



Land: Conservation and Renewal

What we do with the land we use and live on reflects our understanding of God's call to stewardship.

Introduction

In Genesis we learn that God has given us the land to use. Christians for generations have read these opening texts to shape their understanding of how they use the land on which they live. For some, the Bible justifies uncritical land use. With this understanding, we see the land as ours; the land requires work and it is ours to work as hard as possible and subdue it to our will. Surprising to many is that our use of the land has actually abused it. We are beginning to realize that the work we do to the land impacts both us and our global environment. While God has given us the land, it is not ours to abuse, unless we are willing to poison the land to the point where life as we know it ceases to exist.

Many Christians are calling for a vision of stewardship that embodies concern for all life, including the land which lives and breathes and sustains us. This perspective favors sustainability and rejuvenation. This concern for all life persists throughout the Bible. Many mainline Christian denominations are currently engaged in public advocacy for the land based upon this understanding.

Of course humans are not the only occupants of the earth's lands. The problem with the way we have conventionally used the land we live on is that we have maximized its production for a short period of time without great concern for the land's use in the future. The lack of concern and intentionality on our part has led to the destruction of once usable lands, the modification of habitats, ecosystems, and climatic patterns, and the storage of wastes that persist and poison the land. In this session we will look at the ways that humans



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have harmed the land and the ways that we are also working to restore the land. By the end of the study, the reader should have a basic grasp on how restorative practices embody God's call to be stewards of the land.

Ways the Land is Abused

Habitat Destruction

One way the land has been harmed is by removing its natural habitats. Two prominent examples of habitat destruction are shrinking rainforests and mountaintop removal. Rainforests are destroyed to develop farms, harvest timber, and accommodate human expansion. Once the forests are removed, the topsoil rapidly washes away and the land struggles to remain fertile. Destroyed rainforests require hundreds of years to return. Mountaintops are removed to extract coal. This practice removes complete ecosystems. After the coal has been taken from the earth, and its power extracted, the land remains naked and bare. Life cannot return because the soil is no longer productive and the hilltop will remain barren for a long time. Trees, plants, and animals are much more easily removed than they are restored. The mountain will not rebuild itself either. What took millions of years to carve and form has been destroyed by humans in a matter of years.

Habitats are also destroyed by urban sprawl, the horizontal expansion of our communities. Farmlands, prairies, fields, forests, and other lands are seized. When humans move to an area, the land is changed from its natural state into a state that fulfills our needs with little regard to previous nonhuman occupants. The consequences of expansion threaten species and can sometimes destabilize the land as well. When hillsides lose trees, mudslides and erosion become more prominent.

Conventional Farming

It may seem ironic that a task like farming, which depends upon the fertility of the land, could be responsible for the destruction of the land's productivity. However, this is largely the case in our world today. Larger farms often use fertilizers and pesticides. These chemicals assist plants to yield more crops, but salts and other remnants from their use build up in the soil. As the salts accumulate in the soil, it becomes less productive and requires additional chemical modification. This cycle perpetuates itself until the soil has accumulated levels of salt so high that the land is no longer fertile.

Industrial farms are often monocropped. Rather than having a diverse assortment of plants, a monocropped farm has only one species. This one plant drains the same nutrients from the soil, and attracts the same pests and diseases, thus it requires the same kinds of fertilizers and pesticides. Soon enough the irrigation washes away the weakened and damaged topsoil and the productivity decreases as nutrients diminish. Often, crops are rotated to avoid some of these problems, but crop rotation does not prevent salt accumulation.

Conventional farming practices are not sustainable. This model of farming pulls more from the land than it puts back into the land. It is for this reason that many people of faith are seeking to reform farming practices across the United States. Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, and others have lent support for farming reforms that have gone before Congress. The National Council of Churches of Christ Eco-Justice ministry seeks to reform farming and land-use practices to return to a sustainable model of farming.

