



Foundational Essay

CARE FOR CREATION

HENRY G. BRINTON

INTRODUCTION


Katharine Hayhoe is an atmospheric scientist at Texas Tech University and is the co-founder of “Science Moms,” an effort to engage mothers in climate-change issues. She is also a Christian. “God cares for the smallest and most insignificant aspect of nature,” she says, “and about how we are to love others and care for others.” When she saw that poor and vulnerable people are the ones most affected by a changing climate, she had a life-changing experience. “That’s what led me, personally, as a Christian, to become a climate scientist.”¹

Not every Christian will become an atmospheric scientist, but everyone can connect the dots between caring for creation and caring for our neighbors. From beginning to end, the Bible invites us to be good stewards of the earth, and Jesus himself shows us how to appreciate creation and love our neighbors. Scripture begins by saying that humans have responsibility to till and keep the earth (Genesis 2:15), and ends by warning that God will destroy “those who destroy the earth” (Revelations 11:18). There is much we can do as Christians to follow the guidance of the Bible and the example of Jesus in being good managers of our God-given natural resources.


We begin with appreciation for the abundance of creation. God created the heavens and the earth, filled the seas and the land with living things, and said that what was made was not just good, but was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). God has been incredibly generous with the resources of the world, and wants us to see richness and plenty when we look around. “Consider the lilies, how they grow,” said Jesus (Luke 12:27), inviting us to trust God to provide for us out of the abundance of the earth, just as God provides for the lilies of the field. And yet, we so often focus on scarcity and act out of fear and greed.

God created the first human being “and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). Adam was instructed not only to “till” the garden and grow food for his use. He was also challenged to “keep it,” maintaining it well so that the richness of the earth would be preserved.

1. K. K. Ottesen, “Just Asking: Katharine Hayhoe,” *The Washington Post Magazine* (March 7, 2021): 6.



Not every Christian will become an atmospheric scientist, but everyone can connect the dots between caring for creation and caring for our neighbors.



Adam was supposed to be a good steward, a challenge issued later by Jesus in his parable of the talents. In all of his teachings, Jesus wants us to take good care of what we have received, whether it is a gift of money or the treasure of a healthy atmosphere. Finally, we are given a vision of a garden in a city in the book of Revelation, which invites us to work toward a renewed harmony between nature and civilization. The Bible ends with a vision of a clean river and healthy trees in the middle of a city, which encourages us to support such developments in our own communities. From these Scriptures emerge four key themes:

- Appreciate God's Abundance
- Till
- Share the Planet
- Restore Creation


APPRECIATE GOD'S ABUNDANCE

In our high-tech world, many people are feeling a need to escape their offices and recharge in nature. Called *forest bathing*, this practice originated in Japan and is designed to calm the spirits of people who are stressed by too much technology. According to *The Washington Post*, a group of high-tech workers in Seattle recently took part in an activity called "Unplug and Recharge in Nature." After spending so much time in the information-loaded virtual world, they felt a need to reconnect with the tree-filled real world. Some sat and listened to the sounds of nature. Others took off their shoes and walked on the soft forest floor. Research is showing that this kind of bathing is associated with lower stress levels and better moods, as well as an increase in self-esteem, physical fitness, memory, attention, and creativity.²


Jesus knew the value of forest bathing, which is why he said to his disciples, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). They had been healing and teaching, and were so busy that they hadn't even taken the time to eat. On a mountainside filled with natural beauty, Jesus said to his followers, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these" (Matthew 6:28-29). Jesus reminded them that God would provide them with what they needed in terms of food, drink, and clothing. He knew that God had created a world of abundant goodness, in which the needs of all could be met.

Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, says that the Bible starts with abundance. The very first chapter of Genesis is a song of praise for God's generosity. "It tells how well the world is ordered," says Brueggemann. "It declares that God blesses—that is, endows with vitality—the plants and the animals and the fish and the birds and humankind." This is a beautiful vision of abundant life, but so often we focus on scarcity. We want more energy and resources, and often make decisions out of fear and greed. We fail to see what Brueggemann calls "the overflowing goodness that pours from God's creator spirit."³

2. Brigid Schulte, "How Tech Workers Are Turning to the Japanese practice of 'Forest Bathing' to Unplug," *The Washington Post* (September 14, 2015), www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2015/09/14/how-tech-workers-are-turning-to-the-japanese-practice-of-forest-bathing-to-break-their-smartphone-habits/.
3. Walter Brueggemann, "The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity," *The Christian Century* (March 24, 1999), www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-01/liturgy-abundance-myth-scarcity.



