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# Evangelicals and the Environment Going Beyond Stewardship

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IN THE RECENT CAPE TOWN Commitment issued after the 2010 Lausanne Congress in Cape Town, South Africa, evangelicals affirmed their love for the world of God's creation, repenting of waste and destruction to the environment and committing themselves 'to urgent and prophetic ecological responsibility'. The Cape Town Commitment also calls evangelical Christians to 'adopt lifestyles that renounce habits of consumption', 'exert governments... on issues of environmental and potential climate change', and recognize that environmental protection and restoration is part of our missional calling.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, evangelicals have gone a long way in making environmental care an integral part of our mission. This is not surprising, considering the

ecological challenges that our world faces today. In Asia, we are witnesses to natural disasters that have often been caused or aggravated by human carelessness and neglect. To be indifferent to the suffering caused by our destructive attitudes to the ecosystems that support and sustain our life on the planet is not only a mark of folly, but it also imperils our Christian witness since it opens us to the accusation that Christianity, with its dominion theology, has caused or contributed greatly to the ecological crisis<sup>2</sup> and that Christians are insensitive to needs outside our own 'church' concerns.

As evangelicals, with our presupposition of an authoritative Scripture, it is essential that our stance is supported by a solid biblical foundation. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization, *The Cape Town Commitment*, Part 1, Sec. 7a; Part 2, Sec. 6. Available Online: <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/ctcommitment.html#p1-1>.

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<sup>2</sup> Lynn White Jr.'s article, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* 155 (1967), 1203-07, has often been cited. It traces the roots of the ecological crisis to the Christian teaching of humanity's dominion over living creatures, giving human beings the license to exploit their environment for the sake of economic growth, without any regard for the preservation and sustainability of life on earth.

we need to move from exegesis to articulating a biblical theology for Christian engagement on environmental issues. To do this, we need an organizing principle that would help us select biblical texts that are relevant to the subject matter, organize these diverse texts into a coherent arrangement, weigh the selected text in relation to which provide the deepest insight, and lastly, correlate these texts to form an integrated whole. In addition to this, we need to discern which concept or theme would resonate the most in our Asian context.

## I Evangelicals and Stewardship

The predominant organizing principle for evangelical environmental hermeneutics and theology is the concept of stewardship.<sup>3</sup> Several evangelical declarations on the environment stress this theme:

Because we have sinned, we have failed in our *stewardship of creation*. Therefore we repent of the way we have polluted, distorted, or destroyed so much of the Creator's work. ....We make this declaration knowing that until Christ returns to

reconcile all things, we are called to be *faithful stewards* of God's good garden, our earthly home.<sup>4</sup>

In the beginning, God established just relationships amongst all of creation. Women and men—as image-bearers of God—are called to serve and love the rest of creation, accountable to God as *stewards*. Our care for creation is an act of worship and obedience towards the Creator.

We, however, have not always been faithful stewards. Through our ignorance, neglect, arrogance and greed, we have harmed the earth and broken creation's relationships. Our failure to be faithful stewards has caused the current environmental crisis, leading to climate change, and putting the earth's ecosystems at risk. All creation has been subjected to futility and decay because of our disobedience.<sup>5</sup>

All human beings are to be stewards of the rich abundance of God's good creation. We are authorized to exercise godly dominion in using it for the sake of human welfare and needs, for example in farming, fishing, mining, energy generation, engineering, construction, trade, medicine. As we do so, we are also commanded to care for the earth and all its creatures, because the earth

3 See Calvin Dewitt, *Caring for Creation: Responsible Stewardship of God's Handiwork* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998); Loren Wilkinson, ed. *Earthkeeping in the 90's: Stewardship of Creation* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); Fred Van Dyke, David C. Mahan, Joseph K. Sheldon and Raymond H. Brand, *Redeeming Creation: The Biblical Basis for Environmental Stewardship* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996); and Douglas Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

4 Evangelical Environmental Network, 'An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation' (1993). Available Online: <http://www.creationcare.org/blank.php?id=39>.

