



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
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Study Guides for

Caring for Creation

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to illuminate the biblical idea of the interwoven created order and help us recognize nature's significance and worth. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

Valuing the Goodness of the Earth 2

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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Doing Good Work 10

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Focus Article:

📖 Valuing the Goodness of the Earth
(*Caring for Creation*, pp. 11-19)

Suggested Article:

📖 Christian Vision for Creation Care
(*Caring for Creation*, pp. 89-93)

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Valuing the Goodness of the Earth

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

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Genesis 1:1-2:4a

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)

Reflection

If we put God at the center of our thinking about the environment, how would we value the whole earth—both its species and abiota (the non-living factors like air regimes, land masses, and waters) that together form its ecosystems? Jame Schaefer finds three clues in the sermons and writings of some great theologians as they reflected on the creation story in Genesis 1.

▶ *Creatures are valuable intrinsically and instrumentally.* Augustine sees that God created from nothing a universe of “good things, both great and small, celestial and terrestrial, spiritual, and corporeal.” Each one is good in itself and (often) good for the sustenance it provides to others. Even bodies limited by age or disease are good as long as they exist, he says, for existence is good. Rejecting an anthropocentric view, Chrysostom notes all creatures are good, regardless of how they benefit or harm us. To think otherwise is ungrateful to God.

Building on these views, Aquinas depicts each type of 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,” Schaefer writes. They “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.”

▶ *The interrelation of the world's systems, living and nonliving, is a greater good.* Reflecting on Genesis 1:31, Augustine notes the creatures form an interrelating whole that has a “wonderful order and beauty” to bring about “the peace of the universe.” According to Aquinas, “God created living and non-living entities in relation to one another to achieve their common good—the internal sustainability of the world,” Schaefer observes. “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,...while their ultimate



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good is God.”

► *We should embrace God’s valuation of the world.* For Augustine, “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,” Schaefer reports. We are smart, but limited in our perspective, he reasoned; only God sees the big picture of the physical world. Chrysostom warns us against the “arrogant folly” of doing otherwise, telling us to “shun...like a lunatic” anyone who does not endorse God’s view of the world’s goodness.

Aquinas highlights the restrictions on the “natural dominion” God gives humans over the world, while maintaining God’s “absolute dominion” over everything. Thus, Aquinas believes we should love the world in two ways. “One way is loving other living and inanimate creations as goods that should be conserved for God’s honor and glory,” Schaefer explains; “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. 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.”

Study Questions

1. Why are we tempted to devalue some living and nonliving elements of the created order? What’s wrong with this, according to Chrysostom, Augustine, and Aquinas?
2. Schaefer asks, “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?” Do you agree with her answers?
3. Discuss Schaefer’s view that we should recognize “other species, ecosystems, and the biosphere...as having sacramental qualities through which God’s presence can be experienced and some aspects of God’s character that can be discerned.”
4. Which of the three clues to valuing the goodness of the Earth are salient in the hymn “This Is My Father’s World”?

Departing Hymn: “This Is My Father’s World” (vv. 1 and 2)

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.

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

Tune: TERRA BEATA

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



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Focus Article:

📖 The Book of the Word:
Reading God's Creation
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 20-27)

Suggested Article:

📖 Reading the Scripture
Greenly
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 84-88)

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The Book of the Word: Reading God's Creation

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?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:15-17

Meditation: "Judge Not according to the Appearance"

Lord, purge our eyes to see
within the seed a tree,
within the glowing egg a bird,
within the shroud a butterfly:
till taught by such, we see
beyond all creatures, thee,
and hearken for thy tender word,
and hear it, 'Fear not: it is I.'

Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-1894)

Reflection

"The image of 'the book of creation' has been remarkably enduring in the Christian world," Elizabeth Theokritoff notes. "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." Gradually we have come to see Scripture and nature as very *separate* books – the latter being written in a "language of mathematics" accessible only to the scientifically trained among us and (in some people's view) telling us nothing about its author, God.

To help us recover a properly complex understanding of nature as a book of God's words, Theokritoff explores the insights of Maximus the Confessor (580-662), a preeminent theologian of creation.

- ▶ *Creation and Scripture are distinct books in which God does one thing: inscribe the Word that draws us to love him.* Maximus spoke of the "triple embodiment" of the divine Word. "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," Theokritoff explains.
- ▶ *We must avoid flat "literalism" when reading each book.* "The letter kills, if we love it for its own sake," she writes; "the beauty of created things can easily rob us of appropriate reverence if it is not looked at to the glory of its Creator." How can we get beyond "words" to their meaning? Based on John 1:3 and Colossians 1:16-17, Maximus says Christ the Creator-Logos implanted in each created thing a word (*logos*) that is the divine presence that makes it unique and draws it to God. "The notoriously untranslatable term *logos* is not only a 'thought' or 'word,' however; it is also rationality, meaning," Theokritoff notes. "What we should



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today call the 'information' contained in a living organism often comes remarkably close to the concept of the logos that makes a thing itself." Entities are inter-connected into a language through their particular "words."