From start to finish,
the Bible tells the story
of a creation that is not
just good but "very good"
(Genesis 1:31).





We learn to appreciate God’s abundance when we step out of our homes, offices, and churches and “consider the lilies of the field.”



From start to finish, the Bible tells the story of a creation that is not just good but “very good” (Genesis 1:31). God has filled the earth with plants and animals, and has ordered creation in such a way that the needs of all are met. Psalm 104 presents a picture of abundant generosity when it says to God, “when you open your hand, they are filled with good things” (Psalm 104:28b). But the Bible also warns us not to abuse the resources of the earth and wear out the land. Genesis tells us that, when Lot went with Abram, with flocks and herds and tents, “the land could not support both of them living together because their possessions were so great that they could not live together” (Genesis 13:6). When a piece of land cannot sustain a group of people, survival depends on finding a balance with available resources.

We learn to appreciate God’s abundance when we step out of our homes, offices, and churches and “consider the lilies of the field.” At Fairfax Presbyterian Church in Fairfax, Virginia, worship is held on the church lawn on the first Sunday in June, with the songs of birds augmenting the singing of the choir. At University Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, Texas, a garden has been planted between two of its buildings and a “Green Fact for the Day” appears on the church website. Across the country, camps and conference centers give children, youth, and adults the chance to deepen their faith in the glory of God’s creation. In all of these Christian communities, the story of God’s activity is found in not only the words of the Bible but also the works of creation.

Mary Plate DeJong, who is making an effort to reclaim and restore green spaces near her home in Seattle, says that Jesus “used the natural world—the lilies and the birds and all of these natural connections—as teaching points. That is a great invitation to us to see [that] as much as Scripture is revelatory, so is the natural world. The Celtic tradition would say that Christ walks with two shoes—Scripture and the natural world—and without one, he will limp.” She encourages people of faith to “put on the other shoe—the natural world—to really do that one up fast and pull it on tight.”⁴ We put on the shoe of the natural world every time we step out into nature with a willingness to appreciate God’s abundance.

TILL

Jonathan Merritt, the author of *Green Like God: Unlocking the Divine Plan for Our Planet*, was sitting in a theology class with one of his favorite seminary professors. The professor was talking about the revelations of God, and he said, “When we destroy God’s creation, it’s similar to tearing a page out of the Bible.” Merritt was a staunch conservative who thought that environmentalism was irrelevant to his Christian faith, and at that moment he thought, *I would never tear a page out of Scripture*. He left the class a different person, knowing that he could not continue to live the way he lived. Now active in caring for creation, he encourages people to approach the environment by saying, “We have sinned.” He says we have to deal with our wrongdoing “by admitting that we have allowed our air, water, and land to be polluted.”⁵

In Genesis, God says that men and women should “have dominion” over the creatures of the earth, but *dominion* is not the same as *domination*.

4. J.J. Johnson Leese and Mary Plate DeJong, “Natural Theology,” *SPU Stories* (December 6, 2017), <https://stories.spu.edu/articles/natural-theology/>.

5. Tim Stafford, “The Green Baptist,” *Christianity Today* 53, no. 11 (November 2009): 112.

Merritt prefers to focus on the tilling and keeping of Genesis 2:15, in which God “took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” Other Bible versions say, “tend and watch over it” (NLT); “take care of it and to look after it” (CEV); “work the ground and keep it in order” (MSG). In this passage, humans are commanded by the Creator to care for creation. We are to be the prudent managers described by Jesus in his parable of the faithful or unfaithful slave. “Who, then, is the faithful and wise slave whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time?” asks Jesus. “Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives” (Matthew 24:45–46).

