

Why Are We Stewards of Creation?

World Vision's Biblical Understanding of How We Relate to Creation

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Preface

In 1989 World Vision put in place a defining document we call our *Core Values*. In it, World Vision outlines its basis for all its programmes and activities – including a section on stewardship. That section states World Vision’s foundational principle for all its policies and actions regarding environmental issues:

We are stewards of God’s creation. We care for the earth and act in ways that will restore and protect the environment. We ensure that our development activities are ecologically sound.

We are increasingly aware of the need to fully explain, enhance and develop these statements – for our staff, for our partners, and for the sake of the communities and families we daily work alongside. Likewise, humanitarian and development workers around the world are growing increasingly more aware of inevitable connections between care for human well-being and care for the natural creation.

In response, the Natural Environment and Climate Issues team of World Vision presents this document explaining World Vision’s biblical understanding of how we relate to creation together with a new document explaining the development theory basis for working on environmental issues, to clarify and support World Vision’s work on environmental issues. World Vision must root its work in solid development theory. As a Christian agency, we are also compelled to root our work in how we understand our relationship with God’s creation.

This paper is written in the context of significant challenges the world is facing:

1. Global population is expected to reach 9 billion people by the year 2050.¹
2. Climate changes are becoming increasingly destructive to the environment.
3. Roughly 1 billion people currently live in absolute poverty.²

What does this mean? Global experts predict that food production in developing countries will need to almost double by 2050 to meet the food needs of the rising population, particularly in light of the increasing prosperity and consumption of some population groups.³

However, do we increase food production by cutting down forests, increasing irrigation in scarce-water contexts or depleting soil nutrients with extensive monocrops? Many well-intended efforts bring unintended, but well-documented, consequences. And degraded environments worsen the impacts of climate change. World Vision is already seeing the significant effects of climate change in fragile regions on the people whom we serve. Moreover, climate change is currently affecting nearly all food-growing regions of the world, even in prosperous nations – one example is the severe drought challenging the main winter wheat growing areas of the United States as this document is being written.

So, the challenges we face are not theoretical. They are immensely practical. They are affecting people right now – in both the developing and developed world.

¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects*, xiii.

² United Nations, ‘1.5 billion people living in absolute poverty makes its eradication humankind’s most significant challenge, Second Committee told’.

³ How to Feed the World in 2050, *Global agriculture towards 2050*, 2.

Questions World Vision encounters include:

- What sustainable and long-term information do we provide small-holder farmers in places like Africa about how they should work their farms given the environmental challenges their part of the world will be facing?
- What actions should we promote with rural communities as we see drought cycles grow increasingly frequent?
- Is it World Vision's business to be thinking about environmental challenges facing communities, nations and continents? How should we document and share what we witness unfolding?
- Do we worry about water and soil management for small-holder farmers, or is this too distantly related to child well-being?
- How should we advise people living near coastlines in island nations such as the Philippines or Indonesia, as ever more powerful storms hit such regions? Many millions of people live in these areas, often depending on fishing for their living, and lacking resources to relocate.
- Do we speak with friends in the developed world about how their specific actions may be contributing to environmental problems elsewhere in the world? Is this World Vision's role?
- How can we talk to our friends in the developed world where certain discussions, politics and policies regarding climate change are stunted by oversimplifications and misunderstandings, or are even sometimes considered to be things Christians should not be involved with?

Many voices in the world – including the Christian world – express very divergent views about the environment. Some loud and powerful voices assert that nature's only role is to promote human prosperity. Others loudly endorse the other extreme and seem to worship the creation, rather than the Creator.

While these questions could be debated endlessly, World Vision faces the very practical situations described above. That is, environmental degradation and an increasingly turbulent climate are already daily affecting many of the children and families we serve. To stand with them, we need answers and action now. Do we frame our thinking only on development theory?

World Vision, as a Christian organisation, has more than practical, historic or development theory reasons for acting. We have the biblical narrative, church history, and our creeds and doctrines to inform us and to rely on.

So how do we humans relate to creation? Is this something we need to take seriously?

Why does World Vision assert that we are stewards of creation? Does the Bible provide us with guidance for how to think about creation?

What is the biblical perspective on creation?

This document is not intended to be the ultimate theological answer to the infinite questions humankind faces in detailing how to relate to creation. It is not built on an established systematic theology, with a view from there to issues of the creation.

Rather, this brief overview attempts to address a very practical and specific set of questions arising regularly amongst development workers from our area development programmes to our World Vision national offices to our international support offices and Global Centre offices to our leaders. We humbly hope to answer those questions primarily from a resource we expect all World Vision staff and supporters to be familiar with and have access to – the Bible.

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Introduction

As an international partnership of Christians, World Vision derives its understanding of its roles and responsibilities primarily from the Bible. The purpose of this document is to briefly review World Vision's understanding of the Bible's teaching on God's creation.

Because World Vision exists to serve the most vulnerable – many of whom are directly dependent on the functioning of creation's resources – environmental considerations are **not** optional for World Vision staff.

To avoid environmental considerations is to avoid the hope that tomorrow might be a better day – a day without hunger or thirst or sickness or other oppressions. To avoid environmental considerations hinders the ability of people to experience life in all its fullness.

For more on the importance of environmentally responsible development work from a theoretical perspective, please read *World Vision's Guide to the Environment in Development*, available on [wvcentral](#). The paper you are reading now presents that World Vision does not arrive at our understanding of the importance of environmentally aligned and sensitive development solely from development logic (although we arrive at the same place). Rather, this paper's purpose explains that, for World Vision, it is because of our Christian identity and our understanding of the Bible that care for creation is a necessary expression of our faith.

As we delve into the basics of creation – creator, ownership and purposes – we will draw attention to how creation is a gift of God and that creation reveals God.

Humanity's roles and responsibilities with regard to creation directly link with World Vision's mission because of our focus on child well-being for current generations and generations to come. Unfortunately, the earth is not always the recipient of integrity or intelligence in humanity's stewardship. And so, this paper also considers some important ideas about creation and its importance to the poor, about Jesus' intimate connection with creation, and about how Christ is reconciling all things to himself, including creation.

Executive Summary

The purpose of this document is to concisely clarify and explain World Vision's understanding of the Bible's foundational teaching on God's creation, especially as it affects World Vision's mission. One of our guiding documents, titled our *Core Values*, declares:

We are stewards of God's creation. We care for the earth and act in ways that will restore and protect the environment. We ensure that our development activities are ecologically sound.

As a Christian organisation, World Vision has more than practical, historic or development theory reasons for acting. We act because we are informed by and rely on the biblical narrative, church history, and our creeds and doctrines. As World Vision works to protect and serve the most vulnerable, we must consider creation and environmental issues. Only by doing so can all God's children, especially 'the least of these', experience life in all its fullness.

