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Economic Policy and its Effect on Land Use in the United States

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"And the Lord God took the man and placed him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it" (Genesis 2:15). This act of God started a history of man and his relationship to the land, God's creation.

How has this relationship developed? What is the relationship today? Does this relationship reflect man's relationship to God and an acceptance of the fact that God created the earth and still cares for it? Man and God and man and land have not been in harmony since the fall. However, because the Christian has a special relationship to God, he also has a special relationship to the land, God's creation.

As we look at the use of land by man in

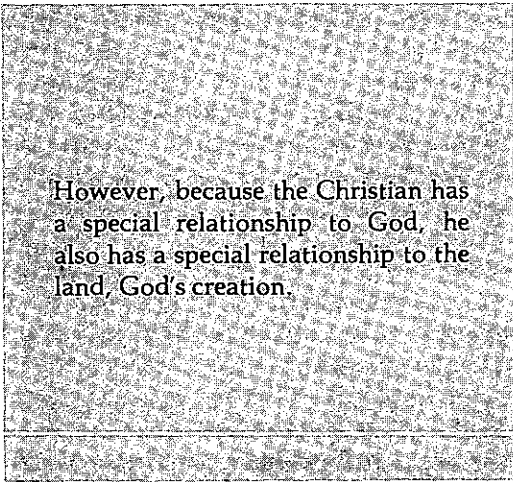
the United States, we can divide land into three areas. First, land is used commercially. This includes commercial, industrial, and residential uses. Second, land is used agriculturally for cropland, grazing land, and forest land. Third, land is used for public use. Areas used thus would include recreation land, land for transportation, and public service areas.

Before we look at the changing views of land that affect land use, we should look at how our population and land use patterns have changed in the last two hundred years.

In 1790, the United States had a population of 3.9 million of which 5 percent was urban and 95 percent was rural.¹ Less

than 2 percent of the land was used for commercial and public use, with the rest in cropland and, mainly, forests.

In 1880 the United States had 50 million people of which 28 percent lived in cities and 72 percent were living in rural areas. Land for agricultural use was 92 percent of our total area. This was divided up with cropland being 10 percent, grazing land 49 percent, and forest land 33 percent. Our commercial and public use areas were 1 percent and our desert and barren wasteland was 7 percent.^{2,3}



In 1920 our population was 106 million of which 70 percent were urban and 30 percent were rural residents. Of our land, 21 percent was cropland, with 39 percent grazing land and 30 percent forest land. Commercial use accounted for .005 percent and public use areas were 1.5 percent. Our desert and wasteland were 8 percent.^{2,3}

In 1974 our population was 211 million with 95 percent of our people living in urban areas and 5 percent living on farms. Our cropland had dropped to 16.9 percent, our grazing land to 30 percent, and our forest land to 31.7 percent. Our commercial areas had increased to 1.5 percent and our public use areas had increased to 6.5 percent. Barren and wasteland increased to 13 per-

cent due to the addition of Alaska and Hawaii.⁴

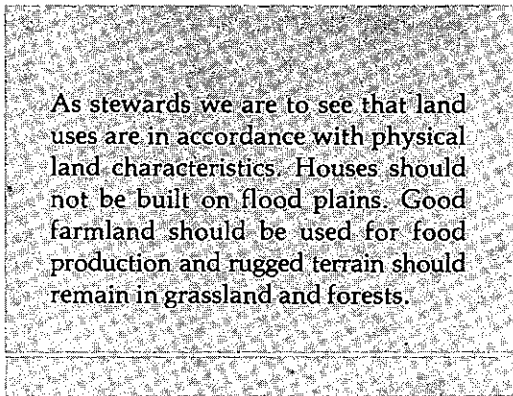
Also in 1974, 39.6 percent of the land in the United States was publicly owned, 58.2 percent of the land was privately owned, and 2 percent was owned by native Americans. 48 percent of United States land was in the farm structure.

Some government projections for the year 2000 are that our cropland of 320 million acres in 1980 will drop to 298 million acres. Our commercial areas will double from 35 million acres in 1974 to 80 million acres in 2000.⁵ Our land for outdoor recreation could increase three times by the year 2000 from 40 million acres to 120 million acres.⁶ Our forest land and grazing land are projected to remain the same with some forest land becoming used also as recreation land.

As we observe the types of land use and how they have changed with history, we see that as grazing and cropland decrease, residential, recreational and commercial land increase. This correlates well with the economic theory of highest and best use. This theory states that the highest use of land or greatest value for land comes from industrial and commercial land sites. The next highest value for land is for residential sites with the next highest value for cropland. It is assumed in economic theory that forest be turned into cropland, cropland be turned into residential land which in turn will develop into commercial and industrial land sites. This succession of use will return the largest profit to the land owner. The land's main purpose is for the profit it returns to the owner, and little regard is given for the physical characteristics of the soil or the animal and plant resources which it provides for man.

This economic theory is based on the premise that the United States has unlimited land resources. For example, when the southeast coast of the United States was settled in the 1700's, the forests were cleared and put into cotton production. After many years of production, the soil was depleted of nutrients, had become eroded, and produc-

tion dropped. The cotton producer moved west into new forest land, cleared the forests, and started production over again. Throughout the 1800's the motto was go west, use up the land resources, and move on. This has been the history of the United States: man and technology using and destroying our land resources and moving on. However, in the 1900's America has found out that the frontier is gone. There are no new land areas to develop. Our country has to learn to live within limits. An economy based on continuous growth is not possible with limited resources. Our present economic problems are a result of trying to adjust to living within certain limits.



