

Environmental Stewardship

A consultation held at St George's House, Windsor Castle
15th – 17th September 2000

Brought together by St George's House and JRI this consultation drew on wide scientific and theological expertise. It discussed a contemporary and practical understanding of 'Stewardship'. Applying Chatham House rules it was agreed not to report on individual contributions, though the names of key contributors are listed. This paper summarises the discussion and the conclusions.

Introduction

According to Christian understanding, human beings are created by the same God who created the entire universe and everything in it. We consequently share a close relationship with all aspects of creation. Human beings, however, are seen to have a special role within the created order. They have a uniquely close relationship with their Creator who has charged them with acting responsibly within his creation.

The term 'Stewardship' is conventionally used to express the scope and nature of that responsibility. However, today the term often has negative connotations. It has been criticised as implying that we can influence global events, that it neglects God's immanence, that it is exploitative, that it assumes human domination and overemphasises our importance in the span of Earth history.

It is not in dispute that humans do act, both detrimentally and beneficially, towards the world. With or without biblical labelling of our role, we are the most influential creatures on the planet.

The question in dispute is that of human intention: how our view of our role affects our behaviour, and how a changed view of role might enable a reorientation of our behaviour. Faced with climate change and largescale destruction of species and eco-systems, many beyond determined environmentalists are calling for an urgent review of human beings' place within the world.

We need to ask, does the term Stewardship clarify the human task in the world, and can it contribute to current theological, philosophical, scientific and pragmatic debate?

To be a Steward

If we are Christians, Stewardship is an idea we will want to think through, since it represents the essential human job description. To want to know God, is to want to know our role, in relation to him and his world.

But there is a more public urgency to the debate. First is the pressing fact that the human face reflected in the mirror of the planet is ugly, greedy and rapacious. In relation to the environment, it is untamed humanity, not untamed nature, that is seen to be the problem.

Second, our sense of role is now confused. Since post-modern relativism came to dominance, the earlier assumption that humans had a purpose in the world, deriving from authority over other creatures, has given way to a sense that any attempt to define the human task must be 'speciesism'. The vacuum in human self-definition is felt on all sides.

However, many who have no faith or commitment to a creator God, but who believe that humans have a role in caring for their environment, use the idea of Stewardship. They consider that stewardship can be understood as human care alone, without any reference to God. Therefore the theological challenge is to understand why true stewardship, that is to say, stewardship *on behalf of the Owner*, changes both the spirit and indeed the practicalities of human action.

More than prudence and thrift

A secondary meaning of Stewardship has developed within churches, restricted simply to financial prudence and thrift. But terms such as 'Stewardship committees' and 'Stewardship schemes', whose valid task is to encourage financial giving among the membership, should not distract attention from the full meaning of Stewardship.

Environmental Stewardship within churches has a growing following, and needs to be robust and radically analytic about possible actions. Churches could benefit from seeing how their methods and procedures match up to such secular approaches as the ISO1400 internationally recognised Environmental Management System (EMS). This is a set of management standards that enables organisations to see and modify how their activity impacts on their environment.

Lessons from the Bible

Genesis is the foundational document of Scripture, which sets out, in contrast to contemporary worldviews, the basic relationships between God the creator and lord of all; the beings he has made, heavenly and earthly; and humankind, also a creature but made for fellowship with him and thus in his image.

In Genesis 2:15 humans are told to '*abad*' the garden in which they have been placed. This Hebrew word is most commonly translated as 'tend'. This might imply that we look after the garden so that it serves us. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, however, '*abad*' is translated as to 'serve' (eg Genesis 25:23; 27:29; Ex 14:12). In other words, our task is to operate within our particular garden (ie the area we can influence) in a way that primarily benefits the garden – so as to be the garden's servant.

The other word with regard to our relationship towards the garden is '*shamar*' a word that implies guarding and protecting from harm (see its use in Genesis 3:24; 4:9). It does not imply that the agent should preserve the garden in the sense of stopping it changing, but rather of protecting it so that it can live in peace.

A third important, though neglected, concept in Genesis is 'rest'. Rest is seen as essential and beneficial. We are told that such rest is 'holy'. Everybody and everything needs to have regular periods of rest. After six days of creation God rested and it was this day of rest, not the preceding days of activity that were deemed to be holy (Genesis 2:3). A Steward must be able to respect and enjoy the wellbeing of creation, and know when it is appropriate to leave things alone.