From our reading of the Holy Scriptures we understand:

- God is the creator, and God has called creation 'very good' (Gen. 1:31).
- While humanity is God's appointed steward of creation, creation belongs to God. The earth is the Lord's.
- Since the earth is the Lord's and God is our ruler, humanity is accountable to God for our stewardship of and interaction with creation.

Since God is creator, owner and ruler, we seek to care for creation in the way that God calls for. The thoughtful and proper care for creation is the logical outworking of our love for God – caring for what God has made, which ultimately belongs to God. Humans are not independent actors with regard to creation, because creation is God's. We will be judged by God if we mar, degrade or destroy creation, and we must act towards creation in the way that God calls us to.

We also understand:

- Creation glorifies God.
- Creation reveals God and God's nature, character and purposes.

Because creation is a means of God's revelation and because of its inherent value and goodness being created by God, we care for creation. We interact with creation in a way that preserves its capacity to reveal God, restores and rehabilitates those parts of creation that have been misused, and stands against uses of creation that destroy its revelatory role.

According to the Bible, God's intentions for creation were not only to reveal God's character, but also to:

- provide for all that God has made, including natural systems and non-human life needs
- provide for human physical needs, including food, water, shelter, clothing and energy
- provide for human and non-human life both now and into the future.

God's twin purposes for creation are to reveal God's character and nature, and to provide for what God has made. Humanity's use of creation must promote – not compromise – the ability of creation to reveal God and to provide for humans and other creatures on the earth now and in the future.

Humans are entrusted by God with both dominion over and stewardship of creation:

- God has tasked humans to govern and supervise the rest of creation – by exercising dominion.
- The purpose of dominion is to carry out God's intention for creation, including revealing God, providing for human and non-human creation, and caring for our neighbour.

- Humanity's exercise of dominion is limited, as God has ultimate dominion over humanity. God holds humanity accountable for our exercise of dominion over creation.
- Humans' stewardship of creation means ensuring that it functions and prospers into the future, to the degree that we are able to influence – a command given before the fall and a command particularly important today. The word *stewardship* is connected with 'watch', 'guard' and 'protect'.
- Appropriate stewardship requires that we know God's stated purposes for creation and God's stated human responsibilities, including caring for the widow, the vulnerable and the oppressed.

God has given two roles to humanity regarding creation: exercising both dominion and stewardship over the earth. Our understanding of dominion is that it is not unlimited, but is intended to ensure creation functions properly, thereby accomplishing God's purposes. Stewardship is particularly connected with caring appropriately for creation.

As Christians we believe we understand something unique about our world since we know its Creator so intimately. Specifically:

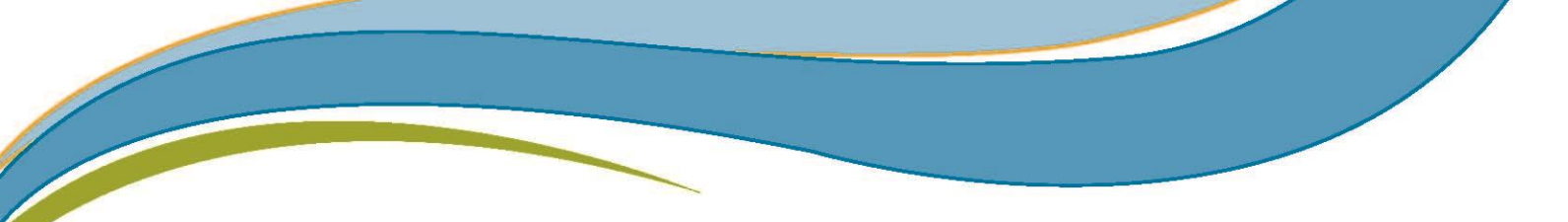
- Jesus is creator and Lord over the earth, and we cannot separate our relationship to Christ from how we act in relation to what he has made.
- Jesus is reconciling all things to himself including all of creation, thereby signalling creation's eternal importance.
- Jesus commands us to care for the poor and oppressed, the 'least of these' (Matthew 25).
- The 'least of these' often depend most heavily on creation's healthy functioning. Anyone concerned with the 'least of these' must pay special attention to care of creation. People whose actions knowingly or inadvertently harm the 'least of these' risk the wrath of the Creator and Judge of all things.
- Caring for creation is a relational act, intimately connected to our relationship with Christ, our relationships with others and our responsibilities in the shared ministry of reconciling all things to Christ.
- Caring for creation is an act of the mind and will; however, as with all things, the leading and filling of God's Spirit is required for true long-term success from a biblical perspective.

In Jesus' life, ministry and teaching we see a unique perspective on creation. Not only does the Bible say Jesus is creator and Lord, but also that it is Jesus who is reconciling ALL things to himself, including creation. Jesus' teaching about the 'least of these' is especially poignant for anyone working with the poor, as the poor are often most dependent on the healthy functioning of creation. Jesus instructs that we need the indwelling of the Spirit to accomplish the good works he's prepared for us in creation.

The Scriptures paint a clear picture of God's creation and humanity's roles and responsibilities. God is the creator, and creation belongs to God, not to humanity. God wants to be known, and creation is a means of revealing God's character and nature. Creation is a means of providing for humanity and the rest of what God has made, and humanity has been given both dominion and stewardship over creation.

We understand that these roles and responsibilities are given so that creation can fulfil its purpose of providing for all humanity now and into the future. Since the poor are especially reliant on creation, we are careful to manage and care for creation so that creation provides well for the poor.

We know that there will be a judgement against those who abuse God's entrusting of resources, and we stake everything on Christ's mercy for our many failings.



Finally, although we see this but dimly, we understand that the creation itself is going to be renewed and reconciled to Christ, by Christ and for Christ. Somehow, in all of this we have been granted the greatest of all eternal opportunities: a choice to share in Christ's own ministry of reconciliation of all peoples and all creation.

With this understanding, World Vision has concluded, and we affirm:

We are stewards of God's creation.
We care for the earth and act in ways that will restore and protect the environment.
We ensure that our development activities are ecologically sound.

Our Understanding of Creation

God's Creation

God Is Creator

The first book of the Holy Scriptures starts at the beginning of all things. The first words of the book of Genesis reveal a powerful creator, and this creator is God.⁴

In Genesis chapter 1, God creates plants with seeds, and animals to inhabit the land, sky and water. Systems, rhythms and natural structures all exist because of the Creator's plan and desire. God creates humans – male and female – and commands all things to be fruitful and to multiply.

God creates and deems it 'good' and 'very good' (Gen. 1:31). Theologian Ched Myers writes, 'The Hebrew word here, *tov*, signifies intense delight'.⁵ This intense delight exists even before humans are created (see verses such as Genesis 1:4). As humans, many of us focus on the human element in the creation story, but we shouldn't miss an important point – that God ascribes inherent value to non-human creation separate from what creation provides for humans.

God Is Owner

As World Vision's core value states, 'We are stewards of God's creation' – that is, creation is God's.