- ▶ *The words in creation are addressed to us.* They not only enable us to discover how other creatures function, they provide "words of [spiritual] knowledge" and "manners of virtue." To read creation this way requires ascetic preparation to acquire inner peace where our perception is not distorted by gluttony, greed, lust, and other "passions." Theokritoff notes, "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."

To help us read the book of creation, Theokritoff commends four principles for reading Scripture: reading with obedience, understanding the Word through the Church, emphasizing the centrality of Christ, and receiving the Word as personal. Creation, as God's book, instructs and 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," she concludes. Yet this "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."

Study Questions

1. Discuss the dangers of a "literal" reading of creation, and of mining creation for pleasing moral allegories. How does Maximus the Confessor's approach avoid these dangers?
2. How, according to Elizabeth Theokritoff, do the principles for reading Scripture apply to reading the book of creation?
3. "The recognition of creation as charged with the words of God has the power radically to change our attitude toward everything we touch," Theokritoff writes. "It calls us to an attitude less of stewardship than 'studentship,' humble receptiveness to what creation can teach." Do you agree?
4. What elements of Maximus the Confessor's way of reading the book of creation are commended in Christina Rossetti's poem "Judge Not according to the Appearance"?

Departing Hymn: 'How Marvelous God's Greatness' (vv. 1 and 4)

How marvelous God's greatness, how glorious God's might!
To this the world bears witness in wonders day and night.
In form of flower and snowflake, in morn's resplendent birth,
in afterglow at even, in sky and sea and earth.

The starry hosts are singing through all the light-strewn sky
of God's majestic temple and palace courts on high;
when in these outer chambers such glory gilds the night,
O, the transcendent brightness of God's eternal light!

Vladimar Briem (1886), translated from Icelandic by *Charles V. Pilcher* (1879-1961), alt.

Suggested Tunes: WHITFIELD or LANCASHIRE



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Focus Article:

📖 **Appreciating Wilderness**
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 28-35)

Suggested Articles:

📖 **In Harmony with Nature**
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 50-53)

📖 **Becoming Mindful of
Creation**
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 65-72)

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Appreciating Wilderness

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

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 104:1-24

Reflection

“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,” Susan Bratton observes.

What specific places of the world come to mind when you hear the word “wilderness”? Why are they valuable to you? Bratton suggests that “for today’s Christians, wilderness still provides an opportunity for reflection and allows us to tap the deepest roots of our spiritual heritage.”

An avid hiker as well as research scientist, Bratton has surveyed and interviewed many hikers along the Appalachian Trail which extends 2200 miles through the mountains of the eastern United States. The further they have trekked, the more spiritual engagement these hikers typically report, whether their personal walk with God is at a stage of “exploration (examining the spiritual self), relation (recognizing and accepting the transcendent), maturation (growing in understanding), [or] incorporation (thinking about ministry to or care for others).”

To help us more fully appreciate wilderness areas – both for the spiritual engagement they can foster and for other values intrinsic to their ecology – she encourages us to take these steps.

- ▶ *Become clear on the changing meaning(s) of “wilderness.”* Our word comes from *wilddeoren*, an Anglo-Saxon term for a place where savage beasts dwell. Translators of the King James Version of the Bible used it to render words that mean desert or grazing land, not totally uninhabited places. The later idea of “wilderness as free of humanity is a construct of colonization and industrialization,” Bratton notes. And today we use the term more broadly for “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.”
- ▶ *Reflect on the positive roles of wilderness in Scripture and Christian tradition.* Several poems like Psalm 104 and Job 38-41 celebrate wild places. “The Old Testament associates intentional journeys into the wilderness...with opportunities to escape threat, gain courage, and communicate with God,” Bratton writes. Prophetic sojourns in the wilderness often featured “a direct encounter with God or God’s messengers.” In the wilderness God formed the nation of Israel and later prepared young David for leadership. These themes of divine encounter and spiritual formation echo



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in the New Testament when Christ rebukes Satan in the desert, or appears transfigured before his disciples on the mount.

Fourth-century Christians moved into the deserts of Egypt and Palestine to resist temptation, concentrate on godly work, and practice continual prayer. Bratton writes, "The passion for the desert spread north with Christian evangelists to boreal forests and chilly lochs" when eighth-century Celtic Christians valued remote hermitages. "While the first non-conformist Protestants rejected the monastic vocation," she admits, "they accepted Sunday strolls as a legitimate break from the week's labor and for enjoyment of creation." Later, Christian artists like Thomas Cole (1801-1848) would glimpse God's providence and blessing in the scenic landscape of New England.