5 Micah Network, 'Declaration on Creation Stewardship and Climate Change' (2009), Par. 3. Available Online: [http://www.micah-network.org/sites/default/files/doc/resources/mn\\_declaration\\_on\\_creation\\_stewardship.pdf](http://www.micah-network.org/sites/default/files/doc/resources/mn_declaration_on_creation_stewardship.pdf).

belongs to God, not to us. We do this for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ who is the creator, owner, sustainer, redeemer and heir of all creation.<sup>6</sup>

The main insight of the stewardship concept in relation to the environment is that human beings are not the owners of the world and of creation. The real owner is God and human beings are only caretakers who must 'steward' the earth according to God's purposes. Here, the human is a trustee, entrusted with the care of what God owns.<sup>7</sup> The image of the steward is drawn from the New Testament text of the 'Parable of the Talents' (Mt. 25:14-30). A steward is a household manager, who is in charge of ensuring that the master's wealth and possessions are used well and even multiplied (Lk. 12:42-48; 16:1-9). Like abilities and financial resources, creation is seen as a natural resource which must be managed well as part of a Christian's accountability to God.

The main text often used to expound the concept of stewardship is Genesis 1-2. Basically, the argument is that the mandate to rule over creation in Genesis 1:26-28 is not a licence to exploit nature, but rather a charge to preserve it and care for it (cf. Gen. 2:15). Dominion does not mean domi-

nation. Here, rulership is exercised not by an abusive dictator-king, but rather by a steward who manages and utilizes resources in order to conserve and enhance, rather than destroy.

## II The Limitations of Stewardship

However, some have pointed out the limitations of the stewardship concept as an organizing principle for Christian engagement on environmental concerns. First, the household metaphor of a steward has been expanded to apply to the world of business, and in evangelical circles has been extensively used in relation to the utilization of financial resources, particularly in fund-raising, entrepreneurship, and financial accountability. Thus, as Christopher Wright points out, it emphasizes 'the management of things rather than of caring relationships'.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the values of the corporate world are geared towards the efficient and productive utilization and multiplication of resources. Creation, however, is viewed more than as a 'natural resource' in Scripture. This can be seen in the use of active and emotive language for creation in relation to the non-human creation: the land moans (Is. 33:9; Hos. 4:3; Jer. 12:11), the ground cries out (Gen. 4:10), the trees clap their hands (Is. 55:12), the

<sup>6</sup> *The Cape Town Commitment*, Part 2, Sec. 6. (italics added).

<sup>7</sup> A good definition of the concept is found in William M. Pinson, Jr., 'A Denominational Perspective on Biblical Stewardship', *The Earth is the Lord's: Christians and the Environment* (ed. Richard D. Land and Louise A. Moore; Nashville: Broadman, 1992): 'the responsible care of all that we are and possess as a trust from God to be used according to His plan and purpose' (135).

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Wright, 'The Earth is the Lord's: Biblical Foundations for Global Ecological Ethics and Mission', in *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective* (eds. Noly J. Toly and Daniel I. Block; Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), 230; Also in *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 123.

earth trembles (Ps. 97:4; 104:32), the mountains and hills skip like rams and lambs (Ps. 114:4, 6), the whole creation groans (Rom. 8:22).

Even though these are metaphors that personify nature, they point to the reality that non-human creation is not just inert matter, waiting to be worked on by human hands.<sup>9</sup> It is not just an object for scrutiny and study, but a subject in its own right. It has a life of its own; it is sustained by God and flourishes under God's eye, apart from human control and intervention. This can be clearly seen in Psalm 104 which shows how God gives water (vv. 10-13, 16), provides food (14-15, 21, 27-28) and shelter (vv. 17-18) for all the living creatures of the earth. In the book of Job, God delights in the wildness of animals, such as the Behemoth and Leviathan, which do not necessarily serve any human purpose and are not often seen by the human eye (Job 39:1-12; 40:15-41:34).<sup>10</sup>