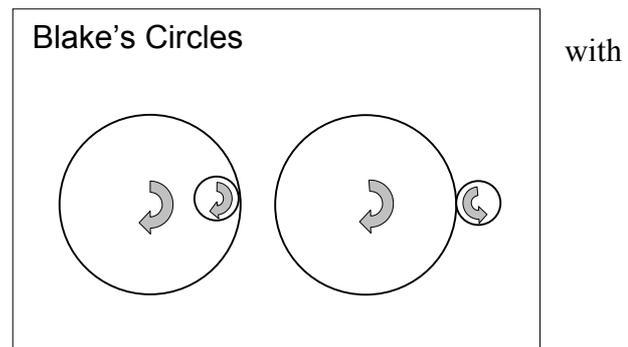
The most controversial term in Genesis is that of ‘dominion’. In Genesis 1:28 God gives humans an explicit role in “subduing” and “having dominion over” all other animals. This task was limited to humanity. Other commands addressed to our first parents, to “be fruitful and increase, and fill the earth”, were given also to the non-human creation (Genesis 1:22). The injunction to subjugation and domination has been commonly misinterpreted as meaning that creation was given to the human species for our own profit and pleasure.

The text does not say that. The kingly rule indicated by dominion was epitomised for the Israelites by the loving pastoral care of the shepherd-king, David. It was to be exercised by those “made in God’s image” – in other words, ruling in God’s way, on God’s behalf; which is Stewardship.

A pattern for stewardship can also be found in the command given to Noah, whose care, most conspicuously among bible characters, was for all the creation. His action of bringing pairs of animals into the ark did more than simply keep some individuals alive. It preserved whole species. Likewise, the protection of the reproductive potential of a large number of species is particularly important in an age when biodiversity is under threat.

The Old Testament writers had no word for the environment or for nature. They accepted that human beings were separate from the rest of the created order but all were part of the same creation. This complex relationship brings about a way of operating within creation, which could be described as working alongside God, going in his direction.

William Blake vividly illustrated this idea with two circles. A large circle depicted God’s activity, and a smaller one represented the activity of an individual person. The two circles touch so that as God’s circle turns it causes the human being circle to turn. The human circle can turn the same way, or the opposite way as God’s: if it is inside God’s circle it turns in the same direction – if outside, it turns in the opposite direction.



‘Turning in the same direction’ as God, should mean that we will perform tasks that are genuinely required, and not done simply because we are technically able to perform them. It can also reinforce an attitude of humility, based on the fact that we achieve most when we listen to and follow the creator-God.

Lessons from other Abrahamic religions

The Abrahamic religions share the idea of a creator who actively involves humankind in his work. A major difference between Christianity, and Judaism and Islam is Christianity’s understanding of a “fall” and the subsequent restoration achieved, but not yet realised, by Christ’s redeeming work. Notwithstanding, the almost universal recognition of massive environmental damage coupled with the understanding of the Torah and the Qur’an have meant that Jews and Muslims have developed Stewardship traditions similar in practice to those of Christianity.

World Bank Vice President Ismail Serageldin is explicit from his background in Islam: “God’s grace is conditioned on the proper execution of Stewardship” – and while Christians would not agree that grace is limited in this way, they would certainly see love towards the creation as an outworking of grace.

Steward is a verb, as well as a noun

Numerous local, national and international conferences have addressed the complex interactions between human beings and their environment. Most have been negative, often seeking to restrict human activity. They have tended to generate pessimism, and words more than action.

By contrast, Stewardship demands positive involvement, and it enables people to find fulfilment as they foster growth and fruitfulness. In many ways we could learn from communities like the Amish who live out a practical concern for the land, plants and animals, rather than just discussing the concept.

Today, the whole concept of making changes to the environment is questioned. Yet conservation is different from preservation. Preservation tries to freeze a particular moment in time; but conservation allows that nature is dynamic. Working with a dynamic environment implies being ready to make changes.

But taking responsibility for change requires clear thought. Six questions need to be asked:

1. Should we change ourselves to fit in with the world, or should we try to change the world we live in?
2. Why should God want change since he made a “good” creation?
3. Are there limits to the scope of our activity?
4. What does our action mean in God’s eyes?
5. Do we actually know enough to make judgments?
6. Are we a part of the natural ecology (i.e. do we have the right to be here?)

Such questions are pertinent if applied to a major ‘change’ issue such as GM crops.

The generation game

Practical Stewardship involves not only protecting creation during the present time, but also ensuring that creation has a future.

There is a pressing need to protect bio-diversity by ensuring that species retain their ability to reproduce. Management of resources may involve controlling the populations of some species, thought obviously not the the point of extinction. We can quickly see the extent of our failure if we add the current catalogue of plants and animals on the endangered list to the tally of those already lost or exterminated.

