

Dominion in Christian Farming

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ABSTRACT

Genesis 1:27–28 and 2:15 are the basis for significant debate on conceptions of stewardship and dominion in Christian responses to environmental issues. Key criticisms of historical perspectives of dominion in the west, including from White, have been influential on Christian environmental responses. However, perspectives of dominion persist among some groups of Christians in their worldview of human-nature relations. Farmers in particular find dominion important as a justification for use and development of nature through farming methods and technologies. Often dominion is used along side or within an understanding of stewardship, which exhorts responsibility towards nature. Within the CFFO, a dominion perspective sees farmers as co-creators with God, able to make creation more than it was. Other farmers, however, temper or reject the concept of dominion.

KEYWORDS

Christianity, dominion, stewardship, farming, worldview,
environment, land, animals, Genesis

Introduction

My research on the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario (CFFO), one of three general farm organizations operating in the province, explored in part the concept of stewardship, which is closely tied to the concept of dominion (Armstrong 2015). Within a context of a growing human population, ever-changing technology, and changing societal expectations on farmers, these two concepts continue to be important for Christian farmers in their understanding of their vocation and relationship to the land, plants and animals with which they work. Farming has to balance the need for control through methods and technology with the need for cooperation with nature which ensures conservation of the health and reproductive capacity of the land, plants and animals being farmed, as well as the surrounding natural ecosystems.

The theological concepts of dominion and stewardship are foundational for a worldview that supports farming, historically and today. The debate on how

to interpret these concepts is longstanding among Christians. This debate continues in particular among the farming community as they wrestle anew with questions of environmental and social responsibility in their farming methods. Although there have been many arguments to move away from a perspective of dominion, the concept persists, and still holds relevance for aspects of how farmers in particular understand their vocation and relationship to non-human nature, especially through their farming work. Dominion in particular justifies use and development of nature through farming.

Biblical basis

The scriptural basis for the concepts of stewardship and dominion is very important for many Christians, both theologians and laypersons, who are invested in the potential of these concepts for guiding Christian behaviour toward nature and the environment. These concepts have particular appeal among evangelicals and members of Christian denominations who wish to root principles of Christian behaviour in biblical texts. As a result, much of the insider literature examines biblical passages that are used to interpret the symbol of stewardship and the concept of dominion and then to apply these to contemporary issues (Creation Stewardship Task Force of the Christian Reformed Church in North America 2012; Fick 2008; Hall 1990; Phillips 2011; Wilkinson 1991).

The opening stories of Genesis are often considered foundational for understanding Christian worldviews on humanity's relationship to the environment. From these stories (as well as many others in the Bible) the concepts of stewardship and dominion as the basis for humanity's relationship with all of non-human nature, or creation, are derived. The debate about dominion and stewardship focuses on interpretations of two key passages, Genesis 1:27–28 and Genesis 2:15. Genesis 1 and 2 are understood as the story of Adam, the first steward of creation, given authority and responsibility by God. Genesis 1:27–28 lays out the relationship between God and humanity, who are in the “image of God.” This passage reads: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (KJV). Then Genesis 2:15 lays out the relationship between humanity (Adam) and the earth, giving Adam (humanity) the responsibility of tending and keeping the garden (the earth). It reads “And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (KJV).

Many consider these stories from Genesis foundational to the attitude of Western Christianity, in the past and in the present, toward the earth and humanity's relationship to it (Fick 2008; Leopold 1949; Ruether 1992; White 1967; and Wilkinson 1991). Critics of the effects of attitudes of domination especially in Western history point to these verses as the foundation of a highly anthropocentric worldview.

The problem of dominion

Scholarly and popular attention turned to focus on environmental issues with both renewed energy and heightened concern in the second half of the twentieth century. Writing out of both social and environmental considerations, historians and critics have looked back to Christian attitudes of dominion as the foundation of the culpability of Western civilization for many environmental problems. Often they criticized dominion for being exercised excessively as domination.

