

“Dress and Keep” the Garden: Environmental Stewardship as a Biblical Motif for the “Great Commission”

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ABSTRACT—This paper identifies Christians as environmental stewards. It observes that Christians through the centuries have embarked on health, educational and evangelistic campaigns though not precluding financial stewardship campaigns in order to fulfill the “Great Commission”. But beyond stewardship of means or treasure, this paper argues that environmental stewardship could serve as a potent strategy for fulfilling the “Great Commission”. It holds that the gospel commission embodies healing, and one of the ways to bring healing is through care for the environment where people live and work. The paper submits that Christians turning their faces towards the world in compassion, getting their hands dirty, sore and worn in its service, in a way, is fulfilling the “Great Commission”. It further asserts that community services that promote environmental restoration and civic beautification help make life enjoyable by making the society pleasant and could as well attract many to the beauty of Christ. It concludes that there is a strong connectedness between environmental stewardship and the other forms of stewardship as well as with the ‘Great Commission’.

Keywords: environmental stewardship, gospel commission, civic beautification, community services.

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I. Introduction

According to Forgács, the ‘Great Commission’ (Matthew 28:19, 20) should rather be emphasized through the teaching component of the ‘Commission’ with less emphasis on evangelism (Anderson, 1998:218). On the contrary, however, Towns (1995:251) sees the ‘Great Commission’ as “the evangelistic mandate of the Church.” He posits that evangelism is in many aspects conditioned by one’s emphasis in interpreting this ‘Commission’. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that an adequate view of evangelism is dependent upon a complete understanding of the ‘Great Commission’. This ‘Commission’ is succinctly regarded as Jesus’ command to proclaim the gospel to every person throughout the world and to make disciples of all nations with the view to building and multiplying them in all nations for the goal of training other disciples for posterity. It is understood therefore, that Christ commissioned His disciples to make disciples of, and evangelize all nations. Therefore, their responsibility is to preach and teach Christ’s gospel (Bright, 2010). But how has this ‘Commission’ been fulfilled by Christians today?

Interestingly, in order to fulfill this Commission to getting the gospel to all nations, Christians through the centuries have embarked on health, educational and evangelistic campaigns, though not precluding stewardship campaigns, which are organized programs presenting the financial needs of a church to the congregation soliciting their involvement in the total work of the church which also includes the evangelistic mandate (Towns, 375). Suffice it to say that without finances, this Great Commission, to an extent, may be hampered. In line with the above financial concern, many Christians today, have mistakenly thought that stewardship is just fundraising. However, it has been observed that stewardship is simply managing one’s resources (time, talent, body and treasure or means) for the glory of God (Towns, 375). Therefore, beyond stewardship of means or treasure, this paper argues that environmental stewardship could serve as a potent strategy for fulfilling the “Great Commission.”

II. Understanding the Concept of Stewardship

In Christian tradition, stewardship follows from the belief that human beings are created by the same God who created the entire universe and everything in it. Stewardship embodies the manner, time,

talents, material possessions, or wealth are used or given for the service of God and humanity. As an ethic that embodies responsible planning and management of resources, it has been applied in diverse realms including the environment. An example of stewardship is in Genesis 2:15, which states “And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and keep it.” Looking after the Earth cannot be divorced from the responsible use and protection of the natural environment through conservation and sustainable practices. Its understanding and application to the environment in a Christian context is known as Christian environmental stewardship. According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, environmental stewardship is the responsibility for environmental quality that is shared by all those whose actions affect the environment (EPA, Aug. 26, 2011). Thus, it presupposes that as seen through God’s created order, man has a clear industrial and caretaking responsibility for nature (Lewis, 2005).

Although the notion of stewardship has been applied in diverse realms, so far the Church has unduly associated stewardship to “tithes”, “generosity” and “money”. This has supported the worldly conception of the word in terms of materialism or economy. In contemporary Christianity, it is popularized as the ‘prosperity gospel’. However, stewardship means much more than simply giving time, talent and treasure (Gray, Aug. 26, 2011: 1).

