

**TO SAFEGUARD AND RENEW:
THE PRINCIPLES OF STEWARDSHIP OF THE CREATION
AS THE FIFTH MARK OF CHRISTIAN MISSION**

Calvin B. DeWitt

Creation is a symphony of material and life cycles empowered by Earth's star the sun, whose energy drives global circulations of air and water—flows shaped by unequal heating and varied topography of land above and below the sea. Solar energy captured by green plants fuels molecule-to-molecule and organism-to-organism transfers, helping to weave Earth's integrative biogeographic and trophic fabric that interlaces all life. Its creatures produce and consume, multiply and diminish, develop and decompose, each with peculiar roles in sustaining biospheric integrity. This is Creation's economic fabric—Creation's Economy. As we human creatures are part of this fabric we also are its stewards—stewards of this symphonic gift, stewards with divine appointments to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth. Unfolding in the canon of Scripture, vindicated in Christ's resurrection, and celebrated in the Holy Eucharist, this economy is the comprehensive contemporary context of Christian mission.

“To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth”—the fifth mark of mission—has been part and parcel of the human task since Adam. With its beginnings in Eden, this mark was affirmed by God's covenant with every living creature (Gen. 9), was vindicated through the sacrificial service of the Son of Adam, Jesus Christ (I Cor. 15), and incorporated in the Great Commission. God's love, expressed in the inexpressible gift of the Son of Man, brings hope for the whole creation—equipping people everywhere to serve and to safeguard the garden of God.

LIVING IN THE GARDEN OF GOD

Each of us inhabits a place on the earth—town or country, hill or plain, north or south. The place I inhabit, on the crest of a low drumlin shaped by continental glaciation, looks out over a sodden jewel-in-the-landscape, blessed with creatures that emerge and return each spring to pulse annually across the great marsh. I have devoted my life to safeguarding the integrity of God's creation. Moreover, as I became aware of the immensity of creation's degradation and destruction, I extended my care to include ecological restoration and renewal. With my wife and neighbors, I get my hands dirty and feet wet to restore and renew wetlands, prairies, woodlands, farms, and gardens to joyful beauty and praise to their Maker.

O SING unto the Lord a new song: sing unto the Lord, all the whole earth. Sing unto the Lord, and praise his Name: be telling of his salvation from day to day... Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad... Let the field be joyful, and all that is in it: then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice before the Lord. For he cometh... to judge the earth: and with righteousness to judge the world, and the people with his truth. (Psalm 96, *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662)

The *Oikoumene* of God

God's creation sings anew every morning in multi-part harmony. Creation's Economy is an economy of divine faithfulness and steadfast love (Lam. 3:22-23), declaring God's glory (Psalm 19:1), and manifesting God's divinity and everlasting power (Rom. 1:20). Writing of economy (οἰκονομία), in 1791, the Swedish biologist Carl Linnaeus wrote:

By the Oeconomy of Nature we understand the all-wise disposition of the Creator in relation to natural things, by which they are fitted to produce general ends, and reciprocal uses. All things contained in the compass of the universe declare, as it were, with one accord the infinite wisdom of the Creator.¹

Eastern Orthodoxy reflects this perspective when it defines theology as... “the rational fruit of the study and examination of the whole work of Divine Oeconomy, from the creation of the world until the last times... realized by the Church within history and time.”¹ Applying this to the local level, Calvin writes, “Let him who possesses a field, so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence... Let him so feed on its fruits, that he neither dissipates it by luxury, nor permits it to be marred or ruined by neglect. Moreover, that this economy, and this diligence, with respect to those good things which God has given us to enjoy, may flourish among us; let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses.”²

Creation's Economy contrasts markedly from our human economy . Poet and artist, William Blake visualises these two economies as wheels—a small one as human economy and a large as Creation's Economy.