Prudent management is in line with the paper “Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice,” adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1990. According to this paper, “tilling” includes not only agriculture but also mining and manufacturing, all of which depend on taking and using the materials of God’s creation. “Keeping” the creation, however, means tilling with care; this means making sure that the world of nature continues to flourish, with all of its intricate, interacting systems that support plant, animal, and human life. “But humans have failed to till with care,” observes the paper. “The eco-justice crisis is the consequence of tilling without keeping, together with the unfair distribution of the fruits of tilling. The Creator’s gifts for sustenance have not been taken carefully and shared equitably.”⁶

God has given us just one earth, with precious but limited resources, so the challenge for us is to till with care. Those of us living in the United States are leaving an especially large ecological footprint, and the shocking truth is that the world would need the resources of four to ten earths if everyone consumed energy the way a middle-class American does. Caring for creation through energy conservation is an important way for us to “keep” the creation, a responsibility we have had since God “took the man and put him in the garden to till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15).⁷

In 2006, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) passed a resolution encouraging all Presbyterians to live “carbon-neutral” lives. Although many of us are unaware of our personal contributions to climate change, the truth is that we release carbon dioxide into the atmosphere every time we burn fossil fuels in our homes and cars. Because transportation is the largest single source of air pollution in the United States, we should think carefully about how travel choices can reduce our carbon emissions. Buying cars with good gas mileage is a positive step, as is purchasing hybrid or electric vehicles. Public transportation is always a green choice, including subways, buses, light rail, and commuter vans. And if we budget the time, many of us can travel around our neighborhoods by bicycle or on foot, and take a step toward carbon-neutral living. All of these practices can help us to till and keep the earth, and be the prudent managers whom the master “will find at work when he arrives” (Matthew 24:46). God wants us to use but also preserve the precious resources of the earth.



Although many of us are unaware of our personal contributions to climate change, the truth is that we release carbon dioxide into the atmosphere every time we burn fossil fuels in our homes and cars.




6. “Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice.” Adopted by the 202nd General Assembly (1990), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Copyright 1990, The Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, Kentucky.
7. Rebecca Barnes-Davies, *50 Ways to Help Save the Earth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 14–15.


SHARE THE PLANET

In his book *Our Angry Eden: Faith & Hope on a Hotter, Harsher Planet*, pastor David Williams identifies the words of Jesus in Luke 6:38 as the “moral core” of the Christian faith, the ethic that guides how we are to act in the world: “A good measure . . . will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” For Williams, this is a reminder that we “are connected to all things, and our every action will be returned to us.”⁸ In terms of our management of God’s resources, it means that we should eat less meat and more whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. Ideally, we should be vegetarians.

The New Testament is full of stories about stewards and slaves, people who have responsibility to care for property and make it productive. Paul says that stewards should be “trustworthy” (1 Corinthians 4:2), and Jesus speaks positively of slaves who are “good and trustworthy” (Matthew 25:21), at work when their master arrives (Luke 12:43). In all of these cases, slaves and stewards are not owners of property themselves, but are caring for the land and the resources of their master. In just the same way, we are challenged to be faithful, wise, trustworthy, and hardworking stewards of the wonderfully fruitful earth that God has entrusted to our care.



We are challenged to be faithful, wise, trustworthy, and hardworking stewards of the wonderfully fruitful earth that God has entrusted to our care.



So how does good stewardship connect to our food choices? “I don’t eat meat,” writes Williams, “because to do so is to place greater demands on our planet than can be sustained.” He knows that a plant-based diet demands less land and energy than a meat-based diet. And it does less harm to the planet, which is becoming hotter and harsher every day. “As our faith stands in encounter with the ethical demands of a new and harsh world,” he concludes, “the choice to move to a plant-based diet will need to become a significant part of a Christian identity.”⁹

The move to a completely plant-based diet is a major shift, comparable to the decision of the Samaritan to “come near” the wounded man and take sacrificial action to help him, in Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33). There is a connection between caring for creation and caring for our neighbors. But whether you choose to be a strict vegetarian or not, an environmentally sensitive diet is based on eating from the garden—the Garden of Eden—that is. This is a diet grounded in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, heart-healthy fats, and lean proteins. Such an approach goes right back to the book of Genesis, in which God says, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed . . . you shall have them for food” (Genesis 1:29). God recommends a vegetarian diet to the first man and woman; the introduction of meat as a food source does not happen until after the flood, when God gives Noah permission to eat “everything” (Genesis 9:3).

Eating from the garden is a faithful way to manage God’s resources, and to be one of the slaves who earns the commendation of the master in Jesus’ parable of the talents. In that story, a man “summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability” (Matthew 25:14–15). The man went on a trip; when he returned, he checked on their management of his property. Praise was given to the slaves who doubled their master’s investment, and condemnation to the one who hid his talent. The parable

8. David Williams, *Our Angry Eden: Faith & Hope on a Hotter, Harsher Planet* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 134.