Environmental stewardship stresses that the ecological problems so evident today, such as deforestation, air pollution, water pollution, and land degradation, are not only environmental but also theological and moral problems. Hence, environmental degradation is a reflection of a disconnection between our religious belief and our behavior (Keenam, 1995). It emphasizes divine ownership and human stewardship (Geisler, 1989:302) upholding the ethical framework that humanity must be beneficent to nature as God is beneficent to humanity (Manahan, 1991:51). The biblical witness makes it clear that man is directed to work the land while at the same time care for it. Man is created in the image of God, and by using what God has provided, he can bring forth unrealized beauty and accomplishment to God’s creation. Because God has given the earth to humans, they should honour God with their use of it. Man’s stewardship of God’s resources could be summarized in a two-fold response: using and caring. Against the background of an environmental ethic rooted in God’s creation, stewardship requires Christians to treat nature now

just the way nature will be when Christ returns. Dominion is to be carried out through servant stewardship (Schaffer, 1970:50).

Christian stewardship is collective. It respects the purpose for which things exist and it respects the dignity of each person. Each person contributes to the well-being of society. Understanding that stewardship is collective requires Christians to find a way in which they can collaborate with others to make the resources at their disposal work for the good of all as God intended it. Man's use of the environment cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of one's neighbour, including generations to come; it requires respect for the integrity of creation (Gray, Aug.26, 2011). The church, therefore, has a fundamental role to play in the conservation of God's creation and the promotion of a sound environment (Keenam, 1995). Christians, particularly those in Rivers State, need to daily learn to approach the environment with respect and to be aware of what human activity can do to harm it. Building solid ethical convictions to guide the actions of her members should be the pre-occupation of the church's teaching on stewardship and mission.

III. Biblical Basis for Christian Environmental Stewardship

Rather than being seen as the basis for Christian Environmental Stewardship, the Bible has been held by some modern scholars as the culprit for environmental chaos. One of the proponents of such a view has been White who claimed that the basic Christian positions rooted in the Bible and assumed to be true are to be held culpable for environmental crisis. The heart of his thesis as stated below is very instructive:

We continue today to live as we have lived for about 1700 years, very largely in the context of Christian axioms. Our daily habits of action are dominated by an implicit faith in perpetual progress which was unknown either to Greco-Roman antiquity or to the Orient; it is rooted in, and is indefensible apart from Judeo-Christian teleology. Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen... Christianity in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps Zoroastrianism), not only establish a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man

exploit nature for his proper ends (White, 1977).

In his statement, White supposedly shows how Christian principles are devastating to the natural environment. He also posits that Christians perceive human history as not circular but linear (progressive) in nature; that because of the Christian's assumption of the image of God and the resultant claim of dominion over nature for the good of man, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion in the world. Accordingly, VanDyk (2009: 186) contends that ecological issues played insignificant roles in Biblical theology and that the Bible is often accused of being hostile or indifferent to the environment. He generates his accusation from the idea expressed in some Bible passages, particularly Genesis 1:28:

“And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

His concern was on the two Hebrew words- וְכִבְשׁוּהָ (wekibšû'hä) and וְרָבוּ (ûredû). Interestingly, regarding this seeming anthropocentric declaration of Genesis 1:28, Manus (2005:9) identified the problematic words as וְכִבְשׁוּהָ and וְרָבוּ holding that וְכִבְשׁוּהָ transliterated wekibšû'hä is from kabash meaning “to subdue” while וְרָבוּ transliterated ûredû is from radah, meaning “to have dominion.” He concludes that what the Hebrew author teaches us here with the verb radah is that it is a divine injunction to handle nature responsibly so that it can be productive to support life on earth. Echoing Keller's view, Manus asserts that the Christian principle of “dominion” in its textual context can only mean responsibility (Manus, 2005:1). Illuminating on the mandate to “subdue and have dominion over,” Hamilton posits that of the twenty-four usages in the Old Testament of “dominion,” it is “to be exercised with care and responsibility. Nothing destructive or exploitative is permissible” (Hamilton, 1982). Furthermore, *radah*, (dominion) in Genesis 1:28 thus calls Christians to have an ecological concern. They are to be responsible to guard their environment (Berry, 2007).

IV. The Mandate to “Dress” (עָבַד *`abad*) and to “Keep” (שָׁמַר *-shamar*)

Accordingly, Berry (2007:1-213) reaffirms the need for environmental sustainability. He tries to offer a Christian approach to living now in the hope that tomorrow is inevitable--he presents a Christian framework for sustainable development. He traces sustainability to God, stating that in the biblical narrative, there is no theology (study & science about God) without ecology. He presents ethical attitudes of respect and rest, which would bring environmental sustainability as products of understanding God as Creator and Sustainer. He thus makes reference to Gen.2:15 as an invitation to “dress” (עָבַד *`abad*) and “keep” (שָׁמַר *-shamar*) the garden. He sees this invitation as the heart of a practical Christian understanding of sustainable stewardship, holding that ‘tilling’ is all about working responsibly and it includes all human endeavours in managing the earth and using natural resources. This encompasses, but is not limited to, farming, animal husbandry, forestry, mining, resource extraction, hunting, fishing and industry. The “keeping”, he holds, is about ‘restrain’ and ‘respect’, which allows natural resources the capacity to renew and replenish.

