

# CARE OF CREATION

Christian Voices on God, Humanity, and the Environment

Edited by Joseph Coleson



Indianapolis, Indiana

Copyright © 2010 by Wesleyan Publishing House  
Published by Wesleyan Publishing House  
Indianapolis, Indiana 46250  
Printed in the United States of America  
ISBN: 978-0-89827-451-6

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# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	9
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Introduction	11
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## **Part 1: Creation, Alienation, Redemption**

1. God's Creation Mandate for Humanity	Joseph Coleson	17
2. The Disastrous Results of Humanity's Fall	Kelvin G. Friebe	31
3. God's Ongoing Redemption of All Creation	Christopher T. Bounds	47
4. God's Constant Care of the Universe	Kenneth F. Gavel	61

## **Part 2: Care for Humanity**

5. The Ethical Challenges of Genetic Engineering	Burton Webb and Stephen J. Lennox	77
6. Choices Between Life and Death	Christina T. Accornero and Susan Rouse	91
7. Living by the Golden Rule	Jo Anne Lyon	107

**Part 3: Care of the Environment**

8. Land and Water Conservation	Travis H. Nation and Kenneth D. Dill	125
9. Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources	Richard L. Daake and D. Darek Jarmola	139
10. Every Living Creature	Ronald R. Crawford and Joseph Coleson	155
11. Endangered Species and Habitats	Martin LaBar and Donald D. Wood	169
12. A Call to Action	Matthew and Nancy Sleeth	185
About the Authors		199

# INTRODUCTION

Joseph Coleson

**A**s I wrap up my editing work on this volume, a 7.0-magnitude earthquake has devastated Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and the surrounding area. As of yet, no good estimate of the final death toll is available, but officials are saying it could go as high as two hundred thousand persons killed.

Within two days of the earthquake, two “explanations” made the news. First, a well-known Christian television personality blamed the earthquake on a pact with the devil that Haiti’s founders made during their revolution to throw off French colonial control at the turn of the nineteenth century. Then, a well-known actor (not known as a Christian) said it was the result of the failure of the Copenhagen conference in December 2009—barely a month before the earthquake—to reach a meaningful accord on dealing with climate change. Ill-informed and illogical, both attempts at explanation illustrate the breadth and depth of misunderstanding across our culture of God’s

creation upon this earth and of God's creation stewardship mandate upon us.

That divine mandate—to care for God's good creation on this earth—is the subject of this book. Genesis 1 and 2 are clear about this as God's creation intention; human beings are God's stewards, responsible for the care and protection of the earth and all its creatures.

This responsibility extends both to our fellow human beings and to the rest of the creation on this earth—the earth itself, its plants, its animals, and all its interrelationships. We call these by various titles among ourselves such as, cultures, societies, nations, ethnic groups, tribes, clans, or families. With respect to the rest of the living creation, we call it, most simply, the biosphere—the sum total of all the earth's ecosystems.

Our responsibilities to each other are different in a number of respects from our responsibilities to the rest of creation. In God's creation intentions, we were not given stewardship dominion over each other, as we were over the earth and the rest of its creatures. However, our early and continuing rebellion against God complicates matters; we deal with that issue at various points in this book.

As one result of that first rebellion, the great catastrophe many theologians call the fall, we became much less inclined to care for creation as God intends and also much less adept at it. However, God has not excused us. In the final reckoning, we will be asked for an accounting of our stewardship, and we will not be allowed to pass on the question. We have not cared for each other appropriately, either, and that, too, will be part of the final accounting.

We ought not to approach these issues from a negative perspective, however. God has built the joys of relationship and stewardship care into our DNA, as it were. Even in our estrangement from God and from each other, one of the greatest of human joys is experiencing genuine relationship with each other in the many patterns appropriate

relationships can display when we are careful to weave them in love and integrity. Even in our estrangement from the earth, another deep and abiding joy is nurturing and watching the growth of living things in both of God's good biological realms on this earth—the plant kingdom and the animal kingdom.

