

Beyond Stewardship: New Approaches to Creation Care

David Paul Warners & Matthew Kuperus Heun (Eds). 2019. Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin College Press. ISBN: 9781937555382. \$17.99 (paperback).

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A group of scholars, from a wide variety of disciplines, have banded together to create this really interesting book about the idea of stewardship. The book is framed as an intellectual descendant of the influential works that came out of Calvin College's Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship in 1980 and in 1991 (L. Wilkinson, 1980; M. L. Wilkinson et al., 1991). Because of these and other work in the 1970s and 1980s, the idea of stewardship of creation has become the dominant metaphor in Christian thinking about the environment, and has become quite common in the secular environmental language as well. But there are a number of ways in which the language of stewardship, and the implied theology, is inadequate. This book lays out a wide-ranging (but also appreciative) critique of the stewardship paradigm, and then offers a series of essays about how Christians can think better about the environment.¹

Beyond Stewardship is an edited volume but suffers from few of the weaknesses of that genre. It appears that the group of scholars studied together extensively, and that the editors did a good job directing the work. The different essays each hit similar themes from different disciplines and directions, and each chapter does a good job referencing the other chapters in the collection. Even the structure and tone of the chapters is quite similar: most start out with a personal story, followed by a statement of a problem, and a suggested way of working through the problem.

It is worth noting right at the outset that this is not an economics book. However, economists who have even a passing familiarity with the literature on Christian thinking about the economy should see the parallels. Stewardship is not just a term that is used to talk about the environment: it is also one of the dominant metaphors used to think about Christian theology and economics. For this reason, the critiques and constructive elements of this book make an indirect, but fascinating, read for those interested in the Christianity and economics literature.

The Critique of the Stewardship Paradigm

After a foreword by Bill McKibben and a preface, the introduction to the book lays out a helpful history of Christian Environmental Stewardship (CES) as a framework for thinking about the environment, and a summary of the theological and scientific critiques of the paradigm. While I have read critiques of the idea of stewardship before, particularly in the literature about theology and the environment, none is quite as comprehensive and concise as the one this book provides.

The argument starts theological and Biblical terms. The book's authors claim that the idea of stewardship, as a way of talking about our relationship to the rest of creation, has limited biblical support. The idea of stewardship is biblical, but it does not get connected to nature, animals, or natural resources in any explicit way in the Bible (p. 9). Theologically, the authors point out a number of flaws with the stewardship paradigm. First, the metaphor implies a separation between humans and creation that doesn't seem to hold up biologically or theologically (p. 10 and chapters 3, 4, and 5). It also often motivates an anthropocentric understanding of creation (p. 68). The volume argues that humans are not separate from creation. We are creatures. The stewardship metaphor also implies (but does not require) some odd images of God. In a stewardship model, God is implied to be "away" or separate from creation (p. 11), and God is implied to be the ultimate "owner" of everything (p. 13). The book argues convincingly that neither God as absent, nor God as owner, is quite the right description of God's loving and sustaining relationship to His creation.

Their critique of stewardship also extends into some ideas closely related to economics. The authors argue that the idea of stewardship is too closely connected to managerial thinking (p. 10), and to ideas about what is valuable that are anthropocentric and focused on human well-being (p. 12). The result, they argue, is a watering down of stewardship to mean nothing more than "wise use of resources," and economic efficiency. This can easily limit the usefulness of the concept for those seeking to critique environmental problems that are economic in nature. As an example, in chapter 3, Meyaard-Schaap relates a story of a pastor defending destructive mountaintop removal for coal mining, saying: "God gave us the coal to bless us, He wants us to use it" (p. 44). Similarly, stewardship has a kind of an individualistic emphasis, with little room

in the concept for collective obligations or action (p. 14). In short, the authors fear that the stewardship paradigm invites us to think about the environment in economic terms. While there is certainly no reason to expect environmental ethics to explicitly contradict economic reasoning, these authors are clearly looking for a theological lens that will motivate a critique of our dominant economic ways of thinking.