Christian motivation

Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection offers hope in that our rebellious acts against God have been dealt with and we can have a fresh start. This new beginning is a form of healing and the Bible maintains that it applies not only to human beings, but also to the whole of creation, which Paul says has been ‘groaning’ as if in labour, waiting for its own new birth into freedom through Jesus Christ (Romans 8:20-22).

Where much of the environmental movement is burdened by guilt, Christians by contrast can admit their mistakes, receive forgiveness and then live freely, in ways that reduce the likelihood of repeating old mistakes. In this we have the privilege of working alongside God, as he restores our relationship with him, and enables us to build a proper relationship with the rest of his creation.

Stewardship involves sustainability

The long-term aims implied by the notion of Stewardship can only be accomplished if resources are not squandered but used as sustainably as possible. In the ideal of true sustainability, resources are used efficiently; only renewable resources are used and all waste is recycled. A Steward will press for movement towards this ideal both in the consumption of resources (e.g. food, energy and materials) and in the disposal of waste. We do need to take recycling more seriously, by developing systems that encourage the re-use of containers (plastic, glass and metal), rather than the current habit of using and throwing away. In the developed world, consumption has been rising unsustainably. Deliberate moves towards sustainable consumption are urgently required.

Towards responsible management

The accountability involved in Stewardship operates at many different levels. At the lowest level there is the requirement for everyone to make best use of his or her own domestic materials. This will include having the most energy efficient home possible, not wasting water and recycling waste wherever possible. It is wrong to think that Stewardship and sustainable consumption are problems for policy-makers and that nothing we can do affects our planet and its future. There are issues that each one of us needs to consider in our home, hobbies and at work.

A second level is management by local communities. For example, planning permission for new projects should take into consideration whether the proposal makes best use of any resources. This may involve issues of land use and sustainability. Planning laws often give local people the power to organise development in ways that will hand a healthy world to future generations. Can we be bothered to exercise those powers wisely?

Thirdly, government and industry, at both national and multi-national levels have the capability to act in ways that either serve or damage the long-term good of the earth and the species that live on it. Even more frightening is that our responsibility is expanding, as exploration moves into space. We need to beware of leaving a legacy of damage that restricts the activity of future generations. Contemporary poor Stewardship includes not only the disposal of old bottles, cars and computers, but also what the growing mass of junk in space, which is accumulating so much that it is becoming increasingly dangerous to place satellites in orbit around the earth.

Stewardship needs science

A good Steward recognises the need to monitor and measure, so that he or she can more fully understand how ecological systems operate, and so that the human race can develop less destructive ways of living within the world.

There is a growing appreciation of the way that what happens in one part of the world influences another. For example, burning fossil fuels and cutting down rainforests affect the world's carbon dioxide balance and causes damaging changes in climate and rises in sea level. While we recognise that this is occurring there is an urgent need for research that aims to understand the mechanisms of the interconnections and to quantify the effects.

To give an example, trees remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere when they are growing. To what extent does this compensate for the burning of fossil fuels? What area of forest needs to be planted to make a significant difference? And what happens when the trees have stopped growing?

Like every living entity, humankind affects the environment that it lives in. We, however, have the intellectual power to understand the potential results of our actions. With this knowledge we can plan development strategies that will not harm and may even benefit the ecosystem. This should allow us to develop technologies that support a fulfilling lifestyle, although the technology must be appropriate to the principal aims of good Stewardship.

Learning from Gaia

Gaia theory is based on the idea that the Earth is a complex interacting ecological/biophysical system. The theory has changed the way that we view the world. It implies that the Earth's 'natural' feedback mechanisms have been maintaining the Earth for billions of years. There is an organic, dynamic relationship between the physical and the biological components of our environment.

The implications of this network are vast. For example without water there would be no life, but few people realise that without life there would be no water. In the absence of life, carbon dioxide would rise until it became a major component of the atmosphere, not the trace gas it is now. Methane would vanish in a few decades and oxygen would vanish in a few million years. The world would soon – in geological terms – become too hot for life. When the oxygen goes there would be nothing to stop the loss of hydrogen to space, and since hydrogen comes from water, the oceans would begin to go. In a billion years or so the Earth would be just like Mars and Venus, a dry and utterly inhospitable planet.

There are two key principles that underpin Gaian understanding. One is that there are firm and binding rules that limit the growth of organisms so that ecosystems are stable and resilient. The second is that those who live well with their environment favour the success of their progeny – living well with the Earth should be a priority of any individual or species that seeks to have a future.

The Earth system operates most effectively during the long periods of glaciation and not so well during the brief interglacials, like now. An interglacial is a condition where the normal responses to excessive warmth do not work and the Earth's temperature rises; somewhat like a fever in one of us. It is a bad time for us to be adding the blanket of greenhouse gas to an already overheated planet.