He concludes with his point that God is creator and sustainer of the universe; that humans are created in his image and designed for *right relationships*--up, out and down--where ‘up’ stands for ‘God’, ‘out’ for ‘neighbours’ and ‘down’ for ‘the earth’. Following his point above on ‘right relationships’, we can deduce that a ‘right relationship’ with the ‘up’ (God) and ‘down’ (environment) affects the ‘out’ (man). If we have a right ‘knowledge’ about the interrelatedness of God, the environment and man then the Great commission could be attained even without any sermon from the pulpit. Interestingly, “He who destroys or degrades the earth dirties its reflection of its maker” (Berry, 2005). In essence, the Christians’ responsibility of being ‘stewards’ or ‘earth keepers’ has a great impact on people’s perception about the God Christians are introducing to them (contacts), which also constitutes the ‘Great Commission’. Because it is statutory for Christians to be stewards of the environment, any omission in regard to this responsibility will definitely negate any effort towards the Great Commission. It therefore follows that worshipping God (as Christians) means caring for his land and anyone claiming to worship God but does not care for the land owned by God, in reality, does not worship God. And more to that, worshipping God

also entails caring for his people because land and people, both made by God, are inseparably connected (Larsen. 1992: iii). Furthermore, it is instructive to note that Christians can jeopardize prospects of the Gospel through irresponsible behaviours toward the environment. This is so because every act of man, when it occurs, becomes irrevocably woven into the web of the cosmic process (Abogunrin, 2008:146-162). This calls for a rethinking on our approach to the “Great Commission.”

V. Christians as Environmental Stewards

According to Berry (2005), humans (Christians) are directed toward having and understanding of the environment and how they should relate to it, based on observation, study and an ethical approach to decision making and stewardship. Furthermore, Christians are called to be earth-keepers, people who ‘tend’ what God has made and entrusted to them. With the understanding that the earth is God’s and not ours, we therefore have no right to exploit the world for our own projects. They conclude by portraying a symbiotic relationship between a right understanding of the doctrine of creation and a right attitude toward that creation. In other words, there is a nexus between the attitude of man as expressed in his relationships with fellow humans and ecological wellbeing.

Forthrightly, “humankind’s continuing deviation from right relationships has damaged the earth through wasteful and greedy practices.” Worshiping God (having a vertical relationship) means caring for his land (having a horizontal relationship) and that anyone (Christian) claiming to worship God (having a vertical relationship), and does not care for the land (having a horizontal relationship) owned by God, in reality does not worship God (does not have a vertical relationship). Furthermore, worshiping God (having a vertical relationship) also means caring for his people (having a horizontal relationship) because land and people, both made by God are inseparably connected (Dale and Sandy, 1992).

From the above, we see how ecological health is tied to right relationships. We see how these authors advocate for social cognition as the absence of it could adversely affect ecological wellbeing since humans are part of the environment. Nevertheless, seeking for societal transformation surveyed the activities of Prosperity Gospel exponents and thus presents the underlying words:

These preachers should rather be the outspoken champions of the poor in their demand for social justice... As earlier observed, socio-political and economic problems of our country are results of structural injustice. There is more in our nation for everybody's need, but majority is denied their rights, because of greed and avarice of the few, who claimed to be leaders (Dada, 2004: 95-107).

From Dada's excerpt, he identifies the fact that the poor and the marginalized seek social transformation. He attributes the socially degraded state of the nation to greed--a strong desire and quest for more wealth at the detriment of the poor and marginalized. In other words, he identifies the root cause of a country's social malady as greed. One may wish to understand how greed, a social vice, could hamper environmental wellbeing. Although Dada's quest in this regards is for social transformation, it may not be out of place to state that the environmental crisis in Nigeria could be linked with social rottenness, which has its root in the neglect of the Christians' responsibility (Genesis 2:15) to maintain the right relationship with others, which has ecological implications.

