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Our Environmental Stewardship

Richard G. Hodgson
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Mention the word “stewardship” in most Protestant churches and people begin to think of the shortfall in the congregation’s budget and the need to contribute more to help make ends meet. The common concept of “stewardship” is equated with money and Christian giving. That is an important part of stewardship, but it is not the whole story.

Pressed more on the subject of stewardship people think of the stewardship of time and of talents for the benefit of the Lord and His Kingdom. Our time and our talents should be used to glorify Him. Right again—another important aspect of stewardship.

Let’s press still further. Is there more to stewardship than the three “T’s”—time, talent, treasure—that the preacher might cover in a classical three-point sermon? Traditionally most Christians have been content to stop with three-point stewardship. Adding a fourth point would unbalance

the sermon and spoil the alliteration.

But God has ordained still another aspect to stewardship: the stewardship of mankind over the planet Earth. We are called by God in Genesis 1:28 to be overseers, trustees, and caretakers of the Earth. We are called by God to be responsible for its land (cf. Genesis 2:15, where Adam was appointed to dress and keep the garden of Eden). Its topsoil, its mineral deposits, its forests, its ocean floors, its mountain slopes, its lakes, its streams, and its rivers are all our responsibility. In Genesis 1:28 we are also summoned by God to take care of the Earth’s plants and animals.

The problem is that for too long we devout Christians have been content to forget about environmental stewardship, our care of the planet Earth. We read of our “dominion” in Genesis 1:28 and have interpreted it to mean that we have a license to

dominate in an arbitrary way, a right to lord it over the land and to destroy anything we found it profitable or convenient or amusing to destroy.

Goodbye passenger pigeon! Goodbye buffalo! Goodbye blue whale! Goodbye forests! We are the bosses of the Earth!

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We have taken the words "subdue it" in Genesis 1:28, not in the sense of bringing it into control or managing it, but in the sense of waging war against other forms of life, as conquerors over nature. Preoccupied with the artificial life style of modern civilization, we thought we were outside of and independent of the natural order's ecosystems. Perhaps "subdue" is not the best translation of the Hebrew since it can so easily lead to abuse. We were appointed by God as trustees, but we tended to follow the wisdom of the world and forget about trusteeship. It was easy to promote ourselves to absolute kingship and pretend we had to answer to no one for what we did.

Here in North America (as elsewhere in the world) we are heading for environmental disaster. Half of our original topsoil on average has eroded away. Today on average in the United States 12 tons of topsoil an acre erode each year on our farms. New topsoil normally is built up at a rate of about 1½ tons an acre a year, leaving a net deficit of 10½ tons an acre a year. This is of course an average, and actual amounts can vary

widely depending upon weather conditions in a particular year, and the conservation practices which are being employed. In recent rains in Iowa (May, 1982) losses of 20 tons an acre or more occurred in 42 counties involving two million acres of prime agricultural land. Some farms lost 100 to 150 tons an acre. To replace that single loss by natural means could require one hundred years, assuming there were absolutely no other losses during that time, a highly unlikely assumption. Especially vulnerable are corn and soybean fields which expose a lot of bare soil to the rain and wind.

This does not mean that there might not be ways to deal with the problem. Perennial corn, which may be coming in five or ten years, would reduce plowing and some of the exposure of the land. Proper contour plowing, the use of terraces, and efforts to recover run-off silt would help greatly, and many are using these techniques. Another possibility which deserves serious consideration is not working the land quite so hard. A five year planting cycle involving two years of corn (or soybeans) followed by oats and alfalfa or clover in the third year, followed by two years of use of the land as pasture is reported to stop topsoil loss and actually permit a slight gain in topsoil over the cycle. Some may complain that the demands of the cash market do not permit them to do anything but corn or soybeans here in Iowa. In the long run, however, can we afford not to grow some other crops, and allow the land the occasional chance to rest as pasture? Perhaps the real problem is that we have let our debts get too high, or our income expectations too large. Yet as good stewards before God we need to leave the land as good or better than when we found it. We need to remember that if something is right in principle we had better do it, and look to God to uphold us.

It must be understood, of course, that the five year cycle described above cannot be blindly applied everywhere. Soil conditions, weather conditions, etc., vary greatly from place to place, and each farmer and gardener

needs to evaluate continually what is happening on his or her land. The important thing is to be watchful, monitor what is happening year by year, and take effective remedial action before problems get out of hand, knowing that as stewards we are answerable to our God.

Like land, water resources are also a concern. In the West many of the underground waters are being pumped out to be used for irrigation. These supplies, in what are called aquifers, are deep underground and take thousands of years to recharge. Most of them will be emptied in the next 10 to 30 years. Western rivers are also being allocated for irrigation to the point of exhaustion. Salts on the fields, no longer being flushed away, are accumulating, poisoning the land.

In so many ways our stewardship of this planet is put into the balances and found wanting, and solutions are often complex. Solving the problems will take time, but the first question is a spiritual one: are we really serious about our stewardship of the planet Earth?

Our burning of fossil fuels is yielding smog which produces acid rain in many areas. In the northeast where soils and rocks do not buffer these acids, crops are being adversely affected and fish are dying in the lakes and streams.