While the authors in this collection are unified in their desire to replace the idea of stewardship with some alternative guiding metaphor, their critique is not absolute. The editors recognize the really valuable thinking about the environment that has been motivated by this idea (pp. 8-9). Moreover, in the Afterword, the editors of the previous Calvin stewardship books also give at least two cheers for the idea of stewardship, in part because it has strong resonances with environmental thinking outside the world of theology. Finally, in chapter 2, Groenendyk makes a case that there are some audiences for whom the idea of stewardship is a really important point of political common ground. The goal of much of the volume, however, is to explore ways of thinking about Christian environmental thought that avoid this critique and encourage a closer connection between humans and the rest of the created world.

Moving Past Stewardship

In the first section of the book, Heun uses an extended metaphor of a person who destroys someone else's handiwork to describe the relational harm and obligations that humans have to God and to the rest of creation, stemming from our created mandate but also from the damage that humans have already done. Groenendyk follows this with a chapter about audience and language, setting the stage for the meditations on language that dominate the next section of the book.

The second section of the book includes five different proposals for ways to think about a Christian environmental ethic. First, Kyle Meyaard-Schaap proposes a metaphor of "kinship" and a kind of liturgical training for the church. He argues that this language does a better job capturing the message of Genesis, evoking a relationship of love and protection rather than dominance. In the fourth chapter, Clarence Joldersma proposes, instead, that we think instead in terms of both humans and non-human creatures being "earthlings," evoking the deep moral responsibility we have for our fellow creatures. This language

is also supposed to remind us of the independent moral standing that non-human creation has as an object of God's love. The fifth chapter, by Aminah Al-Attas Bradford, also tries to flatten the human to non-human hierarchy by focusing on the fact that humans are, ourselves, actually communities of smaller creatures (notably the bacteria that live in and on us). She uses this as a metaphor working out the way salvation is important for all of creation. The sixth chapter is a work of traditional biblical theology, where Steven Bouma-Prediger argues for an "earthkeeping" ethic that emphasizes a continuity between humanity and the rest of creation, while also giving humanity the job of preserving and working toward a creation-wide shalom. Finally, James R. Skillen gives us an account of an eschatological stewardship, in which we point toward the kingdom of God, while reckoning with the need for humility and systemic sins.

The chapters in the third section of the book do not try to propose large frameworks but, instead, each of them offers a way in which Christian environmental thought can be pushed forward. This section starts with Debra Rienstra's chapter, in which she works out the importance of naming, knowing, and delighting in other creatures. The knowledge and care required to restore our relationship with the rest of creation, in her framework must start with close relationship, which can set the stage for the care, humility, and knowledge, necessary to act well. The ninth chapter, by Matthew Halteman and Megan Halteman Zwart, examines the psychology and experience of coming to understand our relationship with animals differently, which can start by seeing the world differently, being open to new ways of thinking and acting, and finally with the joy of discovery as you learn and grow. The tenth chapter, by Becky Roselius Haney, critically examines the worldview that has resulted in humans historically treating nature with cavalier disregard. She documents a historical conflict in which US settlers were given the opportunity to learn how to live in ecological harmony (indeed, a figure from the time made an extensive proposal to do so) but the opportunity was lost. She also offers some hopeful examples of urban design that are based on the assumption that humans and the rest of creation need to live in a more peaceful integrated manner. Chapters 11 and 12, by Gail Gunst Heffner and Dietrich Bouma, both consider how power and social position influence environmental action. Heffner documents a history of US environmental racism, and the damage that

has attended it. She points the reader toward recognition, empathy, and lament, in order to eventually restore environmental and racial divides. Bouma brings the reader to a tea plantation in India in order to illustrate that environmental stewardship requires agency and power, giving some nuance to the connection between environmental progress, political rights, and economic development. Finally, Mark Bjelland finishes this section with a chapter that breaks down some of the subconscious, unbiblical dualisms that dominate the way we think about the environment. He notes that human artifacts are also part of creation, in need of stewardship (thus, perhaps, unifying environmental thinking with the rest of economics). He uses this observation to critique what he calls the culture-nature dualism, in which the histories and relationships of a particular place are lost.

