

# Caring for Creation

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS



**BAYLOR**  
UNIVERSITY

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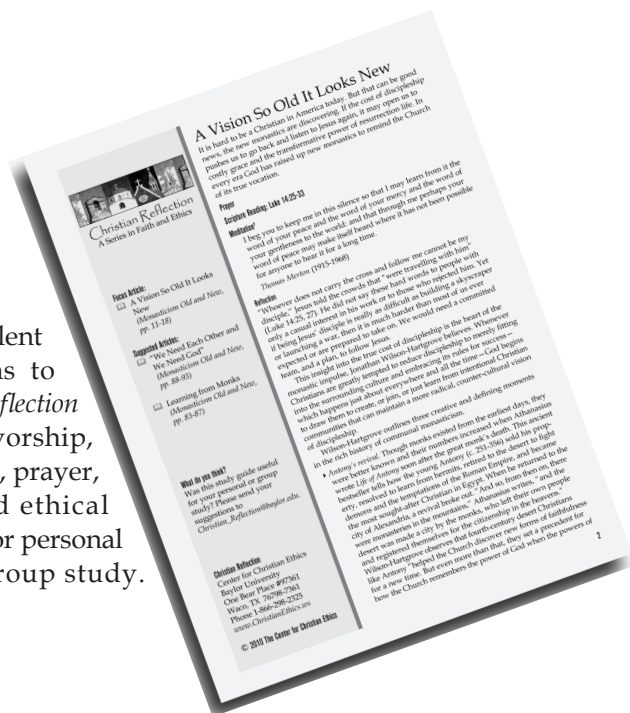
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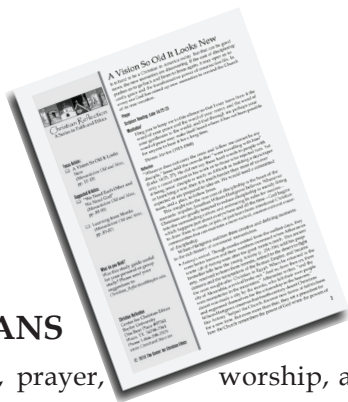
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Leading theologians like John Chrysostom, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas, when reflecting on the creation story, valued all types of creatures, living and non-living, intrinsically for their unique goodness and instrumentally for the sustenance they provide to others. But they valued most highly their complex interrelation in the physical world.

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The natural world is not simply a resource, or a garden entrusted to our care, but above all a revelation of the ways and will of God. How might we recover a robust yet nuanced understanding of nature as truly a book of God's words, with several levels of meaning?

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The term "wilderness" is multi-faceted today, expanding far beyond its original implication of a wild and savage land. The scenic wonders of designated wilderness areas link with the ordinary oak forests and cattail marshes adjoining suburbs into a natural tapestry that is an important spiritual resource, an interactive exercise in understanding God's will and original intentions for creation.

### FAITHFUL EATING

The food we eat, both what we eat and how we eat it, may be the most significant witness to creation care we perform. With every bite we communicate what we think about land and water, fellow animals, fellow humans, and God as the Provider of the many gifts of nurture we daily consume. In today's global, industrial food economy, has our eating become a desecration to God?

### DOING GOOD WORK

Wendell Berry envisions good work—the sort of work that connects us caringly to our place and honors the gifts that we have received of land and life, of membership in a holy creation—as the practical means to fulfill our divine calling to love and steward creation. Given our inevitable ignorance of the places we care for, good work requires cultural practices that develop key virtues like fidelity and humility to guide and delimit our work.

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# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

Through the biblical idea of the interwoven created order—in both its cultivated and uncultivated parts—we recognize nature’s significance and worth, and our membership in it. What practices can form us into faithful disciples who rightly care for creation?

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**T**o depict our rootedness in the created order, Wendell Berry borrows “membership” from the Apostle Paul’s rich image for the Body of Christ. “The Great Economy of creation,” Berry has written, “is not the ‘sum of its parts’ but a membership of parts inextricably joined to each other, indebted to each other, receiving significance and worth from each other and from the whole. One is obliged to ‘consider the lilies of the field,’ not because they are lilies or because they are exemplary, but because they are fellow members and because, as fellow members, we and the lilies are in certain ways to be alike.”

Our contributors explore this biblical idea of the interwoven created order—in both its cultivated and uncultivated parts—to help us better understand nature’s significance and worth, and our membership in it. They commend commonplace practices that can form us into faithful disciples who rightly care for creation.

In *Valuing the Goodness of the Earth* (p. 11), Jame Schaefer explains how Augustine, John Chrysostom, and Aquinas through their interpretation of the biblical creation story came to value all types of creatures, living and non-living. While they valued individual creatures intrinsically for their unique goodness and instrumentally for the sustenance they provide to others, they valued most highly their complex interrelation in the physical world. She concludes, “As faithful disciples we can acknowledge the entirety of the dynamic world as God’s valuable possession, a manifestation of God’s extravagant goodness, and a readily available subject for scientific discovery.”



Elizabeth Theokritoff in *The Book of the Word: Reading God's Creation* (p. 20) explores the ancient Christian idea that the natural world can be a revelation of the ways and will of God, if we are prepared to read it rightly. "Reading nature as Christ-filled reshapes our perception of natural processes. The role in the evolutionary process of death, failure, and extinction looks different in the light of him who gave his life as a ransom for many and his flesh for food."

In the Bible and Christian tradition, the experiences of remote and uncultivated lands are often suffused with practices of meditation and prayer. Susan Bratton's *Appreciating Wilderness* (p. 28) draws on these resources to interpret the contemporary hikers of the Appalachian Trail that she has interviewed. "Wilderness still provides an opportunity for reflection and allows us to tap the deepest roots of our spiritual heritage," she believes. "From the scenic wonders of designated wilderness areas to the ordinary oak forests and cattail marshes adjoining suburbs that link them in a natural tapestry, the entire network is an important spiritual resource, an interactive exercise in understanding God's will and original intentions for creation."

The Christian relationship to wilderness landscapes was explored by America's first art movement, the Hudson River School. Heidi Hornik grew up in the countryside these painters loved. With *In Harmony with Nature* (p. 50) she shows how Thomas Cole's *The Oxbow* depicts humans living in such harmony with nature that their habitation blends into the beautiful surroundings. In *A Mirror to Nature* (p. 54) she describes Asher B. Durand's *Dover Plains* as portraying "a more domestic sort of Eden." A generation later, the New York City artist George Bellows felt the need to escape from the gritty urban environment occasionally to paint pastoral winter scenes, Hornik explains in *Enjoying a Wintry Park* (p. 56); his beautiful *The Palisades* is on the cover of this issue.

Jeff Bilbro's *Doing Good Work* (p. 58) emphasizes that our caring for all of creation begins close to home, in the particular places that we come to know and love. He commends in the agrarian writings of Wendell Berry a vision of "good work—the sort of work that connects us caringly to our place and honors the gifts that we have received of land and life, of membership in a holy creation—as the practical means to fulfill our divine calling to love and steward creation."

"The food we eat, both what we eat and how we eat it, may be the most significant witness to creation care we perform. With every bite we communicate what we think about land and water, fellow animals, fellow humans, and God as the Provider of the many gifts of nurture we daily consume," Norman Wirzba writes in *Faithful Eating* (p. 36). He worries that in today's global, industrial food economy, our eating has become "a desecration to God" because we are so careless of how our foods are grown, gathered, and prepared. In *Women's Broken Bodies in God's Broken Earth* (p. 78), Melissa Browning relates a story that illustrates Wirzba's point on the global scale:

the introduction of large fish like the Nile Perch for export has degraded the environment and fishing economies along the shores of Lake Victoria in Africa. Poor women and children of the region suffer most, she explains. Elizabeth Sands Wise's *Allelon Community Garden* (p. 73) offers a ray of hope on the local level. She describes a congregation's first attempt at gardening to provide fresh vegetables and herbs for members, neighbors, and the poor in the community. "Working side-by-side in their church garden one hot summer, members formed a better community," she notes. "They discovered that relationships cultivated over dirt and sweat, rather than donuts and coffee, were different because as individuals they were more vulnerable, and together more productive."

Burt Burleson's new hymn, "Chosen in Creation's Plan" (p. 43), reveals the theme of creation care throughout the sweep of Scripture's great narrative. His worship service (p. 46) expands these motifs through prayers and scripture readings.

Wes Smith admits "most congregations are more comfortable theorizing about earth-keeping in general than acting to keep their particular regions healthy," but warns this is a theological mistake, traceable to the spirit-matter dichotomy that is so difficult for us to shake. In *Becoming More Mindful of Creation* (p. 65), he guides us to Christian organizations like A Rocha and Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies that help "congregations to be more involved in earth-keeping by reading theology, exploring the place where they live, educating themselves and others about environmental concerns, and building communities of earth-keeping."

Presian Burroughs's *Reading Scripture Greenly* (p. 84) reviews three recent works—Ellen Davis's *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*, Richard Bauckham's *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*, and David G. Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate's *Greening Paul: Reading the Apostle Paul in a Time of Ecological Crisis*—that can help us develop a biblically inspired ecological consciousness.

In *Christian Vision for Creation Care* (p. 89), David McDuffie commends three books that articulate an environmental ethic that is theocentric, scientifically informed, and biblically inspired—Steven Bouma-Prediger's *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, Fred Van Dyke's *Between Heaven and Earth: Christian Perspectives on Environmental Protection*, and *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective* edited by Noah J. Toly and Daniel I. Block. McDuffie concludes, "The ethic that emerges goes beyond mere concern for natural environments to include a commitment to the theological perspective that life on earth is a gift from God and recognition that humanity can potentially play a vital role, through our relationship with God, in support of the continued divine sustenance of God's good creation." ❖

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# Valuing the Goodness of the Earth

BY J A M E S C H A E F E R

Though John Chrysostom, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas, when reflecting on the creation story, valued all types of creatures, living and non-living, intrinsically for their unique goodness and instrumentally for the sustenance they provide to others, they valued most highly their complex interrelation in the physical world.

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**T**he story of creation in the first chapter of Genesis underscores the goodness of creation. It depicts God as creating light/day, the sky, dry land, birds and water creatures, wild animals and other land creatures, and humans, declaring them each “good” and together “very good.” Following the advent of Christianity, theologians reflected on this story and affirmed the goodness of many diverse beings, their superlative goodness altogether, and God’s valuing them. The context of their reflections and their nuances varied as they wrote from their understandings of the world and the contexts of the times in which they lived. Some were responding to heresies that denigrated the material world. Some developed comprehensive theologies about God’s relationship to the world. All theologians shared a profoundly monotheistic faith perspective: God is the creator of all natural beings that constitute the universe, each living and inanimate being has a God-given purpose, and the entire universe is utterly dependent upon God for its ongoing existence.

John Chrysostom (347-407), Augustine of Hippo (354-430), and Thomas Aquinas (1224/25-1274) are among the many theologians who reflected on the goodness of God’s creation. They considered the many diverse creatures as good in themselves (intrinsically), as good for human use (instrumental-

ly), and as superlatively good when all creatures function appropriately in relation to one another as God intends (intrinsically-instrumentally). In this essay I highlight aspects of their reflections about the goodness of creatures and God's valuation of them, discuss the significance of their reflections during our age of widespread ecological degradation, and conclude with general ways we should be acting today if we embrace their teachings.

### **VALUING EARTH INTRINSICALLY AND INSTRUMENTALLY**

In *The Enchiridion* and the *Nature of the Good*, Augustine described God as "the supremely good Creator"<sup>1</sup> who created from nothing the universe of "good things, both great and small, celestial and terrestrial, spiritual, and corporeal."<sup>2</sup> Each has innate characteristics that are unquestionably good. The expansiveness of his valuing them both intrinsically and instrumentally is exemplified in *The Trinity*, where he declared:

...the earth is good by the height of its mountains, the moderate elevation of its hills, and the evenness of its fields; and good is the farm that is pleasant and fertile; and good is the house that is arranged throughout in symmetrical proportions and is spacious and bright; and good are the animals, animate bodies; and good is the mild and salubrious air; and good is the food that is pleasant and conducive to health; and good is health without pains and weariness; and good is the countenance of man with regular features, a cheerful expression, and a glowing color; and good is the soul of a friend with the sweetness of concord and the fidelity of love; and good is the just man; and good are riches because they readily assist us; and good is the heaven with its own sun, moon, and stars.<sup>3</sup>

In *Nature of the Good*, Augustine wrote that even the decay and diminishing of a body is good as long as it exists.<sup>4</sup> Existence itself is good, he noted, because it is made possible by God and upheld in existence by God.

Reflecting on Genesis 1, John Chrysostom dwelled on the text's depiction of God's valuing each type of creature as "good." He identified creatures both beneficial and harmful to humans as good in themselves:

Among the growth springing up from the earth it was not only plants that are useful but also those that are harmful, and not only trees that bear fruit but also those that bear none; and not only tame animals but also wild and unruly ones. Among the creatures emerging from the waters it was not only fish but also sea monsters and other fierce creatures. It was not only inhabited land but also the unpeopled; not only level plains but also mountains and woods. Among birds it was not only tame ones and those suitable for our food but also wild and unclean ones, hawks and vultures and many others of that kind. Among the creatures produced from the earth it was not only tame animals but also snakes, vipers, serpents, lions,

and leopards. In the sky it was not only showers and kindly breezes but also hail and snow.<sup>5</sup>

For Chrysostom, anyone who found fault with these creatures or inquired in any disparaging way about their purpose or use would be showing ingratitude to God, their Creator.

Advancing Augustine's and Chrysostom's thinking about the goodness of creatures, Thomas Aquinas depicted each creature as perfect in some way that God implanted in them. Each is endowed by God with an innate way of existing, and, if living, an innate way of acting. Each type of creature is unique. Each has a grade of goodness based on its innate characteristics—plants with a greater goodness than the earth from which they grow and draw sustenance for flourishing, animals than plants because animals can act and perform many functions plants cannot, humans than animals due to the human capacity to think and make informed decisions ultimately oriented toward eternal happiness with God. While each type of creature is valuable in itself, creatures are also valuable to one another for their sustenance and flourishing; they are altogether essential and therefore valuable to the world's functioning as intended by God. Their value to one another is through their usefulness—plants use the earth and other elements, animals use plants, and humans are intended to use both animals and plants for the *necessities* of life, not to satisfy superfluous wants.<sup>6</sup> Advancing this "order of instrumentality" of the world to God, Aquinas analogized that all creatures are like God's instruments created to serve God's purposes.<sup>7</sup>

Though theologians valued all types of creatures intrinsically for their unique goodness and valued them instrumentally for the sustenance they provide to others, they valued most highly the entirety of the physical world. They believed God wisely created the universe, generously endowed it with the capability of maintaining itself internally, and actively sustains that capability in existence. When reflecting on Genesis 1:31, in which God is depicted as having finished creating the world and declaring it "very good," Augustine described the ensemble of all creatures as a "wonderful order and beauty"<sup>8</sup> and a "tranquility of order" that brings about "the peace of the universe."<sup>9</sup> Aquinas expounded systematically on the goodness of the universe that is brought about by the orderly functioning of its constituents in relation to one another, describing it glowingly as the greatest created good, the highest perfection of the created world, and its most beautiful attribute.<sup>10</sup> The order of creatures to one another is the nearest thing to God's goodness, he insisted, because every particular good is ordered to the good of the whole.<sup>11</sup> That some things exist for the sake of others and also for the sake of the perfection of the universe is not contradictory, he taught, for some are needed by others to maintain the internal integrity of the universe and all things are needed to contribute to its perfection.<sup>12</sup> When all parts function in relation to one another in innately appropriate ways as

intended by God, the universe is indeed perfect, reflects God's goodness, and manifests God's glory.<sup>13</sup>

Closely aligned with theologians' understanding of the greater goodness of the totality of God's creation is Aquinas's teaching that God created living and non-living entities in relation to one another to achieve their common good – the internal sustainability of the world. To achieve the common good, he reasoned, God instilled in each creature a natural inclination toward the good of the whole so each is inclined according to its nature – intellectually, sensitively, or naturally – to the common good of all. Their common good is the internal sustainability of the world, according to Aquinas, while their ultimate good is God.<sup>14</sup> Because humans often act incorrectly by not directing their actions toward the common good of all, he continued, God cares providentially for individuals by offering them grace that can help them exercise their wills appropriately.<sup>15</sup> God's grace cooperates with the individual by actively sustaining the human's innate capacity to make informed decisions and to choose to act accordingly. God's grace also operates on and cooperates with humans to develop moral virtues that will aid them in exercising their wills appropriately to achieve the common good in this life because they are motivated to achieve eternal life with God.<sup>16</sup>

### **EMBRACING GOD'S VALUATION OF THE EARTH**

In *Confessions*, Augustine counted the number of times in Genesis 1 that God is depicted as having created an entity, viewed it, and proclaimed it good.<sup>17</sup> God is the ultimate authority, Augustine insisted, and what God sees as wondrously good, humans should also see as wondrously good; they should move beyond their greed and value natural beings intrinsically for themselves and their place in the orderly scheme of creation.

Chrysostom, when reflecting on Genesis 1, emphasized the authority of God's valuation and warned his flock against the "arrogant folly" of deviating from God's valuing of the physical world. He first told them to "shun... like a lunatic" anyone who did not acquiesce to God's judgment about the world's goodness, and he subsequently instructed them to inform the ignorant about God's valuation in order to "check" the person's "unruly tongue."<sup>18</sup> Characterizing the Earth as "mother and nurse" created by God to nourish humans, Chrysostom urged his listeners and readers to enjoy her as their "homeland" and to be grateful to God for her.<sup>19</sup>

Connecting the human difficulty in valuing the physical world to human limitations and self-centered tendencies, Augustine explained that humans are gifted with intellectual abilities, but their entrenchment in a part of the universe and their condition as mortal beings prevents them from comprehending the universe in its entirety. Only God has this comprehensive ability, he insisted. Nevertheless, humans should strive to overcome their narrow-mindedness and self-centeredness. They should not judge negatively some natural beings and forces that cause them personal discom-



forts. They should consider the natures of things in themselves without regard to their convenience or inconvenience, their pleasantness or unpleasantness, their comfort or discomfort. They should praise God for all aspects of the physical world and never “in the rashness of human folly” allow themselves to find fault in any way with the work of the “great Artificer.”<sup>20</sup> He also cautioned his readers to use other creatures appropriately. Every human who uses these goods correctly “shall receive goods greater in degree and superior in kind, namely the peace of immortality” within which God can be enjoyed eternally; but the person who uses these goods incorrectly “shall lose them, and shall not receive the blessings of eternal life.”<sup>21</sup>

Aquinas emphasized God’s valuation by explaining restrictions on the “natural dominion” God gave humans over the world while God maintains “absolute dominion” over everything.<sup>22</sup> Natural dominion is based on the human ability to know and to will good outcomes that are consistent with the orderly universe God created. Thus, humans should be cooperating with God by carrying out God’s plan for the world.<sup>23</sup> During patristic to medieval times, theologians did not anticipate technologies and practices that could threaten the functioning of ecosystems and the biosphere of Earth.

After discussing God’s love for all creatures and love for the order of the universe, Aquinas advanced the human relation to other creatures by exclaiming that they should love the world with the highest kind of love — *maxime et caritate* — in two ways.<sup>24</sup> One way is loving other living and inanimate creations as goods that

should be conserved for God’s honor and glory. This relates to Aquinas’s and other theologians’ faith perspective that the natural world in its entirety best manifests God’s goodness. To them, the natural world has a sacramental quality insofar as the invisible God can be experienced and some aspects of God’s character can be known through the visible, especially God’s goodness, power, and wisdom.<sup>25</sup> Another way of loving Earth with its diverse creatures is by loving them for their usefulness to humans as goods they need in temporal life while aiming for eternal happiness with God.