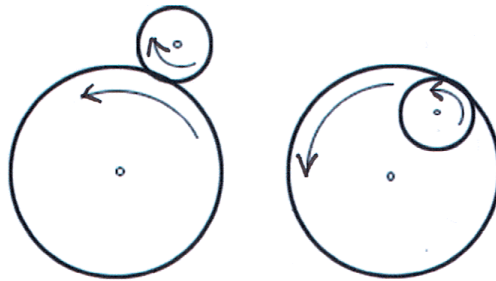


Fig. 1. Visual representation of Blake's two wheels. On the left illustration is the human economy (the smaller wheel) operating outside Creation's Economy (the larger wheel); on the right is the human economy operating within the larger Economy of Creation.

This is the way he expressed it:

I turn my eyes to the schools and universities of Europe.
And there behold the Loom of Locke, whose Woof rages dire,
Wash'd by the Water-wheels of Newton: black the cloth
In heavy wreaths folds over every nation: cruel works
Of many Wheels I view, wheel without wheel, with cogs tyrannic
Moving by compulsion each other, not as those in Eden, which,
Wheel within wheel, in freedom revolve in harmony and peace.³

The wheel of Eden—the economy of which Adam and Eve were appointed stewards—was a wheel moving harmoniously within a wheel; Eden’s economy cycled in harmony with God’s creation. When it operates outside of Creation’s Economy, degradation results.

Degradation of the Life of the Earth

God’s commission to Adam to safeguard Eden suffered from his deciding “to know good and evil.” Re-conception of the divine economy from all-embracing wheel and great teacher into “natural resources,”—begun in Adam—is now pervasive. The human economy has been translocated from “wheel within wheel” to “wheel without wheel.” Even its once-stewards and guardian-overseers are re-conceived as human “resources.”³ The result is that these two wheels now turn in opposite directions, with immense degrading consequences. Degradations of creation—beginning locally, extending regionally, and reaching globally—manifest an arrogation of Creation’s Economy—a failure of people to be responsible stewards of God’s gift.

Many of these degradations can be quickly identified—pollution of air, land, and water, loss of farmland to erosion and salinisation, deforestation and habitat destruction, invasive species introductions, gene pollution, regional and global toxification, desertification, and urban growth that has escaped the boundaries of healthy development. Others are not, of which I identify three:⁴

Biogeographic Restructuring of the Life of the Land.— Study of the geographic distribution of plants and animals shows very evident displacement, reduction, and extinction by deforestation, putting lands into agriculture, and urban expansion. Global climate change compels organisms into new biogeographic patterns and relationships as they move toward the poles or to higher altitudes. A recent analysis of 1,700 species, for example, shows global climate change driving plants and animals some 3.8 miles per decade towards the poles. Climate change is bringing earlier springtimes, with an average decadal advance of 2.3 days. Species driven to extinction by global warming include those that can move no farther north and no higher in altitude, and become de-synchronized from other species thereby threatening survival or removing population controls.⁵ There still is hope here: that human beings will resolve to reverse habitat destruction and address global climate change.

Trophic Restructuring of the Life of the Sea.— The history of ocean fisheries shows that overfishing and removal of filter feeders (oysters and clams), grazers (herbivorous fishes), and predators (carnivorous fishes) have restructured oceanic food webs. Preferential removal of the largest sea creatures from the top trophic levels of the food web has caused smaller species to take

the vacated top consumer role. As these in turn are over-fished or succumb to disease from overcrowding, the next lower trophic level takes top place, spiralling the system downward toward “microbialization.”⁶ This trophic restructuring is signalled by collapse of commercial fisheries. The cod fishery of the European Union for example, dropping from 270,000 tons in 1977 to 38,000 tons in 2002 now has less than half the population needed to sustain it. Earlier, in 1992, the Canadian Atlantic coast cod fishery collapsed and no longer has enough mature cod for needed egg production. Yet, there is hope: understanding of ocean food webs provide the basis for taking action for ocean and fisheries stewardship.⁷