This relates to another critique of the stewardship concept: it can lead to a utilitarian view of creation because it emphasizes the 'wise use' of resources. This wise use, however, can

be defined in relation to what is good for human beings, whether this refers to the present or future generations. In this formulation, the reason for preserving the environment is that it can continue to do its work of sustaining humanity. Non-human creation then is valuable only in an instrumental sense, in so far as it contributes to the welfare, development, and advancement of human beings. When this view is combined with the emphasis of stewardship on wealth creation and multiplication, this can legitimize exploitative environmental practices for the sake of human profit,<sup>11</sup> especially on behalf of the dominant classes and nations.<sup>12</sup>

Scripture shows, however, that creation has value apart from its benefit to human beings. God declared parts of the created order as good even before the entrance of human beings into the world (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). It is God the Creator who has given creation its value.<sup>13</sup> The notion that creation exists only for human beings is contradicted by Psalm 104, which shows how springs, trees, mountains, plants, the great sea provide nourishment and shelter to God's non-human creatures.<sup>14</sup> But above all, creation ex-

<sup>9</sup> Metaphors are not just figures of speech with an ornamental function; they capture a reality that is not accessible to direct description. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 221.

<sup>10</sup> Van Dyke et. al., *Redeeming Creation*, 48-49; H. Paul Santmire, 'Partnership with Nature according to the Scriptures: Beyond the Theology of Stewardship', *Christian Scholars Review* (2003). Available Online: <https://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Journal-of-Lutheran-Ethics/Issues/December-2003/Partnership-with-Nature-According-to-the-Scriptures-Beyond-the-Theology-of-Stewardship.aspx>.

<sup>11</sup> H. Paul Santmire, 'From Consumerism to Stewardship: The Troublesome Ambiguities of an Attractive Option', *Dialog* 49/4 (Winter 2010): 336.

<sup>12</sup> Santmire, 'Partnership with Nature', Par. 5 (Online).

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2006), 398-400; *Old Testament Ethics*, 126-27.

<sup>14</sup> See Walter Harrelson, 'On God's Care for the Earth: Psalm 104', *Currents in Theology and Mission* 2 (1975): 20-21, as cited by C. H. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 400.

ists, as the Scriptures attest, not only and not primarily for human beings, but for the glory and praise of God (Ps. 19:1-6; 148; 150; Is. 44:23). Thus, we see a role for non-human creation beyond that of a 'natural resource', that is, as a raw product to ensure and maintain the economic well-being of humankind.

The utilitarian or instrumental view is related to another limitation of stewardship—it is anthropocentric, in that it centres too much on the role of the human. As managers, trustees, administrators of God's created order, human beings are set so much above the rest of creation that their dependence on the rest of the created order is not sufficiently emphasized. In fact, the opposite view—that nature is dependent on humans (rather than on God) for its growth and survival—can creep in.<sup>15</sup>

Doubtless, human beings do have a special place in creation for they alone, of all the creatures, are made in the image of God and are commanded to rule, as Genesis 1:26-28 affirms. Yet this emphasis can obscure another fundamental truth—both human and non-human creation live in dependence on God and on each other, and God, as a relational God, is in interdependent relationship to both. This is seen in that God, in some sense, is dependent on human beings and on nature to accomplish God's purposes for the world.<sup>16</sup>

The role of human beings, based on the Genesis creation account, has been

extensively discussed, but that of the non-human creation has not been given much attention. Fretheim argues that just as human beings have a vocation, non-human creation has a vocation as well. Not only human beings, but animals, are commanded to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:22). Nature is not just a victim of human transgression, as can be seen in how it is affected when human beings violate God's laws (Gen. 3:17-19; 4:10-12; 6:11-13; Hos. 4:1-3), but is also used by God as an instrument of judgment (Jer. 3:2-3; 5:24-25; 14:2-12). In his parables, Jesus used animals and plants as object lessons, giving insightful lessons about life (Matt 6:25-30; 7:15-20; 13:1-8, 18-23; 24:32-33). Contemplating the wonders of creation helped to bring Job to a place of rest, healing, and appreciation of God's care for all creatures, after all his tortured questions of justice in the midst of all his suffering.<sup>17</sup> All these show that just as human beings have a unique place in the world, non-human creation has a unique role as well.

