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Christian Higher Education and Stewardship

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In March 1989 the oil tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground in Prince William Sound, Alaska. Ten million gallons of crude oil poured from the ship and spread into a slick that covered 1600 square miles of water, fouling 800 miles of shoreline in one of the world's richest wildlife areas.

In the wake of the largest oil spill in United States history, Alaskans were in shock and environmentalists were enraged. Everyone recognized that the time had come "to get tough about conservation" and to put in place better environmental safeguards, not only in Alaska, but throughout the world.

Stewardship or care for the environment has become an international issue. On May 2, 1989, Gro Harlem Brundtland, prime minister of Norway, delivered the sixth annual Benjamin Franklin Lecture in Washington, D.C. Speaking on "Global Change and Our Common Future," she observed:

We are living in an historic transitional period in which awareness of the conflict between human activities and environmental constraints is exploding. It is quite clear that this finite world cannot sustain us if we perpetuate present patterns.¹

Shortly afterward, in July 1989, the largest industrial democracies held a summit meeting in

Paris, France. For the first time in the 15-year history of this conference, attention was given to worsening world pollution, including global warming, acid rain, ocean dumping, oil spills, and the destruction of forests. The summit ended with an urgent call for decisive action to combat serious threats to the world's environment.

Very often these calls for decisive action regarding stewardship of the environment are directed at the educational, scientific community. Prime Minister Brundtland, for example, observed that the role of men and women of science in shaping the future has become more central:

It may be more important now than ever before in history for scientists to keep the doors of their laboratories open to political, economic, and social currents. The role of the scientist as an isolated explorer of the uncharted world of tomorrow must be reconciled with his role as a committed, responsible citizen of the unsettled world of the present.²

If what the prime minister said is true regarding scientists in general, and it is, then it is certainly true regarding the Christian community. In fact, given our understanding of the world as God's crea-

tion, our Christian educational, scientific institutions should be giving leadership regarding issues of stewardship and care of the environment. All of this underscores the urgency of understanding Christian higher education's relationship to stewardship.

Stewardship

To avoid a narrow view of stewardship, we must not think of stewardship as having to do only with the three t's — the use of our time, our talents, and our treasure. "The concept of stewardship extends beyond managing the money one has earned."³ Nor must we limit our concept of stewardship to concern for the environment. As indicated in *And He Had Compassion on Them*: ". . . stewardship is more than thrift, benevolence, or even compassion. It is thankfulness. For Christians it is near life itself."⁴

Thinking of stewardship from this broader perspective, I wish to develop the following point in this article: Since one of the most important aspects of the Christian life, if not the most important, is that of stewardship; and since it is the responsibility of Christian institutions of higher education to equip and qualify Christians for their life and task in this world; therefore, Christian institutions of higher education must be very much involved in the matter of stewardship, equipping students for their calling as stewards.

Stewardship, as William J. Byron points out, "is a traditional category . . . associated with people and the creation — given by God to our care and for our use."⁵ Stewardship says that no one owns anything absolutely; that everything we possess we hold in trust; that the conditions of that trust are set by the Creator who "entrusts" to our care varying proportions of His creation; and that the ethic of stewardship concerns itself with fidelity to or violations of that trust.

All of which points us back, first, to the beginning when God created; second, to the fall into sin; and third, to the redemption through Jesus Christ.

Creation

The Bible tells us that God by His Word brought all things — the heavens and the earth — into being. God declared the creation good, i.e., capable of fulfilling the purpose or realizing the potential for which it was made. It was clear from the beginning that He was creation's God, creation's

Sovereign, and that the creation belonged to Him.

The Bible tells us, further, that God made man and woman. He made them in His image; part of creation, yet distinct in the creation. The writers of *Earthkeeping* make this point very clear:

. . . humans like stars, seas, whales, fish, and birds are simply a part of creation.

. . . humans are also described as being very special in creation; they are made "in the image of God." And they are given a unique position in creation.⁶

According to Genesis 9:9,10 God established covenant with humanity and the rest of the creation: "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature on earth." In this covenantal arrangement God promises to bless us and to make the creation flourish when we live in obedience to His Word. God calls us to rule the creation (Genesis 1:28) and to serve the creation, i.e., "to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15). God expects us to keep the earth with tenderness, even as He keeps us.