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**What God sees as wondrously good, Augustine insisted, humans should also see as wondrously good; they should move beyond their greed and value natural beings intrinsically for themselves and their place in the orderly scheme of creation.**

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## **VALUING EARTH IN AN AGE OF ECOLOGICAL DEGRADATION**

Augustine, John Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, and their contemporaries can contribute to our thinking today about the goodness of Earth with

its many varied creatures and how they should be valued. Though these theologians wrote from pre-scientific understandings of the world as a static, hierarchically-arranged cosmos with living and non-living beings created by God exactly as they can be observed, they adhered to the fundamental Christian belief that the world would not be if God did not will its existence, sustain its existence, and have a purpose for its existence.

Continuing this foundational belief and informing it with our current scientific understanding of the world, goodness can be attributed to the cosmological-biological process out of which Earth and all natural entities have emerged over a 13.8 billion year period. Goodness can also be attributed to their many diverse natures, relationships to one another, and interactions for their common good as communities, ecological systems, the biosphere of Earth, and the universe in its totality. The entirety of the dynamic world can be acknowledged as God's valuable possession, a manifestation of God's extravagant goodness, and a readily available subject for scientific discovery. Faithful humans can be understood as beholders of the world's value and responders to that value out of a desire to share in God's valuation.

When our thinking about the goodness of creation is inspired by these theological giants of the Christian tradition, we see significant implications for our behavior in response to the accelerated rate of species extinction, the degradation and destruction of ecosystems, and threats to the biosphere of Earth. All species and abiota – non-living factors like air regimes, land masses, and waters – are valuable intrinsically as essential components of Earth, and they are also valuable instrumentally as needed by other components to sustain themselves within the web of existence. Ecosystems are valuable intrinsically as composites of intrinsically-instrumentally valuable biota and abiota functioning interdependently to sustain their shared existence, and they are also valuable instrumentally for their contributions to the sustainability of the larger biosphere. The biosphere of Earth is valuable intrinsically as the composite of all systems with biotic and abiotic constituents along with adjoining marginal areas that altogether constitute Earth, and the biosphere is also valuable instrumentally as a home used by humans, other species, and ecosystems. The entirety of the physical world with its many diverse constituents is valuable to God, their purposeful creator and sustainer in existence, who made possible the emergence of humans with the intellectual capacity to discover and value the physical world's goodness both intrinsically and instrumentally and to demonstrate their valuations when acting in all aspects of life.

If one way of orienting ourselves to God is by valuing Earth intrinsically and instrumentally, how should faith-filled people act toward other species, ecosystems, and the biosphere of Earth? Having emerged from and with other entities through the cosmological-biological process, the faithful who believe the physical world is good should *value the evolutionary process* by functioning constructively within it so it can continue to facilitate the emer-



gence of more good and valuable entities. The faithful will also value this process as the conduit through which human and all other species are able to obtain the necessities of life. Because there are functional, historical, and evolutionary limits to the physical world, the faithful will strive to know those limits, live within them, and make changes in their lifestyles compatible with those limits. When functioning cooperatively with other species and abiota, the faithful will be cooperating with God's gratuitous empowerment of this dynamic process and, thereby, valuing what God values.

With Augustine, John Chrysostom, and Aquinas, people who profess faith in God should value *each species, the air, land, and water* intrinsically and demonstrate their valuation accordingly. All other species will be valued in themselves as entities that have emerged over time and space. Integral to discovering their value is the need to discern their interests in surviving and their survival needs. Human interference with their meeting these needs will be avoided in local to global arenas. Species' habitats will be protected, and lists of threatened and endangered species will diminish. Efforts will be made to curtail pollutants and persistent toxicants from the air, water, and land to demonstrate the faithful's valuation of abiotic environment.

The *relations among species, air, land, and water* should be discerned and valued intrinsically and instrumentally by people who believe God is the creator, sustainer, and ultimate valuer of the physical world. Land species use air, water, land, and other species to maintain themselves. Marine species rely upon water and select species to maintain themselves. Airborne species rely upon the air, water, land, and individuals of other species to maintain themselves.

Humans rely upon individuals of other species for food, air to breathe, water to drink, and land upon which to maintain themselves.

Instead of thinking about other species, air, land, and water exclusively for their usefulness to humans, however, the faithful will recognize and value the use that other species have for one another, the air, the land, and the water for their sustenance in the complex web of life.

Following Augustine, John Chrysostom, Aquinas, and other eminent theologians, people who profess faith in God should discover and acknowledge *the contributions that species and abiota make to their shared ecosystems*. Actions that inhibit their contributions will be identified and prevented. Proposed projects will be scrutinized to assure that each constituent can

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**As faithful disciples we can acknowledge the entirety of the dynamic world as God's valuable possession, a manifestation of God's extravagant goodness, and a readily available subject for scientific discovery.**

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continue to contribute to the system. Species that are non-native to systems will not be introduced to them, and efforts will be expended to remove invasive species from an ecosystem into which they have been introduced.

Furthermore, the *overall functioning of these systems* should be valued both intrinsically and instrumentally by the faithful. The complex interactions of biota and abiota that establish and reconstruct ecosystems will be discerned and valued accordingly by people who restrain themselves individually and collectively from disrupting a system's functioning and, thereby, deterring it from achieving its common good—its sustainability. The sustainability of ecological systems and the greater biosphere will serve as an organizing principle for decision-making. A vision of the future informed by the past and the present will be essential to making prudent decisions at all levels of governance. Needs will take precedence over wants, and superfluous use and abuse of other species and abiota will be proscribed. Because humans rely upon the land, air, waters, and species that constitute ecosystems for human health and well-being, the faithful will demonstrate gratitude to them for their use and gratitude to God for making their use possible. With Aldo Leopold, the faithful will think about themselves as citizens of ecosystems rather than conquerors of them.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, the faithful who embrace Aquinas's teachings about the common good should *value the functioning of Earth as the best manifestation of God's abundant goodness* in making our planet in this solar system possible and sustaining its dynamic existence. Other species, ecosystems, and the biosphere will be recognized as having sacramental qualities through which God's presence can be experienced and aspects of God's character that can be discerned: God's *self-limiting power* by endowing the universe with the innate ability to unfold in increasing diversity and complexity over expanding space and extending time; God's *freedom-giving* to the universe to self-organize without coercion or interference with its processes; God's *generosity* through the seemingly endless potentialities with which God has endowed matter to develop creatively; God's *wisdom* through the physical laws within which chance occurrences are operative; God's *humility* by allowing the universe to play itself out in surprising ways amidst considerable suffering, decay, waste, and death; and, God's *patience* throughout the billions of years in which the universe has expanded from an infinitesimal entity to billions of galaxies out of which at least one planet evolving around a medium-sized, middle-aged star has produced a magnificent array of ecosystems with their varied biota, including intelligent beings who have the ability to discern, reflect on, and respond to God's self-communication to value Earth intrinsically and instrumentally.

## NOTES

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13 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a, q. 65, a. 2, translated by the English Dominican Fathers from the Leonine Edition (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1920), 326.

14 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2a 2ae, q. 26, a. 3.

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22 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a, q. 96, a. 1.

23 Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 3.20.

24 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2a 2ae, q. 25, a. 3.

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# The Book of the Word: Reading God's Creation

BY ELIZABETH THEOKRITOFF

The world is not simply a resource, or a garden entrusted to our care, but above all a revelation of the ways and will of God. How might we recover a robust yet nuanced understanding of nature as truly a book of God's words with several levels of meaning?

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There is an oft-quoted saying of the father of monasticism, St. Anthony (251-356), which captures well the ancient Christian attitude to the world around us.

A philosopher once asked St. Anthony, "How do you manage, Father, deprived of the consolation of books?" Anthony replied: "My book is the nature of created things, and this is before me whenever I wish to read the words of God."<sup>1</sup>

The world is not simply a resource, or a garden entrusted to our care, but above all a revelation of the ways and will of God.

The image of "the book of creation" has been remarkably enduring in the Christian world, both East and West. But that very fact easily masks some major changes in the understanding of what sort of book it is, how we are to read it, and what we may properly expect to learn from it. The original analogy between nature and Scripture suggests that nature too has not only a literal meaning, but spiritual and moral significance as well. But this shifts gradually into an emphasis on two separate books, each with its own proper language. Yes, God is author of both; but a growing preoccupation with reading nature in "the language of mathematics" progressively overshadows other levels of interpretation. Nature may still have been valued by Christian apologists as the source of a rationalistic "natural theology"

aimed at those unconvinced by the Bible, but it became increasingly irrelevant to the spiritual life of believers and their experience of God.

One of the most bizarre outcomes of this divergence between nature and Scripture can be seen in the late Stephen Jay Gould's doctrine of "non-overlapping magisteria," in which the empirical universe falls firmly within the "magisterium" of science, while the sphere of religion is "moral meaning and value." The irony of this (doubtless well-intentioned) effort to avoid conflicts is that, while Gould quite properly expects Christians to recognize levels of non-literal interpretation when reading the Genesis creation stories, he maintains a rigid literalism in reading the book of the universe. The entire handiwork of the Creator is thus declared irrelevant to our knowledge of its Author—a strange proposition indeed. Rather than accepting Gould's gracious offer that we can now be "spared from the delusion that we might read moral truth passively from nature's factuality," we need to re-discover a way of discerning in the depths of "nature's factuality" the spiritual and moral truth placed there by its Author.<sup>2</sup>

How, then, might we recover a robust yet nuanced understanding of nature as truly a book of God's words, with several levels of meaning? We might start with the insights of St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662), perhaps the preeminent "theologian of creation" in the Christian tradition but still frequently neglected in discussions of Christian cosmology in the West.

For Maximus, there is a distinction but no division between the two books in which the Creator Word has inscribed himself for our sake. The distinction serves to show how quite different expressions are actually teaching the same thing in complementary ways, and he never tires of exploring the congruences between the two. Creation and Scripture (by which he means, during his era, primarily the Old Testament) are equal in value and dignity, both equally essential for drawing near to God.

Creation and Scripture alike are fulfilled in Christ, in the "law of grace"; and the relationship between the three is so close that the Incarnation of the divine Word may be seen as the culmination of a "triple embodiment." Creation thus contains a paradox parallel to that of the Incarnation: the Word is wholly present within it even while being in himself wholly transcendent. The Word embodied in Jesus has also "hidden himself for us in the 'words' of existent things, so as to be spelled out by each visible thing as by letters," and been "embodied" for our sake in the letters and syllables of Scripture.<sup>3</sup> The Word desires us to read him in both books; but both require effort, and carry an equal danger of misreading. The letter can blind us to the Spirit, and the outward appearance of natural things to their meaning.<sup>4</sup> The letter kills, if we love it for its own sake, and "literalism" in reading the creation is no less dangerous: the beauty of created things can easily rob us of appropriate reverence if it is not looked at to the glory of its Creator.<sup>5</sup> Modern examples of this pitfall are too numerous to mention.

In both Scripture and creation, then, we need to go beyond the letter to

discern the meaning of the words. But what exactly are the “words” of creation? Here we reach the core of Maximus’s cosmological vision, his understanding of the “words” of things, their link with the Word through and for whom all things were made, in whom all things hold together (John 1:3, Colossians 1:16-17). “According to Maximus, Christ the Creator-Logos has implanted in each created thing a characteristic *logos*, a ‘thought’ or ‘word’, which is the divine presence in that thing, God’s intention for it, the inner essence of that thing, which makes it to be distinctively itself and at the same time draws it towards God.”<sup>6</sup>

The notoriously untranslatable term *logos* is not only a “thought” or “word,” however; it is also rationality, meaning. A *logos*-filled cosmos is one that *makes sense*. We may see a “low-level” manifestation of the *logos* of things in the accessibility of the cosmos to mathematics (*logos* also means “ratio”), or in the breath-taking wisdom encoded in DNA, which we also describe in terms of “letters” forming “words.” What we should today call the “information” contained in a living organism often comes remarkably close to the concept of the *logos* that makes a thing itself.

At the same time, entities are inter-connected through their particular “words,” all of which inhere in the Creator Word. Maximus’s sense of solidarity-in-createdness, often eclipsed in recent centuries, is potentially restored to us by evolutionary biology and modern understandings of cosmology. Certainly, the world presented to us through these new discoveries is sometimes “read” in ways that make Christians uneasy: “the sacred” (if any) is located firmly within nature itself; man is merely a part of a great organism; “salvation” is to be found in integrating ourselves into the cosmos. But such ideas often arise because they are falsely seen as the only alternative to a sort of “watchmaker” deity manipulating creation from outside. An understanding of the “words of things,” however, enables us to embrace without fear the “sacred depth of nature” and give it its true Name, which is Christ. It is therefore no diminution of the human person that we should resonate to the frequency of nature, since nature is set ringing by the Creator Word in whose image we too are created.

Where Maximus, and the Eastern Christian tradition generally, take us beyond the insights of many contemporary scientists is in the conviction that the *logoi* in creation are also words addressed to us. They do not address only our reasoning brain, enabling us to understand how other creatures function; the book of creation is also filled with “words of [spiritual] knowledge” and even “manners of virtue.”<sup>7</sup> Striking though this contention is, it is actually hard to avoid if one takes seriously the parallel between Scripture and creation. The preparation for such a reading of creation is not intellectual or mathematical, but ascetic. It means laboring to “put off the old man,” to acquire a state of inner peace in which we are not the plaything of our passions. Paradoxically, it is in this state, when we cease to see creation in relation to our own wants, that we become “king” and have all cre-



ation subject to us. Not that this royal position permits us to dictate the meaning and purpose of other creatures. Rather, it makes us in a certain sense their figurehead, allowing us to convey to God creation's own offering through what is usually termed "natural contemplation," that is, perceiving the spiritual sense in created things. (The very terminology here evokes "creation as bible," for "contemplation" or "vision" [*theoria*] is a technical term for interpretation of Scripture according to the spiritual meaning).

The need for ascetic preparation is no less obvious when it comes to garnering "manners of virtue" from the laws of nature. If we try to read the book of nature when we are still at the spiritual stage of piecing together sounds and syllables, it is not surprising if we come up with nothing more edifying than "nature red in tooth and claw," or at best the Creator's "remarkable fondness for beetles." "The soul's understanding of creation...is dependent on its relation to God. Only to the degree that the soul is itself ordered can it see the genuine order of creation as love, as goodness and as truth."<sup>8</sup> Yet surely, with nature as with Scripture, we do not wait to be perfectly prepared before we ever start to read; the effort to read with understanding is itself part of our life-long ascetic struggle.



What more can we learn, then, about reading the book of creation? More specifically, what might we learn from the way we read Scripture? Concerning Scripture, contemporary Orthodox theologian Metropolitan Kallistos Ware highlights four principles: reading with obedience, understanding the Bible through the Church, emphasizing the centrality of Christ, and understanding the Bible as personal.<sup>9</sup> We will look at how each of these might be applied to the book of creation.

The first principle is *reading creation with obedience*. "Obedient receptivity to God's word," Bishop Kallistos reminds us, involves a sense of wonder and an attitude of listening. Nature, like Scripture, possesses a fundamental unity and coherence: we cannot read nature, or discern our proper role in it, without looking at the total picture. This is true even on a purely physical level: how often have humans decided that some sort of creature or natural feature is expendable because it is inconvenient to us (e.g., predators or swamps), with disastrous results? But on a deeper level, we can draw also on the coherence between the two books to discern the deep structure of creation to which ecological interdependence points. It is on this level that we may grapple with the "hard sayings" of creation—things that seem to us pointless, cruel, or "bad design."

Our sense of wonder should be constantly intensified as discoveries of new intricacies in living organisms and complexities in physics reveal ever more compellingly the wisdom expressed in things; not only majestic mountains and pristine wilderness, but weeds and compost heaps and patterns in running water daily proclaim the dynamic presence of the Word. Natural

systems, whether flourishing or struggling, call us to listen for that pattern and meaning which governs our own lives no less than the rest of creation.

*The book of creation is to be understood through the Church.* Environmentally aware Christians generally recognize the importance of integrating the material world into worship, spiritual life, and our relationship with God. In urbanized societies, making the connection requires some effort; and within less liturgical and sacramental traditions, there can be a temptation to draw elements of “eco-worship” from non-Christian sources. Knowing about other people’s practices or rites can certainly help us see our own tradition with new eyes, but incorporating such material into Christian worship seems neither advisable nor necessary. From earliest times when Christians gathered to receive their Lord in bread and wine, the Church has developed a profoundly theological reading of creation which shows it in relation to the Creator Word, transformed by his presence within it, a chosen instrument for his communication with us. The annual cycle of worship celebrates Christ announced by a star, received by the waters at his baptism, transfigured on the mountain so that his very clothes partake of his glory, mourned by earth and heavens at his crucifixion, filling all things with radiance at his resurrection. Early Eucharistic prayers speak of the earth and sea praising the Lord (in the *Liturgy of St. James*) or offer thanks for flowers and bird-song (in *Apostolic Constitutions*, 8.2).<sup>10</sup> Water and oil, fruits and houses and wells are blessed, uniting spiritual gifts with material blessings. Wood, stone, and mineral pigments come together in an icon to bring us face to face with Christ and convey his power. His saints infuse matter with the Spirit to such a degree that their bodies and clothes work miracles, and the places where they lived are suffused with holiness. All this should provide the lens through which Christians look at the world we live in and read its meaning.

*The book of creation is Christ-centered.* The “words” of things are the “Christ beneath me, Christ to my right, Christ to my left” of Celtic tradition. This is why modern Orthodox writers can speak of praying the Name of Jesus over all aspects of the natural world: “By pronouncing the Name of Jesus upon the natural things...the believer speaks aloud the secret of these things, he brings them to their fulfillment.”<sup>11</sup>

A reading of nature as Christ-filled can subtly shape our perception of natural processes. The role in the evolutionary process of death, failure, and even extinction begins to look different in the light of him who gave his life as a ransom for many and his flesh for food. And when we come to the humbling realization that our survival depends on the earthworm and the honey bee, we recall that our Archetype “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Philippians 2:7), and realize that we neglect our servanthood to other creatures at our peril.

On the other hand, a Christ-centered reading of creation keeps bringing us back to the neighbor in whom we serve him. Loving service to non-human creatures is a natural extension of love for our brother, as we see time



and again in the lives of holy people; but it can never be an alternative.

To say that *the book of creation is personal* is not to invite an individualistic reading of it, or to say that it concerns only my inner life. The point is that, in addition to other levels of meaning, I can look for what God might be saying to me, today, through the natural world around me.

