

Christians, Environment, and Divine Injunction in Genesis 1:28: A Case for Environmental Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

The paper examined Gen 1:28 in relation to the attitude of Christians towards environmental sustainability. Particular attention was paid to different interpretations that have been given to Gen 1: 28 with a view to show that the word 'dominion' or 'subdue' that are used interchangeably in the passage is not meant to be interpreted in a negative way but positively; as a conscientious and caring stewardship which involves the husbanding of the earth resources. The study was based on analytical methods and expository review of relevant studies. The findings of the work revealed some of the activities of Christians in Nigeria that contributed to environmental degradation; such as noise pollution, ritual bath, proliferation of Churches, burial location and burning of incense and candles. The work recommended that Christians should paid close attentions to their activities that are inimical to the environment and adjust accordingly. Specifically, they are to make ecological issues part of their priorities due to the fact that if there is ecological crisis the devastating effects would be felt by all. Equally, government is not to relent in their efforts towards thorough implementation of whatever policies they had made to sustain the environment. In conclusion, ecological theology was suggested to be given priorities in all schools as a

way of deepening the understanding of all in the sustenance of the environment.

KEY WORDS: ENVIRONMENT, SUSTAINABILITY, DIVINE, CHRISTIANITY, MAN

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, the global community is making frantic efforts for the sustainability of human environment with a view to preserve the earth for generations to come. The present situation of the climate debacle in which lots of fears is being created or envisaged against the future would have been averted or at least more relatively managed if man had hearken to the divine injunction of the creator from the time been. If man had used or channeled his God's given talent, knowledge and abilities in consonance with the divine injunction given in Genesis to till and maintained the resources of the earth, there would have been much better result to show in our world today as against the issue of global warming or the degenerating earth.

The fact of global warming is now a reality as against what some nations thought earlier. The rising global temperatures may have undermined the basis of many people's livelihoods, especially in developing regions, overwhelming local capacities to adapt to changing environmental conditions and reinforce the trend towards general instability that already exists in many societies and regions. Also, there is improper land use, due to lack of proper vision and foresight which has resulted in arable and declining land for agricultural purposes. In this case, it becomes pertinent that approaches to solving the problems that emanate from it should be from religious and physical planning. Governments of many nations have risen to the occasion taken up the challenges in collaborations. Academic contributions from religious perspectives will also add a lot of good or benefit to the on-going efforts. The divine injunction in Genesis paves way for a robust discussion that can guide the efforts of those working to save the present earth or the immediate human

environment. This is why this paper will address the topic under four sub-headings viz: environmental sustainability, analytical study of Gen 1; 28, Christians attitudes to the environment, recommendations and conclusions.

Clarifications of Concept

Environmental Sustainability:

In order to define environmental sustainability, there is need to first define sustainability. Sustainability is the ability to continue a defined behavior indefinitely. Meanwhile, Herman Daly sees environmental sustainability from maintenance of three main things, that is,

1. For renewable resources – the rate of harvest not exceeding the rate of regeneration
2. For Pollution - the rates of waste generation from projects should not exceed the assimilative capacity of the environment
3. For nonrenewable resources- the depletion of the nonrenewable resources should require comparable development of renewable substitutes for that resource³⁶⁷

From the above simple illustrations, environmental sustainability can be defined as the rates at which renewable resource harvest, pollution creation, and non-renewable resource depletion that can be continued indefinitely. If they cannot be continued indefinitely then they are not sustainable. It could also be defined as responsible interaction with the environment to avoid depletion or degradation of natural resources and allow for long-term environmental quality. The practice of environmental sustainability helps to ensure that

³⁶⁷ Daly E. Herman. Toward Some Operational Principles of Sustainable Development, *Ecological Economics* 2: 1-6

the needs of today's population are met without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their needs³⁶⁸

Why is it Important to Sustain the Environment

Sustainability of the environment is important for some simple reasons:

- It would help in maintaining quality of life as human beings, the diversity of life on Earth, or Earth's ecosystems.
- It would make us to run out of fossil fuels because thousands if not millions of animal species will become extinct.
- The atmosphere will be damaged beyond repair... if we don't change and the root of that change lies in understanding and striving for sustainability - in our homes, communities in our ecosystems and around the world.
- While many individuals and communities have long recognized the damage that can be caused to our environment and that of the plants and animals we share our planet with, and for the fact that the air we breathe and our rivers and oceans don't recognize local, national or even continental boundaries - so we must all take care of them.
- Looking after environmental health is crucial to ensuring that we and future generations can all go green and can live healthy lives on a healthy planet.³⁶⁹

Now our main concern is what one can learn from Gen 1: 28 about caring for the environment.