If we are to go beyond the concept of stewardship in thinking about the environment, what other scriptural themes and concepts can we use as organizing principles?

### III The Eschatological Framework

The stewardship concept looks at creation from the point of view of the beginning. However, it is possible to look at creation, and its implications for environmental issues, from the vantage point of the end. This is especially im-

<sup>15</sup> Helen Beazley, 'The Stewardship Model and Evangelical Response to Environmental Crisis', *Phronesis* 16/1, 2 (2009).

<sup>16</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Fretheim, *God and World*, 270, 278-84.

portant if the New Testament witness is to play an integral role in our eco-theology, since the NT does not speak as extensively of the natural world as much as the OT.

A widespread belief in some sectors of evangelicalism is that the world will be totally annihilated before the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth. This has resulted in a world-denying form of Christianity in which Christians no longer feel the need to be involved in long-term solutions to societal and environmental problems. Corollary to this view is the thinking that the increasing severity of environmental problems is but an indication that the outpouring of divine wrath on Judgment Day is drawing near.<sup>18</sup> This can inure one to the pains of an ailing world. In a moving story of how this perspective has almost destroyed the faith of his wife, one of my colleagues from Japan explained: 'If we believe that the world around us will disappear someday, it follows that we ought not to labour to preserve the planet.'<sup>19</sup>

In an exegetical study that looks at the passages that deal with the liberation of creation in Romans 8:19-22, the language of destruction in 2 Peter 3:10-12, the new heavens and new earth in Revelation 21:1, Douglas Moo concludes that what is envisioned here

is not the destruction of the natural world but its transformation.<sup>20</sup> N. T. Wright also examines phrases in the New Testament that have often been construed as referring to an altogether other state of existence that has nothing to do with our present earthly existence,<sup>21</sup> and shows that, rather than a radical discontinuity, they refer to a fuller, although hidden, dimension of a present reality.<sup>22</sup>

They point to God's heaven, God's life, God's dimension, impregnating, permeating, charging...the present world, eventually producing new or renewed heavens and new or renewed earth, integrated with each other.<sup>23</sup>

Both authors do not deny the reality of sin and the decay of the human body and the physical world. But just as the resurrection of Jesus shows the transformation of the physical body, so the natural world will be renewed and transformed.<sup>24</sup>

18 Al Truesdale, 'Last Things First: The Impact of Eschatology on Ecology', *Perspectives on Science and the Christian Faith* 46 (1994): 116-17.

19 Katsuomi Shimasaki, 'The New Heavens and the New Earth: Our Hope and Motive for Stewardship', in *The Earth is the Lord's: Reflections on Stewardship in the Asian Context* (eds. Timoteo Gener and Adonis Gorospe; Manila: OMF Literature, 2011), 18.

20 Douglas Moo, 'Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49/3 (September 2006): 459-69. An abbreviated version is found in *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective* (eds. Noly J. Toly and Daniel I. Block; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010).

21 These phrases are 'kingdom of heaven' in Matthew, 'eternal life' in John and Paul, 'salvation kept in heaven for you' (1 Pet 1:4), 'our citizenship is in heaven' (3:19-21). N. T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of Christian Hope* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1999), 3-11.

22 N. T. Wright, *New Heavens*, 14-17.

23 N. T. Wright, *New Heavens*, 11.

24 Moo, 'Nature in the New Creation', 37. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the*



What do all these imply? If the physical world that we live in has continuities with our future hope, then we are motivated to work for the renewal of creation now because the fruit of our labours will not be wasted.

