



Douglas John Hall, professor emeritus of systematic theology at McGill University, Montreal, and author of numerous books, delivered this lecture at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg Seminary on Oct. 27. The talk was sponsored by the Stewardship of Life Institute and the Arthur Larson Stewardship Council.

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STEWARDSHIP AS HUMAN VOCATION

DOUGLAS JOHN HALL¹

Introduction

The 10,000-year experiment of the settled life will stand or fall by what we do, and don't do, now. . . The great advantage we have, our best chance for avoiding the fate of past societies, is that we know about those past societies. We can see how and why they went wrong. Homo sapiens has the information to know itself for what it is: an Ice Age hunter only half-evolved towards intelligence; clever but seldom wise.²

Let me lay my cards on the table right away: I think there is probably no more important theological and ethical task for Christians today than that of developing a worldly theology of human stewardship. I wrote these words at the height of this past summer's sustained heat-wave. Temperatures in my home city of Montreal, which people falsely imagine is a very cold place (well, it sometimes is—in mid-winter) soared into the high 90s and over 100 Fahrenheit, and stayed that way for days. They were accompanied

¹ For Gettysburg Seminary, October, 2005.

² Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, Toronto: Anansi, 2004 (The Massey Lectures)

many times by serious smog conditions, and by dangerous ultraviolet indexes. Yet the patterns of human behaviour in the city continued without a change. Though Montreal has one of the best public transit systems in the world, the North American preference for the automobile continued unabated. Every morning, often as I stood at the bus-stop nearest my home, I watched as car after car went past on its way into the inner city, which is congested beyond belief,—almost always with one person only, the driver. I wanted to paint a big sign and hold it up as I stood there: “Take the bus, damn you!” But my wife warned me against this: she felt I didn’t need the publicity that such an act would bring—in addition to the cancer with which I had recently been diagnosed. Meanwhile, ads in the local papers continued to praise us for our love-affair with cars. “Buy one of these new cars,” cried one blatantly smug ad in a local newspaper, “and throw your bus pass away.”

Standing in all that heat, and breathing in the noxious fumes that were contributing to the smog that had engulfed us, I had very bleak apocalyptic thoughts—though I am not, on the whole, an advocate of apocalyptic religion. Are we at the beginning of a really dangerous period in the history of our planet? Is the global warming of which so many have warned us quite literally real, and not just the rantings of gloomy environmentalists, as status quo politicians and industrialists keep telling us? Is this maybe the onset of catastrophe?—How do you know when you are already into a catastrophic period? When is the point of no return? Is it already too late to alter the tragic course of a planet in the throes of repression, self-deception and the delusions of ideological progress-theory?

I begin in this perhaps alarmist way because—frankly—I am alarmed.

Environmental degradation is not the only crisis by which our civilization is threatened—there are dozens more. But the radical deterioration of the environment is at the same time the most threatening (since without a habitable environment all the other problems are ‘resolved’, along with life itself) and the most difficult for the possessing peoples of the planet to grasp and admit. Moreover, as the citizens of such an apparently favoured society we are deterred from coming to terms with this condition by the fact that we are both the greatest benefactors of the technological society we have created and the greatest polluters. We may be creating the conditions that will make earth uninhabitable, but in the meantime—in this little interregnum—we seem to have it very good, all things considered; and the fact that we have it so at the expense of the majority of the rest of earth’s creatures, human and extrahuman, clearly does not disturb our conscience; it doesn’t even stir us to know (what we must surely know, deeply) that we are robbing our grandchildren and great-grandchildren of their birthright!

One feels desperate, thinking such thoughts. But we must think them—we must think them in all seriousness!—if we are ever going to act to offset the catastrophe we are courting. It is not just action that we need, however; it is a change at the level of self-understanding, of the imaging of ourselves, the human species.

And that, my friends, is where the theology of stewardship comes in. It comes in, first, not as an ethic or moral imperative; but first as theology—or as Karl Barth would have said, theo-anthropology: a conception of God that is at the same time a conception of human creaturehood. We should perhaps alter the traditional answer to the old

Westminster catechism's famous question, "What is the chief end of man?"—the traditional answer being, as perhaps even Lutherans know, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever". I would like to rewrite this answer in order to make it fit the reality of our present context: "The chief end of the human being is to be God's faithful steward in a profoundly threatened creation."