The Scriptures tell us that humans are a work of God, created in the image of God. Humans find their origins in the soil of the earth and in the breath of God (Gen. 2:7). As part of the created order, humans' relationship with the rest of creation comes from God's determination and decision about that relationship.

Humans have no innate ownership of creation. Rather, the Creator owns creation. Humanity has been given a very important role in the created order, but the Scriptures are clear that God has ownership over creation. Humanity's role with regard to creation must be discerned from the first principle: that God is owner. Humanity inhabits creation, but it is not ours.

Since God is the owner of creation, we look to God's Word to determine how we should interact with creation.

The Scriptures show that creation – including the earth, its natural systems, plants, animals, people and all other things – is God's.

- 'The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it' (Ps. 24).
- 'Heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it' (Deut. 10:14).
- 'The land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants' (Lev. 25:23).

Leviticus 25 not only tells us that the land belongs to God, but also identifies humans as 'tenants'.

⁴ We believe creation is the act of a loving Trinitarian God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Creation reflects its Creator's relational being.

⁵ As cited in von Kalm, *Creation to New Creation*, 3.

The Hebrew word for 'aliens' is *ger*. This can also be understood as a 'temporary inhabitant, a newcomer lacking inherited rights, a guest, a foreigner, sojourner, stranger'.⁶ The word for tenants, *towshab*, can be translated as 'a dweller, a mere lodger, resident alien or inhabitant'.⁷

Since we are temporary dwellers on God's earth and part of God's created order ourselves, we treat the rest of creation the way the owner of creation – God – calls for. We take our instructions about our interaction with creation from the Word of God.

God Is Ruler and We Are Accountable

God – the creator and owner – sets the rules for how the earth is to be used.

If humans are tenants, and God is the owner and landlord, it is the landlord's right to set rules or limits for the tenants. God has the ultimate say when it comes to the environment, because God owns it and knows it best. God created the rules that govern the universe and knows its complexities better than our best physicists, biologists and ecologists. Since God establishes the rules for how the universe works, we can seek to learn its features, boundaries and limits, and follow them for our own and others' benefit.

Since God is creator, owner and ruler of all things, God holds people accountable. While most Christians readily understand accountability for not following God's directions – those individual or corporate misdeeds we call sins or trespasses – we often forget that accountability extends to our treatment of creation. Sin affects our relationships with all creation, including relationships between human and non-human species. French theologian Henri Blocher puts it this way: 'If man obeys God, he would be the means of blessing the earth, but in his insatiable greed ... and in his shortsighted selfishness, he pollutes and destroys it. He turns a garden into a desert'.⁸ God holds people accountable for how they misuse, abuse and mistreat creation.

Revelation 11:18 explicitly states that God will destroy those who destroy the earth.

Who are the destroyers of the earth? The word 'destroyers' in Greek is *diaphtheiroō*. This word is also understood to mean 'to ruin passively, to pervert, to corrupt, to destroy or perish'.⁹ The word for earth here is *gē*, meaning soil, land, ground, world.¹⁰ It is not just those who maliciously mistreat the earth for selfish gain who will be punished, but also those who stand idly by and remain silent about environmental abuses.

As one of the largest relief, development and advocacy agencies, and as the largest Christian development agency, World Vision **cannot** remain silent on issues of environmental stewardship.

Because God is creator, owner and ruler, we seek to care for creation the way that God calls for. Proper care for creation is the logical outworking of our love for God: We care for what belongs to God.

What we have seen so far is that humans are not independent actors with regard to creation. Creation is not ours, and we cannot simply do whatever we want with earth's resources.

⁶ Strong, *The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 1616.

⁷ Strong, 8453.

⁸ Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 184.

⁹ Strong, 1311.

¹⁰ Strong, 1093.

Purposes of Creation

With the understanding that creation is inherently good and a gift from a loving God, we now turn to examine some of God's purposes for creation.

God Creates with Purpose

The architecture and composition of creation reveals the Creator's purposes. God created as an act of love and the purposes of creation support God's love.¹¹ Creation is neither a random accident nor divine in itself. We understand creation as a gift that both reveals God and provides for humans.

Creation Glorifies God

Creation glorifies God in the goodness and splendour of its very being and order.¹² Psalm 19:1–4 says,

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

In the ancient Near East, the sun was often an object of worship. But the psalmist tells us that the sun, the firmament, and day and night are created and all testify to the sovereignty of their Creator. This testimony is characterised first as 'glory' – a word often appearing in contexts explicitly affirming that God reigns¹³ and that the universe itself instructs humanity about God's rule. Since Scripture tells us that creation glorifies, praises, exalts and celebrates God, we treat creation in ways that support this aspect, function and role.

Creation Reveals the Creator

God wants to be known by all people groups across all the earth. This is stated throughout Scripture and, ultimately, in the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ In addition to God being made visible to us in Jesus, God chooses to be revealed through creation.

This aspect of God is evident in verses like Romans 1:20 (NIV): 'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse'.

The sixteenth-century theologian John Calvin wrote,

We cannot open our eyes without being compelled to behold God. God's essence, indeed, is incomprehensible, utterly transcending all human thought; but on each of God's works God's glory is engraved in characters so bright, so distinct, and so illustrious, that none, however dull and illiterate, can plead ignorance as their excuse.¹⁵

¹¹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe all God's purposes for creation. This document focuses on two purposes regarding God's intentions for care of creation.

¹² Psalm 65:9–13, Psalm 96:10–13.

¹³ Doran, et al., *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 751.

¹⁴ Exodus 20:4–5, Romans 1:19–20, Mark 12:29–31, John 3:16, John 6:38, John 17:20–23.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, Chapter 5, Section 1.

God is the original artist, and creation reveals God's creativity.

The artist can be seen in the work of the artist. The psalmist in Psalm 8 makes this clear. By looking out over the ocean, by gazing at the stars, by walking through vast forests, we humans learn about the divine character and power of God, and are likely both humbled and filled with deep awe and reverence.

The Christian Eastern Orthodox tradition understands God as both transcendent and immanent, present in all things. Gregory Palamas wrote in the early 14th century, 'God is the nature of all things, and he transcends every nature. He remains wholly within himself, and dwells wholly within us'.¹⁶ This firmly establishes creation's sacredness, because it is pervaded with, imbued with and filled with God and therefore is to be treated with reverence.¹⁷ Reverence for creation does not lead us to worship the created, but instead leads us to worship the Creator of all things.

Similarly, the Christian reformer Martin Luther once said, 'The power of God is present at all places even in the thinnest leaf... God is entirely and personally present in the wilderness, in the garden, and in the field'.¹⁸

World Vision wants all people to come to know God. We know that creation reveals God and that people learn about God through creation. By ensuring our programmes facilitate a flourishing environment, we support the revelation of God.