Global Carbon Imbalance.— Living creatures are based upon the element, carbon—their primary structural substance. In its oxidized form—carbon dioxide—it provides a basic raw material for photosynthesis, the process that produces fuels and building blocks for creating and multiplying living things and for transfers within trophic food webs. Carbon is cycled within the biospheric fabric in producing and consuming, multiplying and diminishing, developing and decomposing. Carbon is conserved and can be accounted for in a “carbon budget” within and among “reservoirs.” Of four major reservoirs, the atmosphere, terrestrial biosphere, oceans, and ocean sediments, the atmospheric reservoir shows a continuing rise in carbon dioxide concentration. The longest continuous records, from Mauna Loa, Hawaii, show a 21.6% increase in the concentrations for the month of February from 316.5 parts per million in 1959 to 384.9 parts per million in 2007—a 21.5% increase in 48 years. Current atmospheric carbon dioxide levels are 27 percent higher than at any point in 650,000 years. Because carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas, this increase portends a warming of the earth, already underway. Immediate action is needed.

These three degradations join others to show that Earth is now under human domination. Globalization of human impact extends human responsibility to the whole biosphere, requiring a global response even as local and regional responses remain as important as ever. Various Christian traditions, locally and regionally, can contribute significantly, particularly by bringing our human economies into respectful accord with God’s greater economy.

Safeguarding the Garden and Creation’s Economy

The biosphere—owned by God—is a great gift and trust that is conveyed to the children of Adam for service and safeguarding. We learn from Scripture:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (NIV)

And Jehovah Elohim took Man, and put him into the garden of Eden, to till it and to guard it. (DBY)

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. (KJV)

And Jehovah God taketh the man, and causeth him to rest in the garden of Eden, to serve it, and to keep it. (YLT)⁸

In these various versions of Gen. 2:15, the Hebrew word, 'abad' is translated "work," "till," "dress," and "serve." We know from experience that gardens (and the biosphere) serve us—with good food, beauty, flavorful herbs, useful fibre, healing remedies, pleasant microclimates, soil-making, nutrient processing, and seed production. The biosphere provides "ecosystem services"—including water purification by evaporation and percolation, moderation of flood peaks and drought flows by riverine wetlands, development of soils from weathering of rocks, and moderation of local climates by large water bodies. Yet, Genesis addresses our service to the garden. Service from the garden to us is implicit; service from us to the garden is explicit. What is expected of Adam, and of us, is returning the service of the garden with service of our own: a reciprocal service—a con-service, a con-servancy, a con-servation. This reciprocal service defines an engaging relationship between garden and gardener; between the biosphere and its human safe-guarders.

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES OF STEWARDSHIP IN CONTEXT

The con-servancy principle - *We should return the service of creation to us with service of our own.*

We can call this "never taking from creation without returning service of our own" the *con-servancy principle*. Our love of God our Creator, God's love of the creation, our imaging this love of God—join together to commission us as con-servers of creation. As con-servers we become followers of the second Adam—of Jesus Christ. As such we come to recognize ourselves as children of Man, children of God, for whose coming the whole creation awaits with eager longing and eager expectation (Rom 8:19).

The safe-guarding principle - *We should safe-guard the Lord's creation as the Lord safe-guards us.*

In our reflecting on Genesis 2:15 in five translations above, we find that we are to con-serve the garden and also guard and keep it. We find the Hebrew word, *shamar*, —to "take care of," "guard," and "keep" also in the blessing of Aaron: "The Lord bless you and *shamar* you." As we expect God to keep us, God expects us to keep the garden. It is a wonderfully dynamic way of keeping, the kind of keeping given to long-distance runners that are not kept in padded cells, but put through their paces.