At one time or another, we have probably all heard a personal "word" in nature without much thought—a "Robert the Bruce's spider" moment.<sup>12</sup> But a more conscious reading can take us further towards learning "manners conducive to virtue." We should not despise the time-honored exegetical tool of allegory as one way of applying the "text" to oneself. This does not mean reducing other creatures to mere ciphers, denying the inner coherence of their behavior in terms of their own world or glossing over their suffering: we are talking about "both...and" interpretations, not "either...or." What allegory can do very well is to help us translate wisdom in creatures devoid of choice, or of moral choice, into wisdom for creatures with free will. As Maximus says, it invites us to "make a matter of deliberate choice virtues that are present in natures by necessity."<sup>13</sup>

This approach can help us with some of the most "difficult" features of the natural world: realities such as parasitism or infanticide, which can easily scandalize our belief in a loving God if we stick to a literal reading of nature. To take one example: we look with unease at the eagles who hatch two chicks, apparently as an insurance policy, but then often feed only the larger and stronger. A literal reading yields classic social Darwinism—a "winner-take-all society." A spiritual interpretation, however, confronts us with the mystery of "to all those who have, more will be given" (Matthew 25:29), reminding us that "having" in this case depends not on an accident of birth but on what we do with our "talent." Nothing prevents me becoming that eaglet that calls incessantly on its heavenly Father until it is nourished and grows strong on his grace.

We are under no obligation to use allegory; there are other ways of hearing God's word in nature. Just so long as we do not confine ourselves to contemplating those aspects of nature that strike our own logic as beautiful, good, and harmonious. Such contemplation too easily fixates us on a supposedly benign "mother nature," without forcing us to look deeper in search of mean-

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**There are many ways of hearing God's word in nature, but we cannot confine ourselves to contemplating those aspects of nature that strike our own logic as beautiful, good, and harmonious. As in our own lives, it is imperative to discern God also in the darkness.**

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ing. In the natural world, as in events of our own lives, it is imperative to discern God also in the darkness: the King of glory reigning from the Cross.



So what can we learn about “caring for creation” from reading the book of nature? First and foremost, our reading confronts us with the One who cares for his creation, and mediates his care *for all through all*. Spiritually as well as physically, our life and our growth towards God are made dependent on the entire nexus of other creatures with which we share the universe.

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4); and the world also is a word which comes from the mouth of God.”<sup>14</sup> We are therefore to return the favor, serving other creatures both spiritually (making their wordless praise our own) and physically (considering their needs whenever our lives impinge on theirs).

The most basic way of taking care of a book is to maintain it in legible condition. Our yardstick in treatment of our environment will not, therefore, be the notoriously elusive notion of “nature” untouched by man, but rather the transparency of natures to the divine words within them. When we shape the natural world, the result should make God’s word in matter more and not less audible and legible. But our shaping is never so transparent that we can dispense with the “reality check” of places and creatures that speak to us of a power and a will beyond our own.

There is little point having a beautifully preserved book if we do not read it faithfully. A book is not an ornament. It instructs us; and if it is God’s book, it also judges us. We should not feel that we are being naïve or primitive if we read the gathering environmental crisis in precisely this light: as a wake-up call from God, an indication that all is not well in humans’ relationship with our common Creator. Such a perspective will color all our exploration of physical causes and possible solutions to environmental problems. And the “judgment” is a message of hope, for God’s warnings are always conditional: we need only turn to him to find ourselves on the path to restoration.

Above all, perhaps, the recognition of creation as charged with the words of God has the power radically to change our attitude toward everything we touch. It calls us to an attitude less of stewardship than “studentship,” humble receptiveness to what creation can teach. Limiting our wants and appetites ceases to be simply a moral obligation for the sake of sharing resources more equitably; it becomes the fast that prepares us for reading, placing between ourselves and the world “a wondering and respectful distance” from which everything becomes an object of contemplation.<sup>15</sup> And our reading will keep sending us back with renewed awe to the book we hold in our hands.

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!”

*Genesis 28:16*

## NOTES

- 1 Evagrius Ponticus tells this story in *Praktikos*, 92 (my translation).
- 2 Stephen Jay Gould, "Non-overlapping Magisteria," *Natural History* 106:2 (March 1997), 16 (10).
- 3 Maximus, *Ambigua*, my translation from J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 91 (Paris, France, 1865), 1285D-1288A.
- 4 Maximus, *Questions to Thalassius*, 32, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 90 (Paris, France, 1865), 372CD.
- 5 Maximus, *Ambigua*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, 91, 1129D-1132A.
- 6 Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, *Through the Creation to the Creator* (London, UK: Friends of the Centre, 1996), 11.
- 7 Maximus, *Questions to Thalassius*, 51, in *Patrologia Graeca*, 90, 476C-482D.
- 8 Bruce Foltz, "Discovering the Spirit in Creation: Orthodox Christianity and Environmental Science," in Daniel Buxhoeveden and Gayle Woloschak, eds., *Science and the Eastern Orthodox Church* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 105-118, here citing 117.
- 9 Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, "How to Read the Bible," in *The Orthodox Study Bible: New Testament and Psalms* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 762-770.
- 10 Texts of *The Divine Liturgy of James the Holy Apostle and Brother of the Lord and Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* are available in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Anti-Nicene Fathers, Volume VII – Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries* (1885), online at *Christian Classics Ethereal Library* (accessed May 9, 2012), [www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf07.pdf](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf07.pdf).
- 11 A Monk of the Eastern Church, *On the Invocation of the Name of Jesus* (London, UK: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1949), 15-16.
- 12 According to the famous children's story, when the good king of Scotland, Robert Bruce, was defeated six times and on the run from Edward I, he despaired of ever winning freedom for his homeland. Seeing a spider persevere to complete a difficult web on its seventh try encouraged Robert to carry on the fight for liberty. For a retelling of the story, see Rohini Chowdhury, "Robert Bruce and the Spider" (accessed May 10, 2012), [www.longlongtimeago.com/llta\\_history\\_bruce.html](http://www.longlongtimeago.com/llta_history_bruce.html).
- 13 Maximus, *Questions to Thalassius*, 51, in *Patrologia Graeca*, 90, 481B.
- 14 Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (London: New City, 1993), 141.
- 15 Ibid.



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# Appreciating Wilderness

BY SUSAN P. BRATTON

From the scenic wonders of designated wilderness areas to the ordinary oak forests and cattail marshes adjoining suburbs that link them in a natural tapestry, the entire network is an important spiritual resource, an interactive exercise in understanding God's will and original intentions for creation.

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The concept of a designated wilderness is among the most American of environmental values. It's been embraced by governments on all continents as they struggle to provide recreation for their increasingly urban populations and mitigate the impacts of human development on the earth's many ecosystems.

The modern wilderness movement, much influenced by Romanticism, arose in response to nineteenth century urbanization and the closing of the western American frontier. Today when someone mentions a "wilderness" we visualize the sunset over Yosemite Half-Dome, a quiet paddle in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, or a Kenyan safari with lions prowling around the camp. In the post-industrial western mind, wilderness is a protected natural area that is as free as possible from human development, providing a respite from the demands of technology.

As many countries expanded their efforts after World War II to protect relatively undisturbed lands and waters with high biological diversity, environmental historians and philosophers began to critique Christianity as antagonistic to wilderness. They argued the Old Testament is anthropocentric and awards humans the right to extract any and all natural resources from Eden onward. Furthermore, these critics said, Scripture treats wilderness as hostile to human endeavor, and even demonic: for instance, that Christ's ascetic confrontation with Satan occurs in the desert and on the

mount may lead Christians to fear and devalue unoccupied terrains. Roderick Nash, in his much reprinted volume *Wilderness and the American Mind*, famously cites the Puritans' belief that they were overcoming the wilderness and replacing it with a New Jerusalem as evidence of deep-rooted Christian theological suspicion of uncultivated forests and peaks.<sup>1</sup>

Yet these arguments are far from persuasive. For example, the Puritan influence on the modern wilderness movement is much more complex. As dour a figure as the fiery preacher Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) strolled through the rolling woodlands in the Berkshire Mountains, at the edge of the frontier in western Massachusetts, in order to appreciate God's handiwork and to find quiet places to pray. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Puritan intellectual lineage had generated New England Transcendentalism, which encouraged appreciation of natural areas. In the same era, Christian cosmology inspired the landscape paintings of the Hudson River School: the canvases of Fredric Edwin Church (1826-1900), a Dutch Reformed deacon, implied the hand of God was painting the brilliant sunsets over Mount Katahdin, the Maine peak that is the current northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail. Indeed, as historian Mark Stoll points out, many American environmental leaders from John Muir (1838-1914) to Rachel Carson (1907-1964) had Calvinist backgrounds.<sup>2</sup>

The first step in sorting out the question of Christian relationship to wilderness is to understand the modern term is multi-faceted. Its meanings have expanded far beyond the original Anglo-Saxon implication of a wild and savage land, its use by the editors of the King James Version of the Bible to translate words which meant desert or open grazing land, and its historic American context, with its unfortunate implication that lands held by Indians were in essence unoccupied. The wilderness as free of humanity is a construct of colonization and industrialization. For instance, Moses, who guided his sheep through the wilderness of Sin and was busy with his flocks when he encountered the burning bush on Mount Horeb, did not have the entire Sinai to himself. The U.S. Army removed the remaining Blackfeet from Yellowstone in order to create the first U.S. National Park. Today, legally designated wilderness, such as the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area, bans wheeled vehicles and must meet minimum acreage criteria. We use the term much more broadly, however, to describe natural areas with little human development. The managers of the Appalachian Trail, for example, honor wilderness values, even if most of the trail does not traverse "legal" wilderness.

The second step is to identify the relevant Christian traditions that generate wilderness and preservationist values. The Old Testament associates intentional journeys into the wilderness – such as Hagar departing from Abraham's camp and Elijah removing himself from the ire of Jezebel – with opportunities to escape threat, gain courage, and communicate with God. Prophetic wilderness sojourns often incorporate a theophany, a direct

encounter with God or God's messengers, such as Hagar meeting an angel at the spring, or Moses listening to the voice of God from the burning bush. A second theme of the Torah and the historic books is acquiring the courage or obedience to face adversity or to accomplish God's will. The Exodus was both a cathartic and a nation-building experience for God's people. David's early service as a shepherd where lions roamed grew into his team work

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**The Scriptures may not be explicitly preservationist, but they do proclaim God's role as Creator and utilize the wild as an example of God's providential care for all creatures, his joy in what he has made, and the beauty of God as emanating from creation.**

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with Jonathan who climbed sheer cliffs in order to raid enemy military camps. The New Testament continues the concept of the theophany or encounter with the otherworldly in isolated spots or on a high mountain, and of the obedient servant as victorious, when Christ rebukes Satan for tempting him to turn the stones to bread, and toward the end of his earthly ministry appears transfigured to his

loyal disciples on the mount.<sup>3</sup> The Scriptures are pre-industrial and do not explicitly forward a preservationist ethic. Throughout they proclaim God's role as Creator and utilize the wild as an example of God's providential care for all creatures, his joy in what he has made, and the beauty of God as emanating from creation. The wisdom literature and poetic books, with texts such as Psalm 104 and God's speech from the whirlwind in Job 38-41, are exceptionally rich in imagery of the wild.

Fourth-century Christian ascetics withdrew to the deserts of Egypt and Palestine in order to free themselves of temptation, concentrate on godly tasks such as hand copying Scriptures, and maintain their continual prayers and praise of God. Elderly monks allowed lions and wolves to share their caves. St. Antony struck a compromise with the wild asses raiding his garden. The passion for the desert spread north with Christian evangelists to boreal forests and chilly lochs. The eighth-century artists and scholars who produced the Celtic high crosses and illuminated manuscripts, such as the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Book of Kells, valued time spent alone in a hermitage above a lake or on a small island with only the sound of the breakers and sea birds for company. Pursuit of holiness required time alone with God. The northern monastics protected wildlife around their sanctuaries from hunting. The tales of St. Cuthbert relate that when he finished praying standing in the North Sea, two friendly otters came to warm his feet.<sup>4</sup>

While the first non-conformist Protestants rejected the monastic vocation, they accepted Sunday strolls as a legitimate break from the week's



labor and for enjoyment of creation. Much American valuation of wilderness has grown out of an aesthetic that assumes God's immanence is evident everywhere in nature. In some cases God's presence is symbolic or metaphorical, such as in paintings by Thomas Cole (1801-1848) where a jutting peak as the residence of God rises above a rich Eden, or showers over a New England river point to God's providence and blessing. Such images argued for protection of scenic landscapes and the last "untrammelled" remnants of the frontier. Paintings of Yellowstone by Thomas Moran (1837-1926) were shown in eastern cities just prior to the designation of the first National Park.

For Christians today, the question becomes: is wilderness still an important site for spiritual practice? The theophanies of the Bible were unique events in sacred history and, with the exception of the Exodus, concerned only prophets and leaders. Nevertheless, the central role of wilderness religious experience in these keystone texts implies its continuing relevance.

The managers of U.S. wilderness areas have always considered personal spiritual use of these spaces as legitimate, even if they are somewhat unsure what this actually means. Most academic studies of the benefits of wilderness recreation have engaged religious motives in passing, if at all. Yet on the Christian side, mindful walking or going on a walking "pilgrimage" has experienced a mild revival. In the United Kingdom, the countryside path system includes right of ways for "saints" roads. Linking historic monastic sites, St. Cuthbert's Way from Melrose Abby, in Scotland, to Lindisfarne (Holy Island) in England, for example, has been so popular, that St. Oswald's Way now heads south along the coast from Holy Island to Durham. While not wilderness by U.S. standards, walkers on these saints' paths traverse heath-covered ridges and cross the still dangerous pilgrim sands, hopefully at low tide. The sands are symbolic of the death of the old self and the new life of baptism. In the United States, a trail intended to celebrate inter-religious use recently opened in the Rockies.

In *The Spirit of the Appalachian Trail* I describe the spiritual and religious experience of twenty-first century long-distance backpackers.<sup>5</sup> In my surveys of hikers, interviews, and review of hiker journals, I have found few reports of intense numinous experience, visions of God, or direct encounters with the divine. However, reports of a heightened perception of the presence of God or of the divine in nature are common.

For many who hike the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, which extends almost 2200 miles from Georgia to Maine, it is a "one step up" form of spiritual development. Many of the twenty-something hikers were out for challenge and did not articulate religious goals or perceptions. Around a quarter of Christians with a denominational affiliation, in fact, did not think of the trek as a spiritual or religious venture. In contrast, some hikers without a religious background began to think about their own spiritual potential when on the trail. Nominal Christians reported thinking about God and specifically God's hand in creation. Committed Christians tended to explore

their care for others and their potential for improving their relationships and service.

Martin Robinson portrays Christian pilgrimage as progressing through four stages: the call of God, the encounter with God, the beckoning God, and finally traveling for Christ.<sup>6</sup> The Appalachian Trail hikers of all religious backgrounds that I surveyed were, indeed, at different stages,

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**While a few large areas of wilderness are critical to protecting the planet's biodiversity, the stepping stones and linkages between them also play a critical role, and these are likely to be in our own backyards.**

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although they might be better titled: exploration (examining the spiritual self), relation (recognizing and accepting the transcendent), maturation (growing in understanding), and incorporation (thinking about ministry to or care for others).

The Appalachian Trail adventure did, on average, promote spiritual wellness in multiple domains for

successful long distance travelers. Hikers, religious or not, enjoyed new friendships, savored the beauty in nature, and improved their physical fitness. Communitarian engagement, rather than appreciation of isolation, was among the most prevalent outcomes. Significant proportions reported assistance in emotional or physical healing, accomplishing a life transition such as leaving college or getting over a divorce, or improved self-esteem.

Interestingly, both pre-trail and on-trail levels of prayer or meditation were correlated to multiple positive outcomes, particularly in the personal domain. Greater frequency of prayer, while not influencing perception of nature, generated feelings of peace and harmony. The level of religious and spiritual engagement with the Appalachian Trail was notably correlated to a perceived increase in positive feelings about the meaning of life. The ancient concept that prayer is valuable and even necessary preparation for a wilderness sojourn proved valid for post-modern backpackers. Many studies of wilderness recreation have emphasized "peak experience" — the rush of plunging down the Colorado River rapids on a raft, or of summiting on Mount Rainer. Yet on the Appalachian Trail a number of key spiritual outcomes improved with mileage and took two hundred miles or more to fully initiate. Wilderness and effort, either in terms of spiritual practice or of literal climbing, still go together.

The effects of frequent prayer and greater mileage were largely on different areas of hiker perception. This implies, and it is certainly my own experience, that at least some of the benefits of wilderness are available during short excursions. For those who are comfortable outdoors, wild nature



offers isolation and time free from human pressures. Woods and river banks offer quiet places to pray and to listen to God, just as they did for Jonathan Edwards. Recent research suggests that exposure to nature can stimulate a sense of humility<sup>7</sup> and elicit thoughts of caretaking.<sup>8</sup> Just as the first Christian monastics believed, wild nature itself is effective in countering acquisitiveness and materialism. Wilderness offers beauty and value beyond the things and goods we personally own or control.

Since spending time surrounded by wild nature has moral and spiritual value for postmodern Christians, I believe we have a special obligation to care for the wild. Just before I wrote this paragraph, a large flock of sand hill cranes flew above my home within the Waco city limits. They were high overhead, but their guttural voices echoed down to my lawn. The cranes are a reminder of how integrally linked one part of the natural world is to another. The gaunt grey birds, with their distinctive red crowns, overwinter in the wetlands on the Texas coast. Now an uncommon sight, they once were frequent visitors along the Brazos River as the seasons changed. Along with the endangered, and even taller, whooping cranes, they take advantage of northern summers and the rich food resources the ponds and marshes of formerly glaciated landscapes provide. Not just their magnificent frames and wing spans, but their complex migration routes and graceful dances on their breeding grounds are works of God. They are our equivalent of the scene described by the psalmist:

The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly,  
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.  
In them the birds build their nests;  
the stork has its home in the fir trees.

May the glory of the LORD endure forever;  
may the LORD rejoice in his works....

*Psalms 104:16-17, 31*

The future of the sandhills and whoopers rests not just in the larger nature reserves – such as Aransas National Wildlife Refuge near Rockport, TX, or Wood Buffalo National Park, one of the largest parks in Canada – but on care for our rivers and for many smaller wetlands and watersheds in between. While a few large areas are critical to protecting the planet's biodiversity, the stepping stones and linkages also play a critical role, and these are likely to be in our own backyards.

One argument often made against setting aside wilderness and natural areas is they undermine the economy and take away jobs. That is, they harm people in the process of sequestering the undeveloped. This conclusion, however, is very superficial. Large parks, such as Yellowstone, are often more economically productive than using the same lands for ranching, due to the parks' value to tourism and attracting seasonal residents. Even small,

if carefully selected, bird reserves in south Texas draw bird watchers from throughout the United States, aiding business development in rural towns. The urban park near my home has over four hundred acres, much of it still in forest and cliffs. In 1910, a thoughtful local family with civic-minded supporters set some logged-over cedar stands and pastures aside as a “green belt.” Today the park receives hundreds of visitors each week representing a full span of socio-economic backgrounds. The “regulars” range from families with strollers to serious mountain bikers.<sup>9</sup> The same area utilized as a woodlot would not have even a shadow of the park’s social and economic value. Wilderness and natural areas play subtle roles in our sense of community and our commitment to democracy. They also encourage physical fitness and peaceful avocations, such as fly fishing and kayaking. Again the entire network is important—from the international gems with their scenic wonders, to the ordinary oak forests and cattail marshes adjoining suburbs. Commitment to natural area conservation provides not just for sandhill cranes, but for children on their first camp out. Justice requires providing access to wild nature for families who cannot afford to see the Alps or stay at a lodge at the Grand Canyon.

From a Christian perspective, we need to recognize not just that God values the biodiversity found in the many species of birds, whales, and wildflowers, but that creation is an interactive exercise in understanding God’s will and original intentions. Wilderness and natural areas provide ecosystem services, such as sequestering carbon, protecting water quality, inhibiting flooding, and even moderating microclimate. Just as in our other relationships—those with God and people—when we care in a thoughtful and informed way, we receive much joy and beauty in return and our own lives are much enriched by the effort.