- *Experience wilderness for ourselves.* "Wilderness offers beauty and value beyond the things and goods we personally own or control," Bratton reminds us. For families who cannot afford to travel to remote protected areas and large nature reserves, she commends regular visits to hike through local city parks or to explore local wetlands that serve, for many migratory species, to link the great protected natural areas. She concludes, "Just as in our other relationships – those with God and other people – when we care in a thoughtful and informed way [for this tapestry of natural areas], we receive much joy and beauty in return and our own lives are much enriched by the effort."

Study Questions

1. How does Psalm 104 extol wild places and wild creatures? How are humans and their needs included in the picture?
2. Select one of these stories that involve a wilderness sojourn – Hagar (Genesis 16:1-13), Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21:8-21), Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-17), Jesus (Mark 1:12-13; Matthew 4:1-11), or Jesus and three close disciples (Matthew 17:1-13). How do the persons encounter God? How are they changed?
3. When you have visited or studied a wilderness area, how has it changed you? Do your experiences match some of those reported by Appalachian Trail hikers to Bratton?
4. Did a friend, an author, or a person you met on the way guide your early experiences of wilderness? How can you share this ministry of vision and appreciation with others?
5. Follow Heidi Hornik's lead in "In Harmony with Nature" to consider how Thomas Cole depicted humans in relation to wilderness. What vision for American society was the artist commending in *The Oxbow*? Does it have merit today?
6. In "Becoming More Mindful of Creation" Wes Smith describes how Christian organizations such as A Rocha and Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies are working to help Christians value the natural world around them. Discuss how these organizations might lead you and your congregation to take the next step toward appreciating wilderness.

Departing Hymn: "Chosen in Creation's Plan"



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Focus Article:

- 📖 Faithful Eating
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 36-42)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Allelon Community Garden
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 73-77)
- 📖 Women's Broken Bodies in God's Broken Earth
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 78-80)

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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 our global, industrial food economy, has our eating become a desecration to God?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 104:21-35

Reflection

"Though surely a physiological act, eating is also an ecological, agricultural, moral, and spiritual act," Norman Wirzba observes. "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."

When it comes to eating, in some ways we live in the best of times. Supermarkets are stocked year-round with a range of attractive and inexpensive foods. Food television networks help us explore exotic world cuisines. Though we rightly worry about pockets of food insecurity, more food calories are available to most people than ever before. We have much to be thankful for.

But there is a serious downside to our way of eating: most of us are increasingly disconnected from the production of food, and this is harming us (we are less grateful for food, less aware of its true cost) and the creation as a whole. "These copious and cheap calories are coming at a very high price to our soils, waters, atmosphere, animals, and agricultural workers," Wirzba writes. "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."

Wirzba commends four steps toward more faithful eating:

- ▶ *Develop a proper relationship to food.* Adam and Eve's sinfully eating fruit from the forbidden tree "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," Wirzba explains. "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."
- ▶ *Learn about the damage caused by the industrial food system.* Sinful, death-dealing eating is not a theological abstraction in today's



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economy. Animals are raised in cruel conditions, fisheries are harvested to exhaustion, water resources are wasted, soils are eroded and damaged by herbicides, world farmers are squeezed by higher seed and fertilizer costs, and they suffer higher cancer rates when they must work with toxic chemicals (often banned in the U.S.). “Viewed ecologically, today’s industrial food production represents a system that is unparalleled in its destructiveness.”

- ▶ *Become involved in food’s production.* This allows us “to deeply sense – with our hands, noses, eyes, and mouths – the fragility, patience, beauty, pain, and miracle that the growth of food is,” Wirzba suggests. “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.”
- ▶ *Support local and sustainable food economies.* By eating locally produced foods, we can save fossil fuels required to preserve and ship foods a great distance, eat tastier and more nutritional foods, and check that they are produced in ways “that treats the land, water, plants, animals, and agricultural workers in a just and God-honoring manner,” Wirzba writes. We can also lobby government for “a Farm Bill that redirects taxpayer dollars to regenerative and natural systems agriculture and away from industrial and exploitative production.”

Wirzba concludes, “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.”

Study Questions

1. How are eating decisions one of our most significant witnesses to creation care? In today’s food economy, why is it difficult for us to know the full impact of those decisions?
2. What practical steps can you take to adjust how you eat in order to honor God by caring for the creation?
3. “In places where the earth is broken by environmental degradation, people are also broken,” Melissa Browning notes. How does her experience with the women fish-sellers on the shores of Lake Victoria in Tanzania illustrate the environmental and human damage of industrial food production?
4. According to Elizabeth Sands Wise, what are the potential benefits of a congregational garden?
5. Discuss other ways that your congregation can support local and sustainable food production. What would be the potential benefits to both members and the wider community?

Departing Hymn: “Feed Me, O Lord, with Needful Food”

Feed me, O Lord, with needful food;
I ask not wealth or fame.
Give me an eye to see your will,
a heart to bless your name.