³⁶⁸ <https://study.com>> academy> environment

³⁶⁹ Ibid. Daly Herman E.

Understanding Gen 1: 28 in the light of Preservation of the Environment:

This section of the paper takes a cursory look at Gen 1: 28 to discover what God thinks about the environment and what should be the response of Christians towards the environment. Some religious people are sometimes reluctant to take environmental issues seriously. In some cases this is because some do not understand environmental issues from God's perspective. This means understanding God's purposes for creation, from the beginning, through to the current time, and into the future.

Gen 1: 28 is said to constitute the continuation and conservation of the environment and it reads thus:

Then God blessed them and said, "be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground.

Then God said, look I have given you every seed-bearing plant throughout the earth and all the fruit trees for your food. And I have given every green plant as food for all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, and the small animals that scurry along the ground- everything that has life..

The above though clear enough has been misinterpreted by many Christians today basically because:

- It has too often been read in the dualistic way.
- Many interpret this to mean that because we are made in God's image, we are spiritual and important, and that the rest of the creation is just material and hence not important

- Also the fact that we are given dominion over the fish, birds and animals and herbs, leads us to think we can use them as we please.

Apparently, it could be said here that two main things were noted by scholars to have underlined the interpretation of Gen 1: 28, one is negative while the other is positive and this borders on the generalized word, “subdue” which some have interpreted differently. For example, on the positive side, Stott noted that our dominion is said to be a cooperative and responsible one. He noted that in our exercising our God—given dominion, we are not creating the processes of nature, but co- operating with them. The earth belongs to us not because we made or own it, but because the Maker has entrusted its care to us.³⁷⁰ Gregorios, on his part, gives a very narrow interpretation of stewardship; an idea which according to him reduces nature to “nothing but an object given into our hands for safe keeping and good management”.³⁷¹ While on the other side of the argument, McHarg, says, the Bible insistence upon dominion and subjugation of nature encourages the most exploitative and destructive instincts in man”³⁷²

The problem here is that many take the Bible so literally and legalistically that unless something is specifically mentioned as being a priority or direct command, it is seen as either

³⁷⁰ John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, Britain: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1990, pp114-124.

³⁷¹ Paulos Mar Gregorios in Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, Genesis 1: 28 and the Divine Imperatives for sustainable Ecology, “ *Theology for Sustainable Ecology in Africa*, Ferdinand Nwaigbo (ed), Proceedings of the Conference of the Twenty CIWA Theology Week, held at the Catholic Institute of West Africa, Pot Harcourt, Monday 21st – Friday 25th March, 2011, p. 128.

³⁷² Ian McHarg in in Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, Genesis 1: 28 and the Divine Imperatives for sustainable Ecology, “ *Theology for Sustainable Ecology in Africa*, Ferdinand Nwaigbo (ed), Proceedings of the Conference of the Twenty CIWA Theology Week, held at the Catholic Institute of West Africa, Pot Harcourt, Monday 21st – Friday 25th March, 2011, p. 128.

unimportant or as wrong³⁷³. So because the environment doesn't seem to be a focus of any particular verses, it has not become a priority for most Christians. Because it talks about man having rulership and dominion over the earth this passage has led historically in Western society to us taking an attitude of superiority over the animals and the rest of creation a) and has been used to justify humans seeing the earth as solely there for our use and exploitation. Therefore, 'subdue' in Gen 1:28 to some implies that creation will not do man's bidding gladly or easily and that man must now bring creation into submission by main strength.³⁷⁴ It is not to rule man.