In conclusion, for today’s Christians wilderness still provides an opportunity for reflection and allows us to tap the deepest roots of our spiritual heritage. God’s providence still flows through the wilds, just as it did in the days of the psalmist. We should join the Lord in loving all creation, and incorporate wilderness preservation into a biblically sound environmental ethos, as the earth’s ecosystems suffer ever-increasing stress.

## NOTES

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# Faithful Eating

BY NORMAN WIRZBA

The food we eat, both what we eat and how we eat it, may be the most significant witness to creation care Christians can perform. With every bite we communicate what we think about land and water, fellow animals, fellow humans, and God as the Provider of the many gifts of nurture we daily consume.

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**T**he food we eat, both what we eat and how we eat it, may well be the most significant witness to creation care that Christians can perform. Eating has never simply been about putting fuel in our bodies. Though surely a physiological act, eating is also an ecological, agricultural, moral, and spiritual act. To eat is not only to bite into what is on our plate or in our hand. It is also to partake in the ecological processes, the agricultural economies, and the ethnic and cultural traditions of cuisine that make food possible and a joy. Every time we take a bite we communicate what we think about land and water, fellow animals, fellow humans, and God as the Provider of the many gifts of nurture we daily consume. We position ourselves as eaters who daily have the opportunity to care for and gratefully receive the blessings of food—or not.

Over the last century it has become more difficult for us to appreciate the deeply ecological and spiritual implications of eating because as urbanites we are often reduced to being shoppers and consumers of food. Not being directly involved in food's production—how many of us are farmers or serious gardeners?—it is common to think that food is a commodity responsive primarily to the dictates of money. The unprecedented fact about our time is that never before have so few known with sufficient detail where food comes from and how it is sustainably and justly produced. Today's typical suburban food shopper goes into a grocery store and finds tens of thousands of food products on display. The sheer amount of what is there,

along with its attractive display and packaging, makes us think that food will always be in plentiful and secure supply, provided we have the money. The availability, appearance, and relatively inexpensive price of foods compel us to believe that today's food production is an unmitigated success. When it comes to food, it seems there is little to worry or ruminate about other than its (still) unequal distribution.

Recent books by Michael Pollan (*The Omnivore's Dilemma*), Barbara Kingsolver (*Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*), Raj Patel (*Stuffed and Starved*), and Paul Roberts (*The End of Food*), and the film *Food Inc.* demonstrate that our easy confidence may be misplaced.<sup>1</sup> It is true that today's industrial agriculture is producing more food calories than we have ever seen before. Moreover, global supply lines of meats, oils, coffee, grains, fruits, and other commodities – all heavily reliant on a steady flow of cheap fossil fuels – along with the consolidation of food processing and distribution into the hands of a few giant food corporations, makes it possible for many of these calories to be inexpensively priced. But these copious and cheap calories are coming at a very high price to our soils, waters, atmosphere, animals, and agricultural workers. Around the world small landholders are being forced off their land (to make way for commodity production) and then finding themselves and their families food insecure. Meanwhile, the processing and artificial enhancement of many of our foods is proving to be a serious detriment to our health and the health of creation as a whole.

The upshot of today's global, industrial food economy means that many Christians now find themselves in a position where our eating is a desecration to God. It is not as though we daily and deliberately choose to violate the land and its creatures. Rather, the food most readily available in stores, restaurants, schools, and hospitals simply is the end product of processes that have put profitability, production efficiency, marketability, and convenience above creaturely care, animal contentment, eater health, and farmer and food worker justice. To eat in a way that honors God and cares for creatures takes time, understanding, and daily work. It requires that we make the protection and nurture of our lands and waters a top priority. It also presupposes wide and detailed knowledge about the sources, life, and death that support and permeate our food, knowledge that fewer and fewer of us have.



Given the considerable knowledge and labor involved in responsible eating, should Christians make food – what we eat, how we grow and prepare it, how and who we share it with – a priority for the living of a Christian life? After all, didn't Jesus say, "do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (Matthew 6:25)

Jesus is warning us that we can make food into an idol. We do this, for instance, when we obsess about food or when we become fixated on having

fine, even exotic, food whenever we want it. How many of us know that among today's seven billion people, over one billion suffer from *over-nourishment*—that is, from eating too many unhealthy calories—and that millions more suffer from various eating disorders (like anorexia and bulimia) meant to cover up deep personal suffering and pain? Jesus is alerting us to the real possibility that we can have an unhealthy relationship to food (and to other

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**When we eat so as to remember God, which is to eat properly, we eat with an appreciation for how food is a blessing and gift. This is no small thing, because it means we will also relate to every other creature in a way that honors God.**

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eaters when we set ourselves up to be the Food Police). He is warning us not to become gluttons or self-righteous. Instead, he wants us to become people who “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33), simply taking it for granted that when we do this the food creatures need to eat will be provided.

By telling us not to worry or obsess about food Jesus is not saying that food

is unimportant in God's kingdom. If that were the case it would be difficult to understand why Jesus spends so much time in the Gospels feeding people, eating with outcasts and sinners (cf. Luke 15:2), and celebrating the goodness of food shared with others. Jesus takes no delight in the hunger or ill-health of others. We must not forget that Jesus was derided by religious leaders as “a glutton and a drunkard” (Luke 7:34). As one commentator on the Bible has said, in Luke's Gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from meal! In his life and ministry food clearly mattered to Jesus. It should matter to us too. The question is how.



We are given a clue to what a proper relationship to food looks like when we turn to one of the foundational stories in Scripture. In Genesis 3 Adam and Eve commit the sin of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Was the sin eating? Clearly not since God had plainly said that they could eat freely from the many trees that are “pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Genesis 2:9). They were, however, forbidden to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because in eating from it they would die (2:17). There are forms of eating that lead to life, even kingdom-of-God life, and there are forms of eating that lead to death. How should we characterize the difference?

A little further in the story we learn that the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was good for food and a delight for the eyes.

Even more importantly, eating this fruit was purported to make its eaters like God (3:4-6). In other words, to eat this forbidden fruit not only resulted in a tasty experience. It amounted to adopting an entirely new relationship to the world and everything in it because now, having become like God, one no longer relates to others as a fellow creature – as one who receives life as a blessing and a gift – but as one who presumes to have control over them. Adam and Eve’s colossal mistake was to think that they could bend the world to their own will and desire. It was to think they could have all creatures on their own terms rather than God’s. It was to deny that they are creatures who *need*.

Another way to narrate this story is to say that we can eat in ways that either remember or forget God as the source and nurturer of life. When we eat so as to remember God, which is to eat properly, we eat with an appreciation for how food is a blessing and gift. This is no small thing, because it means, when its implications are consistently drawn out, that we will also relate to every other creature in a way that honors God. But when in our eating God is forgotten, we bring death to ourselves and to other creatures because now creatures are severed from their relationship to God who is the Source of all life. They have been made into idols that serve the narrow scope of our utilitarian or convenience concerns.

Among contemporary theologians, Alexander Schmemmann has described this death-wielding dynamic with precision:

...the world was given to [humans] by God as “food” – as a means of life; yet life was meant to be communion with God; it had not only its end but its full content in Him. ... The world and food were thus created as a means of communion with God, and *only if accepted for God’s sake were to give life*. ... Thus to eat, to be alive, to know God and be in communion with Him were one and the same thing. The unfathomable tragedy of Adam was that he ate for his own sake. More than that, he ate “apart” from God in order to be independent of Him. And if he did it, it is because he believed that food had life in itself and that he, by partaking of that food, would be like God, i.e., have life in himself. To put it simply, he *believed in food*.... World, food, became his gods, the sources and principles of his life. He became their slave.<sup>2</sup>

The sinful eating dynamic that Adam and Eve inaugurated works like this: people resist receiving food as a gift from God because to acknowledge food’s giftedness is to admit one’s need and dependence – it is to know we are not in control; we then transform food from being a gift into being a possession; as a possession we take control of the food and the many ecological and cultural processes that make eating possible; the control we assume invariably becomes self-serving and self-glorifying, which means food no longer signifies as God’s love and grace made delectable; because



the world of food is refashioned to serve and please us, its ability to feed and nurture others is diminished, precipitating needless pain and death; human eating becomes a destructive race to control and exploit the land, its creatures, and its eaters.

Lest we think this a mere theological abstraction, consider how this dynamic is being worked out in today's industrial meat production system. Because of our desire to have the cheapest food possible, millions of chickens are raised in a manner that violates their being and is an insult to God. Rather than being free to roam and range, chickens are crammed into perpetually dark facilities where they are fed a steady diet of food supplements (to make them grow faster) and antibiotics (to prevent them from dying in the disease-inducing facilities). Many of these chickens have been genetically re-engineered so they will grow bigger breasts (Americans crave white meat). Large breasts combined with rapidly accelerated growth means that many of these chickens find it difficult to walk. Some break their legs under the strain of their own weight. These are highly stressful and miserable conditions for the birds. Their stress and misery, however, are the direct result of our desire to eat chicken meat on terms that satisfy our desire for cheapness, volume, and convenience. In our eating we have become slaves to a food system that systematically degrades chicken life.

The degradation that is being worked out in these chicken facilities is also being worked out in almost all aspects of today's industrial food system. Soils are being systematically eroded and then poisoned with heavy applications of ever more toxic herbicides. Water is being wasted and polluted by the same poisons and by the application of synthetic, fossil-fuel derived fertilizers. Cattle, sheep, and pigs are often being raised in similarly cruel conditions as chickens. Ocean fisheries are being harvested to exhaustion and beyond the ability of fish stock to replenish themselves. Farmers around the world are seeing cancer rates go up as they work with toxic agricultural chemicals (many of which are banned in the United States), or are struggling under mounting levels of debt incurred while purchasing expensive seed and fertilizer inputs. Viewed ecologically, today's industrial food production represents a system that is unparalleled in its destructiveness.<sup>3</sup> Food production and consumption, rather than being the means of life and communion with God and creation, has become instead the means of ill health, exploitation, suffering, and death.



Is a better way possible? What would a form of eating that remembers and honors God look like?

Faithful eating begins when we recognize that food is *not ever* cheap. It is a costly grace daily provided by God. It is costly because for any creature to eat, other creatures must die. The Cambridge dean William Ralph Inge once said, "The whole of nature is a conjugation of the verb to eat, in the



active and the passive.”<sup>4</sup> That means that life’s movement and vitality is constantly being nurtured through the life and death of others. Every diet, even vegetarian diets, presupposes and is a daily witness to death.

Today’s commodification of food does its best to hide this fact from us. Fruits and vegetables show little trace of their origin in the soil, the very ground that is constantly absorbing the deaths of others and recycling them into future fertility. Meat products show little signs of feathers, fur, bones, or blood. Much of today’s highly processed food has been so altered that it is hard to see any of it as a gift from God. Food has become something we design, manufacture, and control.

The best way to get behind the deceptions and dissimulations of today’s food industry is to become more closely involved in food’s production. There are several ways to do this. An excellent, perhaps indispensable, place to start is growing some food ourselves. We do not need a lot of land, nor do we need to try to grow it all (a huge and difficult task). The point is for us to deeply sense—with our hands, noses, eyes, and mouths—the fragility, patience, beauty, pain, and miracle that the growth of food is. Doing even some gardening will help us become more humble and grateful eaters. It will help us see why food is a precious gift that needs our attention and care, our sharing and celebration.

Church members need not do this alone. It would be an even better way if congregations inspired by Jesus got involved in the food business. I do not mean simply that they go out and purchase or collect food for food banks, or run soup kitchens and food lines, as valuable as these activities are. I mean that churches turn some of their land, much of it currently under manicured lawns or parking lots, into flower and vegetable gardens and into fruit orchards. Then Christians could learn from each other the art of gardening and the skills of food preservation. This food could be shared within the congregation but also given to people in need.

Church-supported agriculture can be a powerful witness to the world that Christians cherish and care for the gifts of nurture God daily provides. Regenerative agriculture, agriculture that grows food by naturally increasing soil fertility and by respecting plants and animals, could model to others that we do not need to produce food with methods that poison or brutalize fellow creatures. For most of our histories, people have been directly involved in their own food production. We are in the odd and unprecedented position of thinking we do not have to be.

Christians can also become much more involved in supporting local food economies and sustainable agriculture practices already going on in their region. Today’s industrial, global food system fosters ignorance and anonymity. It presupposes the burning of a lot of fossil fuel to ship food a great distance, and it requires that food be harvested not with an eye to its nutritional quality but with the aim of transportability and a long shelf life. But when food consumers buy locally produced food they can see directly if

the fields and the animals were being treated in a way that honors God and respects creaturely life. When farmers and gardeners are found who do it better, they should be supported financially. As more and more Christians become committed to eating more faithfully, more and more farms will grow food that treats the land, water, plants, animals, and agricultural workers in a just and God-honoring manner.

Changing our shopping and eating habits is not going to be easy. We have all become accustomed to cheap and convenient food. This kind of food, however, is destroying creation. It is compromising good agricultural practices. We can do better. Today's typical American consumer spends less on food than any generation in the world's history. Many of us, re-evaluating our fiscal priorities, can afford to spend more for good food and for good farming. We can do more to make sure that this food is properly shared. Some of this will entail significant changes in personal eating habits. Some of it will require that we lobby government to get behind a Farm Bill that redirects taxpayer dollars to regenerative and natural systems agriculture and away from industrial and exploitative production.

I have a dream that one day all Christians will eat in ways that honor and celebrate the gifts of God's creation. In this dream creatures are made whole and healthy because of our communion with them. I also believe that Scripture calls this dream the Heavenly Banquet.

## NOTES

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2 Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1969), 94-95 (first italics my emphasis).

3 More detail on the destructiveness of today's industrial food economy can be found in the third chapter of my book *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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# Chosen in Creation's Plan

B U R T L . B U R L E S O N

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Chosen in creation's plan, set in place by God's own hand,  
blessed to bless all life in deed, naming, taming earth in need.  
Like our Maker, every care, ours to nurture and to bear,  
every sacred treasure known, held as gifts but never owned.

Every being, all that is, each in the Creator lives;  
not a thing apart, alone — yet creation longs and groans.  
Shamed, we separate in sin, Eden lost time and again;  
thorns and thistles, dust to dust, hear the gospel, now we must.

Chosen in redemption's plan, set in place by God's own hand,  
blessed to bless all life in need, setting right with truth and deed.  
Like our Savior, every care, ours to nurture and to bear,  
all of life a treasure known, lifted high to heaven's throne.

# Chosen in Creation's Plan

BURT L. BURLESON

SOUTHERN HARMONY

( 1 8 3 5 )

Chos - en in cre - a - tion's plan, set in place by God's own hand,  
 Ev - ery be - ing all that is, each in the Cre - a - tor lives;  
 Chos - en in re - demp - tion's plan, set in place by God's own hand,

blessed to bless all life in deed, nam - ing, tam - ing earth in need.  
 not a thing a - part, a - lone, yet cre - a - tion longs and groans.  
 blessed to bless all life in need, set - ting right with truth and deed.

Like our Mak - er, ev - ery care, ours to nur - ture and to bear,  
 Shamed, we sep - a - rate in sin, E - den lost time and to gain;  
 Like our Sav - ior, ev - ery care, ours to nur - ture and to bear,

ev - ery sa - cred trea - sure known, held as gifts but nev - er owned.  
thorns and thist - les, dust to dust, hear the gos - pel, now we must.  
all of life a trea - sure known, lift - ed high to heav - en's throne.

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Baylor University, Waco, TX

Tune: BOZRAH  
7.7.7.7.D.

# Worship Service

B Y B U R T L . B U R L E S O N

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## *Call to Worship*

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,

**Let us rejoice and be glad.**

Surely God is in this place. This is none other than the house of God.

**Let us rejoice and be glad.**

Christ is the head of the Church. Through him all things are reconciled.

**Let us rejoice and be glad.**

This is the day that the Lord has made.

**Let us rejoice and be glad.**

## *Chiming of the Hour and Introit*

"The Lord is in His Holy Temple"

The Lord is in his holy temple,  
the Lord is in his holy temple;  
let all the earth keep silence,  
let all the earth keep silence before him,  
keep silence, keep silence before him.

George F. Root (1820-1895)

Tune: QUAM DILECTA

## *Silent Meditation*

For God brought things into existence in order to communicate his goodness to creatures and to represent his goodness through them. And since his goodness cannot be adequately represented by any one creature, he produced many diverse creatures.... Hence, the universe as a whole participates in and represents God's goodness in a more perfect way than any single creature does.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)<sup>1</sup>

## *Hymn of Praise*

"This is My Father's World"

This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears  
all nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres.  
This is my Father's world: I rest me in the thought  
of rocks and trees, of skies and seas—his hand the wonders wrought.

This is our Father's world: O let us not forget  
That though the wrong is great and strong, God is the ruler yet.  
He trusts us with his world, to keep it clean and fair—  
all earth and trees, all skies and seas, all creatures everywhere.

This is my Father's world: he shines in all that's fair;  
in the rustling grass I hear him pass, he speaks to me everywhere.  
This is my Father's world: why should my heart be sad?  
The Lord is King, let heaven ring! God reigns; let earth be glad!

*Maltbie D. Babcock (1858-1901), alt.; v.2 rev. Mary Babcock Crawford (1972)*  
*Tune: TERRA BEATA*

## *Old Testament Reading: Genesis 1:26-31*

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.



*Unison Reading* (based on Romans 8:22-25)

We know that the whole creation has been groaning.  
The cosmos has been moaning, as if it were giving  
birth right up to this very day. We also groan  
inwardly...longing to know fully what  
it means to be God's beloved child.  
This is salvation, to know deeply  
that for which we hope.  
Though we've tasted it...  
we still long for more.  
So we hope, we wait.  
With patience,  
we wait.

*Gospel Reading: John 17:20-23 (NIV)*<sup>2</sup>

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

*Hymn of Response**"Chosen in Creation's Plan"*

Chosen in creation's plan, set in place by God's own hand,  
blessed to bless all life in deed, naming, taming earth in need.  
Like our Maker, every care, ours to nurture and to bear,  
every sacred treasure known, held as gifts but never owned.

Every being, all that is, each in the Creator lives;  
not a thing apart, alone—yet creation longs and groans.  
Shamed, we separate in sin, Eden lost time and again;  
thorns and thistles, dust to dust, hear the gospel, now we must.

Chosen in redemption's plan, set in place by God's own hand,  
blessed to bless all life in need, setting right with truth and deed.  
Like our Savior, every care, ours to nurture and to bear,  
all of life a treasure known, lifted high to heaven's throne.

*Burt Burleson*

*Tune: BOZRAH*

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## *Offering*

### *Song of Preparation*

“Have Thine Own Way, Lord” (v. 1)

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!  
Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.  
Mold me and make me after thy will,  
while I am waiting, yielded and still.

*Adelaide A. Pollard (1907)*

*Tune: ADELAIDE*

## *Sermon*

### *Benediction*

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

*1 Peter 2:9*

## **NOTES**

1 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q 47, a 1.

2 This Scripture passage is from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.



### **BURT BURLESDON**

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Thomas Cole's *The Oxbow* depicts humans living in such harmony with nature that their habitation blends into the beautiful surroundings.