The Philadelphia Hymn Book (1819)

Tune: DUNDEE



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Focus Article:

📖 Doing Good Work
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 58-64)

Suggested Articles:

📖 A Mirror to Nature
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 54-55)

📖 Enjoying a Wintry Park
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 56-57)

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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.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 80:7-19

Reflection

“What are people for?” Wendell Berry answers we are fellow members and stewards of God’s beloved creation, which should lead us to the “inescapably necessary work of restoring and caring for our farms, forests, and rural towns and communities.”

But while Berry’s vision of humans doing good work to care for the places where they live is enticing, it is very daunting “in our globalized consumer economy,” Jeff Bilbro remarks. “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.”

Berry says good work that restores and cares for the world:

► *is thoroughly grounded in God’s love.* He confesses, “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.” God’s love is expressed in Christ, who was God incarnate in a particular place and time. Jesus cares for all sufferers with “not just a feeling...[but] a practical love.”

If our love for the world is to be fully practical like Jesus’ love, then paradoxically it must be both universal and very particular. It “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,” Berry notes. But “love is never abstract” and so puts itself in “the presence of the work that must be done” in a particular place.

► *requires fidelity, humility, and imagination.* Since we must care for persons, places, or processes in the world that we do not fully understand, our best work is done in the bounds of rich cultural practices like farming, marriage, teaching, medicine, and worship. Such practices share accumulated insight, draw us into supportive communities, and inculcate virtues we need to guide our work. Caring for things requires commitment, awareness of our limits, and imagination “to envision and embrace...how we can participate in healing broken places and preserving abundant life,” Bilbro explains. “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.”



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► *starts small*. We learn to do good work – to love faithfully and humbly, to exercise and correct imagination by attending to reality – by doing it. But getting started in a consumer culture seems difficult, if not impossible. We have learned to mass-produce products we will never use for people we will never see; to shop for another spouse, friend, or congregation when a current one does not please. So, caring for creation is more than we can handle! In our predicament, Berry suggests starting with good work where we are – like growing a garden. This is not copping out, it is going to school. Bilbro explains, “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 marriages, churches, and communities.”

Bilbro adapts a conclusion from Berry’s essay about how language binds us to one another: “‘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].’ And if our work is done with love, humility, and fidelity, we will be standing in a healthier place.”

Study Questions

1. According to Wendell Berry, what is good work and why should we do it? What virtues will we need in every case?
2. List some opportunities to do good work in your life roles. Select one role and discuss the barriers to doing good work.
3. What new good work can you take up that would care for creation? How can your congregation support you?
4. How is God depicted as doing good work in Psalm 80:7-19?
5. Consider how Asher B. Durand’s *Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York* and George Bellows’s *The Palisades* depict humans doing good work to care for the creation.
6. Trace the theme of humans doing good work through Burt Burlleson’s hymn “Chosen in Creation’s Plan.”

Departing Hymn: “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 Burlleson

Tune: BOZRAH

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Valuing the Goodness of the Earth

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, and Thomas Aquinas learned to value the goodness of the Earth through their study of the creation story in Genesis 1.
2. To understand the theocentric nature of their perspective on the goodness of the Earth.
3. To discuss how their insights should shape our response to the environmental degradation of the species, ecosystem, and biosphere of the Earth today.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Caring for Creation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “This Is My Father’s World” locate the familiar tune TERRA BEATA in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

David McDuffie writes, “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.” What Christians need, he suggests, is a “theocentric vision for understanding and protecting the earth that is *thoroughly informed by Christian tradition* and grounded in biblical faith” (*Caring for Creation*, 89, italics added).

In this study Jame Schaefer begins to gather the resources we need from the Christian tradition. She surveys how three giants of theology – John Chrysostom (347-407), Augustine of Hippo (354-430), and Thomas Aquinas (1224/25-1274) – learned to value the goodness of the Earth through their study of the creation story in Genesis 1.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to lead you to a deeper appreciation of the beauty and goodness of the whole creation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Genesis 1:1-2:4a from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

How we can rightly discern the goodness of the created order and come to value it? The short answer – “As the friends of God, we should come to know and value the creation as God knows and values it, insofar as we can” – requires considerable expansion. It raises more questions like these: “How does God value the elements

of creation?" "Is there even more value in the interrelations among the elements as well?" and "If our knowledge of the created order is so limited (in comparison with God's knowledge), how can we come to value it as God does?" Jame Schaefer traces the footsteps of three influential Christian teachers as they reflected on these issues in their sermons and tracts based on the creation story in Genesis 1.