The fruitfulness principle - *We should enjoy the fruit of creation but not destroy its fruitfulness.*

Being a fruitful expression of God's love for the world, the garden bears good fruit. So do the birds, the fish, and human beings (Genesis 1: 20, 22, 28). When the prophet Ezekiel asks,

Is it not enough for you to feed on the green pastures?
Must you also trample them with your feet?
Is it not enough for you to drink the pure water?
Must you also muddy it with your feet? (Ezek 34:18)

he is speaking to this principle by saying that the creation's gifts enjoyed, but not destroyed. Highly expressive of this is Noah, who with obedience and great effort safe-guarded animal lineages, saving them on the Ark. From the Torah, we learn, "When you lay siege to a city, you must not destroy the fruit trees" (Deut.19:19-20)—a basis for the Jewish teaching of *bal taschit*—"do not destroy." We must preserve creation's fruitfulness.

The Sabbath principle - *We should provide for creation's Sabbath rests with no relentless pressing.* "When you come to the land that I will show you, the land must keep a Sabbath to the Lord. . . ." Knowing the importance of Sabbath each week, we also must know its importance for the land. Thoughtful reading of Exodus 23 and Leviticus 25–26 gives us powerful reasons for not relentlessly pressing fields and streams, valleys and mountains, flowering plants and creatures of the sea. All things must have and enjoy their Sabbath rest. The exemplar for Sabbath keeping is the Creator of the world who established and blessed it on the Seventh Day.

The Biospheric and Covenantal Context of Stewardship

The biblical principles of *Con-servation*, *Safe-guarding*, *Fruitfulness*, and *Sabbath* are at the core of human safeguarding and fruitful enjoyment of the garden and the whole creation—at the heart of stewardship and a mark of Christian mission. For the garden, the dynamic interplay between garden and gardener fosters a robust stewardship that yields an increase in knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. This wisdom in time can produce a plan for the garden to be in greater harmony with the principles of garden economy. Harmonious engagement of the garden's economy through interactive service is the essence of stewardship. *Stewardship of the garden dynamically shapes and reshapes human behaviour in the direction of maintaining sustainability for garden plants and the garden over the generations.*

Much as we strive to be stewards of the garden, we also strive to be stewards of God's creation. As our plan reflects the garden's economy, so God's plan reflects Creation's Economy—"God's plan or system for the government of the world."⁹ Creation belongs to God:

The earth (*'eretz*) is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world (*tebel*), and they that dwell therein. —Psalm 24:1 KJV

The earth (*ge*) is the Lord's and the fulness thereof; the world (*oikoumene*), and all that dwell in it. —Psalm 24:1 LXX¹⁰

In contrast with other great faiths, Christianity derives its pervasive influence by translation of God into the flesh in Jesus Christ, and of Holy Scripture into various languages in various cultures.¹¹ Psalm 24:1 is a case in point, where the Hebrew words *'eretz* and *tebel* are translated respectively in the Septuagint (LXX) as *ge* (the root of the word *geology*) and *oikoumene* (from which we get the word, *ecumenical*). Placed into contemporary scientific context, *oikoumene* (οἰκουμένη) is translated *biosphere*—the contemporary name for the habitable earth with all its inhabitants. We can say then that the biosphere, owned by God, is the *biophysical global context* of human action and habitation in the world—it is the *biophysical global context* of stewardship.

This context joins with the *theological and covenantal context* toward development of a full and robust stewardship. The canon of Christian Scripture, "both recounts the history of God's covenantal dealings with humanity and regulates God's ongoing covenantal relationship with his people" and, as the "supreme norm for Christian life and thought," provides "the abiding theological witness to God's pattern of communicative action in Israel and in Jesus Christ." Archbishop Rowan Williams, in his reflection on these quotations from Kevin Vanhoozer has us "locate ourselves" within the "set of connections and engagements, the history of Israel, called, exiled, restored, and of Jesus crucified and risen and alive in the Spirit within the community..."¹²

for themselves. They made names for themselves. Believing themselves to be successful in breaking through the limits of Creation's Economy—conceiving it to be subservient to their own—they brought themselves to believe they were making new things that were “bigger than life.”

