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Practicing a Christian Environmental Ethic through Stewardship

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Abstract

This article defines the human's moral and ethical obligations toward environment and development but based on Genesis 2:15 where *'the LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden'* to work it and take care of it. This implied that he was to think, plan, cultivate and improve on the same garden he had been placed other than living a contemplative life. The article portrays that God's people are stewards but he retains ownership of all His creation through a careful study of God's Word as illuminated by a number of historical and recent authors. Then the article proposes the Christian's practical implications as caretakers or managers of nature that will lead to the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The bible will be at the centre but other relevant sources that are extra- biblical will also be consulted as well.

Key words: Christian, Environmental, Ethic, Stewardship

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Introduction

Throughout the world, environmental issues are of great concern. But, we have the right to live in a clean and healthy environment. However, we face a situation where the environment is badly damaged and continually threatened by human activities. It is therefore our duty to protect the environment, both for ourselves and for future generations. It is also important to note that in modern times, our economic and technological needs have led to us ignoring the effects of our actions on the environment imply a failure of responsible stewardship of creation. Since the effects of the abuse of the environment are felt and spread beyond borders of various countries for instance polluted river or air the rights of other countries are infringed on. Thus, a number of international declarations were drawn up to protect the environment. Two of those declarations on international law are: the United Nations Declaration on Human Environment adopted at Stockholm, Sweden on June 16, 1972. This declaration claimed that every human being had the right to a healthy environment and that people had a responsibility to protect and improve that environment for future generations. There was the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. One of the agreements reached at the summit, Agenda 21, is an all-encompassing plan of action which includes most of the important steps that need to be taken to achieve sustainable and ecologically balanced development (Morrison, 1999). However, others included the African Charter on Human and People's Rights that emphasized that everyone has the right to a healthy and clean environment. There was also The Bamako Convention which was adopted by African states and it prohibits the dumping of toxic waste.

The abuse of the environment includes the following: deforestation without planting others, overgrazing land and causing soil erosion and over-fishing or hunting so that too few animals remain to replenish the numbers. There is also pollution and waste such as smoke, gases and chemicals from factories, furnaces and motorized vehicles. We have the discarded materials such as paper, glass, plastic, unwanted goods, rotting food and damaged machinery. Sewage and industrial chemicals that are carried into rivers and oceans are part of the pollution. Oil that is spilled or dumped from ships into the oceans and nuclear waste is yet another form of pollution. Water pollution (McQuilkin, 1995) exists yet we may not realize how important water is but we all need water to survive.

Regarding stewardship, according to Grenz & Smith (2003) this term refers to the principle that declares that the proper ethical stance begins with the acknowledgment of God as the owner of everything in creation, and as a consequence views human beings as responsible to God for the wide use of all that is entrusted to them to administer in a manner in keeping with God's intended purposes. In their discussion, they assert that that often stewardship is viewed in the narrow sense of a person's responsibility for one's material resources, especially money and possessions. Thus, in this sense, the principle of being responsible to God extends to the various aspects of one's financial dealings: earning, spending, buying, saving, investing and giving. But today, stewardship is generally understood in a more holistic or all-inclusive sense. The human managerial responsibility extends to all areas of life, both individual and communal, and includes both attitude and action.

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In biblical terms, Charles Bugg defines stewardship in the Holman Bible Dictionary as ‘utilizing and managing all resources God provides for the glory of God provides for the glory of God and betterment of his creation’. Christian stewardship regards the obligation of Christians in managing and utilizing intelligently the gifts that God has given. The Christian steward is not only responsible for the financial blessings provided by God but also the spiritual gifts that are given through the Holy Spirit .God wants human beings to be His stewards in the work of creation (FB Crew, 2021).

Elsewhere, stewardship means to look after the world for God. God has created a world in which humans have a special role as stewards of creation. This means they should look after the interests of the planet and all the life on it because when God gave humans dominion over the land, he gave them responsibility too. Humans were created to be stewards on the land, i.e.: to use it, to look after it and to protect it (BBC, 2021). However, Mbambi (2020) reminds us that human beings did the reverse by destroying the environment. Barry in Clark & Rakestraw (1996) approach stewardship in a Christian perspective as over the whole creation- not as commonly applied in church circles, but overall plants and animals, over living and non-living resources alike, over landscape and community. He sees stewardship involving management, not preservation but entailing looking after the world primarily for God to whom it belongs by creation and redemption, and only secondarily for ourselves and fellow humans. To him conservation is about God in the first place, not human survival or comfort.

