

Dominion, Redemption, and an Ecology of Hope: Response to William Dyrness

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Remarks delivered at “Compassion and the Care of Creation,” a conference on poverty and environmental stewardship sponsored by the National Association of Evangelicals at Malone College, Canton, Ohio, March 18-19, 1999.

Dr. Dyrness deserves our thanks for presenting a thought-provoking paper that launches this conference in a positive and hopeful direction. At a fundamental level he contributes valuable insights to our understanding of environmental ethics and the relationship of environmental stewardship to our responsibility to uplift the poor.

Some fundamental insights in his paper are

1. his dependence on a theocentric world view as the context for *all* our thinking;
2. his wise weaving of the redemptive, restorative work of Christ into his environmental ethic;
3. his crucially important reminder that the cosmos is an *open system*, not a closed one, and is therefore “fundamentally open to divine intervention, and by God’s design . . . also . . . to human intervention,” a point similar to one I made in *Where Garden Meets Wilderness* (pp. 25-26);
4. his insistence that human intervention in creation is not merely inevitable but desirable;
5. his reminder that this intervention must be guided by the Biblical dominion mandate, our understanding and application of which must be built on careful use of Scripture;
6. his conviction that our environmental difficulties “did not result because creation was open to human intervention, but because that intervention was intended to grow out of obedience” but instead often grows out of disobedience;
7. his rejection—on the grounds of both theocentricity and the openness of creation—of the naturalism that underpins both knee-jerk pessimism and knee-jerk optimism about both the environment and poverty, forcing us to recognize instead that while improvement is possible on both fronts it hinges on obedience to divine wisdom;
8. his call for “our work on earth” to “reflect Christ by signifying and anticipating the final renewal of creation”;
9. his assurance “that human activity can indeed have a positive impact on the environment,” accompanied by some explicit examples of the sorts of activity he has in mind.

On all of these points—and they are by far the most fundamental in his paper—I find myself in strong agreement. I appreciate and endorse some of his points on a more practical level, too, for example, the importance of promoting not mere recycling but upcycling. And I am grateful for a new insight into Scripture, namely, of the covenant implied in the linking of dominion in Genesis 1:28 with the promise of food in verse 29. Although the remainder of my comments mark disagreements—and sometimes that is too strong a word; some might better be called *quibbles*—they must not be permitted to overshadow our agreement on the fundamentals. So I turn to three criticisms, each offered with constructive intent.

Am I a Scrooge?

First, forgive me if I start with a point that might seem self-serving, but perhaps I shall not be condemned for defending myself against an implicit moral charge. Dr. Dyrness cites one of my articles as suggesting that “environmentalism is a modern luxury the poor cannot afford.” Putting things that way paints me as a hard-hearted Scrooge who wants to let the poor continue to live in ecological squalor. This implication arises from the appearance of stasis in his way of putting it. But the burden of my article was to point out that economic development is potentially a means toward environmental restoration, not always a threat to it. Helping the poor and restoring the environment

must go hand in hand, but it is possible for either one, done wrongly, to hinder the other. What we need is precisely the sort of economically wise environmental stewardship reflected in such things as the upcycling and synecology he endorses.

The Lure of Illicit Moralizing

Second, Dr. Dyrness writes that “we cannot become complacent about the problems that exist. To ignore signs of malign influence of human activity, in desertification, global warming or disappearance of the rain forest, is to ignore both our relationship with the earth and our moral call to respond to its distress.” I have two problems with this.

Saying that some people “ignore signs of malign influence of human activity,” while it may be legitimate in specific instances, easily becomes question begging when it is applied to problems about which there is scientific/empirical debate. Consider a non-controversial example: in the early years of municipal water supply fluoridation, some people objected that the practice endangered health. (Some even thought it a Communist plot!) Should people familiar with the evidence that water fluoridation was safe and beneficial have been accused of ignoring “signs of malign influence” when in reality they found them false?