God also expects us to keep the sabbath, so that we, his stewards may have our rest; to keep the sabbath year, so the land too can rest; and to keep the Jubilee Year, so the people will not forget that the land belongs to God and appropriate it for themselves.⁷

In other words, God charges the man and woman, humankind, to be stewards of His creation. The Greek term for steward is "oikonomos," meaning "manager of the household," a term which makes clear that the creation is not ours; the creation comes from and belongs to God (Psalm 24:1). However, the creation is entrusted to our care by God; and obedience to God requires faithfulness to that trust. As Douglas John Hall states, "To love God is to love and serve His Creation."⁸ If someone says, "I love God," but shows hatred toward the creation by misusing or abusing it, that person is a liar. Further, God makes us stewards of the entire creation — not only the non-human elements of creation (water, plants, animals, etc.) but also the human constructions of creation (marriage, family, business, civil authority, schools, etc.).

. . . the structures of human society are

as much a resource as the earth and sea. In a sense, these resources of human institutions are even more basic to our stewardship of the earth than the earth itself, for it is through them that we affect the earth, for good or for evil.⁹

This brings us to Christian higher education.

Given the fact that it is the responsibility of the college to prepare students for the tasks of life, and given the fact that those tasks are biblically defined as stewardship, it is clear that the academic program of the college should prepare students for the task of stewardship. This is true of the entire academic program — not only courses dealing with environmental issues, but all courses. Both the non-human elements and the human constructions of creation are to receive stewardly care.¹⁰

The Fall

Created in the image of God, the man and woman were capable of fulfilling their assignment to stewardship. But, tempted by Satan who suggested “You will be like God,” they disobeyed the Word of God. They broke covenant with God, forgot that they owned nothing, and broke their trust. Claiming the creation for themselves, they continued “to dress and keep” the garden; but it was in satisfaction of their own desires, not in service to God. As a result of this disobedience the judgment of God fell upon the human race and upon the entire creation.

The results of the fall into sin were immediately evident in faith life as the man and woman hid from God; in marriage when, withdrawing from one another, husband and wife were dressed; and in agriculture as, producing thorns and thistles, the ground was cursed to them.

The effects of human sin are, of course, with us to this very day. In this regard 1989’s first-of-the-year-issue of *Time* magazine made a tremendous impression on me, and, I am sure, on others as well. Instead of the usual “Person of the Year” *Time* decided to focus on the earth as “Planet of the Year.” In the ensuing story reporters observed:

For decades, scientists have warned about the reckless way in which humanity has treated its planetary host. No one paid attention.

This year the earth spoke, like God warning Noah of the deluge. Its message was loud and clear, and suddenly people began to listen.

Everyone suddenly sensed that this gyrating globe, this precious repository of all the life that we know of, was in danger.’’¹¹

But why? Why is this happening to the earth, to the planet on which we live? Reporting on a 1988 conference sponsored by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology in Madison, Wisconsin, Clifford E. Bajema writes:

It was indisputably clear to conference participants that the earth faces a global ecological crisis. And it was also clear to them that the problem stems from human disobedience to God. (12)

Bajema then goes on to describe this crisis as it makes an impact upon the non-human elements of creation. The following observations are of particular interest:

-the earth’s rates of energy transmission are being altered by human acts, such as those causing damage to the ozone layer and the buildup of ‘greenhouse’ gases.

-water both above and below the ground is becoming increasingly contaminated by synthetic products and by-products.

-people are destroying forests and habitats. The results are greater floods and more severe droughts.

-because their habitats are being destroyed, species of animals and plants are becoming extinct at a rate of more than one species per day.