Historian Lynn White Jr.'s highly influential argument, published in *Science* in 1967, emphasizes the importance of religion in human relations with nature and the environment. He argues that "[h]uman ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion" (1967, 1205). White points to the creation story of Genesis as particularly foundational in this regard. He famously said that, "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (1967, 1205). White argues that Western Christian interpretations of Genesis as a call to exercise dominion over nature place excessive focus on the importance of humans. In particular, he notes that human beings are understood as set apart from the rest of nature, creating a dualism between the two, based on the Genesis depiction of humans as "made in God's image" (1967, 1205). In this interpretation of dominion, humans are understood as being placed on earth to rule over nature, which exists for human benefit. This is based especially on interpretations of Genesis 1:27–28, quoted above. For many, this verse lays out at the very beginning of the Bible the special relationship between God and humanity, who are made in God's image, and the special role of humanity, who are given dominion over nature. This worldview, or attitude towards nature, White argues, particularly as it has been interpreted over the centuries, has directly resulted in the increasingly exploitative technology of the northern Europeans, including their farming technology (1967, 1205).

White's direct connection between Christianity and environmental problems resulted in a dramatic response from within Christianity itself. However, he was not alone in emphasizing the importance of religious worldviews, and of Western Christian attitudes toward nature in particular as foundational to current environmental problems.

Carolyn Merchant, writing from an ecofeminist perspective, is particularly critical of the dominion/domination over women as well as the dominion/domination of nature founded in Christian interpretations (1980, 170–172). Both Merchant and White find that Christian interpretations of dominion have been connected directly to the development of Western science and technology, however secular the practice of science has since become (White 1967, 1206; Merchant 1980, 185). Merchant traces the development of science and industrialization in more detail, however. She points in particular to Francis Bacon's scientific agenda to regain human dominion, lost in the Fall of the Genesis story, through the control of nature through science (1980, 185–190). She also emphasizes more strongly the importance of the changed worldview of Europeans through the medieval and early Industrial period. She describes a transition from an organic to a mechanistic view of nature, where the primary metaphor

for nature moves from one of an organism to one of a machine:

The organismic, communal orientation [...] was thrust aside to make way for efficiency and production in the sustained use of nature for human benefit. A value system oriented to nature as teacher whose ways must be followed and respected was giving way to a system of human values as the criteria for decision-making (1980, 238).

Both this worldview and the technology that accompanied it allowed ever-greater exploitation of nature. Merchant notes that both the organic model and the mechanistic model have existed in parallel. “But mechanicism as a metaphor ordered and structured reality in a new way [...] Among its great strengths were that it [...] functioned as a justification for power and dominion over nature” (1980, 215). Again this changed worldview and the subsequent changed practices in the treatment of nature were directly connected to Christian theological ideas, and to interpretations of dominion.

Aldo Leopold argues in a similar vein that the Genesis stories of Abraham, and the wider “Abrahamic view,” have been foundational to the sense of entitlement in the treatment of land, and in particular the treatment of soil, plants and animals that live on and in it, in attitudes of dominion and in the emphasis on property rights in North America (1949, viii, 204–205). Leopold discusses this as the “Abrahamic concept of land” but he also discusses Abraham as a figure. He writes, “Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect” (1949, viii). Although these ideas of property rights and dominion of land have Abrahamic and more specifically Christian foundations, both Leopold and White argue that these attitudes now pervade Western secular culture, and in White’s case, Western science and technology as well.

In terms of farming specifically, although economic factors are important, writers such as White and Leopold illustrate that this biblical worldview is an important determining factor in how farmers treat their land. White argued that Western Christian anthropocentric attitudes continue to be expressed in forceful and controlling farming technology and methods (1967, 1205). Leopold says in the conclusion of his essay “The Land Ethic” that “[t]he bulk of all land relations hinges on investments of time, forethought, skill, and faith rather than on investments of cash. As a land-user thinketh, so is he” (1949, 225). Both of these writers caution that underlying human attitudes toward the land will have far reaching effects on the treatment of it.