More importantly, the charge of ignoring “signs of malign influence” may all too easily metamorphose into a charge of ignoring “our moral call to respond to” the malign influence itself. The latter implies malign motives and involves, at least potentially, a *petitio principii*—assuming the reality of malign influence when it is itself under debate. When over 16,000 basic and applied scientists, nearly all with technical training suitable for evaluating relevant research data, and including 2,300 physicists, geophysicists, climatologists, meteorologists, oceanographers, and environmental scientists specially qualified to evaluate the effects of carbon dioxide on Earth’s atmosphere and climate, and 4,700 chemists, biochemists, biologists, and other life scientists specially qualified to evaluate the effects of carbon dioxide on Earth’s plant and animal life, review the evidence and then sign a petition contesting the reality of anthropogenic global warming and arguing that enhanced atmospheric carbon dioxide will have more beneficial than harmful effects,¹

¹See “Global Warming Petition” of the Oregon Institute of Science and Medicine at www.zwr.oism.org/pproject, cited in E. Calvin Beisner, “Putting Kyoto on Ice,” *World*, vol. 13, no. 30 (August 8, 1998), 12-16.

On February 3, 2006, not having known before that this paper and other proceedings of the “Compassion and the Care of Creation” conference had ever been published, I discovered the following “Editors [sic] Note” attached to this footnote in a posting of this paper at <http://www.worldhope.org/pdf/Compassiondoc.pdf> (copied also at <http://64.233.179.104/search?q=cache:180q8JKkHIIJ:www.worldhope.org/pdf/Compassiondoc.pdf+%22Compassion+and+the+Care+of+Creation%22&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=1&ie=UTF-8>, and at http://www.lgmethodistdistrict.org.uk/district/content/care_of_creation.asp):

The petition Professor Beisner cites was a petition on the Internet. Anyone could sign on as long as they claimed to have a Bachelors degree in a scientific field. No effort was made to check the credentials of signatories. Indeed, found among the signatories were the TV characters Perry Mason and Hawkeye Pierce from the M*A*S*H series. The most authoritative body on global warming is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Over 2,000 of the world’s leading climate scientists and policy experts are involved in its work. In its 1995 Second Assessment Report it concluded that “[Apparently the editor intended to insert a quotation here but failed to do so—there is nothing more in the editor’s note between the quotation mark and the capitalized “The” that follows this bracketed comment.—ECB] The balance of Assessment Report is scheduled to be released in 2000.

On the contrary, the initial 17,000 plus signatures on the petition were raised in response to a first-class mailing to about 19,000 bona fide scientists who, to be included on the petition, had to complete a form including their scientific credentials, sign it, and return it as hard copy, after which it was verified before the name was put on the list. Only afterward was the petition posted to the Internet, at which time a form was also posted that people who wanted their names added to the petition could fill out, listing their credentials, sign, and mail in, after which it, too, would be verified before listing. As the Oregon Institute of Science and Medicine’s research professor Art Robinson, an evangelical

it is indeed question begging to charge them with *ignoring* evidence of malign influence and hence, implicitly, with ignoring “our moral call to respond” to it.

Perhaps this point will be more sympathetically received if we turn the tables. Some economists have argued that various environmental protection policies have malign influences on the poor. Suppose a proponent of those policies were to say, “I’m not convinced they have that malign influence. In fact, my studies indicate that they have a net beneficial influence on the poor. Therefore, I shall continue to promote the policies.” Would it be fair then for those economists to accuse him of ignoring “our moral call to respond to” the distress of the poor? On the contrary, it would beg the question of whether the policies actually had the alleged malign influence.

The crux of my point is that we must take care to avoid moral judgments when there is reasonable ground for disagreement about empirical questions assumed by the moral judgments.

Christian, explained in a post added not long after the petition was placed online:

During the past 2 years, more than 17,100 basic and applied American scientists, two-thirds with advanced degrees, have signed the Global Warming Petition.