However, there is twistedness in humanity which causes us to perform such a task with fierce and destructive delight. However our understanding of that passage should be to tend and watch over what God made so good. Man is to care for it, be the stewards, tending and watching over it responsibly, following in the way of the tree of life, not doing our own thing selfishly apart from God.³⁷⁵ But a responsibility goes along with bearing the image of God. In its proper sense, man's rule and dominion over the earth is that of a steward or a caretaker, not a reckless exploiter. Man is not sovereign over the lower orders of creation. Ownership is in the hands of the Lord. This understanding will take us to look at human actions particularly among Christians that have contributed to environmental degradation.

To What Extent Has Christians Been Contributing to Environmental Degradation

In view of the fact that man wants to dominate nature or basically because of her superiority over the creatures of the

³⁷³ David Attenborough, quoted by Dennis P. Gordon, 'Duty of Care: What is a Christian's Responsibility Toward the Rest of Creation?' Art. in *Christian Odyssey*, June-August, 2009, p.5

³⁷⁴ Harris, R. Laird, et al.; *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1999. 430.

³⁷⁵ Raymond G. Bohlin, Christian Environmentalism - A Biblical Worldview Perspective on You and the Earth, http://www.probe.org/site/c.fdKEIMNsEoG/b.4218299/k.7078/Christian_Environmentalism.htm

earth which has been affirmed, many activities are ongoing among men especially Christians that have negatively impacted the natural environment and this will be discussed under six main subheadings below:

1. **Proliferation of Churches:** Although it is a general belief that the best way to bring the word of God more closely to people is to have more churches. In Nigeria today, there are many registered and unregistered churches and they can be found on every corner and this afford people access to a wide array of places of worship. But what seem not to be too good about this in relation to the environment are the uncontrolled land use, forest and other natural habitat that is continually being taken over by churches. This has led to the extinction of some vegetation and species of animals, birds, reptiles and the likes that are beneficial for human environment. It is claimed that as many as three species a day become extinct and each one has a role in the ecosystem, so their loss has an ongoing impact. The loss of forests and woodlands entails the loss of species which may constitute extremely important resources in the future, not only for food but also for curing disease and other uses. Different species contain genes which could be key resources in years ahead for meeting human needs and regulating environmental problems. It is not enough, however, to think of different species merely as potential “resources” to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves.

Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost forever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity. On this note, David T. Williams, South African theologian has written at length about environmental issues from a Christian, Trinitarian perspective;

One of the major issues confronting the world in the twenty-first century is that of the environment. Human activity has been such that world ecology has been seriously affected, and all indications are that without determined action, concern will move to crisis. Questions of pollution, whether of land, sea or the atmosphere, of the depletion of resources, of the changing patterns of life and the extinction of many species, of erosion, of population growth and of poverty are each of major concern, and more so because they impinge upon each other. Even if the crisis warned against has not yet come, it must be inevitable sooner or later unless there is concerted human action. There may of course be a major catastrophe, such as a meteorite impact or a nuclear³⁷⁶

It is suffice to say here that, some of this destruction of the environment undoubtedly happens as a result of human ignorance. Nevertheless, the Church of England's Board for Social Responsibility was really saying the truth when it posited that, "despoiling the earth is a blasphemy, and not just an error of judgment, but a mistake"³⁷⁷

2. Ritual Bath: It is a religious or magic ceremony involving the use of water to immerse or anoint a subjects body and this is usually performed by the Aladura churches, especially Celestial Church of Christ. They used the rivers for healing rituals. During these acts, the devotees are given a bath inside the river, after which the soap

³⁷⁶ David T. Williams, David T. Williams, "Trinitarian Ecology," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 18.2 (Autumn 2000), p.142; http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/sbet/18-2_142.pdf

³⁷⁷ *Man In His Environment*, "An Ethical Assessment", a report from the Board for Social Responsibility's "Environmental Issues Reference Panel" chaired by R. J. Berry (Church House Publishing, 1966) and *Caring for the Earth, "the Environment, Christians and the Church"* by Keith Innes (Grove Ethical Studies, No. 66, 1987).

and sponge used to perform the bath are thrown into the water. In such baths, some of the bathed persons may have physical or bodily ailments and these are washed in the river. Most often such flowing water is a source of drinking water for others, spreading diseases among those many that drink from the water.³⁷⁸