White, Merchant and Leopold were writing in particular to address environmental concerns, and looking back historically to find the ideological, philosophical and theological roots underlying our current attitudes and practices towards nature. All of these writers serve as key examples of those who emphasize the importance of worldviews for the treatment of land and nature. Furthermore, they all trace the historical path of biblically rooted theological ideas

of dominion into the present day attitudes and practices of science, technology, and treatment of land, particularly in a North American context.

Dominion in current Christian environmental response

many different terms get used, and put into binary pairs to create and emphasize different contrasts. Is human treatment of the earth, historically or presently, best described by the term domination, dominion, stewardship, earth-keeping, creation care, or some other term? (Berry 2002, 293–304; Ellis 2013, 435–439; Kearns 2014, 158; Merchant 1980, 164–190; Paterson 2003, 43–58; Wilkinson 1991, 275–325). Proponents of a stewardship ethic have attempted to reevaluate the significance of these two key passages from Genesis to better emphasize responsibility or reinterpret these passages with an emphasis on stewardship rather than interpretations of dominion as a right of domination.

As Merchant points out above, a dominion perspective gives permission for greater control over and use of nature for human purposes. The “use” aspect of dominion applies not only to land and the use of land, but also to animals, and to farm animals in particular. Stewardship and dominion in many cases co-exist and are used along side each other, one exhorting responsibility with the other justifying or permitting use.

Theological interpretations of the rights and responsibilities of stewardship and dominion are important. However, they are not the only, or even the most important, aspect of differentiation when it comes to the responses of lay Christians. Looking beyond theological interpretations of stewardship and dominion to lay Christian responses to environmental issues and use of these two terms, the work of Laurel Kearns and John Paterson is useful in parsing out the differences in interpretation and application of these concepts. Paterson’s work along with Colter Ellis’ looks at questions of stewardship and dominion among farmers in particular.

Laurel Kearns, a sociologist of religion, has focused on Christian responses to environmental issues within the United States. She categorizes three types of response among American Christians (considered broadly), including a Christian stewardship ethic, an eco-justice ethic, and a creation spirituality ethic (1996, 56, 58–62). Kearns’ Christian stewardship ethic is most closely associated with evangelical Christian responses to environmental issues. The tension between a dominion and a moderated interpretation (stewardship) is evident within her “stewardship ethic” category, which she argues is based on reinterpretation of scripture, especially Genesis 1:26–28, emphasizing the call to “take care of and protect (but not to rule or perfect, as in older interpretations of the passage) the Creator’s creation” (1996, 58).

Kearns’ focus is on environmental activism, particularly among evangelical groups, and usually has an urban focus (1996; 1997; Immergut and Kearns 2012). More recently the issue of climate change has been a dividing point among evangelical Christians in their response to environmental issues. Kearns describes two groups within the larger evangelical response. One she calls “wise-use stewards” and the other she terms “creation-care evangelicals.”

Where the second group argues for the importance of climate change as an environmental issue, the first denies the significance of climate change. Kearns' categories of "wise-use stewards" and "creation-care evangelicals" have some important parallels to Paterson's two categories of "dominion" and "earthkeeping" described below. One emphasizes use from a dominion perspective, and the other emphasizes a moderation of scriptural interpretations of dominion.

There are elements of Kearns' categories of Christian environmental response that have particular characteristics of the urban and American evangelicals she is studying which differ from the concerns of farmers. She notes that "creation-care evangelicals" are concerned with issues such as "species extinction, conservation, pollution, land, water and ecosystem degradation, waste, mountaintop removal, energy use and climate change" (2014, 158). In this sense they are closely akin to other mainstream environmentalists, and largely express urban environmental concerns.

