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Theology of Stewardship

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Introduction As a fundamental directive within Scripture, the biblical call for human beings to serve as good stewards of the earth has been considered through various lenses for centuries. On a daily basis, Christians and non-believers alike engage with decision-making in regards to consuming food and resources, both natural and human-made. These decisions affect their own quality of life in addition to the well-being of other people and creatures across the globe as well as the condition of the planet itself. Varying interpretations of Genesis 1:28 have led to an attitude towards consumption that varies from conscientious to exploitive, especially in westernized culture and society."



Katie Kreutter

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Introduction

As a fundamental directive within Scripture, the biblical call for human beings to serve as good stewards of the earth has been considered through various lenses for centuries. On a daily basis, Christians and non-believers alike engage with decision-making in regards to consuming food and resources, both natural and human-made. These decisions affect their own quality of life in addition to the well-being of other people and creatures across the globe as well as the condition of the planet itself. Varying interpretations of Genesis 1:28 have led to an attitude towards consumption that varies from conscientious to exploitive, especially in westernized culture and society.

In recent years, theologians and civil leaders alike have explored the issue of consumption and its relation to the nature of Christian stewardship in greater detail as population growth and resource depletion become growing concerns. This work will examine these perspectives as they relate to and are formed by biblical hermeneutics and prominent theologies of recent centuries. In particular, the ethics of consumption within the context of stewardship will be analyzed in respect to the ways in which those who appear to deviate from the biblical call of caring for creation, by consuming irresponsibly, impact those living in poverty. Finally, this piece will apply this conceptual framework to ministry in the twenty-first century. A counter-cultural lifestyle of sustainability that adheres to this aforementioned biblical call effectively and thus emphasizes social justice with an option and concern for the poor will be considered.

Biblical Framework towards Consumption

As mentioned earlier, there is a recurring theme present in Scripture that emphasizes a regard both for God's creation and those who are disadvantaged or viewed as outcasts by society, including those living in poverty. There are multiple linguistic parallels that exist between the accounts of "the third day" and "the sixth day" in the Creation Story of Genesis, indicating a distinct relationship and similarity between land and humanity.² Although the two aspects of creation are comparable to one another, nevertheless a distinction is established in form, function, and core identity as human beings were particular in containing the image of God. Some arguably more westernized readings of Genesis 1:28 justify the depletion of resources based upon this apparent hierarchy and the characteristic of divinely established human free reign over the earth. However, the primary interpretation maintains that a responsibility for good stewardship is inherent within this charge.³

² *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1990), 11.

³ *New Bible Commentary*, ed. D.A. Carson, R.T. France, J.A. Motyer, G.J. Wenham (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 61.

Psalm 8:4-8 is cited as a parallel to this verse and further reflects this idea that human beings are called to rule the earth responsibly for the good of all creation as God's image-bearers.⁴ While this authority is granted to human beings by God, it is meant to be a positive element rather than a hindrance within God's greater redemptive work as sole and supreme Creator. Likewise, while human beings are described as being set apart from the land and other creatures by God, it seems that it can be argued that the relationship between the two sets is less hierarchical than symbiotic. Human beings must respect the land for the source of sustenance provided by God therein and God ensures that all living creatures have access to this sustenance, thus all life is regarded as significant.⁵ Even the original meaning behind the phrase 'subdue the earth,' which reflects language of dominance, force and control, must be examined in the sinless context within which it was presented, as God's initial Creation was good and perfect.⁶ Those ideas would not have been associated with the negative connotations of exploitation and destruction that accompany them today. Rather, they would inevitably have been viewed from a more holistic and healthy perspective that allowed natural resources to be consumed conscientiously, respectfully, and in a sustainable manner for all creatures.