Desertification

The deserts on the planet are areas where life struggles to exist. Global warming, climate change, and habitat destruction have increased the size of deserts. As the

deserts increase in size, they change climate patterns further because heat is absorbed and distributed differently. Now, flooding and extreme weather patterns are more common in other areas, which, consequently, further modify land and weather patterns.

Pollution, Waste Production, and Storage

Some of the land that we use is for waste storage. Humans create waste that persists in the environment for tens, hundreds, and even thousands of years. The waste produced by other animals and plants tends to be organic and rapidly breaks down, returning to the land. If one looks at an ecosystem, like a forest, one can see that life and death are intertwined. Things grow, live, die, and are broken down to be returned to the land from which they came. On Ash Wednesday, Christians remember our mortality with the phrase, "Remember from dust you came and to dust you shall return." Perhaps we should remember this phrase daily rather than one day out of the year. It would be harder to forget the need to return and restore the earth.

Resources are extracted from the land in order to make the goods that we use every day. There is a limit to how much we can take if we are not replenishing these resources. It is not possible for us to cease consumption but it *is* possible for people to consume smarter and often less.

Ways to Care for the Land

God has given the earth as a gift, and how we utilize this gift will shape the future into which we will live. As we draw closer to the land, we develop a deeper understanding of God. Notice how often God is revealed in Scripture through metaphors involving land (God as rock, Jesus' parables involving gardens and farms, and so forth).

If there is hope for the future we must live into God's call to stewardship. While the Scriptures do speak of God's restorative power and proclaim that God will come again to create a new heaven and a new earth, it may not be in our best interest to create more work for God by destroying this earth and exploiting it for our own gain. God's call to stewardship requires us to be vigilant and to care for the land on which we live. Christian churches have come to this realization and are beginning to make resolutions to reflect their commitments to helping save the planet. Most mainline denominations

have passed policies to support environmental reform, affirm the negative impact of global warming, and state their solidarity with those who are committed to restoration. The National Council of Churches works on behalf of its member denominations to advocate for new policies and laws that would protect the land on which all people live. For better or worse, the actions that we take at this time will have consequences.

Protection

If it is human activities that are damaging an area, removing these activities and declaring the area a protected area can facilitate dramatic restoration. Nature and the lands we live on can be surprisingly resilient. Because life and land are so deeply intertwined, protecting the land will also help to protect vulnerable species.

Protected lands can also be used to benefit humans. Root systems hold onto soil and help maintain the shape of the land. Without this coverage the earth washes out into the oceans as rains fall. In extreme cases, the land becomes soggy and mudslides can occur as entire hillsides fall apart. Other ways in which people benefit from protected lands can come from the restorative sides of nature.

For many of us, the natural world offers serenity. Hiking, biking, bird watching, camping, and rock climbing are greatly improved when done in a thriving ecosystem. People can go to these areas and encounter the natural world. For those of us who live in cities, protected areas like national parks and forests offer opportunities to experience the world in ways we do not have ready access to. Protected areas proclaim the beauty of creation.

Preservation

Preservation efforts can take place on a large scale, like declaring an area a bird sanctuary, or they can be done on a smaller scale, like working to preserve the land around our living places. Community gardens and native landscaping help to preserve the land in the area we live. A nursery can be a good place to start in finding the plants that are naturally suited to live in your area. An added benefit of selecting plants that are native to a habitat is that they tend to require less maintenance and can improve the soil in which they are planted.

The preservation of land can also involve reducing the waste we produce. Limiting consumption can become



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an act of stewardship. Products that carry a Forestry Stewardship Council logo are made from wood grown in sustainable forests and from recycled paper. There are many other products that have reduced their packaging or changed their packaging to be more environmentally friendly. We can select products with minimal or no packaging. We can prevent products from occupying space in landfills by consuming less, selecting biocompostable packaging, recycling, reusing, and sharing our concern for land stewardship with others. Composting is a way to create new organic soil from the leftovers from our food. We can partner with the bacteria and worms to transform this waste into rich organic matter to supplement and improve the quality of the land.