#### IV The Justice Paradigm

Justice is rooted in the character of God<sup>25</sup> and is a major theme in both the OT and NT. It is closely connected with righteousness with which it is often paired in Scripture (Ps. 33:5; Ps 89:14; Prov. 21:3; Jer. 22:3). In the Old Testament, righteousness involves fulfilling the demands of a communal relationship,<sup>26</sup> especially in relation to the poor, the weak and the oppressed.<sup>27</sup>

This involves more than rendering righteous judgments in court or offering legal assistance to the poor, but includes the improvement of their conditions, especially by those in positions of power and advantage. This means not only refraining from acts of oppression and exploitation (Jer. 7:5-6; 22:3-4; Zech. 7:9-10; Ezek. 18:7-8, 12-13, 16-17), but also doing acts of mercy and

kindness to the most vulnerable ones in society (in the case of Israel, these are the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the aliens.<sup>28</sup>) Thus, justice goes beyond direct help and seeks to introduce and pursue legislation, policies, or programs that would benefit the ones who are most vulnerable in society.

The environmental crisis is a justice issue because the ones most affected by it are the poor. For example, the ones who would be most affected by climate change are regions in which majority of the world's poorest population live, even though they contribute the least to greenhouse emissions that cause global warming. Aside from Africa, which is seen to be the most vulnerable, one billion people in South, Southeast Asia, and East Asia and millions in Latin America would face increased risk.

These effects include increased flooding which results in death, disease and homelessness, drought, reduction of agricultural productivity with the corresponding consequence of lack of food security, decrease in freshwater supply, loss of biodiversity, and loss of communities along with their traditional cultures.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, unlike richer nations, poorer regions have limited resources to adapt to climate

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*Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 147-63.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 60-61; Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 254.

<sup>26</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 1:371-72; Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 256.

<sup>27</sup> The cry for justice assumes that something is amiss which needs to be put to right so that righteousness can be achieved. See James Luther Mayes, 'Justice: Perspectives from the Prophetic Tradition', *Interpretation* 37 (1983), 5-17.

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<sup>28</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press The Hebrew University; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 35.

<sup>29</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *IPCC Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007, 'Regional Vulnerabilities,'* Sec. 19.3.3. Available Online: [http://www.ipcc.ch/publications\\_and\\_data/ar4/wg2/en/ch19s19-3-3.html](http://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/ar4/wg2/en/ch19s19-3-3.html)



change and mitigate its effects.<sup>30</sup>

Even on the level of air pollution alone, the ones most susceptible are those who cannot afford the luxuries of air-conditioned cars and homes (which by the way contribute to global warming) and whose jobs require them to be exposed to polluted air the whole day. Statistics in the Philippines show that bus and jeepney drivers, street vendors, school children and infants, and public commuters have a higher incidence of acquiring respiratory diseases due to pollution.<sup>31</sup> While those with professional jobs may have health insurance and the resources to buy medicines when they acquire respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, this is not the case with the poor, who spend most of their income on food. Injustice happens when some are given access to goods that would enable them to sustain life in a healthy environment while others are denied such access.<sup>32</sup>

The links between poverty and jus-

tice have given rise to the concept of eco-justice, or some would prefer the term environmental justice. The central theme in eco-justice is that caring for the earth and caring for humanity, particularly for the poor and the marginalized, are inextricably linked.<sup>33</sup> A lack of healthy environment impacts the poor more; on the other hand, the poor can contribute to environmental problems as they try to survive economically without regard for the long-term impact their actions make on the environment. Thus, in eco-justice, both poverty and environmental degradation need to be addressed in an integral manner.

Due to the shift in thinking of evangelicals in the past twenty years, we are now more involved in helping the poor, whether through mercy projects or community development. However, without seriously seeing the link between environmental issues and poverty, our approach to poverty alleviation would be only piecemeal and would not fully address what biblical justice demands.

One other issue in the area of justice has to do with whether one can speak of justice for the non-human creation. According to Knierim, ecological order is the work of divine justice,<sup>34</sup> but more scriptural support is needed to prove this contention.

**30** The links between poverty and environmental issues are explored in Ken Gnanakan, 'Environment, Poverty, and Justice', and Sarah La Trobe and Joanne Green, 'Water, Sanitation, and Climate Change', in *Inheriting the Earth: Poor Communities and Environmental Renewal* (Monrovia, Calif.: World Vision, 2004), 41-50, 73-87.