-human cultures are being displaced, relocated, or extinguished. Artificially concentrated populations undermine the productivity of the land as these populations press for more food and fuel.¹³

And then there is the crisis which human sin and disobedience have caused relative to the human

structures of creation. Albert M. Wolters, in *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, describes many examples of exploitation in this regard, pointing to marriage under attack by separation and divorce; the family strained by parental neglect; the state twisted by totalitarianism; industry engaged in the waste of environmental resources; corporations and labor unions both driven by naked greed; and academic life corrupted by scientism, sloppy methodology, and fallacious reasoning.¹⁴

All of this means, as we read in *Earthkeeping*

. . . that humans are destructively wicked creatures. From Eden on, we have tried to make ourselves gods, and in the attempt we have consistently misused creation. . . . We have brought pain or death to other persons, and we have as often brought destruction to the wider world . . . any place or period of our past is filled with examples of such dead-end malignancy: Roman soldiers salting the fields of conquered enemies, Nazis cremating millions of Jews, Americans slaughtering billions of passenger pigeons, the scorched-earth policies of a thousand petty tyrants. The contemporary Christian finds in these episodes good reason to despair at the present state of human stewardship and the future prospects for humanity.¹⁵

“What is wrong?” asks Douglas John Hall in *Imaging God*. The answer: “We ourselves are wrong Not just the way we behave, but the way we are.”¹⁶

It is important in this connection to note that there are those who hold Christians and Christianity responsible for “the plight of the planet.” One such person is Lynn White Jr., author of a well-known article titled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” which appeared in a 1967 issue of *Science*. White claimed that Christianity was responsible for the environmental crisis, basing his thesis on the fact that Christianity taught that humankind was to have dominion over nature. As a result, according to White, humankind has treated nature in a destructive way. Thus, Christianity has caused the “desacralization” of nature and, claiming credit for the development of science and technology, has promoted the very things which

have caused our present environmental crisis.

We must confess that there are elements of truth in the charge made by Professor White. Much damage has been done to our world in the name of Christianity. But it was a perverted concept of Christianity, which emphasized ruling the creation to the neglect of serving the creation, i.e., “dressing the garden and keeping it.”

Francis A. Schaeffer makes much the same point in *Pollution and the Death of Man*. Acknowledging elements of truth in White’s position, he states:

However, although this is true, it is not because Christianity does not have the answer, but because we have not acted on the answer.¹⁷

Then Schaeffer makes a comment which should be of interest to all, especially those in the Reformed academic community. Writing about the value of things as creatures of God, he notes:

This is an extension of Abraham Kuyper’s sphere concept. He sees each of us as many men: the man in the state, the man who is the employer, the man who is the father, the elder in the church, the professor in the university — each of these in a different sphere. But even though they are in different spheres at different times, Christians are to act like Christians *in each of the spheres*. The man is *always* there and he is *always* a Christian under the norms of Scripture, whether in the classroom or at home.¹⁸

This is precisely the point which must be emphasized by Christian institutions of higher learning as they prepare students for stewardship.

Redemption

In the beginning God appointed the man and woman as His representatives to provide stewardly care for His creation. When the man and woman fell, having decided to exploit the creation for their own selfish purposes, God visited them and the creation in judgment — the consequences of which we have just considered. But “when the time had fully come” (Galatians 4:4) God sent His Son into the world to redeem the world.

It is important to emphasize at this juncture, as Wolters points out (in *Creation Regained*), that

the redemptive work of Christ involved restoration, “the return to the goodness of an originally unscathed creation,” and that this restoration “affects the whole of creational life.”¹⁹

It is even appropriate to speak of Christ’s redemption as “re-creation.” This is not to suggest that the original creation is discarded and that God brings into existence a new creation, but rather to point out that, in faithfulness to His covenant, God holds on to the original, fallen creation and recreates, restores it in Christ. God will not abandon the work of His hand; in fact, He sacrifices His Son to reclaim it. And humankind, which violated its original assignment is given a second chance in Christ, i.e., restored as God’s managers, God’s stewards on earth.

When Christ came to earth He fulfilled the righteousness of the Jubilee Year (Luke 4:14-30) and the true meaning of the Sabbath by deeds of helpfulness (Mark 2:28-36). By His miracles He gave us samples of the meaning of restoration — freeing creation from the bonds of sin and reinstating creaturely living as intended by God. Thus He says to the disciples of John the Baptist: “Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, men who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and good news is preached to the poor” (Matthew 11:4,5). Jesus had come to restore a fallen, damaged creation.