The effects of irresponsible consumption of resources on those with limited access to them, has been documented as a significant concern for centuries. The prophetic books of Scripture in particular reflect God's call on humanity to be good stewards of what has been given in harmony with rather than in opposition to others. Inherent in this statement is the notion that all that is available on earth, either natural or human-made, has been entrusted to humankind and has been made possible only due to God's efforts. Ownership, then, does not belong to humans in any way, who are merely borrowers, but to God, who is the source. Especially in Western culture, with a prominence of capitalist and individualistic thought, this reality is not readily embraced by people who struggle to intake and distribute wealth and earnings with a selfless, egalitarian mindset. As mentioned earlier, however, this challenge is not limited to contemporary society. On multiple occasions within Scripture, the tendency of the people of Israel to prioritize the accumulation of riches and material goods at the expense of the most vulnerable and disinherited in society is rebuked. In Isaiah 1:21-24, the perversion of social justice as a consequence of the progression of human sinfulness is illustrated in terms of the ways in which resources are disproportionately consumed to the detriment of widows and orphans most in need of support.⁷ Repeatedly in the biblical narrative appears a theme wherein righteousness is directly and positively correlated with a sacrificial attitude and a sharing and surrender of resources with those less fortunate. Indeed, in Proverbs 29:7, '[t]he righteous' are defined as those who "care about justice for the poor," while "the wicked" are described as having "no such concern" (NRSV). Likewise, in Jesus' parable of the foolish rich man in verses 16-21 of the Gospel of Luke, the rich man is depicted as being foolish for hoarding his possessions for himself in excess and failing "to gain the true riches of a right relationship to God."⁸ As evidenced in such passages as Matthew 25:31-40, such a relationship with God entails service to God's people and, consequently, a universal accessibility of resources within any given society. The story of the famine in chapters forty-one and forty-seven of Genesis

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *NJBC*, 11.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *NBC*, 635.

⁸ *NBC*, 1001.

wherein Joseph hoards goods only to redistribute them to those in need offers a more ethical alternative to the disavowed approach in this aforementioned parable.

Historical Context of Consumption

In addition to evidence contained within Scripture of the imperativeness of proper creation care and consumption for the betterment of the disenfranchised, more recent historical events and perspectives also assert this idea. Alongside the destructive moral and spiritual implications of squandering resources, history has demonstrated the negative socioeconomic consequences associated with the act as well. At the cusp of the nineteenth century, the French Revolution evolved out of class distinctions in response to inappropriate use of financial resources by those in positions of authority.⁹ A similar economic situation in Latin America led to social unrest, violence, and death around this same time period.¹⁰ Over a century later, discord related to the denial of civil rights also stemmed in part from a misallocation of monetary as well as social goods, including participation in community life. It was argued that this indifference to inequality amongst the status quo was in part a residual effect of the industrial revolution, which caused certain groups within society to prosper while isolating others.¹¹ In this way, the class divisions observed in Europe and Latin America extended into the historically young American nation. Those consuming became themselves consumed by a seemingly selfish desire to maintain their exorbitant lifestyles with little regard towards those who were limited from accessing even a small share of these resources. Thus, this observed theme of uneven consumption of resources with political, social, economic, and spiritual repercussions has seemed to persist throughout history.

Howard Thurman recognized an irony in these post-enlightenment, modern Christian responses to this unsettling state of humanity. He noted the corruption of Christianity by those professing the faith, and maintained that a religion that invariably had its beginnings associated with oppressed, downtrodden, and minority peoples could often be followed in a manipulative manner fueled by such sin as “pride and arrogance” that further oppressed others.¹² In this way, Thurman contended, Christians were abandoning God’s call to not only be good stewards of the earth but compassionate caretakers of one another with emotional resources as well.¹³

Likewise, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. linked economic disparity with the potentially damaging ideologies of materialism, classism and nationalism, and argued that an even distribution of wealth need not be regarded as socialistic but, rather, humane and part of God’s created order.¹⁴ He stressed the God-given dignity bestowed upon human beings by God and affirmed that the corruption of the human spirit had culminated in injustice that could only be eradicated by repentance and a renewed life.¹⁵ While laws could change a person’s behavior, they could not change the condition of his or her soul and overall mindset. Dr. King was observably a strong advocate for the welfare of the marginalized members of society who were

⁹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1984), 262-263.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

¹¹ *The Story of Christianity*, 330.

¹² *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1976), 15-16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: First Fortress Press, 1963), 28.

¹⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., *I have a Dream: Writings & Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 81.

in want. In his work *Strength to Love*, he cited Luke 12:15 as a basis for what he considered to be the proper Christian attitude towards material possessions and the accumulation of wealth.¹⁶ While material goods were inevitably required for existence, they nevertheless were not to be regarded as occupying any degree of significance and were not to put above God, others, and even one's own self in terms of spiritual well-being.