Part 1 of this book, the first four chapters, lays out the biblical theology of care for creation beginning with God's original creation design as reported in Genesis 1 and 2. Let me urge you not to skip these chapters. They are both relevant and critical in their laying of a solid foundation for the case for all Christians' passionate involvement in creation care for the right reasons.

In part 2, chapter 5 is an introduction to issues raised by the amazing advances in our understanding of human genetics in recent years. Chapter 6, under the broad headings of abortion and euthanasia, deals with ethical issues surrounding the beginning and the ending of life. Chapter 7 highlights some of the ways we have found, in our sinful greed, to exploit our brothers and sisters also created in God's image just because we can. More importantly, Jo Anne Lyon challenges us to work toward the elimination of these gross injustices as our forebears in the Methodist/Wesleyan/Holiness tradition did in their generations.

In its four chapters, part 3 introduces four important sets of issues involved in taking our creation mandate seriously with respect to the earth and its non-human living populations. Chapter 12, then, comprises a call to action from Matthew and Nancy Sleeth, who recently have emerged at the forefront of evangelical Christian activism in creation care issues, particularly with respect to Christian living in and for the environment God has charged us with keeping. They have been living creation care for years now; their story and advice should inspire you.

Together with all the contributors, I pray this book will give you joy at many places. We also pray it will open your eyes and challenge

you, in ways you have not been challenged previously, to embark upon, renew, or intensify your efforts to fulfill our creation mandate toward God's good earth and its inhabitants, and to minister in healing ways to our sisters and brothers who need the love and care we can extend. Even a cup of cold water given in Jesus' name is precious and eternally consequential. God's *shalom* to you as you read and act upon God's promptings, both individually and with those you count as your local family of faith.



PART 1

# CREATION, ALIENATION, REDEMPTION

# GOD'S CREATION MANDATE FOR HUMANITY

Joseph Coleson

*So God took the 'adam and settled him there in the garden of Eden,  
to serve it and to keep it. . . .*

*This one, this time, is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh.  
She shall be called woman, for out of man was this one taken.*

—Genesis 2:15, 23 (author's translation)

**H**ere in my home office, I keep four hats on top of the bookcase to the left of my desk. The interesting thing about that is I seldom wear a hat, even in winter—but here they are.

When we say of someone, “She wears many hats,” we usually mean that she fills a variety of roles in her job, church, family, or elsewhere.

*A Heaven on Earth: for blissful Paradise  
Of God the Garden was, by him in the East  
Of Eden planted.*

—John Milton

As crown of earthly creation, made in God’s image, all humans wear several hats. God has placed us here for many good reasons—all of them to our good if we will but trust that God is good.

## The Story of Creation

The purposes of this opening chapter are to discuss: (1) what the biblical creation story teaches about how we are to treat each other

and (2) what it teaches about how we are to treat the earth and its non-human inhabitants.

We will focus primarily on Genesis 1–2 for two main reasons. First, the Bible begins with creation, and beginnings are always important. Second, the narrative of Genesis 1–2 is the only wide-angle picture we have of God’s intentions for creation before the distortions caused by human rebellion.

Christians take the Bible seriously as God’s special revelation. The Bible tells the story that natural revelation can only begin to tell, though nature strongly suggests it, as Psalm 19:3 reminds us, “There is no speech, and there are no words; their voice is not heard” (author’s translation). So what God revealed in words to ancient Israel invites and requires our close, careful attention to ensure that what we read and hear is what it actually says.

“Close, careful attention” can get a bit technical at times, but bear with me. Technical doesn’t have to mean boring, despite the common assumptions in our culture. These first chapters of Genesis matter; they will reward our work with them.