Study Questions

1. Augustine traced our temptation to devalue certain aspects of the physical world to two causes: our limitations in knowing and loving the world, and our self-centeredness. On the one hand, since we cannot know all about the natural beings and forces and how they interrelate, we cannot properly value them. On the other, we tend to skew our judgments about the value of things positively if they benefit us, or negatively if they threaten us. These two causes combine to produce "the rashness of human folly" in judging elements of the world.
Through such hasty and anthropocentric judgments, Augustine and Chrysostom agree, we are second-guessing God's plan for the world and showing ingratitude to God. Aquinas suggests this anthropocentric stance is disobedient: after all, our "natural dominion" must be subordinate to God's "absolute dominion." This means that we should strive to know more about the world and care for it in ways consistent with God's plan for the world.
2. Schaefer sketches several answers to this question. First, we should "*value the evolutionary process*" through which we and the world's systems were created "by functioning constructively within it so it can continue to facilitate the emergence of more good and valuable entities." Second, we should "value *each species, the air, land, and water intrinsically*" and avoid interfering with "their survival needs." Third, we should value intrinsically and instrumentally the "*relations among species, air, land, and water.*" Fourth, we should "discover and acknowledge *the contributions that species and abiota make to their shared ecosystems,*" and we would value intrinsically and instrumentally "the *overall functioning of these systems.*"
3. By the "sacramental qualities" of other species, ecosystems and the biosphere, Schaefer means how they can be windows to the presence and nature of God. As we study and care for them, we glimpse something about "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; 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 with its emerging diverse beings 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 [developed]." Encourage members to share how their own study and care of the creation has influenced their view of God.
4. Pastor Babcock, the author of the hymn, enjoyed hiking along a high ridge near his home in Lockport, NY, from where he could see the farmland for about fifteen miles north to Ontario.[†] His lyric, written in 1901, suggests the intrinsic and instrumental value of "all nature" with its living and nonliving creatures. It is God's beloved world, and the second verse, as revised by his granddaughter, emphasizes that we should value it (as God does) by caring for it. There is no reference to the interrelationship of the world's systems being a greater good, which is the second insight that Schaefer discusses. Perhaps this feature of the goodness of the Earth is a recent "rediscovery" for us through the science of ecology.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

† "This Is My Father's World," www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/t/i/tismyfw.htm (accessed July 13, 2012).

The Book of the Word: Reading God's Creation

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce Maximus the Confessor's view of what "the book of creation" contains and how to read it.
2. To adapt principles for reading Scripture to our reading the book of creation.
3. To consider how recognizing that creation is charged with the words of God changes our attitude toward the natural world.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Caring for Creation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn 'How Marvelous God's Greatness' locate one of the familiar tunes WHITFIELD or LANCASHIRE in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Evagrius of Pontus (345-399), from whom we learn much about the fourth-century Christians who sought a faithful life in the deserts of Egypt, tells the following story about St. Anthony (251-356), the reputed founder of that influential movement: "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.'"

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to lead you to himself through the glory of the creation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Colossians 1:15-17 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Ask a group member to read the poem aloud, or invite members to reflect on it during a period of silence.

Reflection

In the previous study guide, "Valuing the Goodness of the Earth," Jame Schaefer commended Aquinas's view that natural things, both living and nonliving, have a "sacramental quality" as windows to the presence and nature of God. In this study Elizabeth Theokritoff explores this idea more thoroughly in the writings of Maximus the Confessor, a seventh-century theologian highly venerated in the Church, East and West.

Many early Christians referred to "the book of creation." Maximus offers a subtle interpretation of this view. In order to understand his interpretation, focus on the meaning of *logos* (it can mean word, rationality, meaning, and ratio). The complex interrelationship among the *logoi*, or "words," in things allows the world to make sense to us at various levels – mathematically, scientifically, morally, and spiritually. Notice how Maximus relates these created *logoi* to the Creator-Logos, the divine Word that is miraculously embodied in Christ, Scripture, and the creation.

Study Questions

1. A “literal” reading finds meaning in the universe, but it does not point to God. Elizabeth Theokritoff mentions two opposed ways of stopping with a “literal” reading of the book of the universe: Stephen Jay Gould reduces his reading to “nature’s factuality” that says nothing about its Author, while others so attend to “the beauty of created things” that they ignore its pointing toward “the glory of its Creator.” Maximus avoids these mistakes by seeing the “words” of things as the divine Word embodied in them, and interpreting them through Christ and Scripture.

Maximus thinks the words in things “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.’” So, how does he avoid the danger of mining them for pleasing moral allegories? He says we must rid ourselves of “passions” like pride, which might lead us to assume nature has nothing difficult or demanding to teach us. Also, as we read the book of creation in light of the incarnation of the Word in Christ and Scripture, we can notice that nature is fraught with humble sacrifice and demanding judgment of our ways.