In relative similarity to Thurman, Dr. King expressed concern in regards to humankind's tendency to trivialize one another to mere objects while regarding actual objects with a level of reverence that would seem to befit a human being.¹⁷ At an even harsher consequence, sometimes these objects seemed to be elevated even to the status of God, with idolatry resulting. Only when a genuine concern for the welfare of all human beings, regardless of income or status, with a selfless sharing out of God's offered abundance occurred would a just society adhering to God's stewardship call be active.¹⁸ While history has indicated such a reality is challenging to manifest, nevertheless it has also demonstrated the resiliency and influence of impoverished peoples reestablishing the biblical framework that reflects conscientious consumption and an ethic of justice socioeconomically and spiritually.

Theological Paradigms towards Consumption

Depending upon which theological paradigm is consulted, the issue of consumption can be viewed quite differently. This is in part due to the reality that theological structures are manifested distinctly within and influenced by cultural contexts. For instance, evangelical thought would consider the issue as tantamount if consulted during its emergence during the eighteenth century as a response to abuses in power by leaders in the church.¹⁹ Despite this historical foundation, however, as evangelicalism began to spread across continents and new sociopolitical climates, the emphasis shifted away from addressing societal reform and such resource consumption type of issues pertaining to community life.²⁰ Instead, the focus became more self-oriented with attention to one's personal spiritual life. Although mission work was thriving in the nineteenth century, it was primarily from the perspective of spiritual conversion on a soteriological and more abstract level rather than practical living exhortations from an existentialist perspective.²¹ Conceivably, such work would be a prime setting otherwise for the proper sharing of resources given its element of global interconnectedness. It seems evident that this focus retained into the present day, although recent developments within certain spheres of evangelicalism has shown an increased commitment to social justice.²²

This commitment was inevitably influenced in part by liberal theology, which was prominent during the nineteenth century. Like evangelicalism, this paradigm evolved throughout recent centuries and is multi-faceted in terms of approach and perspective. While one aspect of liberal Christianity referred to biblical interpretation and was less concerned with the intersection of faith and existence, nevertheless many aspects of this thought pattern espoused a need to be active within the world and cultural life.²³ Paul Tillich, a leader in liberal Protestant thought,

¹⁶ *Strength to Love*, 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁸ *I have a Dream*, 200.

¹⁹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), s.v. "Evangelicalism."

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 584.

²³ *Ibid.*, s.v. "Liberalism," 983.

recognized that secular society could not be separated from the Christian message, and advocated for human response to God's activity with participation in the divine order on earth.²⁴ With this viewpoint as a lens, it would seem that an attitude of individualism towards consumption would not be acceptable in light of the theological belief in the interdependence of humanity and creation in God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Further, Rudolf Bultmann contended that there was a call to responsible living inherent in the gospel message and overall biblical narrative that extended beyond a collection of verses to the very nature of God and humankind in relationship to God. He maintained that an ontological receipt of God's grace would invariably evoke a response in the recipient towards graceful action within society.²⁵ In Bultmann's view, Christians paradoxically lose their self-professed identities in order to receive their true identities in Christ, and must remain participants in the secular world as existing within physical time and space despite their transformed natures.²⁶ It is perhaps within the tension of this dichotomy that the most progress and influence for change in the secular world can be attained. It is evident that the majority of people in any given society may misuse physical and natural resources to the detriment of the earth and its inhabitants. Nevertheless liberal theology attests the necessity of perseverance within the Church to enable a transformed way of living that serves as a counter-cultural alternative model. At the center of this model exists Christ's life and testimony as the timeless ultimate model and guide.

Offered in part as a rebuttal to Protestant liberalism, neo-orthodoxy was in some ways critical of the social action element that arose therein, as it was perceived to lower the capability of God to human responsibility.²⁷ Nevertheless, this theological approach, as advocated for by Karl Barth, still observed the communal foundation within Christianity and the Church as well as the need for proper response to the Word of God within that context.²⁸ Although the emphasis was repositioned in order that human response was portrayed as utterly dependent upon God's transcendent and omnipotent initiative, a recognition of the symbiotic relationship between God, humankind, and the whole of God's Creation was maintained.

Application to Ministry in the Twenty-First Century

With an ever-increasing population size and technological advancement, the endangerment of the earth's resources continues to be at the forefront of socioeconomic issues encountered on a worldwide scale. For wealthier nations, the consequences of the effects are more latent and, thereby, foster complacency and a false sense of security. However, the effects are directly experienced in tangible and destructive ways by those living in poverty across the globe. It is because of this startling reality that an incorporation of a theology of stewardship is so paramount to and urgent within contemporary ministry settings. As this work has demonstrated, it is imperative that a biblical framework be utilized in tandem with a consideration of the history of social justice responses and prominent theological approaches. Without such incorporation, any address of this pressing issue could arguably become politicized, divisive, and thereby ineffective.