Farmers tend to have different environmental concerns. The Christian farmers in the CFFO are not self-defined environmentalists, but do have particular environmental concerns and agendas in their work. This is an important point of differentiation for the sake of categorization. Because of the particular work that it does, the CFFO as an organization is generally concerned with protection of farmland for farming, protecting and improving soil quality, and protection and controlled use of water resources and water systems. CFFO members are often leery of accusations of poor treatment of farm animals by animal rights or animal welfare activists, and can be apprehensive of legislated protection of wild species, especially those that may cause predation or crop damage problems, or those for which protection practices directly interfere with farming practices.

John Paterson's research focuses specifically on Dutch farming Christians, giving it a different emphasis and context in which the concepts of stewardship and dominion are understood and applied from that of Kearns. In his analysis of stewardship within the Christian Farmers Federations of Alberta and Ontario (CFFA and CFFO), Paterson divides the concept into two poles on a spectrum, which he calls "dominion" and "earthkeeping." The key distinctions he draws between these two are, first, that a dominion perspective emphasizes careful management of resources in how they are used and consumed, but not in how they are produced or acquired. On the other hand, earthkeeping emphasizes that both production and consumption require moderation, and should give consideration to the wider impacts that they create. Second, he notes that a dominion perspective maintains the notion of a hierarchy of beings, thus making it more anthropocentric, and also in some cases more androcentric or patriarchal than an earthkeeping perspective. By contrast, an earthkeeping perspective emphasizes the intrinsic value of non-human beings and the rest of creation beyond usefulness to humans. He notes a greater interest in human justice issues within an earthkeeping view. Third, Paterson notes a stronger interest in economic issues within dominion in contrast to a more ecological concern within earthkeeping (1998, 48–62; 2003, 45–56).

A dominion perspective exhorts the importance and permission of use. Notably, Paterson mentions the passage from Matthew 25:14–30, often called the “parable of the talents,” as interpreted in support of a dominion perspective to “use what has been given to them” (1998, 55). In the differentiation that Paterson has given here, the earthkeeping perspective is really a moderation of the dominion perspective, which gives greater value to nature as a whole. He places earthkeeping in the middle between dominion, which he calls a “shallow” environmental response, and deep ecology (1998, 56–57). Although Paterson argued that more recently attitudes of dominion had turned to an attitude of earthkeeping within the CFFO, I have not found that the dominion attitude has disappeared from the CFFO in my own research.

Stewardship in farming when more broadly focused attempts to take responsibility for the positive influence farmers can have on the wider ecological system, as well as the long-term health of their farms. Colter Ellis’ study of cattle ranchers in the US illustrates the use of stewardship among farmers who may not be specifically Christian, but who use the term in a similar religious sense. Here responsibility may or may not be interpreted as foundationally to God, but does include responsibility as a good steward to higher authorities or principles, often intangible, including nature as a whole (balance), as well as future generations. These farmers also include stewardship as responsibility to the land and animals specifically in their care (2013, 434–436). This farming view of stewardship as maintaining natural balance, Ellis points out, is sometimes at odds with conservationists who see grazing (for example) as contrary to good stewardship (2013, 434).

Ellis argues that the ranchers he studies apply both terms dominion and stewardship as part of their self-narrative as farmers and how they relate to nature:

There is a tension here between being in balance with nature and the need to produce the goods. Ranchers must be able to use the land to make a living from beef cattle. Stewardship and husbandry set the parameters of this interaction. Dominion allows for use (2013, 439).

He thus makes a distinction between stewardship, which he defines as responsibility and care, from dominion, which he associates with entitlement as a basis for justifying use.

Dominion perspectives within CFFO

The Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario (CFFO) is a general farm organization that has been operating since 1954, founded by Dutch neo-Calvinist immigrant farmers. The importance of the concept of stewardship within the CFFO came through clearly in my participant observation and personal interviews with members and leaders in the organization. The importance of a perspective of dominion came through as well for some, but not all, of the members.