Signers of this petition so far include 2,660 physicists, geophysicists, climatologists, meteorologists, oceanographers, and environmental scientists who are especially well qualified to evaluate the effects of carbon dioxide on the Earth's atmosphere and climate.

Signers of this petition also include 5,017 scientists whose fields of specialization in chemistry, biochemistry, biology, and other life sciences make them especially well qualified to evaluate the effects of carbon dioxide upon the Earth's plant and animal life.

Nearly all of the initial 17,100 scientist signers have technical training suitable for the evaluation of the relevant research data, and many are trained in related fields. In addition to these 17,100, approximately 2,400 individuals have signed the petition who are trained in fields other than science or whose field of specialization was not specified on their returned petition.

Of the 19,700 signatures that the project has received in total so far, 17,800 have been independently verified and the other 1,900 have not yet been independently verified. Of those signers holding the degree of PhD, 95% have now been independently verified. One name that was sent in by enviro pranksters, Geri Halliwell, PhD, has been eliminated. Several names, such as Perry Mason and Robert Byrd are still on the list even though enviro press reports have ridiculed their identity with the names of famous personalities. They are actual signers. Perry Mason, for example, is a PhD Chemist.

The costs of this petition project have been paid entirely by private donations. No industrial funding or money from sources within the coal, oil, natural gas or related industries has been utilized. The petition's organizers, who include some faculty members and staff of the Oregon Institute of Science and Medicine, do not otherwise receive funds from such sources. The Institute itself has no such funding. Also, no funds of tax-exempt organizations have been used for this project.

The signatures and the text of the petition stand alone and speak for themselves. These scientists have signed this specific document. They are not associated with any particular organization. Their signatures represent a strong statement about this important issue by many of the best scientific minds in the United States.

This project is titled "Petition Project" and uses a mailing address of its own because the organizers desired an independent, individual opinion from each scientist based on the scientific issues involved - without any implied endorsements of individuals, groups, or institutions.

The remainder of the initial signers and all new signers will be added to these lists as data entry is completed.

Dr. Robinson reported to me in a phone call February 3, 2006, that the name “Hawkeye Pierce” never appeared in the list of petition signers, that “Perry Mason” is a chemistry Ph.D. in Lubbock, Texas, and a direct acquaintance of Dr. Robinson, and that the radical environmental group Ozone Action succeeded in briefly getting one bogus name, Geri Halliwell, admitted to the list through fraud, but that name was removed. Dr. Robinson also reported that although no effort continues to add signatures to the petition, new signatures continue to arrive—and be properly verified for authenticity and credentials—at a rate of around twenty to thirty per month, while some past signers, at a rate of perhaps one or two per month, ask to have their signatures removed.

It is sad that some groups stoop to such tactics rather than dealing directly with scientific arguments; it is alarming when Christians uncritically repeat such slanderous charges; it is also contrary to the ethics of editing for an editor to insert such a note into a contributor’s work—a note that implies the contributor’s irresponsibility—without informing the contributor in advance and allowing opportunity for correction or response.

The Meaning of Dominion

Third, let me address one point at which I differ significantly from Dr. Dyrness on an exegetical/hermeneutical matter.² As do others,³ he writes that the proper manner of human dominion over the earth, commanded in Genesis 1:28, is

spelled out in [Genesis] 2:15. There it says that the Lord God put the man and woman in the garden to till it and keep it, or better to “work it and take care of it”. The Hebrew words are explicit. The first to “work it” means literally to “serve it”, from “abad” the word which means servant or slave. The second (*shamar*) implies a watchful care and preservation. The responsibility of the human image then is to watch over and preserve—not produce—the goodness of the earth.

My objection has two parts.