The idea of the Earth exerting strong self-regulation suggests that attempts to 'manage' the environment are likely to have a limited effect, especially while in ignorance of the mechanisms. This means that Stewardship needs to be about determining what is actually going on in the earth system and humbly working with it. Trying to impose alternative controls may at best not work, or at worst be counter-productive.

Gaia has helped us recognise that human beings are inseparable from the created order. In the physical sciences, we see strong links between scientific laws, to the extent that physicists continue to seek for even more unifying principles at the most fundamental levels. Biologists have found that all living organisms share a common information-carrying mechanism utilising molecules of DNA and RNA. The specific code sequences, or genes, that are carried within these molecules are shared between species. Human beings have 98.5% of their genetic code in common with chimpanzees (and 50% with bananas). The methods by which these codes are translated are similar throughout all animals and plants.

Responsible action

Stewardship demands that we act responsibly towards the environment. This means that we need to integrate science, ethics and practical experience. We must work to maintain systems that are working well and restore systems that are failing. Such restorative action may require some form of compensation to support altered systems and help them while they recover. Acting as a Steward may have unexpected consequences and will require an experimental approach to test new ideas.

Principles of Stewardship

As Christian stewards, there are principles that can guide our actions and help us respect the integrity of creation:

1. Acknowledge God as Creator and Owner
2. Care for Creation, because it is entrusted to us
3. Keep God's Earth as God keeps us
4. Protect Creation's regenerative potential
5. Do not exploit the Creation beyond meeting our basic needs
6. Be a disciple of the Final Adam, Jesus Christ. Do not follow the first Adam
7. Do not violate the ordinances by which Creation is ordered
8. Seek first the kingdom of God; do not seek selfish gain or self-interest
9. Do not fail to act on what you know is right

Criticisms of 'Stewardship'

So far, we have assumed that Stewardship is a responsibility and opportunity laid upon all of us by the creator. However, some critics argue that the idea is unrealistic or even a sign of a lack of faith that the creator will care for his creation.

Anthropocentric

A common complaint of environmental activists is that Stewardship means that the earth was made exclusively for human beings – that having dominion over nature is the same as having the power and right of domination. This is often blamed for the extent of pollution currently experienced, despite the fact that poor stewardship, using up the resources that were to hand, has been practised historically in many societies which never had the bible.

The criticism derives, however, from a false interpretation of Genesis, which properly understood indicates that human beings are created to be servants of, not as masters over,

creation. The prime example of this leader/servant is of course Jesus Christ, who showed that self-sacrificial service is the way to exert our power and influence.

Moreover, good Stewardship implies that we avoid extremes. While all things have a use for humankind, they are not made for us alone.

Gaia shows humankind's limited scope

Another criticism doubts the ability of human beings to carry out any Stewarding role, even if we want to. This is apparently supported by Gaia theory, which is based on the idea that the earth has its own built-in mechanisms that redress damage. After all, life has survived on this tiny planet despite over 30 impacts from massive meteors and numerous huge volcanic eruptions. Gaia's enthusiasts are fearful that the love of technology may make humankind think that we have the power and ability to be managers.

The Gaian view sees us as very much a part of the Earth. Therefore how we act affects its and our future. A cynical view says that "nature does not exist for us, had no idea we were coming and does not give a damn about us... We are virtually powerless over the earth at our planet's own geological time scale... On geological scales, our planet will take good care of itself and let time clear the impact of any human malfeasance" (Gould, 1993:48-49). But this is not the Gaian view, in which we have the capacity to live well with the Earth and improve it for us and for all life: a doctrine which is nonetheless not the same as a stewardship, which implies managing a possession.

The Gaian view is often linked with a denial that God created the world and has a purpose for the human beings he placed within it. However this does not follow from Gaia. Gaian theory is not incompatible with the notion that God created and participates in a system that apparently controls itself.

Political and managerial exploitation

Some critics maintain that Stewardship is flawed because it presupposes a hierarchical social order of control and obedience. It is seen as despotic and imperialistic. It leads to the assumption that the world exists only as a source of resources and our only aim is to maximise profits. In other words, Stewardship means little more than "optimising" our use of resources on the basis of market forces, expecting that rarity / scarcity will force up prices and hence protect the over-exploitation of resources. Put like this, Stewardship smacks of repression and unresponsive government. This is in fact merely an extension of the anthropocentric criticism (see above).

Once again, however, this view ignores the Genesis teaching that human beings were commanded to '*abad*', to serve, the garden as they act as Stewards. We need to insist that Stewardship demands good management, but management that sees the system as more important than the manager.