2. Assign four groups to review the application of the principles, which is not summarized in the study guide. The first one, *reading with obedience*, suggests we adopt “a sense of wonder and an attitude of listening” toward all the parts of creation (not just the beautiful or useful ones) and the whole of nature in its interdependence. Elizabeth Theokritoff says, “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.’” The second principle, *understanding the Word through the Church*, encourages us to “[integrate] the material world into worship, spiritual life, and our relationship with God,” though she warns against using “elements of ‘eco-worship’ from non-Christian sources.” The third principle, *emphasizing the centrality of Christ*, relates natural processes to Christ in two ways: the nature of Christ informs our perception of natural processes (her examples are the role of death, failure, and extinction in the evolutionary process, and our daily dependence on lowly creatures), and the work of Christ draws us into loving service to non-human creatures and systems. By the final principle, *receiving the Word in creation as personal*, she understands not “an individualistic reading of it, or to say that it concerns only my inner life,” but being prepared to “look for what God might be saying to me, today, through the natural world around me.” (Note her example of “reading” the difficult case of eagles feeding only one of their two chicks. She warns against restricting our attention to beautiful features of nature, constructing a “supposedly benign ‘mother nature.’”)
3. Theokritoff thinks that this recognition would change our attitude in two ways. First, we would adopt a spiritual asceticism, or self-discipline, to prepare ourselves differently to study and appreciate the natural world. “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.” Also, our study of nature on all levels would “keep sending us back with renewed awe to the book [of creation] we hold in our hands.”
4. Christina Rossetti commends an askesis, or disciplined preparation by God’s grace, in order to read the book of creation aright: “Lord, purge our eyes to see.” With examples (seed/tree, egg/bird, shroud/butterfly) she suggests that we must learn to see the meaning of things in their mature form that is drawing them, through surprising changes, to completion. She applies this pattern to us: we are being drawn by God’s “tender word” to our completion in loving friendship with God.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Appreciating Wilderness

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss meaning of <i>wilderness</i> ; roles in Scripture & tradition	Discuss members' experience of wilderness and plans to care for it
Questions 1, 3, and 4	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 5	Questions 3, 4, and 6
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore the role of wilderness in the biblical narrative.
2. To consider the value today of wilderness areas and the tapestry of connecting forests and marshes – both for the spiritual engagement they can foster and for other values intrinsic to their ecology.
3. To discuss how to we can learn to appreciate and care more for wilderness areas.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Caring for Creation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Thomas Cole (1801-1848) was the founder of America's first art movement, the Hudson River School of painters. This group of artists, Heidi Hornik explains, "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 city studios."

As they sought to develop a characteristic "American" art genre, the Hudson River School artists were influenced by "the interpretation of the American landscape as a manifestation of God's creation." In his "Essay on American Scenery," Cole, an Englishman by birth, explains:

...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!

In this study Susan Bratton guides us to appreciate the designated wilderness areas and tapestry of connecting lands around us as wonderful manifestations of God's creation.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to open your eyes and heart to appreciate wilderness areas as windows onto God's will and original intentions for creation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 104:1-24 from a modern translation.

Reflection

As we learn to appreciate and value the interwoven created order, we will be more drawn into God's plan to care for it, both its cultivated and uncultivated parts. This study focuses on appreciating and caring for some of the most uncultivated parts of Earth – its wilderness areas. The next two studies, "Faithful Eating" and "Doing Good Work," turn to valuing and caring for the human cultivated landscape.

If your group would like to extend their study of the appreciation of wilderness, you might explore the roles of wilderness in Scripture and Christian tradition in the first session and then discuss your experience of wilderness areas and strategies to care for them in a second session.

Study Questions

1. Psalm 104:1-24 extols features of the sky (heavens, clouds, rain, lightning, sun, moon, and the deep), wild lands (mountains, springs, forests), and wild animals (asses, birds, storks, wild goats, coney, and lions). But it also includes cultivated fields, domesticated cattle, and human cultivated foods (wine, oil, and bread). The psalm goes on to mention the sea and its many creatures, especially the awesome Leviathan. God cares for them all.
2. Hagar is driven into the wilderness by Sarah when she is pregnant and later when her son Ishmael is very young; in each case an angel appears unexpectedly to care for her and renew God's promise to her and Ishmael. Elijah runs to the wilderness to escape Queen Jezebel's wrath; an angel appears unexpectedly to care for him, and then God appears to him as a "sound of sheer silence" and promises to care for him. Jesus' disciples are surprised by Christ's transfiguration, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, and the voice of God from a bright cloud; they return with an understanding of Jesus' mission. Jesus, by contrast, knows what to expect in the wilderness and on the mount; he is confirmed in his mission.
3. Encourage members to share their experiences and compare them to those reported by Appalachian Trail hikers to Susan Bratton. "A heightened perception of the presence of God or of the divine in nature" was commonly mentioned, and a few hikers reported "intense numinous experience, visions of God, or direct encounters with the divine." Their experience was related to their previous religious commitments, prayerful preparation, and amount of time and effort expended in the wilderness. A sense of humility, thoughts of caretaking, personal peace, and assistance in negotiating a significant life transition were common.
4. First experiences in wild places can be disorienting and fearful, so we are more comfortable with a knowledgeable friend or guide (either personal or in a guidebook). Our guide knows how to deal with changing circumstances, teach us what to look for and how to appreciate it, and share their enthusiasm for wilderness places. Encourage members to name and thank God for their wilderness guides, and then consider how they can share their knowledge and enthusiasm with family members, friends, and members of the congregation.
5. The single figure in the painting (the artist, Cole, with his canvas) is very small, and the human farms and buildings are small in the distance. Yet the artist enjoys his work (he turns to smile directly at the viewer), and the humans are "living in such harmony with nature that their habitation blends into the beautiful surroundings," Heidi Hornik notes. She quotes Cole's description of the iconography of the painting (*Caring for Creation*, 53). "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," Hornik reports. "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."
6. Wes Smith describes how A Rocha and Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies are helping church members develop an "apologia of earth-care and...theology of ecology," experience wilderness at their research centers and also explore the places where they live, educate themselves and others about environmental concerns, and form communities of earth-keeping in their congregations. Consider his recommendations for how your congregation can take another step toward accomplishing these four related tasks.