Thomas Cole (1801-1848), *THE OXBOW (OR, VIEW FROM MOUNT HOLYOKE, NORTHAMPTON, MASSACHUSETTS, AFTER A THUNDERSTORM)* (1836). Oil on canvas. 51 ½" x 76". Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

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# In Harmony with Nature

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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**T**he *Oxbow* takes its name from the shape of the Connecticut River as it winds back on itself below Mount Holyoke in western Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> Thomas Cole's painting depicts this wonder of nature, which in its pure size and beauty, literally and figuratively, dwarfs the artist who looks up at us from his canvas (positioned a few yards to the left of the parasol) within the painting. The foreground is wilderness, with trees that have blown over from the wind or from the storm on the left side of the composition that shows a downpour of rain. Looking closely at the valley in the distance, one realizes that the land is cultivated and a human settlement exists. Yet those fields and buildings are so trivial in comparison to the rest of the landscape that they go almost undetected. For Thomas Cole, this is an example of humans living in such harmony with nature that their habitation blends into the surroundings. The artist clearly reveres the beauty in God's creation and commends humans for knowing their place within it.

This famous painting is a masterwork in America's first art movement, the Hudson River School. Thomas Cole (1801-1848) was the leader of this group of artists who maintained studios in New York City, but travelled throughout New York State from the spring through the fall making drawings of the beautiful and unique landforms. These drawings then served as the basis of large paintings executed during the winter months in their studios.

Before this period, the artists in the struggling British colonies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had not been very concerned with art beyond portraiture of their wealthy patrons. Fine art academies – the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, the Boston Atheneum, and the National Academy of Design in New York City – were formed in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. By 1825, New York was the wealthiest and largest city in the United States, surpassing Philadelphia, largely because of the opening of the 383-mile Erie Canal that connected Buffalo to the Hudson River at Albany. This allowed the efficient transport of raw materials produced in upstate New York to the City. At the same time New York became the capital of the nation's art world.<sup>2</sup>

Landscape painting became popular in America during the 1820s partially because of the genre's success in England (John Constable and J. M. W. Turner) and Europe (Caspar David Friedrich), but the (literary and visu-

al) artists working in America struggled to find their own national identity. The poet William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878) and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) identified the verdant land as America's wealth and often contrasted it to the densely populated and resource-depleted landscape of Europe. They referred to America as the "Garden of Eden" and interpreted the land as a manifestation of God. They believed God's presence is found in every aspect of nature and through the meditation on nature, one could commune with God.<sup>3</sup> This view stemmed from the metaphysics of German philosophers that were influencing the work of German landscape painters such as Caspar David Friedrich, but also from the American Transcendentalist movement of the 1830s.

Thomas Cole and the other Hudson River School painters were influenced by all of these factors – the new commercial importance of the Hudson River, the search for a characteristic "American" art genre, and the interpretation of the American landscape as a manifestation of God's creation. Their paintings often depicted spectacular scenery in New York and New England. Cole, an Englishman by birth, described the idea of American landscape painting:

...whether [an American] beholds the Hudson mingling waters with the Atlantic – explores the central wilds of the vast continent, or stands on the margin of the distant Oregon, he is still in the midst of American scenery – it is his own land; its beauty, its magnificence, its sublimity – all are his; and how undeserving of such a birthright, if he can turn towards it an unobserving eye, an unaffected heart!<sup>4</sup>

The circumstances of *The Oxbow* commission are quite valuable to our understanding of Thomas Cole's personal motivations for the piece. During the fall and winter of 1835, Cole was working on a different commission for the prominent New York merchant and patron Luman Reed – a series of paintings, *The Course of Empire*, tracing the human transformation of one site from a primitive state through an agrarian society, a thriving empire, a decadent empire, and finally to a state of ruin. The artist drew inspiration for this project from observing, during his travels to Europe between 1829 and 1832, how Turner used landscapes as metaphors for social and political issues as well as vehicles for themes of historical significance.<sup>5</sup> The paintings were going very slowly as Cole encountered numerous difficulties in painting the figures, and he became lonely and depressed.<sup>6</sup> Reed suggested that Cole suspend his work and paint something in "his accustomed" manner for the National Academy of Design's annual exhibition opening in April 1836. Cole had made a sketch some years earlier from Mount Holyoke and returned to the subject at this time.

Cole, in his own words, reveals the iconography of the painting:

Seated on a pleasant knoll, look down into the bosom of that seclud-

ed valley, begirt with wooded hills through enamelled meadows and wide waving fields of grain; a silver stream winds lingeringly along—here seeking the green shade of trees—there glancing in the sunshine; on its banks are rural dwellings shaded by elms and garlanded by flowers—from yonder dark mass of foliage the village spire beams like a star. You see no ruined tower to tell of outrage—no gorgeous temple to speak of ostentation; but freedom's off-spring—peace, security and happiness dwell there, the spirits of the scene.... And in looking over the yet uncultivated scene, the mind's eye may see far into futurity—mighty deeds shall be done in the now pathless wilderness; and poets yet unborn shall sanctify the soil.<sup>7</sup>

A great debate was raging at the time between Americans in favor of a Jeffersonian agrarian society and those advocating for a Jacksonian *laissez-faire* economics that embraced unrestricted industrial, commercial, and financial development.<sup>8</sup> Thomas Cole was an early environmentalist who found the rapid destruction of the wilderness abhorrent. *The Oxbow* clearly pronounces his personal preference for the wilderness, while championing the virtue of an agrarian civilization in which Americans respect their covenant with God.

## NOTES

1 See images of the full painting and its details in color on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's webpage [www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/08.228](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/08.228) (accessed June 6, 2012).

2 Penelope J. E. Davies, et al., eds., *Janson's History of Art*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2012), 832-834.

3 Ibid., 833.

4 Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," *American Monthly Magazine*, 1 (January 1836), quoted in John W. McCoubrey, *American Art 1700-1960: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 98.

5 Fred S. Kleiner, Christin J. Mamiya, and Richard G. Tansey, eds., *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, 11<sup>th</sup> edition (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001), 834.

6 Oswaldo Rodriguez Roque, "The Oxbow by Thomas Cole: Iconography of an American Landscape," *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 17 (1982), 63. This article, which includes sketches Cole used in creating *The Oxbow*, is available at [www.metmuseum.org/pubs/journals/1/pdf/1512787.pdf.banned.pdf](http://www.metmuseum.org/pubs/journals/1/pdf/1512787.pdf.banned.pdf) (accessed June 6, 2012).

7 Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," in McCoubrey, 108.

8 *Janson's History of Art*, 834.



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In Asher B. Durand's *Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York*, the figures enjoy the natural beauty of "a more domestic sort of Eden."

Asher B. Durand (1796-1886), *DOVER PLAINS, DUTCHESS COUNTY, NEW YORK* (1848). Oil on canvas. 42 ½" x 60 ½". Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC. Photo: © Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.



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# A Mirror to Nature

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The landscape depicted in Asher B. Durand's *Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York* has been called a "more domestic sort of Eden" than that of Thomas Cole's paintings. The natural beauty of Dutchess County in the eastern part of the state is conveyed through its rich grasses (on which the cows lazily graze in the right foreground) and berry trees (being picked by three people on the left). Durand is revered for holding a mirror to nature; his meticulous attention to the details of the landscape enables viewers today to locate the exact position from which he painted this scene.<sup>1</sup>

Durand visited Dover Plains, NY, in the mid-Hudson valley in 1847, a few years after it had become the last station on the railroad from New York City. The town is located near the Connecticut border, eighty miles north of the City and twenty miles east of Poughkeepsie.<sup>2</sup> From the topography of the land today, the work is mostly accurate; it seems Durand may have slightly exaggerated the mountain in the background.

Durand was a central member of the Hudson River School. Although he was five years older than Thomas Cole, Durand is often mistaken as a younger artist because he did not take up landscape painting until his mid-30s. When *Dover Plains* was exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1848 (a dozen years after Thomas Cole exhibited *The Oxbow* in the same annual show) it received the following praise: "It is full of truth as well as beauty, and so invested with the characteristics of the natural scenery of certain portions of our land, that almost every visitor who looks upon it could localize the scene."<sup>3</sup> The artist was able to render a recognizable depiction of God's creation that viewers can appreciate for centuries.

## NOTES

1 Carol Troyen, "Retreat to Arcadia: American Landscape and The American Art-Union," *American Art Journal*, 23:1 (1991), 31. For a color image of the painting, see the Smithsonian webpage <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=7642> (accessed June 6, 2012).

2 *Following in the Footsteps of Asher B. Durand: A Walker's Guide* (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum of Art, July 29, 2007), 4. This pamphlet from the exhibition "Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape" is available free at [www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/kindred\\_spirits/uploads/Durand\\_resources.pdf](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/kindred_spirits/uploads/Durand_resources.pdf) (accessed June 6, 2012).

3 Troyen, "Retreat to Arcadia," 31.

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In *The Palisades*, George Bellows turns from the urbanization around him to depict the beauty of nature and humanity's welcoming enjoyment of it.

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# Enjoying a Wintry Park

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The view of the Hudson River pictured in George Bellows's *The Palisades* looks west from Riverside Park in Manhattan toward the cliffs known as the Palisades of New Jersey. A generation after the Hudson River School, landscape painters remain fascinated by the beauty of the mighty river that inspired that first important movement in American art.

This winterscape contrasts the snowy terrain of the park as it descends to the river with the deep blue cold water and the strong dark cliffs on the other bank. The center of the composition draws our attention with the complimentary colors of blue and orange. Sometime after the snow has begun to melt, revealing the brown of the dormant grass, the temperature has dropped to keep the snow frozen—a common wintertime occurrence in this area. Such a cold morning with sunshine is a popular time to get outside and walk. Two gentlemen are visible strolling in top hat and outer coat. The benches and street lamp create a characteristic New York City park environment.

George Bellows remarked in January 1914, “I must always paint snow at least once a year.”<sup>†</sup> His compulsion to paint winter landscapes may have served as a break from the gritty urban themes that he is best known for painting. Bellows was a member of a group of painters dubbed the “Ashcan School” because their work typically depicts with uncompromising realism New York City life and American society more generally. He painted middle-class people walking in Central Park, poor urban children playing in the City’s streets, and prizefighters from the gym located across the street from his studio. The artist, who was born to conservative Methodist parents in Columbus, OH, attended Ohio State University from 1901-1904, but left for New York City before graduation to play semi-professional baseball and study art with Robert Henri in the New York School of Art.

In this image we see Bellows, like Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand before him, turning from the urbanization occurring around him to a more pure landscape tradition that emphasized the beauty of God’s creation and humanity’s welcoming enjoyment of it.

## NOTES

<sup>†</sup> For more on Georges Bellows and *The Palisades*, see [collections.terraamericanart.org/view/people/asitem/items\\$0040null:135/0](http://collections.terraamericanart.org/view/people/asitem/items$0040null:135/0) (accessed June 6, 2012).

# Doing Good Work

BY JEFFREY BILBRO

Wendell Berry envisions good work—the sort of humble, faithful, and skillful work that connects us caringly to our place and honors the gifts that we have received of land and life, of membership in a holy creation—as the practical means to fulfill our divine calling to love and steward creation.

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Caring for creation may seem like a daunting task in our globalized consumer economy. It is hard to imagine what good, caring work on behalf of the world might look like when reliance on electronics and labor-saving technologies obscures the Christian belief that God has given humans meaningful work to do, and instead encourages us to act as if humans are pleasure-seeking units of consumption.

Wendell Berry may be able to help. By asking “what are people for?” he clarifies the role God asks us to play in creation and offers practical ways to fulfill our calling: humans are fellow members and stewards of God’s beloved creation, and this status should lead us to the “inescapably necessary work of restoring and caring for our farms, forests, and rural towns and communities.”<sup>1</sup> Nurturing work is the appropriate way of participating in God’s love for particular people and places. Our current modes of life may make it difficult to practice faithful, loving work, but Berry suggests that even the simple step of planting a garden can lead to profound healing both in our local places and in our own minds and bodies.

Human work should serve the health of all God’s creation, Berry insists. He uses “the Kingdom of God” to refer to this healthful creation—the source of all real value; it is an economic order in which “the fall of every sparrow is a significant event” and an ecological process through which sunlight and soil make “life out of death.”<sup>2</sup> The Kingdom of God thus

includes not only what we typically think of as economic relationships, but also ecological relationships, indeed all the relationships that make up the order of the *oikos* or household of creation. These amazing relationships can never be fully understood; all we can know for sure is “we live within order and that this order is both greater and more intricate than we can know.”<sup>3</sup>



The Kingdom of God is thoroughly grounded in God’s love. “I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love,” Berry confesses. Because this “divine love” is “incarnate and indwelling in the world,”<sup>4</sup> it is not a generic caring; rather it testifies to the particular value of each individual. Indeed, the “point of the Incarnation” is “Christ’s unfailing compassion for sufferers, whom He healed, one by one.”<sup>5</sup> This particularity of Christ’s ministry, Berry explains, is reflected throughout Scripture in “alertness to the individuality of things”; its writers “delight in the variety and individuality of creatures” because each individual matters to a God who became incarnate in a particular place and time.<sup>6</sup>

The reference to Christ’s healing compassion for individuals testifies not only to the spiritual value of each one, but also to the responsibility to care for each one physically. Particular, placed actions demonstrate our commitment to honoring each life in the way that the Incarnation does. According to Berry, “the way of love” that Christ describes “is not just a feeling” but is “a practical love; it is to be practiced, here and now”; when we practice love, we treat each life as “infinitely holy,” recognizing that “all creatures live by participating in the life of God.”<sup>7</sup>

Paradoxically, then, we can only practice “an elaborate understanding of charity” that cares for all creatures if we act as humble stewards of our particular places. On the one hand, love “cannot stop until it includes all Creation, for all creatures are parts of a whole upon which each is dependent, and it is a contradiction to love your neighbor and despise the great inheritance on which his life depends.”<sup>8</sup> Yet on the other hand, “love is never abstract” and so puts itself in “the presence of the work that must be done.”<sup>9</sup> This particular context for our work helps us fulfill our responsibility as stewards of creation. While our responsibility to care for all creation could easily become paralyzing in action, Berry concludes that it demands from us humble, faithful, and skillful work where we are. This is because, regardless of our ignorance and inability to adequately care for the creation with which we have been entrusted, we must use the world in order to live: if “we cannot exempt ourselves from use, then we must deal with the issues raised by use.”<sup>10</sup> Caring use of the world requires us to consider “the issue of life-long devotion and perseverance in unheroic tasks, and the issue of good workmanship or ‘right livelihood.’”<sup>11</sup>

By forcing us to grapple with physical reality, work can reveal our misconceptions of our places. In Berry's novel *A Place on Earth* Virgil Feltner wants to grow crops on a steep Kentucky hillside, but when he attempts to work out this vision, heavy rains wash away the plowed soil and cause lasting damage to the land.<sup>12</sup> By revealing his failure to imagine his place's health, Virgil's work corrects his vision that was inadequate to the real needs of his place. These considerations underlie Berry's extensive writings on the character of good work, work that connects us caringly to our place and honors the gifts that we have received of land and life, of membership in a holy creation. Berry envisions work, then, as the practical means to fulfill our divine calling to love and steward creation.



We must use many places and processes in the world which we do not fully understand. It is in the context of this predicament that Berry discusses doing good and affectionate work within the bounds of certain cultural practices like farming and marriage. These contain the disciplines that develop key virtues in us such as fidelity and humility, and it is these virtues that ought to guide and delimit our work given our inevitable ignorance of the world whose members we are.

Because our vision of creation's health and understanding of the particular places that we use are so imperfect, imagination plays an important role in guiding work. Berry sees imagination as the capacity that allows us to envision and embrace a pattern that we cannot wholly comprehend and so make our work participate in creation's health. Love for the life and health of a holy world naturally leads us to imagine how we can participate in healing broken places and preserving abundant life. When it is disciplined by virtues like fidelity and humility, our work can contribute to the healing of both our damaged places and our insufficient imaginations; work thus cultivates a reciprocal relation between imagination and reality.

Berry, then, always depicts good work as occurring in the context of specific cultural practices that inculcate virtues suitable to our human finitude. In addition to marriage, farming, and poetry, he mentions worship, teaching, and medicine among other key practices. His descriptions of the complex interplay of love, imagination, and reality in the practice of farming can clarify how these practices inform our work. Farming implies limited scale, faithfulness, and community: farmers do not cultivate all of the earth but only one particular field; farmers do not move from field to field but remain in one place for many years so that they are responsible for the consequences of their work and can correct their mistakes over time; farmers do not work alone but with their families and neighbors. Farmers' local, faithful work has the potential to actually enact their love for a place because it can make their love responsible—able to respond—to the real needs of a place.

In his essay “People, Land, and Community,” Berry offers a cohesive vision of how love leads a farmer to imagine the health of his land and then to correct his imagination by hard, faithful work, which ultimately serves the health of his place. “A farmer’s connection to a farm...begin[s] in love,” he observes. “One loves the place because present appearances recommend it, and because they suggest possibilities irresistibly imaginable.”<sup>13</sup> These imagined possibilities may not be realistic given the actual conditions of the farm, but like a young lover, the farmer’s affection blinds him to the blemishes of his new farm:

When one buys a farm and moves there to live, something different begins. Thoughts begin to be translated into acts.... One’s work may be defined in part by one’s visions, but it is defined in part too by problems, which the work leads to and reveals. And daily life, work, and problems gradually alter the visions. It invariably turns out, I think, that one’s first vision of one’s place was to some extent an imposition on it. But if one’s sight is clear and if one stays on and works well, one’s love gradually responds to the place as it really is, and one’s visions gradually image possibilities that are really in it. Vision, possibility, work, and life—*all* have changed by mutual correction.... One works to better purpose then and makes fewer mistakes, because at last one sees where one is.<sup>14</sup>

Through faithful work, the farmer contributes over time to the place’s health; through the problems and realities of the place and the adjustments to work these difficulties

require, the farmer is changed and comes to participate more fully in the good life of the place. This same pattern of love being proved and corrected through faithful work applies equally to the other cultural practices Berry commends; the lover’s initial love for the spouse, or the worshiper’s love for

God is naïve and fails to be adequate, but through “daily life, work, and problems,” innocent, naïve love can be shaped, corrected, and made more adequate to the value truly inherent in the one loved.

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**Imagination plays an important role in guiding work. It is the capacity that allows us to envision and embrace a pattern that we cannot wholly comprehend and so make our work participate in creation’s health.**

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This sort of morally good work may seem difficult, if not impossible, to do. As Berry himself points out, work and pleasure, fidelity and love have



been divorced in our industrialized and consumer-driven culture. Our economy depends on workers who mass-produce often shoddy objects for people with whom they have no connection and who live in far-flung, disparate places. In this economy, workers are abstracted from the objects and recipients of their work, so workers never have to correct an imagined vision of health because they have no faithful bond to the communities their work

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**As we work out affectionate visions with humility and fidelity, Berry finds reason to hope. For within faithfully-kept promises, our work is accountable not only to its immediate effects but also to the health it contributes to or damages.**

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either benefits or harms. These same conditions increasingly exist in human relationships: if spouses find their loves are not easily worked out, they are more likely to look for new relationships than to attempt to correct their loves in the work of faithful marriage. The same unfaithful, counterfeit love is evident in American religious life and indeed nearly every aspect of contemporary culture.

Berry clearly recognizes how far American culture has moved from the disciplines he upholds, but he argues that our culture cannot simply dismiss the moral framework these traditional practices preserve.