On the other hand, there is another reason why destructive conduct with respect to the environment is as pervasive as it is. Severe environmental damage is often the result of the accumulation of individually negligible effects. Even the health effects of an individual act of ill-relationships are typically negligible (Feinberg, 1995:245-257). In essence, Christians' responsibility of being 'environmental stewards,' or 'earth keepers,' has great impact on the environment as any deviation from such responsibility could be detrimental to the environment.

VI. Christian Environmental Stewardship as a Strategy for Mission

One way Christians can fulfill their 'Great Commission' mandate is through community service. Community service has to do with performing an action which benefits one's community. Though it is sometimes associated with punishment (since it is often offered to small time offenders in place of fines or jail term), community service is basically altruistic. It is often performed by volunteers who are not paid for their time as a way to help out or connect with their

community. Community service creates healthier and livelier communities. It helps in building a rich and supportive society of people who know each other and lend each other a helping hand. It is a way for individuals or groups to identify in practical ways with the needs of the society. Some people engage in community service because they believe it carries rewards beyond the obvious and tangible. Community services that promote environmental restoration and civic beautification help make life enjoyable by making the society pleasant (McMahon, November, 2012). Engaging in community service helps people to develop the positive character traits of responsibility, care, citizenship, cooperation, and camaraderie. It is a good example of Christian social concern or involvement. Stewardship therefore imposes on us the morality of responsibility and accountability.

While some churches engage in community service, others are yet to embrace the practice. This scenario aptly captures the opinion of John Stott who said there are only two possible attitudes which Christians can adopt towards the world. One is escape while the other is engagement. By escape he meant Christians treating the world with an attitude of rejection, washing their hands of it and steeling their hearts against its agonized cries for help. The opposite will be engagement. This means Christians turning their faces towards the world in compassion, getting their hands dirty, sore and worn in its service, and feeling deep within them the stirring of the love of God which cannot be contained (Stott, 1984:13-14). Yet, the history of the church has seen evangelism and social concern intimately working together. Christians have often engaged in both activities quite unselfconsciously, without feeling any need to define what they were doing or why (Stott, 1982).

In Rivers State, Nigeria, Salvation Ministries, driven by the philosophy of 'cleanliness is next to godliness', engages in periodic community service. The church has carried out many community services in various parts of Rivers State, especially in communities where its branches are located. The church started with 'operation filling the pot holes'. The road to Rumuosi community, where one of its branches is located, was not drivable. Through the Community Development Council and the traditional ruler, the youth were mobilized. The members of the church at Rumuosi have carried out community service at Uzuoba, Rumuekinni and Rumuosi communities. They cleaned the blocked gutters and filled pot holes. Rivers State Environmental Sanitation Authority (RSESA) helped

with their vehicles to evacuate the dirt. The government, through the RSESA, gave the church bags, waste vans, etc. The programme is done quarterly (every three months). But there is a plan to make it a monthly event, preferably every last week of the month or the first Saturday in conjunction with the state government. The last ones were held on Saturday, 27th August and Saturday, 3rd September, 2011. The church believes that beyond sermons, it is necessary to meet the needs of the people. Since a dirty environment makes people sick, they decided to meet the people's need for a clean environment and good health. This programme of the church had made many members of the host communities to join the church. For example, at Rumuosi community, the membership of the church has grown by over 70% percent since after the first community service in the community. By this development, the church has realized the key objective of embarking on the exercise which is soul-winning (Oral Interview, 2012).

When one degrades or pollutes the environment, it causes displacement, disease and even death. The gospel commission embodies healing and one of the ways to bring healing is through care for the environment where people live and work. The gospel will be less successful among displaced, diseased and bereaved families. When people are also sick and spend their scarce resources on treatment of their poor health, they are likely to contribute less to the evangelism fund of the church.

VII. Conclusion

From a Christian perspective, human beings, together with the entire universe, are created by the same God. Consequently, they are closely related to all aspects of creation. However, human beings have a special role within the cosmos. There is also a unique relationship between man and his creator who has granted him leave to act responsibly within the created order. The term that is conventionally employed to define the scope and nature of that responsibility is 'stewardship'. The stewardship mandate is recorded in Genesis 2:15 where humans are told "to tend and care for" the garden. Christian stewardship focuses on an evangelical interpretation of the biblical mandate for humans to care for the earth. It demands that humans should act responsibly towards the rest of creation. This point is central to the Judeo-Christian response to the world. The

world is given to all. Its heritage is of enduring value made for the benefit of all generations. The gifts of the earth come under covenanted conditions, and the covenant is 'forever.' There is a strong connectedness between environmental stewardship and the other forms of stewardship as well as with the 'Great Commission'.

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