We can work on growing our communities vertically rather than horizontally to diminish the amount of land needed by each person. Living in smaller homes, condos, or apartments requires less land to house each person.

Sustainable and Restorative Farming

Some farming models can be used to help restore the land. For instance, organic farming still uses fertilizer to supplement the soil but the fertilizers that are used come from organic matter such as chicken feces and plant clippings. No chemical additives are used on an organic farm.

There are many other farming practices that promote sustainability. A sustainable farm is one that returns as many nutrients as it takes from the soil. There will never be a loss in the land's productivity on a farm that is truly sustainable. The latest shift in the farming and land management world is a move beyond sustainability to restorative land management. Restorative land management occurs when the land use returns more nutrients to the soil than the plants consume. A restorative farm can increase its generative ability over time. Often crops are rotated and the land is managed on a smaller scale for a farm to be restorative.

Starting a garden on one's own property can also help teach about land use and management. To garden successfully, a person will need to learn about the land and the plants that will grow in that area. Gardens reward the grower with fresh produce, flowers, and reminders of the beauty and bounty of the earth.

People can support local farming efforts by joining a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. In this model, people buy shares in a farm and receive the benefits of the farm's produce throughout the growing season. While local farms tend to be small operations that manage their land in a way that is either sustainable or restorative, it is always wise to learn about a farm before joining their CSA.

Land Sabbath

The Bible mandates that fields are to lie fallow every seventh year. The land, like people, is to experience a Sabbath. This practice seems an oddity and it is impossible to know how much it was actually practiced, but giving areas of land time to rest can assist in restoring the land. When people leave a plot of land alone some native species and weeds will return. Seeds will be scattered across the land by wind and animals. After the land has rested it can be returned to a crop field by tilling the plants into the soil. These plants will act as natural organic matter and the soil will benefit from the added nutrients.

Restoration

We can assist in God's work of restoration by promoting efforts to restore the lands around us. This can involve participation in conservation programs or protesting unnecessary land development. People can support the work of land restoration by picking up litter around where they live. Waste is far less threatening when confined to a landfill that is managed than it is out in the natural world.

We can minimize our impact on the world in a number of ways. Staying on trails while hiking helps to protect the land because we do not trample the plants that cling to the earth. It is also important to maintain the roads and vehicles that transport us and our goods. Proper car maintenance helps prevent chemicals from cars from seeping into the land they traverse. Adding ground cover on hillsides and proper drainage channels

on roadways helps prevent erosion. In many areas people have harmed the land by introducing invasive and foreign species. We can help to restore lands by working to control these species. Ideally, we can engage in assisting restoration by reintroducing species to habitats that have been compromised and working to ensure that all life has what it needs to thrive.

A Hope-Filled, God-Centered Landscape

We must also develop a keen understanding to live lives that reflect God's call to stewardship. This call involves us being caring stewards for all the land of creation and not just the land we live upon. Each of us needs to recognize the connected nature of the land. The decisions that we make on a daily basis have a large impact on the world in which we all live. The land that we walk upon must be managed well in order to support life as we know it. Our world is a global world and many of the items that we use each day come from locations around the world. While it is important to consider the packaging of these items, it is also important to consider how far the items have been shipped. Shipping requires transportation, which has direct and indirect consequences for the land.

It is important to discern God's wisdom as we strive to manage our lands. Knowing and understanding what God would have us do ought to be the basis of the action we take in managing our land. Every Christian can learn about God's call to abundant life through the pages of Scripture and can apply this wisdom to the work that is done on a daily basis. Together, with God's help, we can participate in the restoration of land. Our participation will require us to make changes to our lifestyles and embody practices of restoration and renewal. The result of our actions will be a return to God and the restoration of lands which have long suffered under the work of human hands across the centuries. Centered on God, we can become the spades in the hands of the master gardener, who plants hope for a world of life.

About the Writer

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