**31** Leoncito Silva and Athena E. Gorospe, 'Breathe and Let Breathe: Biblical Imperative for Promoting Clean Air', in *The Earth is the Lord's: Reflections on Stewardship in the Asian Context* (eds. Timoteo Gener and Adonis Gorospe; Manila: OMF Literature, 2011), 89-91.

**32** David Gushee, 'Environmental Ethics: Bringing Creation Care Down to Earth', in *Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective* (eds. Noly J. Toly and Daniel I. Block; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 251.

**33** Terence Gatfield, 'Eco-justice: Some Exploratory Concepts', *Phronesis* 13.1 (2006).

**34** Rolf Knierim, *The Task of Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1995), 110.

## V A Theology of Life and Well-Being

One of the key biblical themes that has not often been expounded in standard biblical theological books is the theme of life. This theme goes to the heart of the gospel—the good news of life in Christ. It is a theme that encompasses both the OT and NT and runs from Creation to the New Creation.

In Genesis, God forms the earth so that life will flourish and gives life not only to humankind but to all the beasts of the earth, the birds of the sky, and all the creatures that move on the ground (Gen. 1:30; 2:17). In the garden, God planted all kinds of trees not only to provide food for humankind and all the living creatures, but because they are ‘pleasant to the sight’ (2:9). God also planted the tree of life, which symbolizes fullness of life in the presence of God.<sup>35</sup>

Because of disobedience of man and woman, however, the way to the tree of life was barred, but in the new heaven and new earth, we find the image of the tree of life again, yielding fruit, with its leaves for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:2, 14; cf. Rev. 2:7; Ezek. 47:12). In addition, there is the image of the water of life flowing from the throne of God (Rev. 22:1, 17). At the centre is the Lamb who offers the water of life.

The Bible repeatedly affirms that life comes from God (Is. 42:5), so that without God’s life-giving spirit people die (Ps. 104:9; Job 34:14–15). It is God’s life-giving breath that links us with all

living creatures: ‘In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being’ (Job 12:10, *NRSV*). This is expressed in the Hebrew term used for human beings and animals—*nephesh haya* (‘living beings’)—which shows our continuity and commonality with other creatures of the earth. We are all dependent on God for life.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, human beings are not the only ones affected when the environment suffers. All living creatures wilt and experience loss of life, whether this means physical death or impairment of bodily functions. Moreover, the delicate balance between living and non-living elements in the ecosystem is disturbed, creating disruptions in the cycle of life.

The sanctity of human life is one of the central norms in Christian ethics. Evangelicals in the pro-life movement have taken this in the direction of the fight against abortion and assisted suicide.<sup>37</sup> However, the sanctity of life should be applied not only to the unborn and the dying, but should involve all human beings—both the present and future generations—‘with a commitment to the preservation, protection, and flourishing of their lives.’<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, the sanctity of human life is still insufficient for an ecological ethic, for it considers only the value of human life. Thus, one must speak not only of the sanctity of human life but also of the sanctity of creation. This is different from seeing creation as divine.<sup>39</sup> ‘The sacredness or sanctity of

<sup>35</sup> John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Vol. 1: Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove; IVP, 2003), 119.

<sup>36</sup> Portions of this section appear in Silva and Gorospe, ‘Breath and Let Breathe’, 92–96.

<sup>37</sup> Gushee, ‘Environmental Ethics’, 258.

<sup>38</sup> Gushee, ‘Environmental Ethics’, 259.

<sup>39</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 400–402.

creation speaks of its essential relatedness to God, not of it being divine in and of itself.<sup>40</sup>

Jesus said, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10). In this verse, Jesus contrasts himself as the good shepherd with a thief whose aim is to steal, kill, and destroy. Often this verse is interpreted in relation to life in heaven, but the image of the good shepherd points to something more than the life-to-come, since the task of the shepherd is to feed and protect the sheep, which pertains to life-in-the-present. Jesus' intention is to give 'life in all its fullness', even if that means laying down his own life. Thus, there is a place for death in the theology of life. Although a commitment to life means countering threats to life and working against what would bring death and would impede the fullness of life, death is sometimes necessary as a pathway to the fullness of life.