Those who ignore, misuse or exploit the earth are marring the ability of people to see God. Since God's desire to be known is so strong, misusing creation is certainly offensive to God. Those who degrade the earth work against God by undermining God's will to be known, and they will be held accountable. Care for creation supports the revelation of God, and World Vision takes an active stance against those who degrade the earth.

In 2010 World Vision conducted research to identify how children first become aware of God. In listening sessions with 484 children ages 5 to 20 from mixed faith backgrounds, our staff asked the children to draw a picture and describe when they first became aware of God. The study found 'amazement at creation' as one of three ways these children identified first becoming aware of God.¹⁹ A 10-year-old girl born to a Buddhist family in Cambodia recalled,

Why do we cut trees and the trees grow back, when we dig the soil, it comes back? Someone more powerful than man must be making this happen, because this is not possible for a man to grow back a tree and grow back soil. Where does the question come from, from my thinking, from my faith? Where does your faith come from, from my thinking? Maybe this is what they call God.

A boy from Uganda said, 'I know there is a God because of the rain. Because who can fetch so much water, go up to the sky, and pour it on us? Only God can do that'.

These children affirm, and World Vision's child well-being aspirations affirm, awareness and experience of God's love can come through the natural environment.

Because creation is a means of God's revelation, we care for creation. We interact with creation to preserve its capacity to reveal God, restore and rehabilitate parts of creation that have been misused and degraded, and stand against uses of creation that destroy its revelatory role. In addition we care for creation because of its inherent goodness and because it was created by God.

¹⁶ As cited in Theokritoff, 'Creator and creation', 67.

¹⁷ Sabada, 'Eastern Church's Ecological Vision'.

¹⁸ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Awakening to God's Call to Earthkeeping*, 14.

¹⁹ World Vision International, *Basic Orientation Module on the Spiritual Nurture of Children*.

Created to Provide

Creation Provides for Non-Human Species

The second purpose of creation is that its natural systems and processes provide for all God has made – human and non-human. Because all creation is connected, both immediate local and long-term global consequences can occur whenever one part of creation is harmed.

Therefore, our use of creation should preserve its ability to provide – clean water, clean air, sufficient grass and trees, etc. – for the needs of other parts of creation.

Creation Provides for Humans' Physical Needs

Creation also provides for humans' physical needs, including food, water, shelter, clothing and energy. The earth has complex natural structures, systems and organisms, and when stewarded properly, all work together to provide human sustenance. By God's design, soil, water, sun and seeds can be stewarded to yield and sustain both edible vegetation and animals. In Genesis 1:29 God says, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food'.

Since the earth is designed to provide for human needs, we use the earth in ways that provide well for people.

For All Humans Now and for Future Generations

Creation is designed to provide for all people – rich and poor, meek and powerful, people today and for future generations.²⁰ This understanding is central to World Vision's mission and calling as a Christian organisation and to our holistic commitment to community-based and sustainable development.

Human activity has the potential to disrupt creation's functioning and future provision for others. For example, dumping unwanted waste into a river may 'take away' the waste, but it means the river is unable to provide clean water to others who depend on it for drinking, fishing, irrigation and the like.

Creation is not the sole preserve of today's generation. Future generations will need the earth to provide for their needs, and as a child-focused organisation, World Vision's work is about children's future.

Stewardship of creation must take into consideration its purpose in providing for other human beings beyond ourselves. Using creation in a way that disrupts others' ability, both now and in the future, to enjoy and benefit from creation is at odds with God's purpose for creation.

To summarise, we have seen that God's twin purposes for creation are to reveal God's character and nature, and to provide for what God has made. Humanity's use of creation must promote – not compromise – the ability of creation to reveal God and ensure the ability of creation to provide for humans now and in the future.

We will now build on this foundation by describing two biblical themes – dominion and stewardship – and how these relate to our work as World Vision.

²⁰ We will speak more about this later because this issue is at the heart of stewardship.

Role of Humans: Our Understanding of Dominion and Stewardship

The Scriptures emphasise two themes regarding the role of humans in relation to the rest of creation: dominion and stewardship. Both refer to the inescapable fact that humans live in relationship to the created order – first as creatures of the created order ourselves, and second, as caretakers of all creation. Both roles are intrinsically intertwined.

Dominion

We understand dominion to mean the power, privilege and responsibility to direct, control, govern, cultivate and manage.

Who Has Dominion?

In the book of Genesis, God gives human beings an active and powerful role. Humans are granted authority over all other parts of creation. As the unique bearers of God's image, we are given 'dominion' – the privilege and responsibility to rule over creation. While misunderstanding of this concept has led to some very poor thinking about how humanity is to interact with creation, the exercise of dominion is clearly part of God's intention for humanity. God tasks humans to govern and supervise the rest of creation – by exercising dominion.

Our understanding of dominion comes from the following two passages:

God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' (Genesis 1:27–28)

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Genesis: 2:15 NIV)

These verses contain the first divine words spoken to human beings, and they are about humanity's relationship, not to God, but to the earth.²¹ These words establish a sharing of the exercise of power (dominion). From this point on, God chooses to not be the only being who has or exercises creative power.²² At the beginning of the creation process, dominion had been solely God's. However, by giving humans the task of dominion, God establishes an extraordinary power-sharing relationship with humans.²³

As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* articulates, 'The Lord entrusted all of creation to their (humanity's) responsibility, charging them to care for its harmony and development. This special bond with God explains the privileged position of the first human couple in the order of creation'.²⁴

²¹ Brueggemann, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 346.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 'Safeguarding the Environment', 451.

What Does Having Dominion Mean?

We run the risk of misunderstanding God's command and intention unless we grasp the meaning of two important words here.

- The Hebrew word for 'have dominion' in Genesis 1:26 is *radah*. A study of the verb reveals that it must be understood in terms of care-giving, even nurturing, not exploitation or malevolence.²⁵ Made in the image of God, we are to seek to relate to the rest of creation as God relates to us.²⁶
- The Hebrew word for 'work it' in Genesis 2:15 is *abad*. This word means 'to serve, till'.²⁷ It means to be attentive to, to work the earth in a way that is to its benefit. This command focuses on the earth, particularly cultivation (Gen. 2:5, 15). This 'subduing' implies development in the created order, offering to human beings the task of intra-creation development, of nurturing the world to its fullest possible potential.²⁸
- God gave dominion to humans before the fall. Exercising dominion over, managing and supervising creation is not a curse, but rather a means of blessing.