By His death and resurrection, Christ bore the penalty for sin and fulfilled all the requirements of the law. Thus He restored the entire creation, all things in heaven and on earth, to the Father (Colossians 1:20). As the entire creation was brought under the curse of sin, so all of creation was included in the scope of Christ’s redemption.

One day Christ will complete the process of restoration. “The creation waits in eager expectation. . .” (Romans 8:19). That expectation will be realized when Christ returns to establish the new heavens and earth wherein will dwell righteousness (Revelation 21).

Meanwhile the redeemed are charged to care for, to be stewards of the reclaimed, restored creation. They are restored to covenantal fellowship with God — a result of divine grace. But they are also under obligation, according to the great love command, to be His representatives, to serve Him, to be stewards of His creation.

It is sometimes suggested, even stated, that Christians are called to redeem the creation. This is not so, of course. It is only Christ who can and does redeem. But it is now the task of redeemed Christians, as stewards, to bring that redemption to expression, i.e., “to promote renewal in every department of creation.”²⁰

Implications

And, given the fact that institutions of Christian higher education are to prepare their students to be stewards of God’s creation, Christ’s redemption and the Christian responsibility to bring that redemption to expression in every part of creation have obvious implications for Christian colleges.

First, it is essential that our educational programs be consistently formed and directed by a biblical worldview. We must avoid a worldview that speaks of a rapture which will free us from this cursed earth; or refers to this planet as a “foreign strand”; or allows Christians to wink at the rape of the creation because not the earth, but “heaven is my home.” We must instead promote a worldview that acknowledges Christ as the Reconciler of all things and understands that Christians have a “ministry of reconciliation” in every part of creation.

Everywhere creation calls for the honoring of God’s standards. Everywhere humanity’s sinfulness disrupts and deforms. Everywhere Christ’s victory is pregnant with the defeat of sin and the recovery of creation.²¹

Second, directed by a biblical worldview, as Christian educators, we must seek to reflect in the curriculum—to the extent that this is possible—all aspects of the created order. No part may be excluded or ignored. We must endeavor to place all aspects of the creation before our students.

At the same time, we must develop a biblical perspective on the various aspects of the curriculum. In light of the Scriptures, we must enable students to see how the sin of the first Adam has ruined the whole earthly realm and how the redemption, accomplished by the last Adam, has brought restoration to the entire creation.

In this way we must make clear to our students how they, professing to be part of the new humanity, are to promote this restoration, i.e., how they are to be stewards, managers of the various depart-

ments within the creation. Indeed, they must be prepared to oppose distortion wherever it appears. But they must also be able to listen as the entire creation cries out for the loving application of such biblical concepts as reconciliation, sanctification, and renewal.

Third, our students must learn about what is happening to both the elements and the structures of creation. Concerning the non-human elements of creation we must share with our students, for example, what Eric G. Walther writes in *The Earth is the Lord's*:

Only in the last one to two hundred years have we developed societies dependent upon the non-renewable fossil fuels of coal, oil, and natural gas. During this brief love affair... we have so depleted two of our three fossil fuels that we must now begin our return to renewable resources.²²

Or we must refer them to what the authors of *Soil and Survival* point out:

The greatest concentration of prime farmland in the United States — and perhaps in the world — exists in the state of Iowa. After one century of agricultural activity, the topsoil of Iowa is half gone. A frequently quoted description of soil loss tells us that an Iowa farmer, on average, loses two bushels of topsoil for every bushel of corn grown. Some say the loss is really much higher.²³

Why is this happening? Probably because fluctuating political and economic conditions have made farmers more attentive to preserving their way of life than to preserving the soil. In any case, our students should be made aware of what is happening to this important element of creation and of their responsibility, as members of the redeemed community of stewards, to reverse this threatening trend.