In so many ways our stewardship of this planet is put into the balances and found wanting, and solutions are often complex. Solving the problems will take time, but the first question is a spiritual one: are we really serious about our stewardship of the planet Earth? Are we really prepared to work and work hard for solutions? As Christians we should be supplying leadership in speaking

to these issues in our country and around the world, articulating the Biblical principles of true stewardship, and working for practical solutions.

There are some hopeful signs that many people are becoming aware of environmental issues. At many of our colleges, faculty and students with backgrounds in many different disciplines are getting interested and excited about environmental studies. To analyze any environmental issue in depth has a way of involving many fields of study. Not just biology and agriculture, but geology, chemistry, planetary science, physics, and engineering. Almost any issue has an economic aspect, a political aspect. A lot of fresh thought is going into environmental ethics and environmental theology. There is an air of excitement about all of this—a chance to do something new, to work together on what may be the major issue of our time.

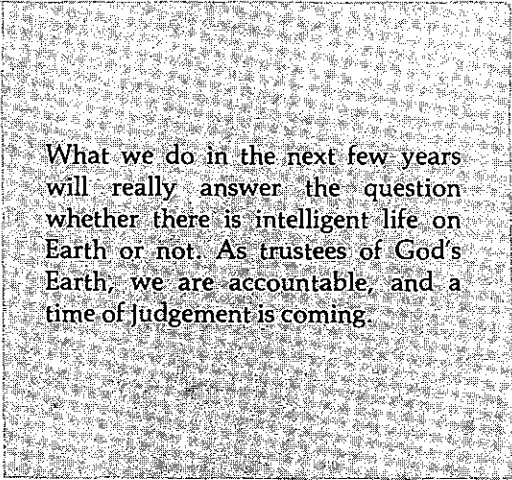
One especially fortunate thing for Christian colleges is the new, developing program at the AuSable Institute for Environmental Studies, located near Mancelona, Michigan. Here faculty and students from 18 participating evangelical Christian colleges—including Dordt, Calvin, and Trinity Christian, to name a few—have a chance to study and discuss the issues first hand amid the beauty of the North Woods.

One does not have to look hard to see that the forest is secondary growth, however. The great stumps of giant white pines amid the forest bear silent testimony to the grandeur of the forest before the land was raped early in the twentieth century. The sandy soil is fragile, and it will be centuries healing.

The serenity of AuSable's bucolic scene is broken from time to time by the sound of the drilling of oil wells. As a few grow rich from oil in the area there are many rural poor who live in shacks and cellar holes, trying to eke out a living. Most of the soil is too sandy to grow much of value.

Yes, AuSable is a great place to study environmental issues—there are so many of them, past and present, right at hand! For

example, in the summer of 1981 at AuSable some faculty and students discovered that sewage being dumped into a marsh by a town in the area was polluting several lakes downstream. Alerted to the problem by AuSable, the Environmental Protection Agency and Michigan's Department of Natural Resources are now requiring the town to get rid of their waste in another way.



What we do in the next few years will really answer the question whether there is intelligent life on Earth or not. As trustees of God's Earth, we are accountable, and a time of judgement is coming.

One of the favorite after-midnight practices of the oil companies in the area is to dump the brine they get as a by-product of their drilling along the roads reportedly "to settle the dust." The problem is that the brine is now getting into the surface wells that supply drinking water to many area families. AuSable is getting requests to test water quality. (The dumping takes place by tank trucks after midnight so the populace does not see the magnitude of the operation. The truck drivers are not friendly toward onlookers.)

There is a lot going on at AuSable, and in the surrounding counties of Michigan. It is not an ivory tower stuck in the woods. Increasingly there are opportunities for students, by practicum courses, to work with county officials on environmental problems, looking together for practical solutions which will promote good stewardship.

Under the dynamic leadership of Dr.

Calvin B. DeWitt, AuSable's director, the college summer program has been developed to offer opportunities in environmental studies which no individual college could offer. At present most of the work with college students involves two summer sessions of five weeks each. This summer (1982), the second summer of the program, is the first year many of the colleges have been able to participate. About 30 to 40 students participated in each session. Classes at AuSable are small (8 to 15 students), and field trips are frequent. Through Bible studies and integrative sessions there is a lot of opportunity to consider what a distinctively Christian approach to environmental stewardship should involve.

One of the highlights of the summer is the AuSable Forum, an annual four-day conference in June that brings scholars from all over North America together to discuss environmental issues in a Biblical perspective. Last year's forum, the second to be held, received prominent attention in the media, including *The New York Times*.

The environmental crisis is mounting around the world, and the exploding world population is making solutions increasingly difficult. For many there is a food crisis, a firewood crisis, an energy crisis. What we do in the next few years will really answer the question whether there is intelligent life on Earth or not. As trustees of God's Earth, we are accountable, and a time of judgment is coming. It is good to see a new awareness of what environmental stewardship means. And it is exciting to discover what a place like AuSable is able to do for our faculty members and our students. These developments are coming not a moment too soon!

For further reading on Christian environmental stewardship, I strongly recommend reading the book *Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources* edited by Loren Wilkinson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980). This excellent work is the result of studies undertaken at Calvin College by a number of scholars.