This role is intended as a means of blessing for both humanity and for the rest of creation. It is our God-given task. John Calvin described it well,

The earth was given to man, with this condition, that he should occupy himself in its cultivation.... 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, but let him endeavour to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even better cultivated. 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.²⁹

Dominion, properly exercised, drives us back to God. Humans are continually interacting with creation in our daily activities, from driving to an office, growing food in soil or catching fish in rivers, lakes and oceans. God created the physical and biological processes on this earth, and effective dominion requires we gain knowledge of how these systems work or risk ruining them – through overuse or by polluting them so they cannot function properly. Agrarian writer and farmer Wendell Berry writes, 'The care of the earth is our most ancient and most worthy and, after all, our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it, and to foster its renewal, is our hope'.³⁰

Dominion over creation was given to humanity as our vocation, and we joyfully exercise this dominion in accord with God's purposes, providing for all that God has made.³¹

Purposes of Dominion

God gives humans dominion in order to carry out the many purposes which we have seen that God has for creation. To facilitate God's revelation, we care for the earth in ways that ensure all people have enough to eat, and enjoy clear air and shelter for protection. In supporting God's purposes, we demonstrate love for God and our neighbour. At World Vision, we believe that holistic love for our neighbour means seeking to promote human and, particularly, child well-being.

²⁵ Brueggemann, 346.

²⁶ More on this later in this section, specifically the biblical vision of 'ruler' as shepherd.

²⁷ Strong, 5647.

²⁸ Brueggemann, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume I, 1994: 346

²⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, Verse 15.

³⁰ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 14.

³¹ Responsibility to exercise dominion was not revoked after the fall. God's initial command remains; we are tasked by God to rule over it in such a way to ensure that it provides for all people.

We've been given dominion to honour God and to care for our neighbours. Through dominion we fulfil what Jesus identifies as the greatest commandment – to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbours as ourselves (Matt 22:37–39). We care for the earth because it is intrinsically linked to the well-being of our neighbour.

We believe we are not loving our neighbours if our activities put contaminants in water and pollutants in the air, threatening our neighbours' well-being. In our globally connected world, we humans can no longer deny that our actions and inactions affect the lives of others, both near and far away.

Another reason God gives us dominion is because God knows it is good for us to be in nature. God knows it is good for us to look out over the plains and savannahs, sit beside a peaceful lake, stand on the shores of great oceans, and walk through mighty mountains. In these activities, we are humbled by the greatness of the Creator, we draw closer to God, and this brings us peace and deep joy.

God's Dominion Over Humanity

Proper understanding of humanity's dominion over creation recognises that ultimately humans are under God's dominion. Humankind's dominion over creation is limited.

Psalms 8 poignantly details how creation reveals God, and how humans have dominion over creation: 'O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!' (Ps. 8:1), or more literally translated, 'O Yahweh, our Adonai'.

Yahweh is God's proper name, and *Adonai* conveys the idea of being master, exercising rulership or dominion. Humanity's dominion is thus limited both by God's dominion over humanity and by God holding humanity accountable for its exercise of dominion.

Dominion properly exercised reflects the character of God. We are to exercise dominion in the way God exercises dominion over humanity and can look to the Scriptures for examples of how God does this.

Scriptures' Examples of Just Dominion

In the ancient world, kings were described as shepherds of their people.³² It was the responsibility of kings to provide for and protect their people, although they frequently failed to do so.³³ In contrast to the failure of earthly kings, the Bible says God does what a shepherd is supposed to do: provide life and security for the people.³⁴

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament use the metaphor of a shepherd to illustrate just rulership (Ezek. 34:1–11, John 10:11), and describe God as our shepherd (Gen. 48:15 Rev. 7:17). One person who identified God as shepherd was King David, who before becoming king was himself a shepherd. David's most famous work is Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my shepherd'.

The *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* states that this psalm is not aimed primarily at communicating a sense of tranquillity. Its primary intent is to say that God keeps the psalmist alive. For a sheep, a vulnerable creature, to be able to 'lie down in green pastures' means to have food; to be led 'beside still waters' means to have something to drink; to be led 'in right paths' means danger is avoided and appropriate shelter is provided.³⁵

³² Brueggemann, 767.

³³ We will take a closer look at failed dominion in the next section.

³⁴ Brueggemann, 767.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

When dominion is exercised as a good shepherd would, even the most vulnerable lack nothing. The shepherd provides basic necessities of life – food, drink, shelter.

Since we understand God is our shepherd, in our exercise of dominion over creation we seek to care for all of creation like a shepherd to his or her flock. We seek to care for, guard, nurture and heal. At World Vision, this is our calling – to care for the poor and oppressed; and to work to ensure children enjoy good health, are educated for life, experience love of God and their neighbours, and are cared for, protected and participating.

Abuses and Resulting Judgement in Scriptures

The Bible also clearly describes examples of improper dominion. God's attitude towards those who misuse dominion in Ezekiel 34 again shows parallels between shepherding and ruling. Israel's leaders and rulers are severely chastised for abusing dominion to benefit themselves while ignoring people under their dominion. God speaks through Ezekiel the prophet saying,

Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally... therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock (Ezek. 34:2–4, 9–10 NIV).

The indictment is clear. Those given responsibly to exercise dominion must not exploit that responsibility for selfish gain. The All Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew articulates the severity of environmental abuses:

We have traditionally regarded sin as being merely what people do to other people. Yet, for human beings to destroy the biological diversity in God's creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by contributing to climate change, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth's waters, land and air – all of these are sins.³⁶

Humanity's dominion is a responsibility with consequences. We are accountable for our exercise of dominion before God.

This prompts World Vision to evaluate our development work and practices. One example: in Southern Africa there is a farming practice known as *chitemene* (slash and burn). This system has been practiced for decades in growing maize (corn). While *chitemene* is an ecologically sound system when population demands are low and ample woodland replenishes soils, today growing populations are exhausting soil nutrients with a monoculture of maize. New methods are called for if farmers' dominion is to result in local flourishing of creation and its inhabitants.

So we care for creation because God gives us this responsibility and power. With power comes responsibility to seek the well-being of all creation.

We have seen that humanity has been given dominion over creation. However, this dominion is not the dominion of an owner. God is still the owner of all creation. Our dominion is not for selfish exploitation of people or creation. God's intention is that creation provides for all people, today and in the future.

³⁶ Chryssavgis, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*.

We Are Stewards

We understand stewardship to be the directive from God to work, care, watch over, guard and protect all that which is entrusted to us.

Stewards of God's Creation

As World Vision's core value states, 'We are stewards' – resources at our disposal are not our own. We understand our call to stewardship through our study of Genesis 2:15, 'The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it'.

The Hebrew word for 'care' is *shamar*, meaning to 'watch, guard, protect'. The concept denotes careful and close observation – specifically, an attentive and protective tending.

Genesis 2:15 reveals that creation is to be worked, that humans are created to be workers, that work is the plan of God and not a curse, and that humanity is to be provided for through creation. This passage also shows that, even before the fall, the creation needed to be cared for. This aspect of caring for creation means we are to guard, nurture and protect creation – a good articulation of roles of a steward or servant.³⁷

What Is the Relationship Between Dominion and Stewardship?

If dominion is responsibility to care for creation, then stewardship describes how we exercise this dominion.