Our students should also be made aware of their responsibility relative to the human structures of creation. Here again the importance of a consistently biblical worldview is evident. As Wolters states in *Creation Regained*:

Marriage should not be avoided by Christians, but sanctified. . . . Politics should

not be declared off-limits, but reformed. Art ought not be pronounced worldly, but claimed for Christ. Business must no longer be relegated to a secular world, but must be made to conform again to God-honoring standards.²⁴

In other words, the students in our classrooms must hear the same message heard in a 1980 conference on "Faith, Science and the Future" at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology:

We can say that God values *all* of creation . . . and that human redemption involves the redemption of the whole cosmos from its 'bondage to decay' (Romans 8:18-24). If it is true that human sin has brought evil to the . . . world, so then our acceptance of salvation from sin wrought for in Christ should show itself in our respectful treatment of that world.²⁵

Conclusion

I began by stating that I wished to develop one point in this article, i.e., that Christian institutions of higher education must be very much involved in the matter of stewardship, equipping students for their calling as stewards. I trust that this point has been made.

Martin O. Heisler, in the foreword to Cynthia H. Enloe's *The Politics of Pollution in a Comparative Perspective*, observes that stewardship, care of the environment, is "one of the modern world's most crucial" issues.²⁶ This being the case, it is essential that the leadership of contemporary society be prepared to furnish the world — its non-human elements and its human structures — with renewing care. And no institution is more able to provide that preparation than an institution of Christian higher education.

Notes

- 1 Cheryl Lyn Dybas. "Global Change and 'Our Common Future' Charted by Norwegian Prime Minister," *NSF Directions*, 2, No. 4 (July-August) 1.
- 2 Dybas. p. 1.
- 3 Paul G. Schrotenboer and others. *For My Neighbor's Good*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1979. p. 29.

- 4 Paul G. Schrottenboer and others. *And he had compassion on them*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1978. p. 44.
- 5 William J. Byron. "The Ethics of Stewardship," in *The Earth is the Lord's*, eds. Marilyn Evelyn Jegen and Bruno V. Manno. New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978. p. 45.
- 6 Loren Wilkinson, ed., *Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1980. p. 208.
- 7 John Hart. *The Spirit of the Earth*. New York, Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984. p. 71.
- 8 Douglas John Hall. *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1986. p. 129.
- 9 Wilkinson. p. 94.

10 Again, it is interesting to note, as we did in the introduction, that the importance of education re stewardship is broadly recognized today. I recently received a memorandum from the White House in which the president of the United States declared that excellence in education requires environmental sensitivity.

In *Meeting the Expectations of the Land* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984. p. 156) John Todd states:

There is a vast storehouse of knowledge currently locked up in the insular reaches of academic and scientific institutions which can be used to form a science and practice of stewardship.

It is clear. Higher education, Christian higher education, has

a responsibility regarding the matter of stewardship.

- 11 Thomas A. Sancton. "Planet of the Year," *Time*, (January 2, 1989). pp. 26-71.
- 12 Clifford E. Bajema. "Earthkeeping is Covenant Keeping," *The Banner*, (April 3, 1989). p. 8.
- 13 Bajema. pp. 8,9.
- 14 Albert M. Wolters. *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for Reformational Worldview*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1985. p. 45.
- 15 Wilkinson. p. 5.
- 16 Hall. pp. 6,10.
- 17 Francis A. Schaeffer. *Pollution and the Death of Man*. Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970. p. 58.
- 18 Schaeffer. p. 59.
- 19 Wolters. p. 57.
- 20 Wolters. p. 60.
- 21 Wolters. p. 60.
- 22 Eric G. Wolther. "Stewardship and the Food, Energy, Environment Triangle," in *The Earth is the Lord's*, eds. Marilyn Evelyn Jegen and Bruno V. Manno. New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978. p. 144.
- 23 Joe Paddock and others, *Soil and Survival*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1986. p. 7.
- 24 Wolters. p. 58.
- 25 Paul Abrecht. ed., *Faith and Science in an Unjust World II*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980. p. 70.
- 26 Martin O. Heisler. Forward, *The Politics of Pollution in a Comparative Perspective* by Cynthia H. Enloe. New York: David McKay Company, 1975. p. viii.