Ever since, as the canon tells, people continued pursuit of “freedom” from God's economy—from creation's life-giving principles and wholesome constraints. Human gains in “freedom” came at the expense of increasingly losing the life-giving service—ecosystem services—of Creation's Economy. This “success” brought “freedom” to take direct charge over things in creation that once produced free goods and free gifts of God's grace; people became the producers, as they also became creation's consumers.

As Adam was tempted, so was the Son of Man. And whereas the first Adam yielded, the second Adam resisted and overcame temptation, conquered death, and vindicated creation in his resurrection.¹⁴ He appeared to Mary Magdalene as the gardener, ushered in the new Eden—the new creation—and fulfilled creation's eager expectation for the coming of the children of God (Rom 8:19).

The Word made flesh, dwelling among us (John 1:14a) became the focus of divine action in the world. As the Logos through whom all things were created, Jesus Christ, “the hermeneutical key... to the history of the whole world, and hence to the meaning of life...”¹⁵ initiated and led the process of undoing of the degrading works of the first Adam; initiated and leads in doing what the first Adam was supposed to do; and reconciles all things to God. The Word incarnate, expressing God's profound love for the world (John 3:16-17) comes liturgically into the sanctuary and the Holy Eucharist, moves into creation to open the shackles of enslaved peoples and creation, breaks the chains of sin, oppression, degradation, and bondage, and renews the life of the earth. Jesus Christ—the hope of the world.

He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn over all creation.
For by him all things were created:
things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible,
whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities;
all things were created by him and for him.
He is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.
And he is the head of the body, the church;
he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead,
so that in everything he might have the supremacy.
For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,
and through him to reconcile to himself all things,
whether things on earth or things in heaven,
by making peace through his blood,
shed on the cross.¹⁶

Principles on the care of creation, gleaned from the canon, reverberate in Jesus Christ—the Logos through whom the whole creation has its integrity. Adopting the mind of Christ,¹⁷ we take on his

humility, not counting ourselves not divine, but servants (Phil. 2:6-9). As was expected of Adam, achieved by Noah, and taken on by Christ, we also become servants—servants of the garden, of humanity, of the whole creation. Adopting his mind, we come to know him and participate in him incarnate in the Holy Eucharist.

The Holy Eucharist

As we eat the bread and drink the wine in the Holy Eucharist, we thereby become participants in Christ's crucified body and shed blood. As this fleshly participation brought his disciples to know him following his resurrection (Luke 24:30-35), so it is for us.¹⁸ Christ's hospitality—"a hospitality once and for all established as indestructible by the cross and the resurrection..."—makes what Christ has accomplished to be "done constantly in the history of the Church."¹⁹ Recognizing his broken body and shed blood in the fruits of the garden, and also in their preparation by the gardener—the wine-maker and baker²⁰—we experience a reciprocal service, a reciprocal communion, between garden and gardener. We experience a reciprocal service between the grain and grapes of the garden and ourselves as adopted children of the second Adam. The material food and drink broken and poured out as Christ's body and blood, affirms the good creation and good steward of God's gift of creation.

STEWARDSHIP OF RECONCILIATION AND RENEWAL

With the now clear and abundant scientific evidence of adverse restructuring and transformation of Creation's Oikoumene by adverse human actions in the world, there is the clear and vital need for gaining substantial knowledge and understanding of the biosphere and for developing moral and spiritual courage and resolve to examine the message of the Christian church in the light of our global biospheric and covenantal context. The Church needs to do what it can do best: "to proclaim the full truth about the environmental crisis in the face of powerful persons, pressures and institutions which profit from concealing the truth;" and to strive for reform and replacement of practices and institutions that degrade God's creation.²¹ The joyful task and honourable privilege of the Church and of every member is to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth—meeting creation's eager expectation for the coming of the children of God.

Principles on the care of creation, gleaned from the canon, reverberate in Jesus Christ—the Logos through whom the whole creation has its integrity. Locating ourselves within the canonical drama of Adam and on through Israel to Jesus crucified, risen and commemorated in the Holy Eucharist, we come to understand in adopting the mind of Christ, that we participate with Christ in the reconciliation of all things.²²

Endnotes

¹ Worster, Donald. 1979. *Nature's Economy: the Roots of Ecology*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, p. 37.

