

2008 LEADERSHIP SERIES

*Universal Foundations
for Human Rights:
A Dialogue in Genesis*



CHRISTIAN EMBASSY

3. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Universal Foundations for Human Rights: A Dialogue in Genesis

Our recent discussions of Genesis and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have led us to conclude that there is great coherence with the Biblical view of Creation as stated in Genesis 1:26-27. Human dignity and worth are inherent and gender equality is affirmed because all, both male and female, are created in the image of God.

What follows in verse 28 shows that, from the beginning, the environment and humanity have been inextricably linked to one another: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’” In what is often called the Cultural Mandate, God gave Adam and Eve an equal responsibility for the care of His creation. They would be “earth-keepers.”

It comes as a surprise to many that the environment is not explicitly addressed in the UDHR, but it is clear that the unsustainable development of the environment threatens many of the fundamental human rights set out in the UDHR, such as the right to life, health, and property. It can be argued that everything which affects the environment has an impact on the human condition. Because environmental degradation is both a cause and consequence of many human rights violations, this oversight by the original drafters of the UDHR is seen today as a regrettable omission,

To whom does the earth belong? Psalm 24:1 says “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.” However, Psalm 115:16 says “the highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to man. Stott concludes that the answer is both. It belongs to God because he made it and to us because he has given it to us as tenants. God remains the ‘landlord,’ the Lord of all the land!

The logical consequence is that we can not elevate the earth to the status of a god, or as more important than its human inhabitants. Nor can we err to the other extreme by elevating people to the status of a god with no consideration given to the earth. In giving us the moral responsibility of exercising healthy environmental ethics, (increasingly called “creation care” in Christian circles) Stott makes three observations:

1. *God gave man dominion over the earth.* “God arranged an order, even a hierarchy, of creation. He set man midway between himself as Creator and the rest of creation, animate and inanimate.... We combine dependence on God with dominion over the earth”
2. *Our dominion is a cooperative dominion.* “We are not creating the processes of nature but cooperating with them.”
3. *Our dominion is a delegated, and therefore a responsible dominion.* “The earth ‘belongs’ to us not because we made or own it, but because its Maker has entrusted its care to us.”

The United Nations is to be commended for recognizing this. Principle 1 of the Rio Agreement on Environment and Development says, “Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.” The Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development says, “We commit ourselves to building a humane, equitable and caring global society, cognizant of the need for human dignity for all.” And the seventh goal of the Millennium Development Goals is to “Ensure Environmental Sustainability.” There seems to be a consensus that we have a universal right to live on an earth that is developed responsibly.

Many Christians have not addressed their need for involvement with the Cultural Mandate and its correlation to sustainable development. (1) They may simply be apathetic or driven by other priorities.

(2) There are those who would say that the spiritual issues of humanity far outweigh the needs of our physical habitation. (3) Those who believe that the end of the world is imminent might simply conclude that environmental issues do not warrant their concern in light of the inevitable destruction of our earth. (4) Others would misinterpret the mandate to “subdue and rule” in irresponsible, exploitive or destructive ways. Christian philosopher Os Guinness recently said, “Many of the problems with our world are from *domination* of the earth (plundering), rather than *dominion* of the earth (care and developing).”

Let us examine more closely a biblical perspective on sustainable development and conclude with a draft of an article on the environment to amend the UDHR.

1. **Establish ownership.** Read Genesis 1:26-28 and Psalm 24:1-2.
What is relationship between God and humanity? Between God and nature?

Whereas...

2. **Establish responsibility.** Read Genesis 1:26-28 and Psalm 8:3-8.
[Note that *rule* in Genesis 1:26 and 1:28 means “to have dominion, subjugate, master.”
Subdue in Genesis 1:28 means “to bring into subjection, tread down or make a path, to make to serve, by force if necessary.” Could this justify exploitation and destruction of creation?

Whereas...

3. **Establish precedent.** Read Genesis 2:15 and 19-20. Note also Leviticus 25:1-7 on land management and Deuteronomy 22:6-7 and 25:4 on animals, both wild and domestic.

Whereas...

4. **Establish the root cause of the degradation of our ecosystem.** Read Genesis 3:17-19 and Hosea 4:1-3. In what ways did the Fall impact our environment?

Whereas...

5. **Establish the future state of our ecosystem.** Read Isaiah 65:17, 19b-25.

Whereas...

6. ***Therefore, everyone everywhere has the right to...***

“If therefore our dominion over the earth has been delegated to us by God, with a view to our cooperating with him and sharing its produce with others, then we are accountable to him for our stewardship. We have no liberty to do what we like with our natural environment; it is not ours to treat as we please. ‘Dominion’ is not a synonym for ‘destruction.’ Since we hold it in trust, we have to manage it responsibly and productively for the sake of both our own and subsequent generations.”

[John Stott, *Involvement: Being a Responsible Christian in a Non-Christian Society*, p. 159]

“For you made us only a little lower than God, and you crowned us with glory and honor.
You put us in charge of everything you made, giving us authority over all things”
(Psalm 8:5-6 NLT)