9. Williams, 139–40.

challenges us to resist our fear of losing, to take risks, and to be good stewards of the resources entrusted to us.

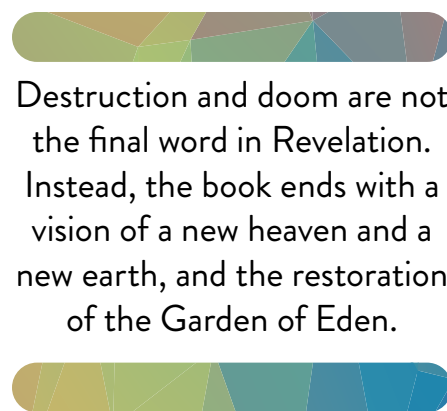
“Life presents plenty of opportunities for fear,” says pastor Robert M. McClellan. “Global threats send shock waves into everyday homes. . . . On scales large and small, the world is full of people who choose to use fear to get what they want, unconcerned for those they leave in their wake.”¹⁰ Those who want to be involved in reversing damage to the environment will have to turn away from fear, and trust in the divine master who has given them the ability to manage their time and resources in ways that will benefit all of God’s people. The parable of the talents is really not about investing money, says McClellan, but about people who “share what they have been given—indeed, even themselves—for the good of all.”¹¹ Eating from the Garden of Eden is one of the ways that we can be good stewards of land, water, and air, and show our concern for the generations that will follow us.

We are faithful stewards when we eat a plant-based diet, because the production of meat is expensive and energy-intensive, especially compared to the growing of fruits and vegetables. Substituting vegetarian ingredients for meat is an environmentally friendly choice to make, because it means that you are eating lower on the food chain. The growing of fruits and vegetables is also gentler on the environment, since the meat industry discharges waste into the water and soil, and emits high levels of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. A recent Oxford study revealed that plant-based diets improve both our personal health and the health of the planet. Such diets lead to “reduced environmental impacts globally and in most regions,” according to the study. “Globally, the changes included large reductions in greenhouse gas emissions (54–87%) with greatest reductions for vegan diets.”¹² We do a better job of managing God’s resources, as well as maintaining our personal health, when we eat from the garden.

RESTORE CREATION

The book of Revelation is filled with frightening images: a great red dragon, beasts from the sea and land, an apocalyptic battle, and the final judgment. Jesus is described as the one who is “coming with the clouds . . . and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him” (Revelation 1:7). When the seventh trumpet blows, we learn of God’s plan “for destroying those who destroy the earth” (Revelation 11:18). Cinematic jokes about the end-times have been around since *Ghostbusters* (1984), a movie in which a character says, “Fire and brimstone coming down from the skies! . . . The dead rising from the grave! Human sacrifice, dogs and cats living together . . . mass hysteria!” That’s a vision of the end of the earth, grounded in the words of John in Revelation. Except, perhaps, the stuff about “dogs and cats living together.”¹³

But destruction and doom are not the final word in Revelation. Instead, the book ends with a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, and the



Destruction and doom are not the final word in Revelation. Instead, the book ends with a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, and the restoration of the Garden of Eden.

10. Robert M. McClellan, “Pastoral Perspective: Matthew 25:14–30,” *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 2, Chapters 14–28* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 260.

11. McClellan, 264.

12. “Balanced Plant-Based Diets Improve Our Health and the Health of the Planet,” *News and Events, University of Oxford* (October 12, 2018), bit.ly/FMPlantBasedDiets.

13. Henry G. Brinton, “Between Text and Sermon: Revelation 21:1–22:7,” *Interpretation* (January 2016): 84.

restoration of the Garden of Eden. The promise of the last two chapters of Revelation is a new relationship with God, one in which people live in harmony with God and with all that God has made. This bond is a restoration of the original creation in Genesis, and it contains the best of numerous biblical images: a new heaven and earth, a city, and a garden. Revelation is really about *Caring for Creation*.

First, Revelation speaks of *a new heaven and earth*. As chapter 21 begins, John sees “a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more” (Revelation 21:1). This transformed creation fulfills the expectation of the apostle Paul that “the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay” (Romans 8:21). But what does it mean for creation to be transformed and “set free”? The coming of a new heaven and a new earth does not give us license to abuse creation, trusting that God will provide a replacement. John Polkinghorne, the theoretical physicist and Anglican priest, argues that God’s “new creation is the divine redemption of the old.”¹⁴ The new creation transforms the old, moving it into a closer and healthier relationship with its Creator.