A better possibility is that we will begin finding ways to do good work where we are. In an early essay titled "Think Little," Berry answers those who feel as if they have no opportunities for doing good work and so are tempted either to ignore their responsibility to care for creation or to assuage their consciences by becoming part of the green "fad." He proposes that, as insignificant as it may seem, growing a garden will enable us to begin doing good, healing work. Growing a garden has many physical benefits: it improves a piece of the world, makes us active producers of our own food, and reduces our dependence on the agribusiness industry, on the oil needed to transport food, and on the landfill where food packaging ends up. As gardeners, then, we can practice a love for all creation by caring for a particular part of it. In addition, as gardeners we are "enlarging, for [ourselves], the meaning of food and the pleasure of eating," for by applying our "minds directly and competently to the needs of the earth...we will have begun to make fundamental and necessary changes in our minds."<sup>15</sup> Our imaginations will be expanded as we participate in the healthy economy of the soil, where water and sun and organic nutrients, brought together with human care, grow good food. We will then be better able to imagine how this healthy pattern of the Kingdom of God might be cultivated in our mar-

riages, churches, and communities.

By making the health of creation the standard by which human work is judged, Berry makes our work responsible to a host of difficult questions. To paraphrase the questions he asks in “Going to Work”: How might I help my spouse and household to live in a healthier way? How might my relations with my community be made more harmonious? How might I contribute to the health of my place and the land around me?<sup>16</sup> These questions may be quite difficult to work out in the situations in which we find ourselves, and while Berry grapples with these difficulties, he continues to place his confidence in “the willingness of good people to do the right thing now...[for] good work, faithfulness, willingness to serve, honesty, peaceableness, and lovingkindness will support hope.”<sup>17</sup> As long as individuals find ways to work out affectionate visions under the disciplines of humility and fidelity – through practices as simple as growing a garden – Berry finds reason to hope. For when people work within faithfully-kept promises, their work becomes accountable not only to its immediate effects, but also to the health it contributes to or damages.

To adapt the conclusion from Berry’s essay about how we use language to bind ourselves to one another in relationship: “When we promise in love and awe and fear, there is a certain kind of mobility we give up. We give up the romanticism of progress.... We are [working] where we stand, and we shall stand afterwards in the presence of what we have [worked].”<sup>18</sup> And if our work is done with love, humility, and fidelity, we will be standing in a healthier place.

## NOTES

1 Wendell Berry, “What are People For?” in *What Are People For?: Essays* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 123-125, here citing 125.

2 Wendell Berry, “Two Economies” in *Home Economics* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), 54-75, here citing 55, 61, and 62.

3 Ibid., 55.

4 Wendell Berry, “Health is Membership” in *Another Turn of the Crank: Essays* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1995), 86-109, here citing 89.

5 Wendell Berry, *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay against Modern Superstition* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2001), 101.

6 Ibid., 102.

7 Wendell Berry, “The Burden of the Gospels” in *The Way of Ignorance: And Other Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2006), 127-137, here citing 134 and 136.

8 Wendell Berry, “The Gift of Good Land” in *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2009), 267-281, here citing 273.

9 Wendell Berry, “Word and Flesh” in *What Are People For?*, 197-203, here citing 200.

10 Wendell Berry, “The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity,” in *Another Turn of the Crank*, 64-85, here citing 73.

11 Berry, “The Gift of Good Land,” 277.

12 Wendell Berry, *A Place on Earth: A Novel* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2001), 180.

13 Wendell Berry, “People, Land, and Community,” in *Standing by Words: Essays* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), 64-79, here citing 69.

14 Ibid., 70.

15 Wendell Berry, "Think Little" in *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1972), 71-85, here citing 82 and 84.

16 See Wendell Berry, "'Going to Work'" in *Citizenship Papers* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoad, 2003), 33-41.

17 Wendell Berry, "Hunting for Reasons to Hope: A Conversation with Wendell Berry," interview with Harold K. Bush, *Christianity and Literature* 56.2 (2007), 215-234, here citing 223.

18 Wendell Berry, "Standing by Words" in *Standing by Words: Essays* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoad, 1983), 24-63, here citing 62.

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# Becoming More Mindful of Creation

BY R. WESLEY SMITH

**Christian organizations like A Rocha and Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies lead congregations to be more involved in earth-keeping by reading theology, exploring the place where they live, educating themselves and others about environmental concerns, and building communities of earth-keeping.**

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**W**hile the Church through every era has answered the call “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8), its discernment of the most pressing needs of God’s creatures to address has varied. In late antiquity Christians founded hospitals to offer hospitality to the sick and various sorts of schools to train the clergy or to provide religious and moral training for children who were no longer receiving it at home. In the high middle ages they started universities with specialized faculty to teach theology, law, medicine, and philosophy. Beginning in the seventeenth century believers like Anthony Benezet and William Wilberforce helped abolish the modern slave trade. More recently Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin pioneered “worker houses,” intentional communities to address the needs of immigrants living in American slums.

As each era has had its own pressing concerns to address, discerning believers have interpreted Christ’s commission to his disciples – “Go into the all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15) – in various ways that address those concerns and glorify God.

During the last few decades of the twentieth century environmental concerns have swelled. Countless reports and studies show the effects of global warming, the increasing speed at which species are becoming extinct, the

increasing rate of desertification, the pollution of water sources and the air we breathe, and so on.<sup>1</sup> Many individuals and groups are active in raising awareness and are working to reverse the negative environmental effects. How will the Church respond to these environmental concerns?

Authors like Michael S. Northcott, Christopher J. H. Wright, Wendell Berry, and Steven Bouma-Prediger are challenging and guiding believers to engage in creation care.<sup>2</sup> Christian organizations such as A Rocha and Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies are working to educate Christians about the degradation of the environment and to organize their response to its needs. I will refer often to the work of these two organizations as I discuss how congregations can become more involved in earth-keeping through theology, place, education, and community.<sup>3</sup>



The first thing that the Church must do in response to the environmental concerns of our age is to think through its theology carefully. An apologia of earth-care must be worked out and a theology of ecology must be developed.

Sometimes when we do environmental theology we are tempted to dwell only in the realm of ideas, critiquing competing systems of thought and articulating our own ideal. Or we may be tempted to swing the other direction and become totally immersed in practical actions – such as recycling our newspaper, buying a more fuel efficient car, or ‘consuming’ less stuff – while we sniff at those who do not monitor their personal habits so closely. However, an exclusive focus on either ideals or actions will make us look pretty foolish. Neither our lofty ideas nor particular practices are the panacea we sometimes think they are. Both are important, but we should never look to either one as the sole way that we care for creation.

Time spent in theological and practical reflection on the environment is of immeasurable value. Just as a fish moves and lives in water, humans move and live in creation without giving it much thought. Engagement in the arena of creation-care begins by identifying our context, answering questions about where we are and how we can glorify God through what we do in the place where we are.

Careful theological reflection is necessary to articulate what we know about God, ourselves, and the rest of the created order, and how we know it. For instance, it reminds us that humanity is both *part of* creation and is *distinctive within* it. Today there are powerful, competing ideologies about the relationship of humanity to creation that neglect one of these truths. On the one hand, Christopher Wright explains, the Church must resist “destructive global capitalism” that is an expression of human exceptionalism, seeing all the world as our resource for more and more “minerals and oil,... land to graze cattle for meat,...exotic animals and birds, to meet obscene human fashions in clothes, toys, ornaments, and aphrodisiacs,...commercial or tourist exploitation of fragile and irreplaceable habitats,...[and] market

domination through practices” that exploit resource countries and their people. On the other hand the Church must resist the “pantheistic, neo-pagan and New Age philosophies...[that] are passionate about the natural order [which includes humans], but from a very different perspective”; they ascribe to nature an “independent potency” and worship it as if it were a deity.<sup>4</sup> Both of these ideologies are idolatrous, placing human greed or nature itself in place of the Triune God. If the Church is to live out its mission to “all the world,” then it must remain attentive to her head, Christ, and avoid the temptation to confer its allegiance to anything else.

Both A Rocha and Au Sable offer the Church good examples of being mindful about the theology that forms the basis for earth-keeping. A Rocha states their theological foundation: “Underlying all we do is our biblical faith in the living God, who made the world, loves it and entrusts it to the care of human society.”<sup>5</sup> Au Sable has done the same: “We are a Christian institute of environmental studies with the mission of bringing both the Christian community and the public at large to a fuller, deeper, and better understanding of the stewardship of God’s creation.”<sup>6</sup> Both organizations express mindfulness of theology.



Even as we are theorizing about a theology of earth-keeping, taking practical actions to care for the earth is also essential—for what good are our ideas about the environment if they are not worked out with our hands? The second task for Christians responding to the environmental concerns of our age is to know, love, and care for the particular places where we live. Once again, A Rocha and Au Sable can show us the way, for they are intimately connected to specific locales where participants can learn to care for creation.

A Rocha operates field centers in over nineteen countries on six continents; seven of its project locations are in the United States. The education and work being done at each center is specific for the location. For example, A Rocha France is at work helping farmers restore the original wetlands of the Vallée des Baux. Their theology insists that God’s creation has intrinsic value because it is his creation, and their desire to care for what God cares about has motivated them to mindful action.<sup>7</sup>

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Au Sable's home base is located near the town of Mancelona in north-west Lower Michigan, but it also operates campuses on Whidbey Island, Washington, in Costa Rica, and in southern India. Students and adults of all ages do research and take courses in environmental science specific to these locations. Currently sixty-seven Christian colleges and universities in the United States support the Institute's research and give academic credit for its coursework.<sup>8</sup>

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**As we begin to understand creation as one of God's great gifts to us—a means not only of food and shelter, but of knowing God—we realize our lives are directly connected to our environments and we begin to take more responsibility for the world around us.**

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To know and act with love in a particular location is not easy. There is often a troubling disconnect between ourselves and the places we inhabit. To make us more aware of our dislocation from our places and to help us reconnect to them, Loren and Mary-Ruth Wilkinson at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, recommend that we do some thought experi-

ments. We might trace the water we drink from precipitation to tap; calculate how many days it will be until the Moon is full; describe the soil around our home; list the primary subsistence techniques of the culture(s) that lived in our area before recent years; name five native edible plants in our area and their season(s) of availability; note the direction that winter storms generally come from; investigate where our garbage goes; find out how long is the growing season for various plants where we live; identify five trees in our area, and find out which of them are native; identify five resident birds and any migratory birds in our area; learn how humans used the local lands during in the nineteenth century; discover the primary geological event or process that shaped the land; point north from where one is sitting right now; list the wildflowers that are the first to bloom where we live; identify the rocks and minerals found nearby; note how many people live next to us, and their names; notice how much gasoline we use each week on average; list the developed and potential energy resources in our region; describe the plans for large development in our area; and identify the largest wild region nearby.<sup>9</sup>

The relevance of such thought experiments may not be apparent at first because, most likely, they produce frustration or embarrassment rather than action. However, we must realize that knowledge of God's creation informs us about God. As we begin to understand creation as one of God's great gifts to us—a means not only of food and shelter, but of knowing God—we realize our lives are directly connected to our environments and we begin to take more responsibility for the world, especially the local ecosystem in



which we live. Of course, such thought experiments are not the best way to know where we live; as Bouma-Prediger notes, the richest awareness of place comes from direct experience.<sup>10</sup> We never really know a particular ecological zone by merely reading about it in a textbook or online. Earth-care requires that we closely observe our places and the various interactions therein, and recognize the effects of our own actions on them.

Admittedly, most congregations are more comfortable theorizing about earth-keeping in general than acting to keep their particular regions healthy. But we should recognize this as a theological mistake. It is traceable to the spirit-matter dichotomy that is so difficult for Christians to shake: the tendency to value spirit much more than the physical world God has made and of which we are fundamentally a part. Here is where a holistic theology undergirding the Church's work in the world is essential. We must remind ourselves of our belief that "through [Christ] God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven" (Colossians 1:20). We should take a hard, honest look at what we are preaching and teaching, verbally and non-verbally. Where are the inconsistencies? How can we worship and glorify God in all that we do, including the areas of ecology and the environment?



In addition to the areas of mindfulness we have discussed—doing better theology of creation care and practicing earth-keeping in the particular places where we live—two more areas are crucial. These are sharing what we learn with others and building communities of people who support one another in their caring for the earth.

Around the A Rocha field centers and Au Sable campuses, education takes a variety of forms and covers a plethora of creation-care topics, both scientific and theological. These organizations realize how important it is to share with others what they have been learning in their research. Both are mindful about educating the local communities about their watersheds, food sources, and ecosystems. To this end they welcome many school children, congregations, and local environmental groups to their sites for opportunities to learn something new or practice the earth caregiving skills they have gained.

These forms of education engender mindfulness about creation not only within these outreach groups, but also in their teachers. For this reason Au Sable Institute runs an Environmental Education Internship Program that trains college graduates, who have enjoyed their own immersive college-level courses at Au Sable, to teach and lead younger students in these outreach groups.<sup>11</sup>

Au Sable and A Rocha emphasize learning about caring for the earth in groups. The mastery of information and skills of caregiving, which can seem so overwhelming to an individual, is more easily accomplished among the supportive relationships in a community that is concerned for the environment. These organizations recognize that congregations can be such com-

munities for earth-keeping. Thus, each year A Rocha UK creates an environmental-themed resource pack for churches that include sermon helps, worship materials, and Bible-study lessons for adults and children.<sup>12</sup> Au Sable offers year-round weekend retreats for churches at their Michigan campus. In addition to various outdoor recreational activities, participants enjoy “guided nature hikes and devotionals focused on stewardship” that provide “an opportunity to meet God in a personal way through experiencing the beauty of His creation,...learn more about the earth, nature and all that God has created,...[and] achieve a greater awareness of everyone’s responsibility as caretakers of this world.”<sup>13</sup>



Many people worry about where to start in becoming more mindful of creation. Should they start by reading theology, exploring the place where they live, educating themselves and others about environmental concerns, or building communities of earth-keeping? It seems like too much to consider at one time. To make creation-care more a delightful challenge than an overwhelming task, Loren and Mary-Ruth Wilkinson begin their book with the following sound advice.

1. Don’t try to do everything at once.
2. Avoid over-simplifying complex issues: don’t become an “environmental fundamentalist.”
3. Doing will win others over more than talking.
4. Laugh at yourself.
5. Prioritize: people and their feelings always come before projects, favorite problems.
6. Don’t despair at the magnitude of the problem; the earth is the Lord’s.
7. Don’t make an environmental ideology the center of your faith.
8. Don’t leave the Christian mind behind in approaching environmental problems.
9. Wherever you are, and whatever stage of life, you can always do *something*.
10. Don’t become so occupied with problems that you fail to see the glory of the creation and the Creator.<sup>14</sup>

For congregations the first step might be to “get on the same page” by taking the time to develop a theology of ecology. Church study groups will find a number of useful resources to point them toward a Christian perspective on the environment that is theocentric, biblically inspired, and scientifically informed.<sup>15</sup> In this stage, and the ones that follow, it is important to remember that God is at work in the world and the Holy Spirit will guide the Church. Ask that God’s Spirit would guide your thinking as new ideas are developed. And spend time listening.

Build a community of members committed to earth-keeping. Do not try to take this cause on alone. Most likely some members are already interested in ecological issues: get to know who they are and how they are engaged in creation-care. Perhaps a committee should be formed or a deacon or elder appointed to earth-keeping. Locate organizations like A Rocha or Au Sable that are involved in creation-care and partner with them. They will provide resources to support the congregations that join them.

Form action groups and recruit team members with like-minded interests. Start small with something like recycling waste paper products at the church, replacing Styrofoam plates and plastic silverware at church dinners with an eco-friendly option, turning down the heat or air-conditioning when a building is not in use, or creating a community garden on the church grounds to grow food for the hungry in the neighborhood. The options are endless, but the key thing is to succeed at small achievable goals before adding more.

Above all, do not sell your congregation short. Who knows, among your members may be another activist like Saint Francis, who after reading the Gospel of Matthew chose a life of simplicity. Or another gifted writer like John Calvin who taught others about earth-keeping when he wrote (on Genesis 2:15), “let every one regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses. Then he will neither conduct himself dissolutely, nor corrupt by abuse those things which God requires to be preserved.”<sup>16</sup> Or another poet like Maltbie Babcock who taught us to sing:

This is my Father’s world,  
and to my listening ears  
all nature sings, and round me rings  
the music of the spheres.

This is my Father’s world:  
he shines in all that’s fair;  
in the rustling grass I hear him pass,  
he speaks to me ev’rywhere.<sup>17</sup>

The Church, as the Body of Christ, is made up of many members who are wonderfully diverse in their gifts to address the issues of creation-care.

## NOTES

1 For a more extensive catalogue of environmental woes, see E. G. Nisbet, *Leaving Eden: To Protect and Manage the Earth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 109–139; Nick Spencer, Robert White, and Virginia Vroblecky, *Christianity, Climate Change, and Sustainable Living* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, 2009), 11–46; and Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, second edition (Baker Academic, 2010), 23–56.

2 See, for instance, Michael S. Northcott’s *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996), *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming* (Marynoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), and *Climate Change and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). Christopher J. H. Wright describes creation

care as essential to missional living in *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 2006). For a good introduction to Wendell Berry's writings, see *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, edited by Norman Wirzba (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2003). Steven Bouma-Prediger's classic *For the Beauty of the Earth* (2010 [2001]) is reviewed by David McDuffie in "Christian Vision of Creation Care" on pp. 89-93 of this issue.

3 A Rocha ([www.arocha.org](http://www.arocha.org)) and Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies ([ausable.org](http://ausable.org)) are just two of many fine ways that Christians are responding to pressing environmental concerns. I offer them as examples of how believers might collectively care for creation. There are many other people and groups who are working in this area that deserve the support and encouragement of mindful Christians.

4 Wright, *The Mission of God*, 417-418.

5 "About A Rocha," (accessed March 1, 2012), [www.arocha.org/int-en/who.html](http://www.arocha.org/int-en/who.html).

6 "About—Au Sable," (accessed March 1, 2012), [ausable.org/about/](http://ausable.org/about/).

7 "Where We Work," (accessed May 18, 2012), [www.arocha.org/int-en/work/world.html](http://www.arocha.org/int-en/work/world.html), and "The vallée des Baux," (accessed May 18, 2012), [www.arocha.org/fr-en/work/conservation/baux.html](http://www.arocha.org/fr-en/work/conservation/baux.html).

8 "From Nature Camp to Environmental Institute: The Story of Au Sable," (accessed May 18, 2012), [ausable.org/about/history/](http://ausable.org/about/history/), and "Sustaining Partners and Participating Colleges," (accessed May 18, 2012), [ausable.org/about/participating\\_institutions/](http://ausable.org/about/participating_institutions/).

9 Loren Wilkinson and Mary Ruth Wilkinson, *Caring for Creation in Your Own Backyard* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing 2001 [1992]), 214. Their list is adapted from Bill Duvall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as If Nature Mattered* (Layton, UT: Peregrine Smith, 1985).

10 Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 37.

11 "Church and Community: Environmental Education Program Overview," (accessed June 1, 2012), [ausable.org/church\\_and\\_community/community\\_schools\\_program/](http://ausable.org/church_and_community/community_schools_program/).

12 "Resources," (accessed June 1, 2012), [www.arocha.org/gb-en/resources.html](http://www.arocha.org/gb-en/resources.html).

13 "Church and Community: Retreats at Au Sable—Great Lakes Campus," (accessed June 1, 2012), [ausable.org/church\\_and\\_community/conferences\\_and\\_retreats/](http://ausable.org/church_and_community/conferences_and_retreats/).