1. University of Athens website: <http://www.cc.uoa.gr/theology/html/english/cac/sections.htm>

2. Commentary on Genesis 2:15, from John Calvin's *Commentary on Genesis*. First Latin edition 1554. First English Edition 1578. English translation of 1847, reprinted by Banner of Truth Publishers, Vol. I, Chapter II.15, 1965.

³ William Blake, "Jerusalem" 15:14-20. In: *The Complete Poems*, ed. W.H. Stevenson (Longman Annotated, English Poets; 2nd rev. ed., London), 1989.

3. A consequence of this re-conception is that the great deposits of carbon that have been sequestered by mires, marshes, and moors—and their related stores of coal are “fossil fuels.” Viewing these deposits as our teachers on the workings of the great economy, however, would tell how green plants in the distant past removed excessive carbon dioxide from the atmosphere thereby making earth more habitable.

4. For a more comprehensive treatment, see my “Biogeographic and Trophic Restructuring of the Biosphere: The State of the Earth Under Human Domination” published 2003 in the *Christian Scholar's Review* 32:347-364.

5. Camille Parmesan and Gary Yohe, “A Globally Coherent Fingerprint of Climate Change Impacts Across Natural Systems,” *Nature* 421 (2 Jan 2003): 37-42.

6. Jeremy B. C. Jackson et al., “Historical Overfishing and the Recent Collapse of Coastal Ecosystems,” *Science* 293 (2001): 629-637.

7. Consider, for example, the Orange Roughy. Discovered in 1889, this fish now is consumed, lives at depths of 2500 to 5000 feet, is thought to live up to 150 years, and reproduces when it is 25-30 years old. It is caught when it is concentrated on its spawning grounds. Its population is declining and we do not understand its place in the sea's foodweb.

8. Abbreviations here for various Bible translations are: NIV, New International version; DBY, Darby Version; RSV, Revised Standard Version; KJV, King James Version; and YLT, Young's Literal Translation.

9. Third Edition of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1981), 720.

10. Parallel translations in the King James Version (KJV) and the Septuagint (LXX) show a consistent correspondence of the Hebrew 'eretz with the Greek *ge* as in Isaiah 34:1, LXX.

11. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996, 26.

12. Vanhoozer, Kevin J., *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press (2005), 137-139 [italics his].

13. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book V, lines 185-191.

14. Andrew Walls writes, “The mission of the church is not simply to add to itself but to bear witness that by his cross and resurrection Christ bought back the whole creation and defeated the powers that spoiled it.” *The Missionary Movement*, 255.
15. Vanhoozer, 223.
16. Colossians 1:15-20.
17. Philippians 2:5-11.
18. Augustine writes, “...they did not recognise Him, as is shown by Luke’s narrative, until the breaking of the bread took place... The deeper significance of all which is this, that no one should consider himself to have attained the knowledge of Christ, if he is not a member in His body—that is to say, in His Church...” *The Harmony of the Gospels*, Book III, 72, S. D. F. Salmond, *transl.*
19. Rowan Williams. *Archbishop's Larkin Stuart Lecture*, “The Bible Today: Reading & Hearing,” Toronto, Canada, April 16, 2007. [This lecture is accessible at: http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/070416.htm]
20. Irenaeus, writes, “He took from among creation that which is bread, and gave thanks, saying, ‘This is My Body.’ The cup likewise, which is from among the creation to which we belong, He confessed to be His Blood.” *Against Heresies*, 180 A.D., 4,17,5.
21. Summarizing Committee Report of the World Evangelical Theological Commission and Au Sable Institute Forum, In: Mark Thomas, guest ed., *Evangelicals and the Environment: Theological Foundations for Christian Environmental Stewardship* (special issue), *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17(2):122-133, 1993.

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