We govern creation for the good of humanity and other parts of creation, not in a domineering, selfish and exploitive manner, but by nurturing creation, preserving it and helping it to function as God intended.

The Bible says God's intention is that humans exercise dominion best by adopting the approach of being stewards – appointed caretakers who follow instructions from God the owner – over creation. Stewardship is **how** we exercise dominion as God intends.

What Is the Purpose of Stewardship?

Good stewardship requires attention to how creation was designed to work.

God's command to Adam in Genesis 2:15 to work the garden and care for it came before the fall. Our requirement to care for creation is not a result of sin. God knew that using creation – working the land – also requires that we care for the creation. Growing vegetables and crops, for example, takes nutrients out of soil. To preserve soil's ability to produce, we must manage the soil and put nutrients back. These activities are inseparable.

If we want creation to sustain us, we need to care for creation. If we want creation to feed us, we need to steward creation appropriately.

Good stewardship is attentive to the owner and the owner's intentions. By definition, stewardship of God's creation must be attentive to the things that are close to the heart of God: the orphan, the widow, the vulnerable and the oppressed. This is also the mission of World Vision – to care for the orphan, the vulnerable. As World Vision's founder Bob Pierce once prayed, 'Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God'. God's stewards of the earth must wisely ensure it bears

³⁷ See the appendix for discussion about stewardship and management.

enough fruit for all to eat, clean air for all to breathe, pure water for all to drink, etc., for current and for future generations.³⁸

Greed, be it individual or collective, is contrary to God's will and the order of creation.³⁹ Creation's resources must be shared, used and developed in accordance with justice and charity.⁴⁰ This is a question of preventing the injustice of hoarding resources or treating our atmosphere, land and water as dumps where we can dispose of waste without consequence or accountability.

The Scriptures are clear: God stands with those who are oppressed, with the vulnerable, the orphans and widows (Ps. 9, Jas. 1:27). As Christians, our stewardship must cultivate the earth with the intention that all humanity can enjoy and benefit from creation's abundance.

Proper stewardship has one eye tending the earth for today and one eye toward tending the earth for future generations. Pope Paul VI wrote,

We are the heirs of earlier generations, and we reap benefits from the efforts of our contemporaries; we are under obligation to all men. Therefore, we cannot disregard the welfare of those who will come after us to increase the human family. The reality of human solidarity brings us not only benefits but also obligations.⁴¹

Stewardship calls us to exercise godly dominion in using creation for the sake of human welfare and needs in areas such as farming, fishing, mining, energy generation, engineering, construction, trade and medicine. As we provide for human welfare and needs, we are also commanded to care for the earth and all its creatures. On an increasingly crowded and interconnected planet, we know definitively today that local action and choices have an impact on the planet's natural systems and on our neighbours who live close and far away. As stewards we need to think of these activities not only in terms of beneficial products and results, but also impact on others.

Consequences of God's Mandate to Stewardship

Unfortunately the earth is not always the recipient of service-oriented stewardship by humanity. Land degradation, extinction of species, air and water pollution, dumping of chemicals and toxins – we lament this widespread abuse and destruction of the earth's resources, including its bio-diversity, and repent of ways in which we may have intentionally or unintentionally contributed to the earth's degradation.

Probably the most serious and controversial issue regarding creation care now is the challenge of climate change.

While some debate the scientific consensus around the causes of climate change, and while the global politics of finding solutions remains a challenge, World Vision finds itself in the centre of addressing climate extremes' disproportionate effect on families and children least able to cope, mostly in the developing world, where there is less capacity to adapt, respond or relocate. World poverty and climate change need to be addressed together and with equal urgency, given this impact on 'the least of these'.⁴²

³⁸ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 'The environment and the sharing of goods', 481.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*.

⁴² The Lausanne Movement, *The Cape Town Commitment*, Section 2, Part 2b-6.

Care of Creation from the Life and Ministry of Christ

What we have seen so far in our overview is that God is author and creator of all things. Creation, made by God and for God, has value in itself, reveals God, provides for humanity and for creation, and mankind has been given dominion and stewardship responsibilities. In this next section, we will look at how much fuller we understand care of creation as we look to the author of creation – Jesus Christ.

Specifically, this section will describe Jesus' role in creation, Jesus' teaching about the poor and its implication for caring for creation, and Jesus' (and Christians') role in reconciling all things to himself (Col. 1:20).

Christ the Creator

Christians' perspective on creation comes directly from the life and teaching of Jesus. We understand that Jesus Christ is the creator, the firstborn over all creation, and the heir, sustainer, reconciler and redeemer of creation.⁴³ The very Author of our salvation is also the Author of creation.⁴⁴

John 1 introduces Jesus this way,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. (John 1:1–3)

Because Jesus is creator and Lord over earth, we cannot separate our relationship to Christ from how we act in relation to what he has made. We cannot claim to love Christ while abusing the earth intentionally or unintentionally, and especially as we now understand that the earth is his inheritance (Heb. 1:2).

Twentieth-century Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper said, 'There is not a square inch of the entire creation over which Jesus Christ does not declare, "This is mine"'.⁴⁵ In light of Christ's special relationship with the rest of creation, Christians have a unique calling to care for creation. We care for the earth and responsibly use its abundant resources, not according to the rationale of the secular world, but for our Lord's sake.⁴⁶

Christ the Reconciler

Not only is Christ the creator, sustainer and heir of creation, but Christ will reconcile all things. Christ is ushering in the kingdom of God. We understand that in some way, shape or form, God will reconcile all things in Christ – including the natural environment.

Colossians 1 tells us,

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col. 1:19–20)

⁴³ Hebrews 1, Colossians 1.

⁴⁴ Sorley, *Christ and Creation*, 58.

⁴⁵ As cited in Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 488

⁴⁶ The Lausanne Movement, Part 1 section 7.

The Greek word for reconcile is *apokatallaso*. This word has an emphasis on ‘to reconcile fully’.⁴⁷ All things imaginable will be reconciled completely, including all of creation. While we are not entirely sure what the future will look like, we can be confident that there will be reconciliation. God will reconcile, and bring peace, and things standing at odds will be united. If Christ is reconciling all things to himself, an implication is that we must not work against him by degrading or harming what he not only made, but for which he died in order to reconcile.

The Scriptures also say that the children of God are blessed with a role in bringing this restoration. In 2 Corinthians 5:18, Christians are called to Christ’s ministry of reconciliation. As well, not only are Christians called to a ministry of reconciliation, but we are also called to act in ways that liberate creation from decay. Romans 8 shows us,

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Romans 8:19–21)

Somehow and in some way the children of God share in liberating creation in bringing about the fullness of the kingdom of God. This is primarily Jesus’ task, but like dominion, he willingly shares this task with us, implying that Christians will or should somehow be involved in protecting and even rehabilitating creation.