Stewardship in a theological vacuum

An essential implication of Stewardship is that human beings are not owners, but are merely acting on the owner's behalf. If no mention is made of God the owner, then it leaves the impression that humankind alone is in charge and is responsible. This ignores the Christian understanding that human beings act as covenant partners with God, and leads to two errors.

First, it implies deism – the idea of a creator who is absent from his creation. At best it sees God as an absentee landlord, someone who started the ball rolling and then has left it in the hands of his Stewards. Secondly, it divorces creation from redemption. The Bible describes the whole of creation groaning in anticipation of this redemption, which is God’s work, not man’s.

Neither of these errors belongs with Stewardship, but they are dangerous potential pitfalls, particularly when Christians use the concept in discussion with people of another or no faith. A Christian counter-understanding is illustrated by Jesus’ intervention when he turned water into wine (John 2:1-10). This can be seen as an overcoming of devastation – a sign of redemption. However, it only came about because the human servants in the story obeyed his instructions. In this they acted as loyal Stewards working to further the revelation of the Son of God.

Ways forward

Alternative terms

Stewardship represents humanity as companions, tenants, curators, trustees or guardians. Good Stewards represent the interests of the voiceless – the poor, the weak, other species, future generations, the Earth. A correct Christian understanding of ‘dominion’ is identical with Stewardship.

Other terms have been suggested as alternatives to Stewardship, but each has limitations. Terms such as friend, co-creator or manager express some elements of the concept, but it could be argued that Stewardship encapsulates all of them.

Priesthood is another possibility. It begins with the acknowledgement of humanity created in the image of God and called to continue God’s blessing of creation, preserving its beauty and nurturing its fruitfulness. Human beings are to act as priests as they offer back to God the creation, which has come originally from his hand. This use is popular in traditions like Eastern Orthodoxy that place high value of the ideas of blessing and offering. It suffers in contemporary language from the fact that few people in the Western tradition understand this usage of ‘priesthood’.

Status quo is dangerous

The escalation in use of resources and output of pollutants is threatening our very existence. Leaving things as they are is not a valid option. If Gaia theory is correct then the Earth system will continue, but the consequent global upheavals will be most unpleasant, and perhaps fatal to the human species.

Many people are only goaded into action when faced with disaster or when they see a common foe. One possibility is that environmental campaigns, in rallying support for environmental care, could encourage people to see themselves as ‘stakeholders’ in their environment. People need to see that they are part of the problem, but that they can be part of the solution.

A Christian difference

Stewardship moves the debate away from self-interest to focussing on the ‘owner’ of the earth, i.e. God. While enlightened self-interest may cause us to act cautiously, it carries no implication of being responsible to God for our actions. The Christian understanding is that God is the creator and continues to work within his creation to sustain it (Col 1:17). Ignoring his sustaining role means that we diminish God and the sacred nature of the entire creation of which humankind is an integral part. Serving and preserving the Earth is an act of worship.

Christians believe that God has given us a unique responsibility to serve the world and that we are all individually and personally accountable for our actions. We need to live in each day as if we will die tomorrow, but look after the Earth as if we will be on it forever.

Key contributors

Professor Robin Attfield
Professor Sam Berry
Professor Calvin De Witt

Sir John Houghton

Professor James Lovelock
Dr Pete Moore

The Revd Dr Murray Rae

Professor of Philosophy, Cardiff University
Professor of Genetics, University College London
Professor of Environmental Studies, University of Wisconsin and Director, Au Sable Institute
Chairman – The John Ray Initiative
Co-Chairman, Scientific Assessment Working Group
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
Hon Visiting Fellow, Green College Oxford
Professional Science Writer, Visiting Fellow Trinity College Bristol. (*Meeting rapporteur*)
Lecturer in Systematic Theology, King’s College, London

THE·JOHN·RAY·INITIATIVE

The John Ray Initiative promotes responsible environmental stewardship in accordance with Christian principles and the wise use of science and technology. The JRI organises seminars and disseminates information on environmental stewardship.

Inspiration for the JRI is taken from John Ray (1627-1705), scientist and Christian, who pioneered systematic classification of plants and animals.

<p><i>For more information contact us at:</i> JRI, QW212, University of Gloucestershire, Francis Close Hall, Swindon Road, Cheltenham GL50 4AZ, UK. Tel: 012 4254 3580 Fax: 087 0132 3943</p>	<p><i>The John Ray Initiative</i> is a company limited by guarantee and a Registered Charity Company Registration No: 3420063 Registered Charity No: 1067614</p>
---	--