The above discussion by Barry (1996) concurs with St. Paul in Colossians who writes that Christ Jesus has the ‘primacy over all creation. In him everything in heaven and on earth was created...He exists before all things, and all things are held together in him... God chose through him to reconcile all things to himself making peace through the blood on the cross- all things whether on earth or in heaven’ (Col.1:15-20). He notes that the Bible does not, like the Greeks, look back to a recoverable paradise; it begins in the garden (which needs management) and ends in the city.

Mbambi (2020) emphasizes that Genesis chapter 1 talks about God’s ownership through the creation of the Heavens and the Earth. Just like the flowers, the mountains, the birds, the creatures on dry land and the oceans, the skies, the moon, the sun and the stars, we too (human beings) were created by God. But God created us human beings in His own image and likeness. Making us second in command, God made us stewards over the rest of His creation. Because we were created out of love, it gave God much pleasure to make us part of His beautiful plan, so that we could be in partnership with Him which would keep us close to Him. But along the way we’ve lost the true purpose of God’s plan for creation, we’ve forgotten our place as stewards and we’ve taken over God’s place as the owner. We’ve taken over and started to control everything as if it was our own. Furthermore, Mrs. Thatcher while commenting on the failed stewardship remarked that once remarked that we do not have a freehold on our world but only a fully repairing lease (*The Common inheritance 1990*). Also, Valerio (2002) laments the failed stewardship. He argues that to be a disciple and neglect creation is a contradiction in terms. It is also underlined that a neglect of creation can stand against the integrity of the gospel that is preached He sees a failed stewardship as a lost dimension that needs to be recovered.

Regarding the environmental ethic, it is the stewardship of the living and non-living systems in order to maintain their sustainability for present and future, allowing development with equity. Health and quality of life for humankind are ultimately dependent on this (Barry in Clark & Rakestraw, 1996). However, according to history regarding of the major world religions’ support and promotion of the environmental ethic, it is a known fact that in 1986

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the World Wildlife Fund (as it was) held its 25th anniversary celebrations at Assisi and called upon the world's religions to assert their commitment to conservation. Declarations on "man and nature" were produced in the name of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism (Edinburgh & Mann (1989). The Christian statement was not strong, and the Duke of Edinburgh subsequently convened a series of meetings at Windsor on "the Christian attitude to Nature". He challenged those attending with a question, "there must be a moral as well as a practical argument for environment conservation. What is it? The answer, of course, is responsible stewardship and this is the key to the values which determine our actions toward environment (Edinburgh & Mann, 1989).

Genesis 2:15 tells us of God placing the man had created in a well-watered garden of Eden to *work it and take care of it*. Work did not come with the fall of but was part of God's original plan for humankind. God provides, but he holds us responsible for maintaining what he has created which is nothing but responsible. This stewardship principle applies to us today as it applied to Adam. It is not enough to be blessed with land. We must maintain that land and control all that could destroy it. Thus, we could not stop destructive processes like soil erosion and deforestation and must not use chemicals that are harmful to the soil (Adeyemo, 2006). Humankind was like a tenant on the God's land as a landlord.

Christian responsible stewardship in promoting environmental ethic should at the forefront of any mission of extending the kingdom of God because of the call to 'take and care' (Gen. 2:15) for the Garden of Eden which is our world. The commitment to conservation goes hand in hand with the original call of humanity not only to survive but to flourish (Grudem & Asmus 2013). This creation was lent us by God and hence a need to use it properly. Ruskin also argues that God has lent us the earth for our life; it is great entail. It belongs to as much to those who are to come after us and whose names are already written in the book of creation, as to us; and we have no right, by anything we do or neglect, to involve them in unnecessary penalties, or deprive them of benefits which it was in our power to bequeath (ACTS Website, 2021)..

The above call to flourish can't be realized unless environmental challenges are addressed (Valerio, 2003). The environmental challenges facing the world today are so many but they include climate change, deforestation, loss of biodiversity and clean water shortage (Valerio, 2003). He argues that climate change is recognized as being the biggest threat to our world caused by the releasing of harmful gases into the atmosphere (predominantly carbon dioxide) when the fossil fuels are burned. The greenhouse gases trap the sun's heat in the atmosphere, leading to global warming which in turn results in a change in climate. The result of all this includes floods, droughts and storms. Yet it is also noted that there is deforestation when the rain forests are cleared and burned yet the same rain rainforests are incredibly precious (Valerio, 2003). They contain huge varieties of wildlife and all are increasingly under the threat from the demand for timber and the resources these forest hold. But, above all deforestation is linked with issues of poverty, as the uneven distribution of land and money are both caused by and a cause of the forests' destruction.