Bad Eschatology⁴⁸ Is No Excuse for Human Irresponsibility

Humans’ mistreatment of the environment can be attributed to various factors, including a lack of reverence for creation’s ‘inherent goodness and order and “sacramental character”’.⁴⁹ An all too frequent reaction by some Christians to the issue of responsibility to steward creation is, ‘Who cares? It is all going to burn anyway. Why should we care about creation? Creation’s sole role is to promote human prosperity’.

The genesis of this bad thinking is often a poor interpretation of 2 Peter 3:10 (NIV).

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.⁵⁰

Peter is addressing false teachers of the day who claimed that because the *parousia* (second coming of Christ) had not yet occurred, the promise was therefore null and void.⁵¹ He argues that delay of the *parousia* is evidence of God’s patience, and he emphasises the unexpected nature of Christ’s return and judgement. Peter is not giving an account of the timing, mechanics or science of how these events will transpire. He is arguing that since we do not know when these events will take place, we ought to be living holy and blameless lives.

Careful reading indicates that Peter is likely not talking about total destruction of all the physical elements but the elements of evil, perhaps similar to scriptural descriptions of ‘powers and principalities’. Peter’s word choices correlate the return of the Lord to the destruction of the world

⁴⁷ Strong, G604.

⁴⁸ The study of the final events of history, the ultimate destiny of humanity, commonly referred to as the ‘end time’.

⁴⁹ Dr. Michael Hanby, Assistant Professor of Biotechnology and Culture, Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, from correspondence with the authors, December 2012.

⁵⁰ Some manuscripts translate ‘everything will be laid bare’ in the sense that nothing will be hidden, all works will be exposed. Other manuscripts have ‘everything will be burned up’, NIV footnote a.

⁵¹ Craddock, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 357.

through the flood at the time of Noah. At that time, it was wicked human life that was destroyed, but the planet and its systems endured. If the world was not destroyed at the flood, perhaps Peter is referring to the same kind of destruction in the future. So, are we sure that we are understanding this apocalyptic language properly? In historic Christian traditions and interpretations of Peter's argument, the destruction will be of both hidden and open human sin, evil and wickedness – not oxygen, nitrogen, hydrogen and the like.

Even if Peter can be credibly interpreted as saying the earth and universe is going to be destroyed, it would be an incorrect conclusion to say humankind can then do anything it wants with creation. God remains the owner, and God's purposes for creation have not changed. God has tasked us with managing and caring for creation through dominion and stewardship. Unless God revokes these roles and responsibilities, they remain ours to fulfil. Nowhere in Scripture are these roles revoked, regardless of whether the earth is to be destroyed.

Christ's Concern for the Poor and Their Close Relationship with Creation

Scriptures show us that God loves the poor, upholds the cause of the oppressed, feeds the hungry, and sustains the fatherless and the widow.⁵² Many of the poorest around the world are engaged in rain-fed agriculture, in subsistence farming, in artisanal fishing and in pastoralism. These livelihood pursuits are viable only when the earth's ecosystems both work and work predictably. Since the poor are most dependent on the healthy functioning and well-being of the earth and its natural systems, we have an important responsibility to steward the environment in ways that consider their needs.

The Eastern Orthodox All Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew observes the link between how our treatment of the environment affects other people:

The way we respond to the natural environment directly reflects the way we treat human beings. The willingness to exploit the environment is revealed in the willingness to permit avoidable human suffering. So the survival of the natural environment is also the survival of ourselves. When will we understand that a crime against nature is a crime against ourselves and sin against God?⁵³

Perhaps there is no stronger guidance for stewardship than Jesus' instruction to care for 'the least of these' in Matthew 25.

'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (Matt. 25: 35–40)

Jesus' teaching implies attentiveness to creation. This verse is a clarion call to seek understanding of how our use of creation affects others.

Can we be indifferent to our water, food or energy use, practice and policies when these verses exhort us to steward creation in ways that care for all people, but especially the 'least of these'?

⁵² Psalms 145, Psalm 147, Deuteronomy 10:17–18.

⁵³ Chryssavgis, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*.

These verses compel us to carefully consider how we live our lives and how to steward creation in ways that care for all people, especially the 'least of these'. These verses say we ought to ask, 'Are we depriving the poor of something to eat or drink by not worrying about how our actions might affect them or without acknowledging our role in stewardship of the environment?'

Most of us in the developed or industrialised world have lost direct and daily connection with the earth, its rhythms and systems. We have forgotten how many people are utterly dependent on rain coming at the right time and in the right amounts for a good crop, for food and life. Daily lives of the rural poor or coastal fishers are often spent attempting to harvest the earth and its abundance. Of all the people on earth, their livelihood is most dependent on the proper and reliable functioning of the created order. The health and production of livestock and crops are directly linked to well-being. When eco-systems are sick, livelihoods of the poor suffer and can even disappear. Christian scholar, author and World Vision India National Director Jayakumar Christian writes, 'The powerlessness of the poor is intensified by worsening ecological imbalance and environmental degradation'.⁵⁴

Because human actions now have an impact on the environment not only locally but also globally, actions in one country can affect the poor living on other continents. The United Nations Development Programme *Human Development Report 2011* states, 'In many cases the most disadvantaged people bear and will continue to bear the repercussions of environmental deterioration, even if they contribute little to the problem'.⁵⁵ Does this not risk the wrath of God?

God calls all people to stewardship of God's creation. This includes working with the poor to be themselves effective stewards, and to call others in positions of power to more effective and just stewardship.

Working with the poor to promote human transformation quickly brings us to address problems caused by environmental degradation. The poor often live on degraded land, sometimes because they have degraded it (knowingly or unknowingly) and sometimes because degraded land is unwanted and, therefore, available.

Degraded land and ecosystems often result in poor agricultural productivity, poor water safety and conservation, declining biodiversity, and desertification. Degraded land is not God's intention for creation. Rehabilitating degraded land and local ecosystems is not only possible but is also in line with both good stewardship and reconciling creation to the Creator's intentions.

Degraded environments often make sustainable long-term improvement of child well-being difficult. This is because degraded environments are usually less fertile and resilient in terms of food production, are often more polluted, and can even harbour more disease.

Restoring degraded land and ecosystems is not only possible, but – as World Vision has documented in places like Humbo, Ethiopia, with reforestation – in some cases can occur remarkably quickly. Reinforcing humanity's role in stewardship of creation and ensuring that people have the skills, knowledge and power to preserve or restore their part of God's creation (water, trees, soils, marine environments) allows more people to experience the biblical vision of fullness of life.

In today's world we see that humans can have an impact on the natural world to an extent inconceivable even a few generations ago. Release of certain refrigerant gases into the atmosphere can destroy ozone and result in harm from increased solar radiation reaching the planet. Release of pollutants from burning coal can acidify rain, destroying forests and lakes, resulting in birth defects

⁵⁴ Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed*, 135.