### **To Love and Cleave**

We begin with care for humans for several reasons: (1) in Genesis 1, the author asserts humanity’s unique place in the world before recording God’s mandate for us to care for the earth; (2) we need a biblical understanding of our place in creation in order to fulfill the creation care mandate appropriately and to know when we have done so or failed to do so; and (3) we need to be firmly rooted in a biblical theology of creation so that care for the earth and its non-human inhabitants will not devolve into worship of creation or neo-paganism, rather than stewardship dominion.

## Days of Creation

In a narrative so beautiful it often is called exalted or poetic prose, Genesis 1 presents a summary of God's good creation. From the initial statement, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," it moves immediately to its main subject, "Now the earth was . . ." (Gen 1:1–2).

Genesis 1 presents God's creation upon the earth as a series of three pairings. "Let there be light . . ." (first day, vv. 3–5) is paired with the making and placing of the light-bearers (fourth day, vv. 14–19). The creation of the expanse dividing the waters above and below (second day, vv. 6–8) is paired with the population of the waters below and the expanse above by the creatures of the waters and the air (fifth day, vv. 20–23). The gathering of the waters below so the dry land could appear (third day, vv. 9–13) is paired with the creation of land creatures, including humans (sixth day, vv. 24–31). The real culmination of this narrative's creation week, and of its theology, is the seventh day of rest, the first Sabbath (2:1–4), but that is a discussion for another occasion.

## Creation of the '*Adam*

God's work in the Genesis 1 narrative climaxes in the creation of humans. Hebrew '*adam* (Hebrew "human being"; v. 26) is a collective noun, which means it may designate either an individual or a group, depending on its context. Moreover, '*adam* does not mean man or male only, but rather human(s), as Genesis 1:27 will make clear. In case we should miss it, though, it is even more emphatic in the summary of Genesis 5:2, "Male and female [God] created them and [God] blessed them, and [God] called *their* name '*adam* in the day of their creation" (author's translation).

Genesis 1:26 says, "Then God said, 'Let us make '*adam* in our image, according to our likeness" (author's translation). As God's creative acts

upon the earth reach a climax, the importance of this particular creation is signaled by God's pausing to hold a heavenly council. Did God confer within the Trinity? With already-created angels? Perhaps both; we cannot rule out either. What we do know is no other act or work of creation is accorded this honor and significance. This honor is given only to the '*adam*'.

The decision made, the narrator records its enactment: "So God created [*'adam*'] in [God's] own image, in the image of God he created him [the pronoun here also must be a collective, or the next clause makes no sense]; male and female [God] created them" (v. 27). It begins here, at the introduction of the human species, and it continues throughout these two chapters until the human, turning away, mars the whole. What begins, you ask? The insistence of the text that both male and female are human, that both are created in God's image, and that both share in God's blessing and mandate.

God's very first communication to the newly formed humans is a blessing, but a blessing in the form of a five-fold instruction. All five verbs are imperative (in command form) and all five are plural, "God *blessed* them and said to them, '[You] be fruitful and [you] increase in number; [you] fill the earth and [you] subdue it. [You] rule over . . .'" (v. 28, emphasis added). Both fertility and stewardship are God's blessing, but also God's mandate. God gave both fertility and stewardship to the woman and to the man, jointly and equally. Whether every human would have produced offspring had not sin intervened, we cannot say. We do know God freely bestowed this blessing as a vital part of the natural order. We need not beg, bribe, or cajole fickle nature gods for it, as the ancient pagans thought.

This free and abundant blessing, bestowed at the inception of human life, coheres with the later scriptural portrait of God as a "compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6). God intended the first humans to practice

being, living, and loving in the image of God, and to teach their children to do likewise. It did not happen that way, but this was God's intention.

### From Solitude to Union

Genesis 2 does not contradict, but complements Genesis 1. It provides detail in the picture of human creation that would destroy the literary quality of Genesis 1 if forced into its tightly-woven narrative. Genesis 2:18–25 records the second and final step in the creation of the human species; God's making of the woman.