14 Wilkinson and Wilkinson, *Caring for Creation in Your Own Backyard*, 8.

15 See, for instance, the books reviewed by David C. McDuffie in "Christian Vision for Creation Care" and by Presian Burroughs in "Reading Scripture Greenly" in this issue on pp. 84-93.

16 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis, Volume 1*, translated by John King (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), (accessed April 5, 2012), [www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.viii.i.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.viii.i.html).

17 Maltbie D. Babcock, "This Is My Father's World," verses 1a and 2b, (accessed April 15, 2012), [www.hymnary.org/text/this\\_is\\_my\\_fathers\\_world\\_and\\_to\\_my](http://www.hymnary.org/text/this_is_my_fathers_world_and_to_my).



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# Allelon Community Garden

BY ELIZABETH D. SANDS WISE

Working side-by-side in their church garden one hot summer, members formed a better community. They discovered that relationships cultivated over dirt and sweat, rather than donuts and coffee, were different because as individuals they were more vulnerable, and together more productive.

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A few dozen church members stood outside Faith Baptist Church in Georgetown, Kentucky, on a blustery Sunday afternoon, dress shoes perched in the freshly tilled soil. Toddlers meandered freely about, and senior citizens were sprinkled among the twenty- and thirty-somethings who had decided to get their hands dirty at church.

We had gathered to dedicate a garden.

Within weeks, two plots of tilled-up soil were transformed from dirt into garden, thanks in part to the donation of compost from a local family farm, and the hands of the youth group on the church's annual service project day. We had a fence to keep the rabbits out, bark mulch for paths, a host of tender plants breaking through the soil, and an outer border of marigolds to fend off mosquitos.

We were optimistic — perhaps too optimistic. We did not anticipate the difficulty of lugging water out to our garden space — more than one hundred yards from the nearest faucet — in the middle of a hot and dry growing season. We assumed that the old adage “many hands make light work” would apply to our garden: surely, we would have many hands involved. We dreamt of church potlucks full of garden salads and fresh veggies, which would require that our lettuce, tomato, and pepper plants all bore fruit simultaneously.

And so, oblivious to what lay ahead, we knelt in the dirt, dug our hands into the soil, and we prayed. The journey of Allelon Community Garden had begun.

## A NAME FOR OUR DREAM

*Allelon* is a Greek word used in the New Testament to mean “one another” or “together,” and is recognizable in clauses like “Greet *one another* with a holy kiss” (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Peter 5:14), the commandment to “love *one another*” (e.g., John 13:34; Romans 13:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; and 1 Peter 1:22), and the teaching in the Church “we are members *one of another*” (Romans 12:5; cf. Ephesians 4:25). Because we call the Faith Baptist garden a “community-building project” on our flyers, *Allelon* captures well the spirit of the endeavor from the beginning stages of planning the garden.

Behind the church building were multiple grass-covered lots, owned for years but hidden from view by overgrown shrubbery and unused by church ministries. A group of young folks began to ask some questions. Why aren’t we using this land? Why don’t our children play outside, instead of in the gymnasium? Could we convert some of the space into a community garden as a way to be better stewards of the church’s resources? If a garden failed, we reckoned, we could offer to hide the evidence by tilling it under and replanting the grass.

After talking through a handful of concerns posed by church committees and some members of the congregation who had ruled out a garden initiative in an earlier era of the church, the garden committee began putting out feelers into the community and asking for feedback. Was this something church members *wanted* to do? Who would be willing to do the difficult, sweaty work of gardening? We talked through our theoretical concerns (about the purpose of the garden and how to deal with inevitable disagreements) as well as practical ones (like who would pay the water bill and whether the garden would have a budget line).

Clipboards were passed around. E-mails sent. Announcements made. And then it began.

Church members with a penchant for gardening began to donate leftover vegetable seeds to our “seed bank,” a basket set out in the church’s reception area. The youth traveled to Anathoth Community Garden in Cedar Grove, North Carolina, on Spring Break and got excited about their potential involvement in the soil at Faith. One teenager planned his Eagle Scout project around the garden initiative. A local farm, unaffiliated with the church, agreed to donate truckloads of compost. A rototiller was borrowed.

And before we knew it, we were standing in the dirt in our Sunday best, singing hymns and praying a prayer of dedication over the season of work that lay ahead.

## THE POTENTIAL OF COMMUNITY GARDENS

Those of us committed to getting our hands dirty knew that this endeavor would be difficult, that we would probably want to give up at some point, that we would spend a lot of time complaining about the fruits of our



labor or lack thereof. But we also held a single conviction firmly: it would all be worth it. Bryan Langlands, who serves as the campus minister at Georgetown College and spearheads the Allelon Garden, maintains four reasons that community gardens like ours have the potential to make a difference in the life of a congregation and its surrounding community.

The first is the *potential for intergenerational ministry*, especially in today's church culture "in which ministry and structured fellowship opportunities are increasingly stratified by age demographics," says Langlands.

A second potential is as *an avenue for outreach into the lives of those residing nearest our church buildings*, those who are often not members of the churches they border. As Langlands notes, "In an age in which churches sometimes consist largely of members who commute in for Sunday worship from elsewhere, such connections with immediate neighbors are important. We have discovered that when we knock on our neighbors' doors to talk to them about our church, giving them a fresh tomato tends to open up many more doors than if we were simply handing out church brochures." After all, who can resist garden-fresh produce?

Community gardens can provide *a much-needed resource to many who otherwise might have limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables*. Their fresh produce can "feed local people who are underresourced and/or who live in food deserts." Many food pantries are happy to take garden produce to distribute to the hungry in their communities.

Additionally, community gardens are a *potential resource for expanding the church community's education and discipleship programs*. Langlands sees gardening as "a teaching tool for church members and neighbors, helping them to learn about the joys of producing your own healthy food." He continues, "Since so many of us are so far removed from the land and food production, gardening can also help to make the many Bible stories that have to do with agriculture come to life." Jesus' parables, for example, are brimming with references to sowing and reaping, good soil and farmers, vineyards, landowners, and the harvest.

Even in our small town, the Allelon Garden is not a unique offering to our community. Within a few blocks of our church, Georgetown College developed a community garden on its campus in 2010. Many of the faculty and staff involved in that initiative were instrumental in starting Allelon, and shared resources between the two—a tiller, for example, as well as a used pick-up truck—were important in getting the church garden started.

A nearby Nazarene church has steadily expanded their community garden since 2010, which was begun as an initiative to get the youth group involved in the local community. Their garden is tended by youth, senior citizens, and life groups, as well as the children's ministry.

Each of these gardens supports the local community, especially, due to the economic crisis in recent years, by donating produce to nearby food pantries. The Nazarene church has donated dozens of vegetable varieties to

food pantries, local schools, and neighbors in the community. The Georgetown College garden donated more than six hundred and thirty pounds of produce last year. Though our local food pantry has readily accepted donations of fresh food—and thus far at least is willing to take as much as we can produce—it is important to note that this is not always the case, especially in more urban areas, where poverty takes on a different glint. Churches in the early stages of planning a garden should always enquire with other ministries to make certain that plans for food distribution are feasible. Nobody wants to be stuck with a hundred pounds of tomatoes! As with most backyard gardens, “when it rains, it pours” when it comes to harvest time.

### **MISSION ACCOMPLISHED**

The mission statement of Allelon Community Garden is “to serve Jesus Christ and to nourish the family of Faith by cultivating Sabbath relationships among church members and those around us, by being a teaching tool for Christian formation, and by growing healthy food for the hungry and for the enjoyment of all.”

In its first growing season Allelon produced over three hundred and fifty pounds of green peppers, lettuce, onions, squash, bush beans, carrots, and tomatoes. The majority of that—more than three hundred pounds—was donated to our local food pantry, and the rest distributed to church members on Sunday mornings, passed out to neighbors of the church through what we called a “free farmer’s market,” or taken home and used by those working in the garden. My freezer, for example, still houses leftover pesto from last year’s bumper crop of basil!

The Eagle Scout project provided us with two spacious raised beds, complete with a variety of prolific herbs, and a water spigot within few feet of the garden, hooked up to the church’s plumbing. Our weeks of carrying water in two-gallon containers across a football field’s worth of yard, followed by weeks of stretching out a double hose and then recoiling it multiple times a week, were thankfully over!

The Allelon garden taught us to overcome fears of spiders, how to tell the difference between tall grass and onion greens, when to pick a small, crookneck yellow squash, and whether green beans and misshapen carrots could be eaten freshly picked. We learned lessons for future growing seasons: not to plant pumpkins in the middle of summer, for example, if you want to harvest them in the fall. Our visions of a fall pumpkin-carving festival fell flat when basketball-sized pumpkins began rotting on the vine in mid-August. Perhaps most of all, the garden taught us stick-to-it-iveness, keeping with a project even as the tedium sets in and the novelty wears off, especially in the heat of a very long summer.

Throughout the discomfort, we clung to the tangible results of our garden: beautiful heads of Romaine lettuce decorating the communion table, impressive pounds of produce we were donating to the food pantry, the joy



on friends' faces as they picked up fresh tomatoes in the church lobby, and teaching people how to use baggies of fresh herbs.

Looking back on Allelon's first growing season and the tangible results linked to our successful harvest, I am struck by the *intangible* results, the things that have been most sustaining and meaningful to those of us who spent hours hunched over in the hot sun, planting and weeding and picking and pinching. Certainly meeting church neighbors and their pets might make a difference in the life of those neighbors as well as in the life of the church. And teaching our children about God's provision in a garden might shape their future career paths, food tastes, and, most importantly, faith journeys.

But it is the relationships cultivated through the work of the garden that enable us to say we have accomplished the Allelon "mission." Relationships are different when they come together over dirt and sweat, rather than donuts and coffee. People are more vulnerable. Admitting you have no idea what a green bean looks like on the vine or how to tell an onion from a tall blade of grass can be a humbling experience.

None of us experts, we learned together about gardening as we failed and succeeded *together*. Our pumpkins may have rotted, but we learned how to prune fruit trees. The cherry tomato plants were much too close together – forming a solid, impenetrable wall – but the basil proliferated. The raised herb beds were too close to the garden fence to fit the lawn mower between them, and rabbits still managed to sneak through the fence, but we spent many a Sunday school hour divvying up fresh herbs into snack baggies to distribute to the congregation.

And it is in working together, in the dirt, in the hot sun, side-by-side, that we have become a better community. We have learned to rejoice with the psalmist, that indeed, "the earth is the LORD's, and all that is in it" (24:1).



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# Women's Broken Bodies in God's Broken Earth

BY MELISSA BROWNING

**In places where the earth is broken by environmental degradation, people are also broken. The poor and marginalized—especially women and their children—are often shoved by their circumstances to live in and carry the burdens of these broken places.**

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**I**n the world around us we see both beauty and brokenness. The beauty of creation calms our souls and reminds us of our Creator, but too often this beauty is marred by pollution. When we see dirty rivers and green spaces littered with trash, when our bodies breathe the air of smog-filled cities, when our eyes witness the barrenness of over-farmed and over-grazed lands, we know all is not well with our world.

In places where the earth is broken, people are also broken. For better or worse, the environments in which we live shape the course of our lives. In places where food does not grow, people starve. In places where water is not safe, people die of water-borne diseases. In places where factories emit toxic pollutants, people struggle against any number of diseases caused by environmental degradation.

The broken places of our world in turn break the people who live there. Even more, those who are already marginalized are often shoved by their circumstances to live in these broken places. While people with money or resources can leave when land becomes desolate or toxic, those without resources have few options and must stay.

In our world, those who are most marginalized by environmental degradation are the poor, those who live off of the land. And the poor are most often women. Because the feminization of poverty is on the rise, it is often women and their children who carry the burdens of these broken places.

When I was doing research on HIV/AIDS in Mwanza, Tanzania, one group of women I interviewed were fish-sellers who worked along the shores of Lake Victoria. This massive lake, which connects three countries in East Africa, has become environmentally degraded through overfishing and the export-based fish industry. The introduction of large fish for export, such as Nile Perch, have eliminated hundreds of species of fish native to the lake and destroyed biodiversity. Today, those who make their living from the lake fight for limited resources and in the process, further degrade the environment.

Along the lake in Bondo, Kenya, women fish-sellers trade sex for fish to sell in the market. Women who refuse to participate in this sex-for-trade system may not be given fish to sell at the market, a place on the bus going to the market, or a space at the market to sell the fish. While it is less public, this same practice occurs in Mwanza where I did my research. Women in my study reported that some of the men fishers would not sell fish to older women or to women who refused sex. Yet these women fish-sellers must buy from the men who fish the waters because in Mwanza women do not fish. Some women thought this was due to taboo and others thought it was because men are stronger, but none of the women in my study believed that women could fish the waters. Women, they believed, were confined to the land.

During the time when I was doing field research, some of the women were in trouble with local police officers. In this area of the lake it is illegal to catch fish that are smaller than seven inches long in order to control overfishing. Yet when the police enforce the law they go to the market and arrest women selling small fish rather than go to the beaches to catch men bringing in illegal fish. Here, women are seen as easier targets and as a result are pushed even further to live off what remains of the broken earth.

Women fish-sellers in Mwanza have much to teach us about the beauty and brokenness of creation. They remind us that more often than not, women carry the greatest burdens of environmental degradation. In places where patriarchy dictates the norms of a society, women will always be given the leftovers. This means that when a community is living off of already depleted resources, women and children will have even fewer resources with which to survive. In a very real way, the women fish-sellers in Mwanza bear the burdens of a harsh environment in bodily ways, as they are asked to trade their bodies for the limited catch that will provide income to feed their children.

If we are to effectively respond to the brokenness of creation, if we are to truly care about the bodies of people, broken as they are pushed to the margins of a broken earth, then we must explore (or perhaps interrogate) our own understanding of the creation story.

Genesis 1:28 reads: "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'" Within Christian history, the idea of subduing and having dominion over the earth has gotten us into a bit of trouble. We

have too often misinterpreted the idea of dominion as “rule over” in a way that depletes resources without taking any responsibility for their renewal. The word used in the Bible is best compared to the care benevolent rulers would extend to their people. It is a rule that brings justice, not destruction.

Dominion without responsibility, without justice, can only be understood as a hierarchy, which leaves no room for mutuality or care. We would do well to remember that patriarchal dominion was not God’s original intent

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**We have often misinterpreted the idea of dominion as “rule over” in a way that depletes resources without taking any responsibility for their renewal. The word used in the Bible suggests a caring rule that brings justice, not destruction.**

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for creation. Even the mention of a man ruling over a woman (Genesis 3:16) is framed as consequent punishment for their sin. But in Christ Jesus “there is no longer male and female,” the Apostle Paul writes, for the rule of Christ is a rule where dominion is based on care and mutuality, rather than conquering and conquest.

When we seek to care for creation, we must move beyond dominion that fosters hierarchy and seek to

model care that restores justice. In reflecting on the stories of the women fish-sellers in Mwanza, I suggest that because environmental degradation and the devaluing of women’s bodies are deeply linked, learning to value women’s bodies and women’s work can also teach us to care for the earth and the flourishing of all creation.

Theologian Sallie McFague has suggested that one possible answer to the ecological crisis is to learn to see the world as the body of God. Drawing on the biblical creation story to speak about the unity of creation that has been present since the beginning of time, she argues that Christian theology not only values the body, but values all bodies. In McFague’s approach, we extend the respect we give to our bodies to the bodies of every living and non-living thing. According to McFague, if we believe that bodies matter, then we must also believe that our ethical obligation extends to all other bodies on the planet.<sup>†</sup>

In thinking about the ways in which broken bodies and broken earth are connected, we can ask if a stronger obligation to the earth could be created if we learned to value bodies—all bodies. If we truly saw the body of the woman fish-seller in Mwanza as part of the body of God, would we not care for the earth underneath her feet, for the waters where she makes her living? If we realized that the Nile Perch that is exported from her lake to our table was killing her environment and her future, could we be uncaring?

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;  
for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.

*Psalms 24:1-2*

Yes, the earth is God's body, and we are called to be co-creators with God. May we find ways seek out the broken places and join God in making them well.

**NOTE**

† Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993).



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## ❖ Other Voices ❖

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Environmental issues challenge theological traditions in ways unprecedented by debates over Christian attitudes toward war or sexuality or poverty. For environmental issues present moral problems that escape the received frameworks of theological ethics. Species loss and degraded biodiversity obviously arrest our moral attention, but how do they matter for Christian life? New technological capacities seem to exercise transgressive control over organisms, but what part of the Christian story offers approval or critique? Globalizing capitalism changes everything from agriculture to local economies, but how is it measured by theological wisdom? In an urbanizing world, the need for sustainable planning, housing, and energy use calls for imaginative new political forms, but how are they intelligible to Christian communities? Climate change places new dimensions of society in moral jeopardy, but how is that preachable on Sunday mornings?

**WILLIS J. JENKINS**, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (2008)

...if positive Christian warrants for environmental care are to be found, substantial critical work has to be done. As I seek to show, some of this work will be biblical-exegetical, asking: what do these texts mean? Some of the work will be theological-hermeneutical, asking: how might we read these texts reasonably today in ways which accord with and display the Christian gospel? Some of the work will be personal-ascetical, asking: what performances of Scripture do we as Christians need to master, what processes of formation do we need to enhance, that will predispose us towards true discernment and right action for the common good, including the good of creation?

**STEPHEN C. BARTON**, *"New Testament Eschatology and the Ecological Crisis in Theological and Ecclesial Perspective"* (2010)

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,  
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.

Í say more: the just man justices;  
 Kéeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces;  
 Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—  
 Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
 To the Father through the features of men's faces.

**GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS (1844-1889)**

The notion of God, which most adequately, comprehensively, and dynamically gathers up the vast biblical witness, is very close to John Calvin's statement, "The God who is the Fountain of all livingness." It has never occurred to me that my understanding of God should be threatened by galaxies or by light years. A new precision about the structure of the physical universe is not in fact disintegrative of a biblical understanding of God, but rather tends to be illustrative of it. I have never been able to entertain a God-idea which was not integrally related to the fact of chipmunks, squirrels, hippopotamuses, galaxies, and light years!

**JOSEPH SITTLER, "Ecological Commitment as Theological Responsibility" (1970)**

Reconciliation with God and reconciliation with God's creation are not alternatives but natural partners. In the end they are inseparable, as John's vision [of the New Jerusalem] shows, and in the crises of our contemporary world both are urgent needs. The Church's "ministry of reconciliation" today must surely embrace both.

**RICHARD BAUCKHAM, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (2010)**

So I asked myself, *What, if anything, does the Bible have to say about caring for the earth?* Using an orange pencil (I wish it had been green), I read the Bible from cover to cover, underlining everything that had to do with nature, God's revealing himself through creation, and stewardship of the earth. What I ended up with was an underlined Bible.

**J. MATTHEW SLEETH, MD, *The Gospel According to the Earth: Why the Good Book Is a Green Book* (2010)**

In a 2008 Barna Institute poll in the United States, 78 percent of Christians indicated that they wanted to see Christians take a more active role in caring for creation. Among evangelicals, the proportion was 90 percent. Tom Rowley, Director of A Rocha USA, took these results a step further, asking A Rocha USA members, "What keeps you from becoming more involved in creation care?" The largest group of respondents, 37 percent, cited a lack of opportunity, and the second largest group (30 percent) indicated a lack of knowledge of appropriate actions to take.