⁵⁵ UNDP *Human Development Report 2011*, 3.

from mercury, and causing lung and heart problems for millions. Greenhouse gas emissions⁵⁶ from burning fossil fuels and cutting down trees is driving climate change, and World Vision is witness to increasingly variable rainfall and rising seas negatively affecting millions of people.⁵⁷

As a Christian organisation we seek to promote change that brings well-being to children, families and creation, and to challenge all activities that damage God's creation and people. This is not an issue of sentimentality but of World Vision's primary obedience to Jesus' call to care for 'the least of these'.

Community, The Spirit, and Care of Creation

Creation is a prism through which we can see that God is a relational being. Christians' Trinitarian⁵⁸ understanding of God convinces us of the relational nature of creation, designed out of love and for love, and endowed with both life and freedom. God initiated a covenant relationship with humans – creating in his own image a relational people, intended for relationships marked by love, care, empowerment and engagement. And so humans are to mirror God's own qualities in relationship to creation, both human and non-human.

Caring for creation is a relational act. Care of creation is an act of love from us towards God. We love and serve God by being good stewards of God's creation – a very practical way to love God and neighbour. We recognise we are only fully able to do so through the empowerment and indwelling of the Spirit of God.

The Spirit of God actively reveals God's will and empowers believers today. Our ability to understand and follow the commands expressed in Scripture to properly exercise dominion and stewardship are marred by sin, just as all things are marred by sin. As humans, it is impossible for us to fully understand God, God's purposes, and our roles with respect to creation without the illumination of the Spirit.

And so the fullness of God's intent is dependent on those who are filled with the Spirit to be the **best** examples of exercising dominion. We rely on the Spirit of God to understand our roles and responsibilities, and to empower us to fulfil them.

The Spirit helps us to realise our potential to live as the children of God we are, children who are both willing and able to become all that God wants us to be. As we listen to the Spirit, we are more likely to play our proper role in enacting God's vision for all children to experience a life of well-being, in all its fullness. This is our prayer, that as people of God we will understand what is at stake, what we must do in our roles to contribute towards fullness of life and be empowered by the Spirit to make it so.

⁵⁶ Some incoming radiation from the sun is reflected directly back to space by the earth's atmosphere and surface and some is absorbed by the atmosphere and by the earth's oceans and land, where it is converted into heat, warming the surface of the earth and the air above it. Particular gases in the atmosphere act like the glass of a greenhouse, preventing heat (infra-red) from escaping, causing earth's surface temperatures to rise.

⁵⁷ UNDP, 3.

⁵⁸ The belief that God is one in three persons; distinct, yet one substance, essence and nature.

Conclusion

The Scriptures' picture of God's creation and humanity's roles and responsibilities are clear. God is the creator, and creation belongs to God. God wants to be known, and creation is a means of revealing God's character and nature. Creation is also a means of providing for humanity and the rest of what God has made. Humanity has been given both dominion and stewardship over creation, so that creation can fulfil its purpose of providing for all humanity now and into the future. These roles are so important that abuse of dominion and stewardship will be judged. Moreover, because the poor are especially reliant on healthy functioning of creation, we are to manage and care for creation so that creation works for the poor. Finally, although we see this but dimly, we understand that the creation itself is going to be renewed and reconciled to Christ, by Christ and for Christ.

With this understanding, World Vision has concluded and we affirm:

We are stewards of God's creation.

We care for the earth and act in ways that will restore and protect the environment.

We ensure that our development activities are ecologically sound.

Appendix

Use of 'Manage' and 'Management' to Understand Stewardship

There has been much discussion over whether use of the word 'manage' or 'management' is appropriate in describing how humans interact with creation.

At World Vision, we are comfortable with the word 'steward'. In reality, for some people the word 'manage' carries with it baggage because of connotations in some countries, cultures or sub-cultures.

One argument says the word 'manage' carries with it too many negative associations, evoking images of use of power to control. For some people, especially living in cities, the word can suggest a business relationship, perhaps of a technocratic or utilitarian corporate manager or CEO. That is, the word may imply something mechanical in nature or lacking in soul.

Before unpacking the concept more, this paper uses the word 'manage' in the context of an ongoing, personal, loving relationship with the Creator. The Bible tells us that humans are given the task by God of caring for creation. In English, three slightly different synonyms are most often used by Scripture translators and commentaries for this process: caretaker, steward or manager. Again, we understand that these roles come in the context of our ongoing relationship with the Creator who has given us the task. Throughout this paper, we understand and use the term 'manage' to relate to our role as caretakers of creation.

While many people are more comfortable with the word 'steward', what does that word mean? A steward is often defined as:⁵⁹

1. One who manages another's property, finance, or other affairs.
2. One in charge of the household affairs of a large estate, club, hotel, or resort.
3. A ship's officer in charge of provisions and dining arrangements.
4. An attendant on a ship or airplane.
5. An official who supervises or helps to manage an event.

The function of a steward is to care for something which usually belongs to someone else. That activity is also called 'management', or the process of making decisions about how best to use resources. Hence, a steward is a manager, and a manager is a steward. The words are synonyms.


At World Vision, management is something happening continually at all levels. We manage resources entrusted to us by donors. We manage time and efforts of our staff. As well, the people we serve are managing their own time and resources. They make regular management decisions about what to plant, when to harvest, what to use as fuel and what food to eat.

Management is also an activity happening continually in our area development programmes in terms of natural resources, such as soil, water and biodiversity. Common technical words used in these contexts include:

- land management
- natural resource management
- watershed management.

Further, since humans are part of creation and since God is creator, creation is not the 'property' of humanity. Humans have a relationship with God, and within this relationship comes opportunity for

⁵⁹Merriam-Webster Dictionary.



love, sacrifice, responsibility and accountability. One part of responsibility is to care for, steward and manage what God has created.

From a perspective of practice, when humans are creating food or are making decisions about where and how to live, or how to earn an income, we are faced with choices. We are faced with choices because all resources are not unlimited. We do not have unlimited time, money, natural or human resources to devote to everything. (For example, if we need to increase food production do we do it by cutting down forests? Do we do it by using only chemical fertilisers? Do we do it using conservation agriculture techniques?) How we make choices between alternatives – like ensuring that the need for more food does not occur at the expense of clean air and water today or in the future – is what we call management.

This paper is not the first time World Vision has written about this issue. In 2002, several prominent Christian thinkers published a book edited by World Vision's Don Brandt titled *God's Stewards*. R. J. Berry writes in this book, 'Stewardship means active management'. Additionally, Berry writes, 'God made and appointed us to be stewards, managers, agents and caretakers'.⁶⁰

Therefore, it is within our history as an organisation that we understand that the act of stewardship and management are closely related, and so we have chosen to use both words.

For this paper, we define the word 'manage' as the ancient practice of tending, stewarding, caretaking, overseeing, cultivating and acting as earth-keepers. And managing creation is pleasing and glorifying to God.

⁶⁰ Brandt, *God's Stewards*, 25.

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