First, we must not miss the narrator's extreme care to show that the woman was human, along with the man. Verse 18 records the only "not good" of the creation narratives, "Then God said, 'It is not good for the '*adam* to be alone. I will make for him an '*ezer cenegdo*' [A-zer ceh-neg-DOE]" (author's translation). We cannot detail the Hebrew evidence here, but (anticipating the gender distinction) we should translate this phrase, "a power like him, facing him as equal." In this context, "a power" is another human. "Like him" means "of the same kind or species"; the animals the '*adam* would name were not of his species. "Facing him as equal," a preposition with an attached pronoun, repeats both ideas, "a power" and "like him," but in different words; repetition for emphasis is an important feature of the biblical text.

God then caused the larger land and flying creatures to present themselves to the '*adam* for naming (v. 19). This served two purposes. First, the '*adam* began to exercise the stewardship dominion God would mandate shortly. Second, the '*adam* soon realized none of these creatures was the power like him of which God had spoken. The '*adam* was ready for the second act of human creation.

Taking from the side (not the rib only) of the sleeping '*adam*, God constructed another (v. 22). The man recognized her as human the

moment he saw her. “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man” (v. 23). He saw she was like him, of the same kind and species, a power who could face him as equal.

The narrator’s own editorial instruction on this, given in and to a distinctly patriarchal culture, is enough to remove all doubt, were there any. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (v. 24). Mature adults leave the hierarchical authority that nurtured them to effective adulthood, and establish a new partnership based on mutuality, equality, parity, and reciprocal regard. This is God’s creation intention.

We must skip over most of Genesis 3, but even in this chapter reporting the great disaster, we find affirmations of God’s original perfect intentions. One of these is the notice of God’s habit of communing with the human pair in the cool of the afternoon (v. 8)—in the Middle East, a refreshing time of day, when the midday heat diminishes. Here, vocabulary, grammar, and syntax combine to show God’s own delight in the creation and intimate fellowship with the human pair, even his disappointment when, one day, they failed to show.

God cursed the serpent for its role in the human rebellion (v. 14), but did not curse either the woman or the man. God predicted that the man henceforth would dominate the woman (v. 16). However, even apart from the previous narrative, it is clear from this verse alone that this was not God’s creation intention or mandate. It is not even God’s arbitrary sentence, as though several were available, and God chose this one for the woman. Rather, man’s domination of woman is one of many disastrous but natural consequences of sin, as their mutuality of interdependence was replaced by greed for dominance. I repeat: man’s domination over woman is not God’s creation intention.

It is—first, last, always, and everywhere—the result of sin. That Genesis 3 teaches and illustrates this so vividly confirms that our reading of Genesis 1 and 2 is correct.

### **Caring for One Another**

Again, if space permitted we could develop several implications. We must mention only three briefly, and move on.

First, every human is and reflects the image of God. This image was distorted, but not destroyed, by the action of our first parents. Thus, every human is of measureless worth. Woman as well as man, man as well as woman, is created by the finger of God, in the image of God, and gifted with the breath of God. By extension, no other reckoning can make any human into less than the image of God: ethnicity cannot; language cannot; citizenship cannot; education or lack thereof cannot; wealth or lack thereof cannot; and pedigree cannot.

Any theology, philosophy, custom, or action that violates or devalues this truth is not from God but from another source entirely. Another way of saying this is that God has a place at the table for every person, an equal place in the family of God. God expects us to affirm and practice this ethos today, both for its own sake and as preparation for the days to come.

Second, God intended marriage as the daily setting for human love and care for each other in its most intimate expression. God intended family as the setting where children are loved and cared for completely. Family life is designed to teach that love does not hoard power, nor use power abusively; love empowers. God designed the family, as a society in miniature, to be a model, a laboratory producing adult powers able and willing to become godly, loving members of the larger society beyond our kin, but within our ken.

Third, permanent or oppressive hierarchy is a result of sin. It is not part of God's creation purposes; rather, it is antithetical to them.