- 3. Noise Pollution:** Noise pollution from churches can have many negatives effects on human beings and on the environment. It can have effects on the mental and physical health of persons. According to studies carried out, noise not only causes irritation or annoyance but it does also constrict the arteries, and increases the flow of adrenaline and forces the heart to work faster than required, thereby accelerating the rate of cardiac ailment, the reason being that continuous noise causes an increase in the cholesterol level resulting in permanent constriction of blood vessels, making one prone to heart attacks and strokes. Health experts are of the opinion that excessive noise can also lead to neurosis and nervous breakdown. Generator smoke, noise from musical instruments and mounted speakers both within and outside the building by church could cause those living in such environment to have difficulty with rest and sleep. For example, according to Adodo, some animals, birds, livestock plants and reptiles are very sensitive to noise and can become unhealthy in such environment; birds could even fly away, thus depriving the environment from enjoying some of the benefits of nature.³⁷⁹
- 4. Burning of Incense and Candles:** Research shows that air inside churches filled with pollutants from burning candles and incense, may be a bigger health risks than

³⁷⁸ Olayiwola, D. O , Religion and Ecology: The Aladura and nature in commensalism in P. Ade Dopamu & E. Ade Odumuyiwa (eds), Religion, Science and Culture, pp 93-102, Ikenne Remo, Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions, 2003.

³⁷⁹ Anselm Adodo, *Nature Power*, Ewu-Esan: Benedictine Publications, 2004, p.42.

the air we breathe on major roads. Holy smoke (as it is nicknamed) from burning incense and candles pollute air in churches. Incense and candles release substantial quantities of pollutants that may harm health as a detailed new study of air quality in a Roman Catholic Church, celestial as well as Cherubim and Seraphim suggests. Even a brief exposure to contaminated air during a religious service could be harmful to some people, says Atmospheric Scientist, Stephen Weber of the University of Duisburg, Essen in Germany. A previous study in the Netherlands indicated that the pollutants in smoke from incense and candles may be more toxic than fume-particle pollution from sources such as vehicle engines. According to research, air quality is affected by a number of indoor and outdoor pollutants sources. Burning of candles within indoor environments can release a large number of toxic chemicals, including acetaldehyde, formaldehyde, acrolein, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons. It is believed that regular burning of several candles in indoor environments can expose people to harmful amounts of organic chemical.³⁸⁰ People with asthmatic conditions are more prone to dangerous health risk in such environments.

- 5. Cemeteries:** Generally cemeteries have little contamination impact on the environment provided they are correctly sited and operated. An ideal cemetery will be situated in a deep, acidic soil, with intermediate properties such as clay or sandy clay with the water table at least below the bottom of the graves. However, in Nigerian situation, this seems not to be taken into consideration as one could see some burial ground sites very close to the house and well. Meanwhile, the idea of having it close with deep-rooting trees that could consume some of the sewage water passing through the

³⁸⁰ Ben Harder, 'Earth & Environment, Holy Smoke: Burning Incense, Candles Pollute Air in Churches', August 16th, 2006.

unsaturated Zone are ideologies not known or taken for granted in our local areas here. However, as noted by researchers, the place of interment should be at least 30 meters away from any other spring or water source or watercourse. The practice of burying the dead at home has environmental implication. Research has shown that human corpses may cause groundwater contamination and this occurs when products such as gasoline, oil road salts and chemicals get into the underground water and cause it to become unsafe and unfit for human use³⁸¹. In a situation where also the grave is not constructed to standard, the remain after some months or years may let out or ooze out unpleasant and contagious smell that are injurious to health.

6. Parking Lots and Exhaust Emission: This aspect relates to the movement of cars and congestion usually created when churches do not have parking space. This not only creates inconveniencies for road users in that environment but equally environmental hazards. According to experts, internal combustion engines emit combustion products (carbondioxide, oxides of nitrogen and oxides of Sulphur as well as products of incomplete, combustion (carbonmonoxide, soot and volatile organic compounds). In sufficient concentrations, each of these emissions has human health effects.³⁸² The products of incomplete combustion can be minimized 'if proper parking arrangements are put in place as well as proper control and management of emission systems in automobiles. Meanwhile, the experience of Lagos Ibadan expressway where there are different camp ground with their programmes being run concurrently have caused some of the health hazards identified above. People may

³⁸¹ Environmental Scoping Report on "Proposed Cemetery at St Patrick's Catholic Church, Lookout, Montserrat prepared by Eco engineering Consultants Limited, Trinidad, West Indies. p. 45.