Those farmers and leaders in the CFFO who most clearly expressed ideas of dominion and stewardship are indeed passionate about the religious, social and environmental significance of their religious worldviews, and the effect that their farming practices then have on the world, human and non-human, around

them. The perspectives described by these farmers clearly reflect the rural and agricultural focus of their daily lives. Their often very practical grappling with the balance of environment and economics is a result of their work as farmers. Farming requires them to put the ideals of their worldview to the test in real-life situations. The faith-inspired principles these Christian farmers bring challenge other farmers around them to consider farming issues from a broader perspective. This means looking beyond just economic considerations, as well as considering the benefits for agriculture as a whole in the long-term. At the same time, the practical realities of the farming industry often present challenges to farmers' religious worldviews. The high cost of farming equipment, or the low value of some crops, for example, may limit the crop rotations that some farmers can sustain on their farms. Compromises must be made in order to survive as farmers, particularly economically, while they continue to work towards the ideal they would like to see happen on their own farms, and in farming as a whole.

Some farmers who expressed a worldview allowing for use of creation clearly expressed ideas reflecting the theological concept of dominion as foundational for human relations with nature. These farmers understand humanity as having been given dominion over creation by God primarily based on the first and second chapters in Genesis, especially Genesis 1:28–29, and Genesis 2:15. A dominion perspective emphasizes the centrality of humans, both in their role as stewards, and as the central concern of God and creation. Human dominion extends over all living and non-living aspects of creation, and this may be to a greater or lesser extent exercised primarily for human benefit. Human developed technology, especially farming technology, plays a key role in the exercise of this dominion.

Some “use advocating” farmers connected dominion with the neo-Calvinist concept of “the cultural mandate” from Genesis 1:28 in interviews. One such farmer read the passage from Genesis to emphasize his view of humankind's relationship with creation, argued that humans are commanded by God to develop creation, and strongly disagreed with any movement (such as some environmental groups) to preserve or restore wilderness, or to reduce the human population:

Farmer: See God created mankind, man and woman, to take care of creation way back, shortly after creation or as part of creation and [...] so [reading from Gen 1: 27–28] “God created man in His own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. Then God blessed them and God said to them, be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” So, man was given the task to develop creation, and we have a movement nowadays to un-develop creation. We want to make it one big nature park again, and that's the outcome of evolutionary thinking. When God is not a part of our worldview, and man is no longer the crown of creation, as Genesis teaches, man is the crown, he is made in God's likeness, has been given the task to develop creation, but evolution denies God, and we're the result of a big bang, and we're an animal just like any other, and why should we have rights over any other

animal? And so, let's reduce our population because we're polluting the earth, we're a carbon footprint, reduce the population, so that it's in line with the rest of animal life. Basically it's a culture of death, whereas Christianity is the culture of life. (Personal interview)

Not surprisingly, those who emphasize dominion take an antagonistic position against those who espouse deep ecological views, as is made evident from the quote above. Their perspectives are almost complementary opposites. That is to say, where deep ecology movements primarily promote the preservation of wilderness, and the reduction in the human population, strongly dominion oriented views argue that humans should develop all of creation, leaving no area outside of human control and care, and that the human population should be allowed to grow. Those looking from a dominion perspective often argue that our ability to produce food will meet the population's needs by the grace of God, through developments in agricultural technology.

It is important to note that the dominion oriented perspective of use and development of creation has been favoured within the CFFO over the course of its history, and is still predominant in contemporary CFFO literature and policies. Elbert van Donkersgoed was the first full-time staff for CFFO, and held his position from 1971 to 2006. He was influential in advancing the idea of stewardship within the CFFO during his many decades of work within the organization. His understanding of stewardship is based on a dominion attitude of use combined with an ethos of active development of nature as befitting God's co-creators. He said:

Another thought about stewardship is the recognition that the land that God has given us can be more. Because one of the things about the Reformational worldview is that the role of humankind in the creation is that humankind is in a certain sense a co-creator with God and is making the creation more than it was. Now even, I'll refer to the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve being put in the Garden of Eden, their first job was to name everything. And they had to care for the garden. And caring for the garden is not preserving. As far as I'm concerned caring for the garden means making it more than what it was when God was done. And so the notion of stewardship to me is making it more than it was [...] So I'm very comfortable with farmers saying, "Well, you know, I'd like to do 200 bushels of corn." But it can't put the goals of simply producing bushels of corn at the expense of the long-term ability of that creation to produce that. The notion that this has to be long-term has to be part and parcel of stewardship. But I'm very comfortable that stewardship does mean that we are going to make it more than it was. Stewardship is not preservation. It is not static, stuck in some past, or going into the past. It is about making it more than it was. And that's one of the things about Christian Farmers Federation, that the fundamental attitude of the vast majority of members are on that page of saying, "I can make this more than it was," and that they're very comfortable as entrepreneurs on that page. So it was also very comfortable for me to work with this worldview. Part of me being a human being is to make it something more than it was. (Personal interview)

Elbert van Donkersgoed here clearly articulates a theological perspective that is based on a dominion interpretation of Genesis 2:15. He also notes the histor-

ical prevalence of this perspective within the CFFO. In articulating this view of stewardship, van Donkersgoed points back to the Genesis stories again, in order to explain his interpretation of the role of humanity connected to both God and nature, as co-creators with God in their work as stewards of nature.

In addition to the commandment in Genesis 1:28 to have dominion over the earth and to subdue it, and the passage from Genesis 2:15, another common Bible story that I heard used to argue for developing creation is the parable of the talents (mentioned by Paterson above) found in the Gospel of Matthew 25:14–30 (with a similar version in Luke 19:12–27). In the quotation below, from a question and answer period at the conclusion of a Sustainability Committee presentation at the CFFO Annual Convention in 2012, a CFFO member makes specific reference to the parable of the talents as a principle exhorting use of modern farming technology. This challenge to the presenters indicates the active biblical hermeneutics among the membership and leadership on the best farming practices to use:

CFFO Member Question: I can't let [the Sustainability Committee] get away with a sustainability without asking the question, "what is not sustainable about an operation growing corn-soy-wheat mix on a livestock operation, and using all the latest technology, what is not sustainable about that?" If we don't use the latest technology, there's a Christian principle that is about not burying our talents (CFFO Annual Convention 2012, question and answer following Sustainability Committee presentation).

The debate on sustainability and stewardship among members illustrates that farmers are invested, often deeply, and in ways that are strongly religious, in these differing views on the best farming practices and technologies.

On the other hand, some farmers in advocating for similar development-type farming methods instead express a different theological view resembling the earthkeeping stance described by Paterson above. The farmer quoted below clearly rejects the idea of dominion and moderates it in his emphasis on responsibility in interpreting the biblical principle of stewardship:

Farmer: I think there are places in the Bible where some people try to say that "man has dominion over the earth" kind of thing. But I read it myself to say that we are responsible for creation. We are responsible to do it effectively. We are responsible to do things that aren't wasteful and aren't harmful. (Personal interview)

Not only do some farmers in CFFO express perspectives like this that reject a notion of dominion, others express a perspective of stewardship that advocates maintaining the integrity of creation, and mimicking nature as much as possible in farming methods, quite different from that expressed by van Donkersgoed and others above.

Conclusion

A theological dominion perspective still underpins many modern farming practices, allowing for use and development of nature for human benefit. My research found that the concept of dominion is still widely used among farmers

within the CFFO today to integrate their understandings of their vocation as farmers and their worldview as Christians. Ideas of dominion are often also tempered with understandings of responsibility through concepts like stewardship.

Many farmers still find the theological concept of dominion, based in Genesis 1 and 2, important for their understanding of their relationship with nature through their work as farmers. Dominion allows for use and development of nature, which is vital for many aspects of farming. The concept of dominion continues to be challenged, however, by competing worldviews such as those of some environmentalists, conservationists and animal welfare activists who hold a different view of the appropriate relationship between humanity and non-human nature, including land, plants and animals. This poses ideological, as well as often practical, challenges for farmers. These debates will certainly continue as worldviews meet with the reality of practical considerations on farms.

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