²⁴ "On the Method of Correlation," in *The Christian Theology Reader*, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 56.

²⁵ Ibid., "On the Existential Interpretation of Eschatology," 666.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ "The Method of Correlation," 56.

²⁸ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 36, Google e-book.

In today's society, especially within westernized culture, it seems that any dialogue regarding the issue of resource allocation that occurs within a faith-based setting is held suspect as belonging to one particular ideology over another. This causes an emphasis of the biblical foundation surrounding this issue to be even more necessary in order to stress its non-partisan nature, as all peoples are affected by consumption regardless of class, nationality, gender, and the like. Similarly, since a person's ability to meet higher spiritual and emotional needs is inhibited by his or her inability to access resources to meet basic human needs, it follows that any theological or spiritual teaching should flow out of and responds to rather than precede economic and social outreach.²⁹ Perhaps such an emphasis and attitude shift would enable an active and healthy discourse coupled with missional results rather than stifling conversation and productivity as seems to be the current climate.

While dialogue around the issue of consumption within faith communities would arguably be a helpful start to addressing the deplorable state of the poor affected by it, history has evidenced that change is slow-moving. Often, more assertiveness is needed with responses on a larger scale within society and not limited exclusively to physical churches or places of worship. As mentioned earlier, Protestant liberalism reiterated a historically observed correlation between faith and praxis within a Christian's community and sphere of influence. The practice of right faith invariably includes outreach to the disadvantaged, which, consequently, inevitably entails a more evenly distributed sharing of resources. It is not a lack of resources themselves, but the irresponsible and unsustainable distribution of these resources, that contributes to world hunger and poverty. It is shameful from a Christian, if not anthropological, perspective that an abundance of resources exist on the planet capable of meeting the basic needs of all of humanity, yet millions continue to die from starvation and other preventable causes due to this misallocation of goods. It is seemingly paradoxical that by grossly accumulating wealth in an effort to promote personal safety humans are in effect committing self-sabotage through unsustainable living practices.

In light of this condition, and as history has shown, a more holistic ministerial response would entail social action on the part of faith community members motivated out of God's authority as well as God's love and grace with a concern focused on others. As Dr. King asserted, "[p]ower at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."³⁰ Any progress towards a just ethic of consumption initiated by the faith community would arguably be most effective if formulated out of this mentality of not only internal but external faith expression through dynamic and socially engaged acts of service. As dual members both of earthly society and the Kingdom of God, Christians are called to consume material goods with a humble and sacrificial mindset that honors God by honoring God's Creation. While Christians cannot force others to follow suit, their action, if enacted with collective unity, would statistically contribute to influential change. Examples of such action would include an identification of and outreach to those in need with a sharing of financial, material, spiritual, and emotional resources at an invested level that defies common cultural standards of minimal involvement. By displaying an attitude shift that replaces the psychosocial narrative of personal gain and appetite appeasement with the biblical narrative of borrowing what has been lent as a gift with care and concern, it is possible that a more Edenic climate of consumption could emerge on earth.

²⁹ *Strength to Love*, 68.

³⁰ *I have a Dream*, 172.

Conclusion

While the causes of the abuse of financial, natural, and synthetic resources on earth appear complex, the systemic foundation is clear from a Judeo-Christian standpoint. The biblical narrative speaks of people who chose to rebel against God's established order and, consequently, initiated the exploitation of creation for personal and temporary rather than collective and eternal gain. It is evident that the effects of this condition recur today environmentally and spiritually, and a faithful and effective response is urgently needed, yet challenging to attain. Theological and historical paradigms illustrate that it is indeed possible to prompt change for an environment wherein resources are produced, consumed, and distributed with care. Such a change, theologians and social justice leaders argued, could emerge with God at the focus rather than self-interestedness with shallow pursuits. In the midst of today's religiously diverse landscape, all human beings occupy creation and share basic needs and a desire for a promising future. Perhaps this commonality could serve as a starting point for interfaith dialogue concerning the subject of conscientious consumption and motivator for widespread social change.



Athens Archaeological Museum
(Photo by MC)