**FRED VAN DYKE, *Between Heaven and Earth* (2010)**

# Reading Scripture Greenly

BY PRESIAN BURROUGHS

Three recent works reviewed here can help us develop a biblically inspired ecological consciousness. Although they consider different combinations of biblical texts, they ultimately agree that the Scriptures teach us to live now in accordance with the fullness of God's new creation.

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What does it mean to read Scripture "greenly"? For Ellen Davis it means immersing ourselves in the agrarian sensibilities of biblical writers while staying abreast of current ecological issues. Richard Bauckham's reading rejects the modern assumption that we can master nature and highlights instead the humble place of humans in a community of creation. Cherryl Hunt, David Horrell, and Christopher Southgate read Scripture greenly by using the tools of narrative theory and natural science to construct an ethical paradigm appropriate for our present ecological situation.

Conversing primarily with Old Testament authors and contemporary agrarians, Ellen Davis's *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 252 pp., \$27.00) suggests that we will see the world as the ancient Israelites did and consequently interpret the Bible more accurately if we reimagine our relationship with the earth in agrarian ways. Since agrarians recognize that our lives depend upon a healthy ecosystem, they emphasize that sustainable living requires habits that support the wellbeing of all things. Davis claims that the Torah takes this principle a step farther by making sustainable living a theological matter: God required Israel to live carefully on the land of promise, otherwise Israel would experience not only ecological degradation but, ultimately, exile from its land.

Highlighting passages in Jeremiah and Isaiah, Davis demonstrates that the Bible understands humans to be a "covenanted unity" with the rest of creation. Like contemporary agrarians, the biblical writers have an "abiding awareness of their place," which influenced them to "attend to the physical



means of human existence, the chief of those being arable land" (p. 26) (see, for example, Deuteronomy 11:10-12). In biblical and agrarian writings such land care comprises four elements. First, the "land comes first" so that humans must adjust to the needs and natural workings of the land, recognizing it as partner. Second, true wisdom accepts that we depend on God's guidance and grace in order to live sustainably. Third, all creation is finite and our existence is necessarily material in nature. Finally, farmland is not a commodity but a priceless gift entrusted to communities who care for it even as they derive sustenance from it (cf. Leviticus 25).

In contrast to these tenets of agrarianism, the food system of the ancient world often functioned as a means of power. Ancient Egypt and monarchical Israel, like corporations and industrialized nations today, controlled the production and distribution of food so that the people at the top gained the greatest profit. This is a stark contradiction of the manna economy of Exodus, which teaches that God generously provides enough for everyone and demands appropriate actions in response. Practically, the manna economy invites Israel to "engage in two concrete practices of restraint, namely, eschewing excess and keeping Sabbath" (p. 75).

The story of King Ahab and Naboth in 1 Kings 21 leads Davis to reflect not only on who controls earth's produce but who is entrusted with its land. Treating the land as a commodity, King Ahab attempted to purchase the ancestral land of Naboth, whereas Naboth respected the land as covenantal inheritance. Here and elsewhere the Old Testament espouses an economy in which plots are given to family groups who maintain the land, subsist on and sometimes profit from it, and then pass it on to descendants, ensuring the perpetual health of people and land. In connection to contemporary agriculture, Davis argues that decentralized, family-owned farms are both more productive and more biblically sanctioned than centralized, corporation-owned farms.

Yet how might such farming square with an increasingly urbanized world? Addressing this question, Davis looks to The Song of Songs. While Jerusalem elites became increasingly prosperous by controlling the countryside, Song of Songs 8:11-12 subtly critiques their agricultural practice of not directly caring for their vineyards. Instead, the passage lauds a form of agriculture in which families attentively care for the land. Although it stretches our imagination to envision ecologically faithful urban life, Davis argues that there are signs of hope in the growing trend of urban agriculture, city planning done with the surrounding bioregion in mind, and the use of sewage as "an agricultural asset" (p. 161). Furthermore, she envisions a time when we protect farmland by supporting local family farms and eschewing the luxury of suburban homes that eat up farmland. Throughout her book, Davis demonstrates that biblical authors understood "how completely the health of human lives and cultures is bound up with care of the land and just distribution of its bounty" (p. 180).



Conversing with Old Testament and New Testament authors and contemporary eco-theologians in *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010, 176 pp., \$24.95), Richard Bauckham focuses on how the Bible depicts humanity's relationship with the wider creation and the consequent implications of this relationship for ecological care. By reflecting on Genesis and the Mosaic law, he suggests that human "dominion" over creation does not mean total control over its processes since God established creation to be self-regulating. Rather, in Genesis and Exodus, he sees a model of stewardship in which human beings self-restrainedly care for and rely upon creation. In part, this includes reserving room and resources for other creatures. Since God designates herbage to be food for all living things (Genesis 1:30) and commands the people of Israel to allow wild animals to feed from their resting fields (Exodus 23:11), Bauckham contends that humans are not to "fill" the land so extensively that other creatures cannot also abide there.

The theological core of the book draws upon Psalm 104 and Matthew 6:25-33 to demonstrate that the Bible places humans within a community of creation. Adopting a community-of-creation mentality, humans are to live within limits so that all creatures have access to God's "generous extravagance" and, as Psalm 148 powerfully envisions, continue their activity of praising God "simply by being themselves and fulfilling their God-given roles in God's creation" (pp. 67, 79). The Bible presents humans as "eminent members and citizens" of the creation community (p. 91) but also chief perpetrators of the degradation over which creation mourns (Jeremiah 4; 12; Hosea 4). The Apostle Paul takes up this prophetic picture of creation mourning over the human destruction of creation in Romans 8:22. Like the prophets before him (cf. Isaiah 32; 35; 51; Amos 9; Joel 3), Paul hopes for a time when God will restore creation by eliminating human sin and sin's consequent ecological devastation. The ethical implication Bauckham draws from God's ultimate salvation of the entire creation is that we are to "anticipate" now what God intends for the future by living peaceably with all creation.

In his reflection on the Bible's grand narrative of salvation, Bauckham concludes that Scripture manifests a quadrilateral of relationships among God, humanity, and animate and inanimate nonhuman creation. He claims that although the New Testament does not often focus on nonhuman creation, it assumes the theological heritage of the Old Testament and views nonhuman creation through a Christological lens. For example, as illustrated by such texts as Colossians 1 and John 1, Jesus' incarnation and resurrection teach us that God does not intend to free humans from their materiality but perfect them in it. "For the biblical meta-narrative, history is the story of humans in relationship with the rest of creation.... God's purpose in history and in the eschatological future does not abstract humans from nature, but

heals the human relationship with nature" (p. 150).



In *Greening Paul: Reading the Apostle Paul in a Time of Ecological Crisis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010, 334 pp., \$34.95), David G. Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate attempt to discern the cosmological narratives contained in Paul's writings, compare these narratives to those found in contemporary eco-theologies and science, and develop a well-reasoned, Pauline narrative arc that inspires responsible ecological ethics. They do this in the belief that a Pauline story of creation can "be a means to articulate a counter-narrative, a challenge to dominant economic and cultural narratives, a means to envisage communities in which a different story constructs a different sense of identity and undergirds different patterns of practice" (p. 59). The authors examine the stories told by Romans 8:19-23 and Colossians 1:15-20, identifying three movements of Paul's creational narrative: creation, reconciliation, and new creation. These movements in turn inform a reconstructed Pauline theology that highlights creation's eschatological future.

Three verbs in Romans 8:19-23 — "is waiting," "was subjected," and "will be liberated" — set the trajectory of creation's narrative, referring to present, past, and future moments respectively. Reflecting some characteristics of a tragedy, this narrative maintains that creation now suffers but will be liberated in the future. The focus here is neither upon the tragic state nor its causes but rather "on the divine action that leads both humans and non-human creation to freedom and glory" (p. 83). Although creation's liberation results from an act of God, the interpreters suggest that through Christ humans now have the opportunity and responsibility to live in concert with the liberation of the eschatological future.

Emphasizing reconciliation rather than new creation, the narrative outlined in Colossians 1:15-20 also includes a past, present, and future. In the past, creation took place in and through Christ. After an implied rupture, Christ's death reconciled all things to God, and his experience as firstborn from the dead inaugurated the resurrection. At present, Christ reigns over all things, is the head of the body, and brings peace while the faithful live with Christ and have been buried and raised with him. Returning in the future, Christ will have first place in an implied new creation and everything will find its goal in him.

These interpretations of Colossians and Romans highlight two aspects of God's salvific purposes: the reconciliation of all things and the liberation of creation from decay and death. Nonetheless, Horrell et al. maintain these texts are not transparently eco-ethical. To formulate an eco-ethic they relate the biblical passages to contemporary science. Acknowledging that their revised Pauline account of creation is different from what Paul had in mind, they take crucial cues from evolutionary biology. Their reconstructed Pau-

line narrative consequently does not include a “Fall” since death, decay, and predation have been integral to Earth from the dawn of evolution. Rather than intrusions, these experiences of mortality are central to evolution, inherent to creation, and even established by God as a subjection to futility. Evolution also set the conditions in which, once humanity became capable of self-transcendence, the Incarnation finally took place. By transcending his own desires and living for God and others, Jesus Christ opened the way for all people to achieve self-transcendence. Although science has no place for eschatology, the authors retain the Pauline hope of a new creation miraculously established by God that is without death or decay. While humans have no power to usher in the new creation, they do have the possibility as redeemed members of creation “to act in wise and healing ways impossible for other species” (p. 137).

Ultimately, Horrell et al. conclude that God calls people to self-emptying lifestyles for the sake of others. It is only through this form of selfless suffering that people attain the glorification God has in store for them. Following Christ’s reconciliatory purposes and limiting their aspirations, appetites, and acquisitions, Christians can reduce extinction rates, help threatened species, and ensure all creatures can flourish. While we perhaps cannot yet escape the use of pesticides and pharmaceuticals to protect humanity, the authors encourage us to reduce the killing of animals through vegetarianism. Still, they allow that meat raised humanely and sustainably on small farms is faithful to the arc of God’s redemptive story.



These three works contribute positively to a green reading of Scripture and assist the Christian community as it develops a biblically inspired ecological consciousness. For people interested in the Bible’s presentation of creation as community, Bauckham’s work is most synthetic and accessible. Readers wanting to delve deeply into individual texts and complex interpretive factors around ecological issues will benefit from the contributions of Davis (for the Old Testament) and Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate (for the Pauline epistles). Although each book considers different combinations of biblical texts, they ultimately agree that the Scriptures teach us to live now in accordance with the fullness of God’s new creation.



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# Christian Vision for Creation Care

BY DAVID C. MCDUFFIE

By applying the traditional Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love to how we understand the relationship between God and the earth as a part of God's creation, the three books reviewed here articulate an environmental ethic that is theocentric, scientifically informed, and biblically inspired.

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In this era of widespread ecological crises, Christian believers and communities concerned with the protection of God's good creation are asking with increasing urgency, "What is the relationship between Christianity and ecology?" Answering the question is difficult because it involves careful contemplation of how Christian faith, rooted in the foundational witness of Scripture, can effectively address contemporary issues such as global climate change, scarcity of fresh water, threats to biodiversity, degradation of the world's oceans, unsustainable agricultural practices, and deforestation. Does the Christian tradition have a uniquely Christian answer to these and similar ecological problems, and if so, what does its vision of creation care look like? The three books reviewed here—Steven Bouma-Prediger's *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010, 240 pp., \$25.00); *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective* (IVP Academic, 2010, 300 pp., \$25.00), edited by Noah J. Toly and Daniel I. Block; and Fred Van Dyke's *Between Heaven and Earth: Christian Perspectives on Environmental Protection* (Praeger, 2010, 247 pp., \$44.95)—offer a theocentric vision for understanding and protecting the earth that is thoroughly informed by Christian tradition and grounded in biblical faith.

The theologian Steven Bouma-Prediger claims in *For the Beauty of the Earth* that “authentic Christian faith requires ecological obedience. To care for the earth is integral to Christian faith” (p. 14). His message has been well received among Christians since the book’s first publication in 2001. This new edition updates the survey of scientific research on the environment.

Referring to the book’s title, Bouma-Prediger explains why he prefers to use the term “earth” instead of “nature,” “environment,” or “creation” in arguing for a Christian environmental ethic. The concept of creation is too broad, for it refers all things other than God, which includes the entire cosmos. “Earth” is appropriate because it refers to the life that each of us shares with other humans and non-human nature in relation to God, and is the location for cultivating our understanding of our proper place in God’s earthly creation. “This book is about the earth—the earth God created and continues to lovingly sustain and redeem and will one day make whole—and it is our responsibility and privilege as humans to care for the earth” (p. 17).

His view, predicated on a biblical faith in the goodness of the created order and informed by Christian tradition and the best available science, is a theocentric rather than ecocentric or anthropocentric environmental ethic, “for our earthly home, for all its importance, does not lie at the center of things. God is at the center, and all things...exist to praise God” (p. 134).

In chapter 6 he suggests a Christian environmental ethic, rather than telling us what actions we ought to take, should tell what type of people we ought to be. Drawing on “theological themes that emerge from the biblical narrative” (p. 141), he articulates “ecological virtues” for those who would be caretakers of the earth, such as respect and receptivity, self-restraint and frugality, humility and honesty, wisdom and hope, patience and serenity, benevolence and love, and justice and courage.

Bouma-Prediger calls for a radical faith in the God that is the ever present source of the good news of the Christian gospel, “the God who cannot be domesticated, the wildest being in reality” (p. 186). This faith calls for action on behalf of our ailing planet, for this faith is incarnational and must move beyond words if it is to effectively spread the gospel in a time of widespread ecological crises. “Perhaps,” he writes, “we should, like [Saint] Francis, speak only when necessary and spend more time preaching with our actions” (p. 187). Such action, it is implied, will result in the protection and perpetuation of the beauty of the earth.



In *Keeping God’s Earth*, Noah Toly and Daniel Block commissioned ten essays from scientists and biblical scholars to outline the crucial contributions from science and Scripture in the formation of an evangelical Christian expression of creation care. While, from an evangelical perspective, scientific knowledge cannot be an end in itself but is “a medium by which God’s truth is recognized” (p. 16), the editors insist it is absolutely necessary for



properly understanding the environmental crises we face. Yet, they warn the scientific approach cannot go beyond its informative role in order to tell us what to value and how to properly address the environmental issues that threaten parts of God's creation.

In four sections of the anthology that deal with urbanization, biodiversity, water resources, and global climate change, contributions from a scientist and biblical scholar are paired to provide an informed response to the environmental issues. Many authors emphasize the covenantal relationship between God and all creatures (human and non-human alike), and appeal to the biblical mandate that humans care for and protect the divinely proclaimed goodness of God's creation. For example, in "The Changing Global Climate: Evidence, Impacts, Adaptation and Abatement," the prestigious scientist Sir John Houghton—he is Professor Emeritus of Atmospheric Physics at the University of Oxford and a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for his service on the U. N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—argues that addressing the realities of global climate change is "an essential way that we can display the *imago Dei* within us; by caring for the earth, we reflect God's own loving care for the world." Houghton concludes, "As Christians, the issue of climate change goes beyond the scientific data and projected outcomes that I have described here. Environmental justice is a spiritual discipline of faithfulness that comes from the knowledge of the facts and a response of the heart" (pp. 214-215). In "To Serve and to Keep: Toward a Biblical Understanding of Humanity's Responsibility in the Face of the Biodiversity Crisis," biblical scholar Daniel Block argues that humans, because we are at the center of a covenantal relationship between God, the earth, and other living things, have a responsibility not only for our own well-being but also "to serve the primary relationship, that is, God's covenantal relationship with the cosmos" (p. 126).

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**If Scripture doesn't answer our scientific questions, it offers other guidance: it reminds us of the divine source of life, helps us recognize ecological relationships, and gives hope that creation will be redeemed from the degradation that threatens.**

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The contributors to *Keeping God's Earth* realize that since the biblical writers had no inkling of the environmental degradation that we recognize all around us today, we should not expect them to answer the purely scientific questions that we face. However, Scripture offers other forms of guidance to contemporary Christians: it reminds us of the divine source of all

life, helps us recognize the ecological relationships that maintain us, and provides, through its eschatological expectation, secure hope that all of God's creation will ultimately be redeemed from the degradation which now threatens.



Conservation biologist Fred Van Dyke attempts to broaden the appeal of Christian creation care for non-Christians who are interested in promoting conservation efforts. In *Between Heaven and Earth* he criticizes those environmentally concerned Christian writers who make claims of "discovering" something "new" in the biblical texts that can now be applied to contemporary efforts to alleviate environmental damage. These writers ignore the rich Christian tradition of reflection on conservation of the earth, as they ply their new biblical theories to an audience deeply skeptical of Christianity's record. In correction of this approach, Van Dyke writes, "these [Christian] ideas [about conservation] are really quite old. That we are unfamiliar with them is the result of a selective loss of our collective cultural memory. And this is a memory we must recover" (p. viii).

Van Dyke traces the Christian conservation ethic from its source in the biblical text through its development in theology and the life of the Church. An early expression of this tradition is the biblical land Sabbath wherein not only the Israelite people but also the land is prescribed a divinely mandated Sabbath rest. "The land Sabbath is exemplary of a pervasive biblical concept, that God views non-human nature as a morally considerable entity," Van Dyke writes. "Nature exists under the sovereign control and care of God just as humanity does" (p. 63).

Christian conservation principles, which spring from recognition of the divine relationship to all of creation, are strengthened by the hope of eschatological fulfillment that includes the renewal of all God's creation. Van Dyke explains, "The Bible's answer is that the fate of nature is its redemption in the kingdom of God. Nature has a future. And because nature has a future, present conservation effort is both significant and appropriate to God's future purposes for it" (p. 67).

Van Dyke admits that despite the potential for congregations to promote effective creation care, they have not always promoted the conservation ideals contained within Church tradition. He calls both conservation groups and Christian communities to critical self-assessment and repentance. The current conservation movement lacks solid grounding in a historical tradition that promotes the moral imperative of conservation and therefore is too dependent on favorable economic conditions for growth. Christian tradition provides such a foundation, but it is necessary for contemporary Christians to reclaim this conservation ethic and act upon it in partnership with the conservation movement. "Christianity is the world's largest and most global religion," he notes, and it has "a consistent record of teaching and at its best,



practicing an understanding of the human relationship to nature that, if consistently applied, brings healing and reconciliation between human and non-human creation" (p. 217).

Van Dyke hopes the "rickety bridge" connecting the conservation community and the Church can be mended to form a stronger partnership to conserve and protect the earth's ecology. He concludes, "Hope is a necessary condition for conservation to possess *purpose*. Purpose is a necessary condition for *meaning*.... Meaning is the prerequisite of *motive*. Environmental science can provide knowledge. Only faith can provide hope, and only hope can give conservation its necessary trinity of purpose, meaning, and motive" (p. 235).



These three books articulate a theocentric environmental ethic that is scientifically informed and biblically inspired. Their common goal is to promote a form of creation care that is both ecologically beneficial and uniquely Christian.

They accomplish this by applying the traditional Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love to how we understand the relationship between God and the earth as a part of God's creation. As they examine the history of Christian teaching and tradition, the authors emphasize faith in the inherent goodness of the created natural order, the cultivation of a loving connection with the ecological communities in which we exist, and a hope that life on earth will ultimately be redeemed from the degradation that currently threatens it.

The ethic that emerges goes beyond mere concern for natural environments to include a commitment to the theological perspective that life on earth is a gift from God and recognition that humanity can potentially play a vital role, through our relationship with God, in support of the continued divine sustenance of God's good creation.



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