God is the source of life and sustains life. To believe in God, according to Gustavo Gutierrez, is to believe in the God of Life.<sup>41</sup> This affirmation leads to actions that sustain life and give life. In this way, we can be 'friends of life', as Gutierrez describes those who make a choice to fight on the side of life.<sup>42</sup> Gutierrez, however, applies the term only in relation to human beings. To be truly friends of life, we need to expand this commitment to life to non-human creation—being careful to preserve natural habitats and counter threats that would affect the cycle of life.

The affirmation that God is Life, as powerfully embodied in Jesus' resurrection, is our hope that regardless of discouraging situations that bring death to our community, we dare not be paralyzed into inaction. Jesus has destroyed death once and for all and promises 'a new heaven and a new earth' (Rev 21:1).<sup>43</sup> With faith and hope we can persevere to make visible here on earth and in the midst of death and deterioration, the God who is Life.

## VI Some Concluding Reflections

Although the stewardship concept has provided an impetus for evangelicals to be involved in environmental issues, it is limited in its usefulness as an organizing principle for a biblical theology that could support and sustain Christian involvement on these issues. This is because it is preoccupied with the role of the human and does not sufficiently account for the human as embedded in and interdependent with the rest of creation, and not just someone who is over creation. Moreover, the metaphor of a steward as household manager or financial overseer does not resonate so much in Asian cultures, where the majority live in agricultural or coastal settings.

Of the above themes, the closest to the Asian psyche is a theology of life. A reverence for life is characteristic of many Asian religions. As evangelicals, we often have a polemic reaction

40 Wright *Mission of God*, 402.

41 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life* (London: SCM Press, 1991).

42 Gutierrez, *God of Life*, 62-64.

43 Martin J. Hodson and Margot R. Hodson make this point in *Cherishing the Earth: How to Care for God's Creation* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2008), 205.

to this reverence because it divinizes nature. At the same time, this characterizes nature religions and those with affinities to the New Age Movement. However, the recognition of the value and interdependence of all creation, whether human or non-human, means that there is already a solid starting point for environmental engagement. Rather than completely debunking this reverence for life, it may be wiser to critique the way in which nature has been divinized, but affirm the basic respect for life and for the ecological systems that sustain life.

A theology of life belongs to a biocentric approach to creation care, which affirms the value of all living organisms. In a biocentric approach, 'our duties toward living things do not derive from our duties to other humans. Rather, they are grounded in the value the organisms possess simply by virtue of being alive.'<sup>44</sup>

This approach, however, has been criticized for several reasons,<sup>45</sup> the foremost of which is that it does not fully take into account the role of the human. Since all life forms are regarded as being equal in value and integrity, then this means that it is best not to interfere with existing ecosystems but just allow things to take their course. This non-interventionist approach,

however, goes against the scriptural teaching of humanity's role, as expressed in the first chapters of Genesis and in Psalm 8.

However, rather than the model of stewardship to explain humanity's role, Christopher Wright suggests the image of a servant king. The OT portrays the king in the role of shepherd (Ezek. 34) and servant (1 Kgs. 12:7). A good shepherd takes care of the flock and does not abuse or exploit it, while the idea of a king as servant emphasizes his responsibility to care for the needs of his subjects.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the task of the king in the ancient Near East and in ancient Israel is to administer righteousness and justice.<sup>47</sup> In addition, the image of a shepherd is complemented in Genesis 2 with that of a gardener, who tends the garden and cares for it.

These images, with their emphasis on providing justice and righteousness, caring for and serving one's subjects, maintaining order so that each part of the created order fulfils its function, are more consistent with a theology of life. Yet these still need to be complemented by images that emphasize the horizontal dimension. Sustained by the God of Life and interdependent with the rest of creation that have life and sustain life, human beings respond by being 'friends of life' and 'bearers of life' to a world threatened daily by death.

<sup>44</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

<sup>45</sup> Bouma-Prediger, *Beauty of the Earth*, 130; Gushee, 'Environmental Ethics', 254-57.

<sup>46</sup> C. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 122.

<sup>47</sup> Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 45-46.