Statement of the Problem

The Bible is still so central in teaching and correcting the faithful in each and every way of life (2 Tim 3:16-17). Though everything that the Lord created was very good (Gen. 1:31) humanity has failed to effectively have dominion and subdue the earth (Gen 1:26, 28) as evidenced through environmental abuse that has led to a permanent damage. This will not only affect the current generation but will creep to the coming generations. This indicates that humanity has failed in its commitment towards the promotion of stewardship of creation

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(Gen. 2:15). Thus, this chapter is to remind and assert that through the Word of God and a host of theological sources there is a lot of contribution to the environment debate. It is a call to practically apply the same Word to promote responsible stewardship on environmental ethic in the world today.

Objectives of this study

1. To re-examine the critical issues of a good Christian stewardship towards the maintenance of environment in the world today
2. To show how the environmental ethic can be promoted and sustained both for the present and future generations based on the Word of God and other extra biblical sources
3. To formulate realistic implications and practical actions of Christian stewardship on environment for the faithful.

Review of Related Literature

One of the objectives was *to re-examine the critical issues of a good Christian stewardship towards the maintenance of environment in the world today*. In order to have a good environmental ethic is to promote a good Christian stewardship. Through such ways, the maintenance of environment in the world today can be realized. Grudem and Asmus (2013) emphasize that God wants human being not just to survive on the earth but to flourish. They quote the bible where everything on earth ultimately belongs to God. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and all those who dwell therein” (Ps 24:1). We own what God has entrusted to us as “stewards” of that which is ultimately his. This means that we are accountable to him for how we use our possessions. We don’t own the environment that has been destroyed in various ways yet ‘it is not our own’ Sowunmi in Hallman (1994) outlines how the environment has been devastated and manifested through air, soil erosion, desertification, deforestation, the extinction of plant and animal species, global warming and loss of human life and spirituality. It is also emphasized that the lattermost is a destruction of the human essence resulting in alienation from own’s culture, which creates loss of self-esteem and human dignity, lack of motivation and a sense of hopelessness. Sowunmi concludes that many of the victims of this spiritual destruction are destined to become alcoholics, drug addicts and criminals.

In his book *Earth’s Cry*, Morgan (2015) also underlines that global warming, melting ice-caps, shrinking rainforests, depletion of fish populations, rising sea-levels, species extinctions - these realities are now known to us, the words are familiar yet deeply unsettling and profoundly unwelcome. The enormity and complexity of the issues often leave us confused, despairing or simply numb. For Christians, a strange dissociation often seems to exist between the ecological crisis and a heritage that includes a Creator God. However, this work reiterates the place and role of the same Christians in taking care of creation irrespective of the various challenges related to the environment. Responsible stewardship question needs to be re-examined for the purposes of development in this 21st century. Furthermore, this work is based on another objective: *To show how the environmental ethic can be promoted and sustained both for the present and future generations based on the Word of God and other extra biblical sources*. Because of the ecological threats, one wonders whether Christians have a spirited fight and a commitment to avert and alleviate such threats. What contribution has Christians contributed in the day today life? Jones (2005) notes that as

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the ecological threats to the earth multiply and intensify; Christians are turning to the pages of the Old Testament for guidance on environmental ethics. Yes, scriptures have authority. But there is a lot to be desired regards the proper usage and contribution of the Word of God towards the alleviation of ecological and other environment related problems. But is wisdom about this critical issue to be found only there? He argues clearly and passionately that Jesus is the Saviour not only of the humanity but also the Saviour of the planet and of the whole cosmos, which came into being through him and for him. To what extent is Jesus the Saviour of the entire planet both humans and non-humans, living and non-living things? Is Jesus the Saviour of the earth?

It is also underlined by Warner (2008) while discussing the question of the *Care of Creation*. He approaches it using a *Franciscan spirituality* of the earth where the cries of the earth's destruction are highlighted. There is both theological and practical approach to developing a *Franciscan spirituality* of the earth. St. Francis had a passion for the creation and an example is of the love for birds. Warner (2008) mentions prayers, meditations, spiritual practices and group activities which can provide practical hands-on approach to reconnecting with the earth and acting in a right relationship. It is also pointed out that the earth with all its creatures is in crisis. One of the most precious aspects of the resources is the Franciscan tradition- Caring for the earth is part of the wider retrieval of the Franciscan theology for our new time. But do meditations and prayers and love for birds and animals enough to avert the current crisis? How exactly can such an approach alleviate the ongoing environmental crisis today? http://www.emersonkent.com/speeches/sermon_to_the_birds.htm (accessed on September 10, 2021)