As stewards we are to see that land uses are in accordance with physical land characteristics. Houses should not be built on flood plains. Good farmland should be used for food production and rugged terrain should remain in grassland and forests.

Our economic system, having its basis in the writings of Adam Smith, has the premise of maximizing self-interests as its goal. All products, commodities, and services are bought and sold with the purpose of receiving the greatest profit from the transaction. Land has value only when man wants it and uses it or develops it. Man and his self-interests are the determining factors in current land use.

We have lost the concept that "the earth is the Lord's." Land is a gift from God to man. Man is free to use and enjoy the benefits of the land. However, God is the owner, and we are the stewards. As stewards we are accountable to God for our use of the land. We are told "to dress and keep the garden." This means our use of the land must be guided by

the principles of sustainability and renewability. We are to leave the land for future generations in as good, if not better, condition than when we received it. Our cropland, grazing land, and forests must be protected from severe erosion. Our water supplies must be kept free from harmful pollutants.

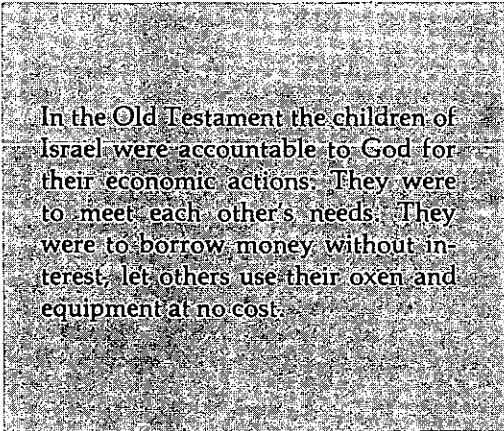
As stewards we are to see that land uses are in accordance with physical land characteristics. Houses should not be built on flood plains. Good farmland should be used for food production and rugged terrain should remain in grassland and forests. Cities and communities should have zoning and land-use plans for orderly growth and development, making the best use of different land types. As stewards we should seek dispersed control of land. A major concern in the United States is the concentration of power of those who own the land. Foreign and United States corporations and our government own large tracts of our land. As ownership of land and natural resources are concentrated, it lessens the possibilities of individual stewards using their stewardship abilities. Every individual should have the right to develop and live out his stewardship principles.

An example of this problem is documented in a book called *Westward in Eden: The Public Lands and the Conservation Movement* by William Wyant. (1982) The book deals with the greed, waste and destruction of public lands by private corporations. In a recent *Des Moines Register*, reviewer Lauren Soth said of Wyant's book,

The public lands will not be ceded to the states. The national forests will not be turned over for rampant timber cutting and mining on a single purpose basis. The concepts of multiple use and conservation for future generations have been solidly established. "What needs emphasis is that the frontier is gone," says Wyant, "but the mystiques and the myths persist as if it were there. . . . The massive give-

aways of the public land—to the railroads, the timber interests, the mining interests, the ranchers—took place against a background of apparently limitless resources and a thinly spread population. . . .” That probably was good economic policy in the 19th century, it is not today.⁷

A major criticism of our economic system is that it shows a lack of love for others. Our system and its operation shows love and concern only for self. In the Old Testament the children of Israel were accountable to God for their economic actions. They were to meet each other’s needs. They were to borrow money without interest, let others use their oxen and equipment at no cost. They were commanded to let the poor glean their fields and to be honest in all their buying and selling. They were blessed to be a blessing to others.



As Christians we are a community, a body; we are not just individuals. We cannot support the concept of economic individualism which says “just take care of yourself.” To serve God and to work for the good of your neighbor are concepts that the Christian must live by.

John Calvin saw that our economic activity as Christians was secondary to our goal of serving others and showing love for

the whole community when in a sermon on Ephesians he wrote,

It is not enough when one can say, “Oh, I work, I have my trade, I set the pace.” This is not enough, for one must be concerned whether it is good and profitable to the community and if it is able to serve our neighbors. . . . And this is why we are compared to the members of a body. But now if one’s hand be employed to give some support to another member and that even to his damage the whole body will by this means fall into ruin. . . . It is certain that no occupation will be approved by him which is not useful and that does not serve the common good and that also redounds to the profit of everyone.⁸

As Reformed Christians let us live out these ideals as an expression of love for our God and our fellow man. Let us be the stewards of the land that God wants us to be.

Notes

¹R. Barlowe, *Land Resource Economics*, (New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1978), p. 65.

²H. Wooten and J. Anderson, *Major Uses of Land in the United States*, (Washington U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Informational Bulletin 168, 1957), pp. 36-37.

³U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, *Yearbook of Agriculture*, 1923.

⁴T.H. Frey, *Major Uses of Land in the United States: Preliminary Estimates for 1974*, (Washington, Dept. of Agriculture Economic Research Service Working Paper No. 34, 1977).

⁵“Our Land and Water Resources: Current and Prospective Supplies and Uses,” (Washington U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Economic Research Service No. 1290, 1974).

⁶Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, *Outdoor Recreation for America*, (Washington, Government Printing Office 1962), p. 32.

⁷Lauren Soth, *Des Moines Sunday Register*, May 9, 1982, p. 4C.

⁸J. Calvin, Sermon 31 on the Epistle of Ephesians cited in Fred Graham *The Constructive Revolutionary* (Richmond, Va., John Knox Press, 1971), pp. 80-81.