Relationships of health and integrity flourish not because of, but in spite of, a legitimate hierarchical atmosphere, however benign it may appear on the surface or from a distance. Any and every legitimate hierarchy is formed for a limited purpose, for a limited time, with carefully limited powers, and subject to rigorous accountability. This includes parents over their children, teachers over their students, pastors over their congregations, managers over their employees, and governments over their citizens. It includes every hierarchical arrangement because, in this world drunk with power and in pursuit of power, it is true more than ever that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

### **To Serve and Keep**

The second purpose of this chapter is to focus on the role God assigned us—already a very important “hat” at our creation—to serve and to keep the earth as stewards, as God’s regents, responsible under God for the well-being of the earth and all its creatures, not just for ourselves and our own good. Indeed, the creation theology of the Bible teaches that our own good cannot be sustained apart from the good of the rest of creation we were appointed to serve and to keep.

Of course, we bungle this assignment; our first parents began the bungling with their fateful decision to turn from God, as told in Genesis 3. But their tragic decision did not nullify our charge to serve and to keep God’s creation here on this earth, though it made the task more difficult. If we are to wear this hat well, we will begin by discovering what God intended from the beginning.

### **The Stewardship Mandate**

Following the report of God’s creation of the *’adam* (Gen. 1:27), Genesis 1:28 records the stewardship mandate. This fact is important in and of itself. The very first words of God to the human pair are this

combination blessing and mandate to exercise dominion over the rest of God's earthly creation, including even the earth itself! The entire verse reads, "God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth'" (NASB).

It is also significant that this blessing is presented as an imperative, a series of five plural verbs of command: [you all] be fruitful; [you all] multiply; [you all] fill; [you all] subdue; [you all] rule. We have already noted these plural forms as evidence that God intended both male and female to be God's agents upon the earth. Also important is the identification of blessing with instruction. Far from restricting human freedom and happiness, God's commands or instructions are for our good and for the good of all the earth. How would we acquire knowledge, experience, wisdom, and all else that makes for *shalom* (Hebrew "peace, wholeness, total well-being"), unless God had, in the infancy of our kind, started us on the right path with instruction? How would we do so, unless God had continued, even after our rebellion, to teach and counsel us through Scripture and other complementary means?

Finally, it bears repeating that God did not abolish or modify these instructions when we turned from God and became incapable of fulfilling them as originally intended. We still are responsible. As Christians, we stand in awe of, but also take delight in, God's gracious invitation to partner in working toward the fullness, the *telos* (Greek "end"), of the restoration Christ effected by his death and resurrection.

### **Agents of God's Care**

At several points, Genesis 2 confirms that God created humans for responsible stewardship upon the earth. Verse 5 notes "no plant of the

field had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no [*'adam*] to work [serve] the ground.” Wheat, barley, and other cultivated grains are meant here. It is not that these species did not exist, but they need special conditions to produce enough crop to be useful as a source for food. In Canaan, they needed the rain provided by God, but also the human work of the soil—plowing, planting, tilling, and harvesting. The earth does best in the unimpeded exercise of this divine-human partnership.

Genesis 2:7 reports that God formed the first *'adam* from the *'adamah* (Hebrew “earth”). We may translate this as “earthling from the earth” or “human from the humus.” The word play is intentional in the Hebrew text. Our physical origin from and connection to the earth is an intrinsic reason for humans to care about creation.

Genesis 2:8 says, “God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the [*'adam*] whom he had formed” (KJV). After a fairly lengthy description of the garden, the author resumes the narrative of human creation. Verse 15 records two reasons for placing the human in the garden: to work or serve it, and to keep, watch, guard, and protect it.

This verse demonstrates that the common idea that work is a curse, the result of sin, is false. Far from being a curse, work is a blessing and one of the ways we function in the image of God. God worked in the creation of the universe, including this earth. Then God invited the first human to partner in the work of maintaining and protecting the garden of Eden, a kind of microcosm of the whole earth, a place to learn what work means and how to do it.