Departing Hymn

"Chosen in Creation's Plan" is on pp. 43-45 of *Caring for Creation*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Faithful Eating

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Genesis 3:1-13, 21-24	Psalm 104:24-35
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)	Explore a congregational garden project
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the food we eat and how we eat it is a significant witness to creation care.
2. To outline steps we can take toward more faithful eating practices.
3. To discuss how your congregation can encourage faithful eating.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Caring for Creation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Feed Me, O Lord, with Needful Food” locate the familiar tune DUNDEE in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“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,” Elizabeth Sands Wise recalls. “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, the 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 mosquitoes. We were optimistic – perhaps too optimistic.” The water faucet was too far away from the garden, the volunteers were too few, and the neighborhood rabbits ate more than their fair share of the produce.

However, by working side-by-side in their garden, church members formed a better community. Sands Wise notes, “Relationships are different when they come together over dirt and sweat, rather than donuts and coffee.” The church gardeners discovered that as individuals they were more vulnerable before one another, and together more productive.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide you to care for the creation through the foods you choose to eat and how you eat them.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 104:21-35 from a modern translation.

Reflection

As we learn to appreciate and value the interwoven created order, we will be more drawn into God’s plan to care for it, both its cultivated and uncultivated parts. This study focuses on caring for an important aspect of the human cultivated landscape – the farms and fisheries, domesticated plants and animals, and natural resources from which we produce food. Norman Wirzba warns that today’s industrial food system is harming the creation

and is unsustainable. He suggests practical steps to become more aware of how our eating patterns impact creation.

If your group would like to extend their study of faithful eating, you might explore the damage caused to the creation by the industrial food economy in the first session and then discuss how your congregation can encourage more faithful eating in a second session.

Study Questions

1. Our eating decisions – what we eat and when and how we eat it, the amount we will pay for it, etc. – influence the demand for food products. This in turn influences how resources of water and land are used around the world, how plants are cultivated (and modified), how farm animals are cared for, how food products are preserved, shipped, stored, and packaged, how chemicals are used in the production of food, and how food workers are treated.
It's difficult to gauge the impact of our decisions because we know so little about how food is produced. "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...it is common to think that food is a commodity responsive primarily to the dictates of money," Norman Wirzba writes. "Never before have so few known with sufficient detail where food comes from and how it is sustainably and justly produced."
2. Form four groups to brainstorm specific steps members can take to implement Wirzba's suggestions to think theologically about our proper relation to food, learn about the damage caused by today's industrial food economy, become involved in food's production, and support local and sustainable food economies. Encourage them to develop one of their ideas. How will they find the expertise they need (from a church member, outside resource person, information in books or on the Internet, etc.), and how will they support one another?
3. While doing research on HIV/AIDS in Tanzania, Melissa Browning interviewed women "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," she explains. "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." Ask members to mention other cases in which industrial food production, inadvertently perhaps, damages the environment and harms food workers.
4. Elizabeth Sands Wise lists four benefits of a congregational garden as (1) an *intergenerational ministry* with members of all ages working together in appropriate ways, (2) an *avenue for outreach* to neighbors as church members share fresh produce with them, (3) a *resource to feed local people who are underresourced for fresh produce*, and (4) a *teaching tool for the congregation and its neighbors* to learn the joys of producing food and appreciate the role food plays in biblical stories. The mission statement for 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." Sands Wise notes the relationship cultivated among members through the work of the garden is the most significant benefit.
5. A congregation might share seasonal recipes that incorporate locally grown foods, offer classes in food nutrition or gardening, host a farmer's market, feature fresh local produce in its congregational meals, start a produce exchange program for home gardeners, provide financial assistance to poorer members to buy local products, sponsor field trips to local food production facilities, invite local farmers to share their concerns, etc. The benefits of these activities might be similar to those listed above for a congregational garden.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Doing Good Work