³⁸² Environmental Scoping Report, p.46.

not feel the effects immediately but this may come up later.

Christians Distinctive Contributions to Environmental Sustainability

There is therefore no doubt that like other parts of the globe, the ecology of our country is experiencing dreadful conditions as a result of man's actions and/or inactions. Already the environment is degraded leading to pollution, global warming, deforestation, ozone layer depletion and the likes. Therefore environmental sustainability must be part of the major concern of the Christians. In view of this it is imperatives that Christians take decisive steps towards the sustenance of the environment.

The care for the earth is important equally as care for human beings. Christians have an obligation to walk gently on the earth and to diligently take care of it. There is need to care for God's creation and to work to better the world. There is much that can be done to put Biblical understanding of God's creation and role in caring for it into action in our work practices and in our own lives. Christians do not care for the environment purely for practical reasons, or for humanitarian reasons. They are also motivated by the desire to love, understand and protect the environment in order to glorify God.

Sometimes, caring for the environment and the needs of others can be costly. It could be discovered that there is little that can be done, and efforts put in place may seem fruitless against the size of the environmental problems that exist. But then below are some other issues to be taken into consideration:

- There is nowhere implied an encouragement or permission to exploit natural resources irresponsibly in the scripture. Rather the scriptures and particularly Christian teachings advocated simplicity of life style that generated a deep reluctance to exploit nature on a large scale or indiscriminate way. (Genesis 1:28; Mark 12:28-31). Therefore, there should be mutual relationship and

interdependence among all the created beings animate and inanimate, human and non-human as shown from the creative order. Christians are to obey all laws and regulations given by legitimate authorities to promote environmental sustainability.

- Churches (especially those seriously concerned) are to look at/for ways to reduce the indoor pollution such as improving ventilation, repent of extravagance pollution and wanton destruction of plants and animals. Christians are to obey all laws and regulations given by legitimate authorities to promote environmental sustainability.
- Christians are to incorporate ecological concerns into preaching and some other activities of the church. Environmental education, self-awareness, fresh vision, re-awakening of moral and religious sensitivity to nature should be promoted among all but especially among young one so that it becomes a culture for them. Caring for ecosystems demands far-sightedness, since no one looking for quick and easy profit is truly interested in their preservation. But the cost of the damage caused by such selfish lack of concern is much greater than the economic benefits to be obtained. Where certain species are destroyed or seriously harmed, the values involved are incalculable. Christians can be silent witnesses to terrible injustices if they think that they can obtain significant benefits by making the rest of humanity, present and future, pay the extremely high costs of environmental deterioration.

Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt has been made to approach the topic of environmental sustainability through interpretation of Gen 1: 28 and discussion of what should be the attitude of Christians towards the preservation of the environment. It is obvious that, what is required is, for Christians to re-discover the true meaning of teaching of the passage (Gen1:28) and carry

out the divine injunction/order issued by the Creator to humanity as permanent guarantee to sustain the environment. Christians need a rethink of their dealing with nature and this in order to overcome the ecological crisis. Although, ecological issue is a global problem but that of Nigeria is a very peculiar one because policies are made and most times they are not followed. It is, therefore, the ultimate responsibility of the government to develop policies that are backed up with authority and actions like other countries so that, in the next few years, the emission of carbon dioxide and other highly polluting gases can be drastically reduced, for example, substituting for fossil fuels and developing sources of renewable energy. Worldwide there is minimal access to clean and renewable energy. There is still a need to develop adequate storage technologies. Some countries have made considerable progress, although it is far from constituting a significant proportion. Investments have also been made in means of production and transportation which consume less energy and require fewer raw materials, as well as in methods of construction and renovating buildings which improve their energy efficiency. But these good practices are still far from widespread, thus, however the good news is that there is need for all to think and act ecologically, in order words it is imperatives to do something to save the mother earth and human race from environmental degradation and gradual technical extinction.

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