The first part has to do with the meaning of the relevant words. In Genesis 1:28, *subdue* translates the Hebrew *kâbash*, to subdue, to bring into bondage, from a primitive root meaning to tread down or beat down, to make a path, to press or squeeze or knead, or to attack or assault; to bring into bondage.⁴ *Rule* translates *râdâh*, to have dominion, chastise, tread, trample, or prevail against.⁵ Viewing the use of these words in the Old Testament reveals that they often denote quite harsh actions. In contrast, *till* translates *‘abad*, to labor, work, or do work; to work for another; to serve as subjects; while *keep* translates *shâmar*, to keep, watch, preserve, guard, wait for, or retain.⁶ The linguistic range of the relevant terms is quite different and in some respects almost antithetical. Yet Dr. Dyrness and several others insist both that the latter two terms define the former two and that tilling the earth means serving it.⁷

However, although *‘abad* may rightly be translated *to serve* or *work for* another in some contexts, it is properly translated thus only when it is followed by the accusative of a *person* or *persons*. When it is followed by the accusative of *things*, it is properly translated *to labor, work, or do work*, e.g., to till the ground, a vineyard, or a garden.⁸ While indeed all of man’s tilling of the earth should be service *to God*, it is inaccurate to say that it is service *to the earth*. Rather, man’s cultivating the earth is designed, as Old Testament commentators C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch point out, to cause the earth to serve man.⁹ As evangelical environmental writer Richard Young—who is also a Hebrew professor—put it:

Normally when *ground* is the object, *abad* means to till or cultivate, implying cultivation for one’s own sustenance. The context of Genesis 2:5, however, suggests a different focus.

²A second such point is his reference to the prophets’ discussion of environmental crisis, but time won’t permit my discussing it here. I have done so in *Where Garden Meets Wilderness*, pp. 46-49, in regard to similar treatments by other writers.

³Wilkinson, ed., *Earthkeeping*, 286-7; Gelderloos, *Eco-Theology*, 13.

⁴In addition to Genesis 1:28, see Numbers 32:20-22, 32:29, Joshua 18:1, and 1 Chronicles 22:17-19, the subduing of the land of Palestine, including the hostile nations in it, by Israel; 2 Chronicles 28:9-10, the subduing of Judah by Samaria to make them slaves; Nehemiah 5:5 and Jeremiah 34:11, 16, making slaves; Esther 7:8, to subdue or force a woman; Micah 7:19, subduing iniquities; Zechariah 9:15, subduing enemies in warfare.

⁵In addition to Genesis 1:26, 28, see Leviticus 25:39, 43, 46, Israelites are forbidden to rule fellow Israelite bondslaves with rigor; 26:17, if Israel rebels its enemies will reign over it; Numbers 24:19, Messiah will “have dominion, and shall destroy him that remaineth of the city”; Judges 5:13, Deborah had dominion over the mighty in battle; 1 Kings 4:24, Solomon had dominion over the land and kings from Tiphshah to Azzah; 5:16, 9:23, and 2 Chronicles 8:10, officers ruled over workers; Nehemiah 9:28, Israel’s enemies had dominion over it; Psalm 49:14, the upright shall have dominion over fools; 68:27, Benjamin had dominion; 72:8, (Messiah) the king shall have dominion from sea to sea; 11:2, Messiah shall rule in the midst of His enemies; Isaiah 14:2, 6, restored Israel shall rule over its oppressors, who once ruled over it; 41:2, God subdues kings before the ruler from the east; Jeremiah 5:31, the priests bear rule in oppression over the people; Lamentations 1:13, Judah’s conqueror prevailed against it; Ezekiel 29:15, humbled Egypt shall no more rule over the nations; 34:4, the shepherds of Israel ruled the people with cruelty.

⁶Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, ed., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Edward Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1907] 1978), 461, 712-13, 921-2, and 1,036.

⁷Gelderloos, *Eco-Theology*, 13; Wilkinson, ed., *Earthkeeping*, 287.

⁸Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 1,036.