Lagat (2019) in his book *Christian Faith and Environmental Management* uses ideas from the logical position of a Christian, created in the image of God (Gen.1:26), redeemed by God and given responsibility to subdue and keep the earth arguing that a Christian has the responsibility and mandate to care for the environment. In his arguments one sees that successful stewardship happens when a Christian is aware of God's intention for creation, exerts efforts to increase it, and is expected to give an account to God for their actions towards it. It is also pointed out that some think that the cultural mandate negates environmental stewardship. Therefore, in his arguments it is an explicit revelation of how humanity has done the reverse by damaging what is precious to God and to them (human beings) as seen in the creation story in Genesis... And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good... (Gen. 1:31). Lagati (2019) notes how it is often misunderstood that *the subduing of the earth* (Gen.1:27, 28) means to produce as many children as one wishes. But, the blessing that accompanies the stewardship mandate concerns the blessing for being fruitful. It does not mitigate the need for birth control, rather frames population in a positive perspective for humankind.

Elsewhere in the bible, the Palmist says "All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things". These all wait for you that you may give them their food in due season. What you give them they gather in; you open your hand, they are filled with good. You hide your face, they are troubled; you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. You send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the earth" (Ps 104:27-30). Here the Psalm gives an interpretation to the many voices of nature, and swings sweetly both of creation and providence. This poem (Psalm) generally contains a complete cosmos; sea and land, cloud and sunlight, plant and animal, light and darkness, life and death, are all proved to be expressive of the presence of the Lord. There is total dependence and provision from the Lord and in due season for all kinds of created

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things from the land, sea and the air. As there is total dependence on God and on his provision, the implication is that all that there is, is God's property and should be used only in reference to the end for which they were created. All abuse and waste of God's creatures are spoil and robbery on the property of the creator.

The first human being, Adam, lived in the Garden of God (cf. Gen. 13:10, Ezek 28; 13, 31:8, 36:35, Joel 2:3) in an environment of peace and harmony with all God's creations and nurture: eco-balance in a state of symbiosis (Hallman, 1994). He sees the Garden of Eden as a paradise and an ecosystem in which different species of organisms in God's creation from the smallest to *homo-sapiens*, co-exist in a state of symbiosis, fulfilling God's plan and the purpose for which they were created. It is realized that in the Garden of Eden the first human beings lived in a close relationship to every living creature, the birds of the air and the beasts of the field, in an environment of natural beauty and splendor unspoiled by ecological degradation. God himself is seen very much present with the whole of his creation in a human (anthropomorphic) way. In this respect, any ecological degradation, whether in the form of imbalance in nature by humans, discrimination and inequality in human relationships, injustice, wanton destruction of the ecosystem, depletion of the ozone layer, is a destruction of God's creation. All these affect human existences and interfere with God's order of creation. Hallman (1994) asserts that God's creation and ecosystem must be saved if humans are to survive. Thus, this is a call to conserve environment through responsible stewardship. Furthermore, Rayan in Hallman (1994) presents the earth as a symbol that sums up all the gifts and loves which God shares with humankind and all living things. It is not so much a thing or object as a relational reality, vibrant and alive, dynamically mediating life and love from heart. He argues that there is necessity to avoid and prevent the grabbing and monopolizing of the earth and its resources by individuals and groups. They must remain common to humankind and to the whole people, in each place.

In Deuteronomy 20: 20-21, there is a principle of respect for the environment, which forbids random destruction of trees that may have taken generations to grow. Fruit trees are always to be spared, and other trees should be cut only if needed for the siege. The random cutting of trees is prohibited here. However, we need to take caution, however, when trying to apply the details of this text in Deuteronomy which is about war and cutting or not cutting of trees since this is not applicable for a modern war (Ayedemo, 2006).

Elsewhere, the book of Psalms also has a lot of praises to the creator and his creation (Ps 104). It makes us think of the different parts of God's creation the way the first chapter of the Bible presents them. This chapter has been described as Genesis 1 in poetry. It calls us to look around at the world in which we live and thinking of all God's creatures. The forces of nature (104:1-4), Land and sea (104:5-9), birds and animals (104:10-13), plants and trees (104:14-18), moon and sun (104:19-23), the sea and its creatures (104:24-26) all portray the power of God who gives and sustains life (104:27-28) and all the creatures are dependent on him but we shall eventually die (cf.Gen.3:19).

Ethical Implications for Christians

From the ongoing discussion, stewardship implies that we need to take care of the earth and its resources as He commanded us not to steal in one of the commandments, " You shall not steal" (Ex.20:15). A lot of resources have been stolen and abused by individuals and other bad leaders in different governments (through corruption). This contributes to the poverty of the lower classes of people who also resort to the destruction of the environment.

