order. Perhaps the relationship of all the creatures to the brooding dove dominates the image, but there is also a suggestion of interrelationship in the presence of fish-eating birds. The goodness and dance-like beauty within this image reflects the Creator’s joy and owes nothing to human uses for these creatures. The artist cannot image transcendence directly, but he suggests a ‘beyondness’ to God through the mysteriousness of the nimbus and cross; the brooding dove only *represents* (like a steward) and does not fully present the deity.

Departing Hymn

“Stars and Planets Flung in Orbit” is on pp. 42-43 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.