⁹C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 volumes, volume 1, *The Pentateuch*, 3 volumes in 1, translated by James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976 rpt.), 1:84.

God's concern is not with people managing the garden for their own sustenance, for they had not been created yet, but with the need for a manager to help keep order and harmony in creation. The service is to be rendered to God, not to ourselves.¹⁰

While tender cultivation is suited to a garden, forceful subduing is suited to all of the earth that has not yet been transformed into the garden.

This introduces the second part of my objection to this method of interpreting the dominion command of Genesis 1:28. The Biblical text makes it quite clear that the Garden Adam was told to till and keep was not the same as the earth he was told to subdue and rule. God “planted a garden in the east, in Eden” (Genesis 2:8). A river watering the Garden “separated into four headwaters” (2:10) that flowed *out of the Garden* to water the earth. It was specifically the *Garden* that Adam was to till and keep (2:15). In contrast, it was the *earth* that he was to subdue and rule (1:28). Genesis 2:15 therefore should not be seen as defining or explaining Genesis 1:28.

As James Jordan points out, all of the earth was “very good” as God created it (1:31), but Eden was specially good, the Garden within Eden was even more specially good, and the trees of life and of the knowledge of good and evil in the midst of the Garden were still more specially good.¹¹ Adam's dominion mandate involved his transforming, bit by bit, the rest of the earth from glory to glory. Thus, in keeping with the Biblical teaching that the purpose of all creation is to glorify God, Jordan says that “The task of Adam's descendants would be to . . . [bring] the world from primordial to eschatological glory.”¹²

It would have made little sense to tell Adam to subdue and rule the *Garden*. It was already in perfect order, and succeeding Biblical imagery indicates that it was a type of both the sanctuary and the New Jerusalem—and through them of heaven itself.¹³ But the *rest of the earth* apparently lacked some of the fullness of the glory of the Garden. It was Adam's task to transform all of the earth (to subdue and rule it) into a garden while guarding the original Garden lest it lose some of its glory and become like the unsubdued earth.

This has important implications for our understanding of the environment and our role in it. Among other things, it implies that much that we find in the earth would not, without human transformation, have been as God intends it to be *even had the Fall and the Curse never occurred*, and therefore that transforming the earth from its natural state is, in principle, good—though sin can cause us to transform it malignly. It also implies that the extension of human dominion is, in principle, to be not lamented but celebrated.

Let me conclude by saying that I think the understanding of dominion and stewardship that I have just sketched actually complements Dr. Dyrness's notion of an ecology of hope. The hope, it is clear, is based on Christ's redemptive and restorative work not only for human beings but also for the cosmos (Romans 8:19-21). Understanding dominion and stewardship this way fits well with his call for our “work on earth” to “reflect Christ by signifying and anticipating the final renewal of creation.” Indeed, it reveals that man's original calling is reflected in—and greatly surpassed by—the work of Christ:

For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels. But one testified in a certain place, saying: “What is man, that You are mindful of him, or the son of man that You take care of him? You made him a little lower than the angels; You crowned him with glory and honor, and set him over the works of Your hands. You have put

¹⁰Young, *Healing the Earth*, 163.

¹¹The sense in which each of these environments—the earth, Eden, the Garden, the two special trees—was good may have differed in important ways. Perhaps one way in which the earth was good was as a domain in which Adam, God's image-bearer, would learn to exercise dominion; one way in which Eden was good was as an initial locale for man's transformational labors; one way in which the Garden was good was as an initial home and sanctuary for man, where he would commune with God; and one way in which the two trees were good was as tests of Adam's submission to God's rule.

¹²James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1988), 148. I am indebted to Jordan for the insights expressed here.

¹³Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, chapter 12.

all things in subjection under his feet.” For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor. . . . (Hebrews 2:5-9)

In the incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Christ, we see fulfilled at last the dominion for which God placed mankind over all creation. His dominion is the model for ours. Our challenge is to learn to reflect it.

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