Because God entrusts us with his creation he expects us to do something with it, something worthwhile, and something that he finds valuable (Gen.2:15). This is also evident

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in the dominion or cultural mandate (Gen. 1:26-28). That is; having dominion, filling the earth and subduing it. It implied that that they were to make the earth more useful for their benefit and enjoyment. They were to create useful products from the earth, for their benefit and enjoyment, but not to wreck creation (Grudem & Asmus, 2013).

For a today's Christian, God wants us to discover, create and invent products from the earth-at first, perhaps, simple structures in which to live and store food, and later, more complex forms of transportation, and eventually to modern structures and other forms of transport, factories- and other useful products. Humanity has capacity to do this for the glory of God because He has entrusted us with property making us accountable stewards. As we promote an environment ethic through stewardship, it implies an expectation of human achievement. When God entrusts us with something, he expects us to do something worthwhile with it (Matt. 25: 14-30). Whatever form of environment that is within our reach, not only do we need it for the present but also for the posterity.

The faithful need to practically reduce the amount of resources we use for instance we can get rid of wasteful packaging which just ends up being thrown away; we can use closed energy-saving stoves to cook on instead of open fires and people with cars could use them less or share them when they travel to work. There is an implication of re-using materials-boxes, wood glass, building materials and machinery can all be re-used. This means that fewer resources have to be exploited and that there is less waste polluting the earth. Yet another implication is the recycling of glass, plastics and paper can be recycled. In this process they are broken down or melted and reformed to make new materials. Organic waste can be made into compost and used to restore soil fertility. The new technologies, I mean renewable resources (those resources which grow again or replace themselves quickly. Air, soil, water, plants and animals) like solar power and biogas can be introduced to reduce the use of non-renewable resources and energy sources (nonrenewable resources are those that can exist in fixed amounts on earth. They are formed over millions of years and cannot be renewed in our lifetimes once they have been used such as minerals, gas and oil (McQuilkin, 1995)

We need to reiterate the pace and role of Gen1:28 and 2:15 about 'being fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion...and till it and keep it. Regarding the promotion and keeping the environment, these texts indicate that humans do not have merely a responsibility to creation. We are a part of creation. God created nature "good" and us 'very good'. Rather than indicating a higher level of spiritual growth, avoiding or ignoring issues of ecology are signs of imbalance and ignorance. Because we are a part of creation, we cannot live apart from it. Should Christians be guided by the dominion (fill, subdue, and have dominion) motif of Genesis 1:28 or the nurturing (till and keep) motif of 2:15? But the Christian does not need to choose between the two. Both are divine mandates. God called us to be innovative and creative. God is pleased when we use his creation to create instruments to praise him, irrigation systems to feed people, and technology to disseminate worthwhile information. God calls human beings to be faithful stewards of nature. He owns it (Ps.24:1). It is his. We are just tenants. Just as we are stewards of our bodies, which are his and thus must care for them; just as we are stewards our finances; so it is with our physical environment. We can be good stewards, caring well for his world, using it for human welfare and for the glory of God, or we can wantonly abuse and destroy it as the Israelites did (Exod.23:10-11; Lev.25:1-7) thus a heavy responsibility for personal stewardship (McQuilkin, 1995).

Conclusion

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The Bible is an authoritative book as far as a real practicing of a Christian environmental stewardship ethic is as far as the relevant texts are concerned. Its immense contribution towards environmental conservation can't be underestimated as there's a lot guidance that is needed to be applied practically. Reflection on environmental ethic through stewardship and ecological phenomena calls us to take stock of our own roles and tasks in the protection and care of the earth, God's creation. In addition, both history and the present (the bible and other extra-biblical sources) demonstrate eschatology is too often used or concentrated on and hence becoming an excuse for apathy and inaction regarding the practical conservation of environment through responsible stewardship. This causes many to focus solely on saving and liberating *human* beings from sin in this wicked world whilst ignoring the environment or taking it as a secondary issue yet it is so crucial.

Recommendations

1. Poverty and its effects should be reduced by helping the poor earn a living in a way that does not damage the environment with the guidance of both the government and religious institutions.
2. Churches' constant sensitization and education about environment: On its own it can't change the world but it does have a role to play because it is an important part of conservation. Through Education people's attitude, inactivity, apathy and insensitivity towards environmental protection can change.
3. Institutions of learning like theological colleges need to always have *Theology of Creation and Responsible Stewardship* as core academic courses or programs in their curriculum for enlightenment and education on this topic. Annual lectures on the stewardship and the Care of the Earth should also be in place to sensitize the student population.
4. There is need for a re-examination of a practical partnership of religious institutions and government to support environment and stewardship so as to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (sustainable development).

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