Second, Revelation speaks of *a city*. John sees “the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Revelation 21:2). This holy city is the beautiful place where God and humans will live together eternally, but this is not simply a vision for the future: “The New Jerusalem vision is meant to be God’s vision by which we live our lives right now,” according to New Testament professor Barbara Rossing.¹⁵ In this city, God says, “To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life” (Revelation 21:6). This free gift of life-giving water reminds us of the importance of fresh, clean water for the continuation of life on earth. It also reminds us of the importance of the spiritual water given by Jesus (John 4:14). Good water is needed for life, both physically and spiritually.

Third, Revelation speaks of *a garden*—a Garden of Eden, restored in the center of the city. This is a powerful message about God’s desire for the built world to exist in harmony with nature, and it serves as biblical support for the church’s commitment to *Care for Creation*. There is a river in the urban garden of Revelation, on “either side of the river is the tree of life . . . the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:2). This is the place where creation is renewed, brokenness is healed, and curses are removed (Revelation 22:3). The message of the garden is that God wants to heal our world.

So, what would it mean to anticipate this harmony and healing, through the planting of a garden? The congregation of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Billings, Montana, began planning a community garden in 2003 for two reasons: to reach out to their neighbors and make use of an empty lot next to their church. By 2009, the garden was bursting with vegetables, and over two-thirds of the gardeners were neighbors from outside the congregation, some of whom desperately needed a healthier diet. Using organic gardening guidelines, participants have grown closer to the soil, water, and air, while gaining insight into local insects, rodents, weeds, and plant diseases. At St. Andrew, all of the gardeners are asked to contribute at least 10 percent of their produce to someone in need, or to a local service



What does it mean for creation to be transformed and “set free”? The coming of a new heaven and a new earth does not give us license to abuse creation, trusting that God will provide a replacement.



14. J. C. Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 167.

15. Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 142.

organization. Special events such as garden picnics and harvest dinners build a sense of community among the gardeners.¹⁶

In the last chapter of Revelation, Jesus says, “See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book” (Revelation 22:7). Keeping these words means taking steps to harmonize humans and nature, in line with the vision of God’s new heaven and new earth. It means that we care for the creation that will be the location of New Jerusalem, and take actions to free the world from decay. Revelation can lead us to do the work of healing and to provide life-giving water to others, both clean drinking water and the spiritual water of Jesus Christ.

And how, specifically, can we do this? According to journalist Jonathan Merritt, Christians across the theological spectrum are now learning to “serve a God who wants this creation to flourish.”¹⁷ Christians are embarking on 40-day *carbon fasts* aimed at reducing their personal carbon footprint: removing light bulbs at home, turning off computers at night, and eliminating unnecessary car trips. Churches are developing *green teams* that promote recycling, replace energy-inefficient appliances, and create community gardens. Denominations are supporting education, regulation, and economic incentives to combat pollution. People of faith can restore the earth by supporting the values of God’s garden in the city, including harmony between nature and the built world. We can work and pray for this place in which healthy relationships will exist between people and nature, as well as between people and God.



People of faith can restore the earth by supporting the values of God’s garden in the city, including harmony between nature and the built world.



ABOUT THE WRITER

Henry G. Brinton is the pastor of Fairfax Presbyterian Church in Virginia and is an author who has written on religion and culture for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *Huffington Post*. His books include *The Welcoming Congregation: Roots and Fruits of Christian Hospitality* and *The Bible’s Greatest Hits: Top Sixty-Six Passages from Genesis to Revelation*, as well as two small-town mystery novels, *City of Peace* and *Windows of the Heavens*. Henry and his wife, Nancy Freeborne-Brinton, have two adult children, Sadie and Sam. An endurance athlete, Henry has completed a marathon, triathlon, or century bike ride each year since 2000.

16. Brent Long and David Kimball, “Growing a Community of Gardeners,” *ideas! For Church Leaders* (Spring/Summer 2010): 6–7.

17. Jonathan Merritt, *Green like God: Unlocking the Divine Plan for Our Planet* (New York: FaithWords, 2010), 154–55.