The book ends with a final chapter by David Warners that reflects on the implications of thinking of all of creation as a gift from God, which pushes our relationship to God to the foreground in environmental work. The book also contains an Afterword and a poem. The Afterword is a response to the volume, mostly supportive, by three of the authors of the earlier Calvin stewardship books.

Implications for Economic Thought

There are two broad lessons that this book offers economists. The first is that economists might have made environmental protection too easy. Consider the book's implicit critique of the standard economic approach to environmental problems. Philosophers and theologians often come to the conclusion that creation has inherent value, that is, value that is independent of any human preferences. If this is the case, then the standard economic toolkit is inadequate. Calculating the willingness-to-pay for an environmental good will often under-value the environment if it has intrinsic value, and externalities would have to be considered even when the harm is experienced by a non-human part of creation. Market efficiency, if we think about it in standard terms, ignores so much. Taking these elements seriously – inherent value and externalities on non-human creatures – would be extraordinarily difficult. It would require considerable knowledge, a big dose of humility, caution about human projects, and some sacrifice of human well-being for the sake of the rest of creation. This, incidentally, is exactly what the authors of this volume recommend for Christian thinking about the environment.

If this way of approaching the natural world would be a challenge, the authors do give us some guidance as we proceed. Their solution is love. If stewardship is merely about efficient action, they argue, then it will never be enough to motivate the care, humility, and deep knowledge required. But if stewardship is about relationship and care for the created world, then that affection will help us muster the attention, knowledge, humility, and sacrifice necessary to do the job well. Stewardship as love, of course, is a far more biblical concept than stewardship as efficient action. The two are not necessarily in conflict, but stewardship as love (or kinship, earthkeeping, etc.) makes a claim on our preferences and affections. This follows the leadership of Christ more closely than the anthropocentric model of human dominion that has motivated too much apathy about the natural world.

Despite these arguments, I am not ready to give up on the idea of stewardship as a Christian economic and environmental ethic. The critique offered in this book is strong, but the idea of stewardship more closely follows the biblical narrative than they acknowledge. One of the standard interpretations of the *imago dei*, and the broader theme of election, is that humanity was chosen to be God's representative to the rest of creation, just as the Church is chosen to represent God to humanity (Hall, 2004; McDonald, 2010). In this reading, the God-given job of humans, vis-à-vis other creatures, is to show them God's blessing (McDonald), or, following Hauerwas and Berkman (1993), to reveal to them that they are beings created and loved by God. This is a high calling, but it still sounds like the job of a steward, even if the term has come to have other connotations.

It may also be that the right approach is to hold the stewardship-as-prudence and stewardship-as-loving-kinship models together. If we reject the model of steward because we dislike the connotations with careful use of money, we risk also throwing out the biblical calling to be careful with our use of money. Believers can take this volume as a thoughtful warning, though, that our economic ethic should be tied closely to scripture and tradition, and to not let our reading of scripture devolve into little more than an Econ 101 lesson.

Who Should Read this book?

The production value in this book is quite high, and the whole volume is remarkably readable.¹ Academics looking for cutting edge work in

environmental studies, theology, or economics may find the content lacks the technical depth that they are seeking. Nevertheless, this is a book that might be enjoyed by academics across many disciplines, and may also be useful to clergy who want to think carefully about environmental questions. The book could also work in an undergraduate seminar, since it covers a variety of topics in short chapters. For those looking for a broad-thinking Christian environmentalist critique of a dominant way of thinking, this book is of great value.

Endnote

1. The book was released with an illustrated companion and a podcast series of interviews with each of the authors. You can check these out here: <https://calvin.edu/directory/publications/beyond-stewardship>.

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