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand Wendell Berry's concept of doing good work in caring for creation.
2. To consider why we should do good work, and what virtues we will need (in every case) to do it.
3. To reflect on the depiction of good work in painting and poetry.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Caring for Creation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

"By forcing us to grapple with physical reality, work can reveal our misconceptions of our places," Jeff Bilbro writes. "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." Virgil's father, Max, recalls the morning after the storm:

It was hurt. Bound to have been. There's no way to plow sideling ground so it'll hold in a rain like that. "Virgil," I said, "this is your fault. This is one of your contributions to the world." That was hard for me to say. And he took it hard. I saw he was about to cry. As bad as I hated to do it, I let it work in him while we stood there and looked. I knew he was hating the day he ever thought of raising a crop, ready to give up. Finally I put my arm around him and I said, "Be sorry, but don't quit. What's asked of you now is to see what you've done, and learn better." I told him that a man's life is always dealing with permanence—that the most dangerous kind of irresponsibility is to think of your doings as temporary. That, anyhow, is what I've tried to keep before myself. What you do on the earth, the earth makes permanent."

Wendell Berry, *A Place on Earth* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2001 [1967]), 180

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide you to opportunities to do good work in caring for creation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 80:7-19 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this study Jeff Bilbro guides our reflection on the concept of "good work" in the writings of Wendell Berry (b. 1934), a renowned agrarian writer and a farmer in Henry County, KY. The primary focus is on loving and stewarding the creatures and places of the natural environment, both cultivated and uncultivated. However, consider how the concept also applies to our caring for the people and institutions in our lives.

Study Questions

1. By doing "good work," Wendell Berry refers to the meaningful tasks of caring for the world that God has given to humans. Jeff Bilbro explains: "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.'" We'll need virtues specific to the particular thing we are caring for – a farm, forest, community, family, congregation, etc. – but in every case we'll need fidelity, humility, and loving imagination. These virtues are salient because we are working with creatures, places, and processes we cannot fully understand. We must learn to care for things by imagining their good, remaining faithful to them, and humbly correcting our inevitable mistakes.

2. Encourage members to reflect on good work in caring for their particular family members, friends, work-places, congregation, neighborhood, etc., as well as particular creatures, places, or processes of the natural world. Select one thing and consider why it is difficult to understand, imagine its good, remain faithful to it, and humbly accept one's limitations in caring for it. Berry notes that our consumer-driven culture undermines loving attention, faithfulness, and acceptance of limitations. Discuss how his analysis applies to the case at hand.
3. Members might select a project that extends their current good work, or one that is different in some way that stretches their understanding and love. Discuss how other members of the congregation might provide knowledge about the good of the people, creatures, places, or processes that are involved, encouragement to withstand the difficulties, or cooperation in doing the work. Consider how the elements of the primary work of the congregation, which is worship and praise of God, engenders loving imagination, faithfulness, and humility.
4. The Psalm depicts God as caring for the people of Israel as a loving gardener transplants a grapevine into verdant soil and then protects it from scavenging animals and human intruders. This image of God's people as his vine or vineyard is common in prophetic writings (cf. Jeremiah 2:21 and 6:9; Ezekiel 15 and 17:1-10; Hosea 10:1 and 14:7). Jesus deploys the image in the parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1-12) and transforms it in his teaching "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower" (John 15:1 ff.).
5. Asher B. Durand's *Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York* celebrates the beauty of a particular human-cultivated landscape. Heidi Hornik reports that "his meticulous attention to the details of the landscape enables viewers today to locate the exact position from which he painted this scene." He depicts a picnicking family enjoying the vista that includes contented cattle and sheep, and cultivated fields, stands of trees, and ponds.

George Bellows *The Palisades* portrays a harmonious use of the Hudson River environs for recreation (the foreground figures stroll through "the snowy terrain of the park") and commerce (in the background are fishing buildings and a steam engine). Hornik explains, "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."

6. In the first verse, humans are "set in place by God's own hand / blessed to bless all life in deed." They are meant to work alongside God, their Maker: "every care, ours to nurture and to bear." They do not own the garden, but can know and care for its "sacred treasure...held as gifts but never owned." The second verse confesses the sinful work that separates us from fellowship with one another and God in the garden ("Eden lost time and again"). Nevertheless, "all that is, each in the Creator lives" in a way that allows us to "hear the gospel" of Christ's peace. In the final verse, redeemed humans are given places of responsibility to help restore the broken world ("setting right in truth and deed") as they work alongside Christ, their Savior, so that all things can honor God ("lifted high to heaven's throne").

Departing Hymn

"Chosen in Creation's Plan" is on pp. 43-45 of *Caring for Creation*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.