The verbs used in Genesis 2:8 help us understand the meaning of the earlier verbs (1:26, 28) “rule over” and “subdue.” God did not make humans the agents of God’s care over the earth and its creatures to misuse and abuse them. Rather, we are charged with serving—with working, sometimes long hours or in difficult or even dangerous

circumstances, to ensure by our physical and mental labor the well-being of the earth, its vegetation, and its creatures. Moreover, we are charged with keeping them—guarding them, watching over them, and protecting them from harm. Examples are shepherds and ranchers who care for their stock in harsh weather before seeking their own shelter; more than a few have died saving their animals.

We should not assume it was unnecessary to protect creation from harm in the garden paradise. Catastrophic harm actually did come upon all creation due to the first humans' blatant disobedience. If it could happen then, how much more ought we now to be vigilant for the well-being and protection of all God has charged us with?

It is important to note that (together with many other implications) the “one flesh” of Genesis 2:24 means man and woman share equally in our God-appointed care for the earth and our fellow-creatures.

### **Conclusion**

We have pondered, all too briefly, what we may learn from Genesis 1–2, the only extended narrative we have of God's creation intentions unmarred by humans turning away. To fudge a bit and peek over into Genesis 3, we should note God's great delight in experiencing creation with God's creatures and the disappointment in God's question, “Where are you?” (vv. 8–9; the Hebrew is more vivid than the translations can render). This alone is reason enough for us to care passionately about serving and keeping. God delights in experiencing creation with us!

Of course, we do not live amidst God's lavish provision in Eden anymore. God predicted and it came to pass, the earth's diminished capacity to yield its bounty to our hand. The work of serving and keeping still occupies us, but now it is more troublesome and less rewarding, even with the great advances of the last two centuries. At life's end, we return to the earth from which we were taken.

But all is not lost! In what J. R. R. Tolkien called the great *eutastrophe*, God in Christ has reversed the great disaster. God promises the earth and our fellow creatures will share with us in the eschatological renewal. We cannot know when it will be revealed in all its fullness. We are invited, though, to practice wearing the hat—to live as though it has begun, because it has begun. As you read through this book, look for ways to serve and keep the earth, and to respect, honor, and love others as Genesis 1 and 2 teach that God created and calls us to do.

### **Suggestions for Reflection and Action**

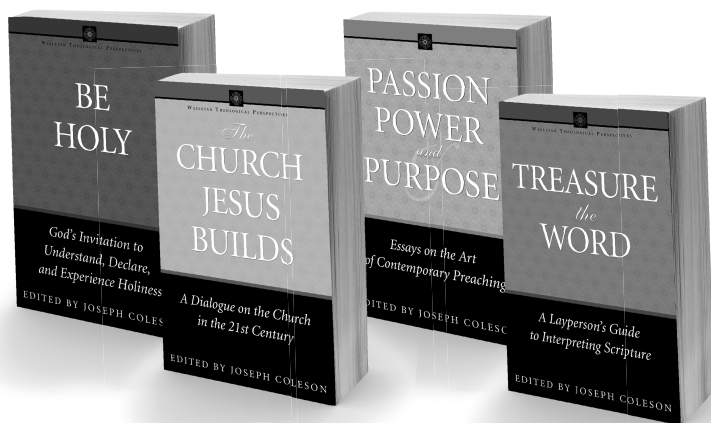
1. Chapter by chapter through this book, ask yourself, “What might this world have been now, had our first parents not turned from God? What can I, and we, do now to practice and demonstrate God’s already-yet-still-to-come restoration of all things?”

2. For seven days, record your interactions with others unlike yourself by reasons of gender, ethnicity, economic status, health, or other markers. Ponder whether and how you have treated each as a brother or sister also created in, and exhibiting, the image of God. If you have not done so, how do you need to change?

3. Find a way to (re)connect with the earth, the soil, the trees or other plants, or animals large or small. Plant and tend a garden, however small; it will help you (re)connect with God’s blessing and mandate.

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