That would be putting stewardship right out front and centre, where it should be. It would also be 'glorifying God' in a real, not merely a rhetorical, way. We Christians have been hiding this biblical metaphor under a bushel, the bushel of religion. We've talked endlessly about stewardship, to be sure, but in a truncated, unworldly manner: that is, we've associated it too narrowly with support for our churches, which, unlike the old European situation of Christian establishment, have had in this new world to fend for themselves. Well and good; but in doing this we have prevented this potent symbol from entering the main stream of human and worldly consciousness. Sometimes churchfolk have actually criticized me for wanting to open the theology of stewardship to its worldly application. They fear it will take away from support of the church! Nonsense! What is needed is a transformation of human beings, churched and unchurched, in their way of regarding themselves in their total intercourse with the world. Churchfolk who feel themselves to be a stewards in this larger sense will be far more likely to support the church too than if they confine their notion of stewardship to a restrictive ecclesiastical deployment.

1. 'WHAT ARE PEOPLE FOR?'

But having begun by sounding this alarm, let me start all over again, in a more reflective way. And, since I have mentioned the famous question of the Westminster

Catechism, let me begin by reworking that question in contemporary terms. The old Westminster divines stated the primary anthropological question of our faith in admirable doctrinal language: “What is the chief end of man? [read, of the human being].” And as we have seen they not only stated the question in a fine doctrinal manner, but they also provided a wonderfully nuanced religious answer: “The chief end of the human being is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” Splendid! But this question and this answer belong to a calmer and more pious age than ours—an age which, for all the calamitous nature of daily life, was decidedly more ordered and spiritually sure than ours. If we want to discover the Christian anthropology appropriate to our own age, we shall have to begin by rewording the question itself, not only the answer.

And how shall we state that question in a manner that has sufficient urgency to capture the crisis of our times? There are of course many ways of stating it, but none, in my experience, is so contextually perceptive as wording proposed by one of the truly prophetic minds at work in these United States. I refer to Wendell Berry, and specifically to his book, *What Are People For?* That’s it. That’s how we should state the primary anthropological question of Christians today. What are people for?³

There are now six-and-a-half billions of us on this planet (world population has tripled in my lifetime), and the rate of population increase, which many expected to show signs of lessening, is in fact continuing apace. The U.S. Bureau of Statistics estimates that by the year 2050 the population of planet Earth will be nine-and-a-half billions. In the two-thirds world, abysmal poverty, disease and inter-racial and religious hatred prevent most human beings from entertaining even the most modest expectations and purposes. In our own society, even with its relative affluence and the high expectations of individuals, many

of our people still feel unwanted, some—especially among the old, the young and the poor—feel quite superfluous. The suicide rate among the indigenous peoples of North America is the highest in the world. Surrounded as we are by complex machinery and whole technocratic systems in relation to which we feel very small indeed, human beings ask as perhaps never before in history what reason could be found under the sun for their existence.

Not only that, we are the recipients, daily, of messages about our species that can only render us still more confused and depressed about our *raison d'être*. Indeed, a great deal of what we hear suggests that humankind is not only the most problematic species of all (a bit of news that would not surprise readers of Augustine and Calvin though it is still shocking to middle-America), but that we are a species whose very existence impedes creation and its promised flowering. The great Harvard scientist, E.O. Wilson, notes, for instance, that if the human species were suddenly to disappear, the earth would flourish; whereas, if the ant species disappeared there would be catastrophe. Such a statement is hardly calculated to make us humans feel wanted, let alone needed!

WHAT ARE HUMAN BEINGS FOR?

Do we have any positive purpose at all? Are we destined from the outset to self-destruct?—and perhaps to take down the whole ecosystem along with us? Christians would do well not to underestimate the power of this attitude in the general populous. If people develop indifference towards such ultimate questions as purpose and meaning, life and death, it is generally because they sense that no answers are trustworthy—or perhaps that none but negative answers can be given. The cynicism and nihilism that are just underneath the surface of our culture—cynicism and nihilism that can be heard in the

³ San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990. See the essay “What are People For?”, pp. 123ff.

popular music, most of which has substituted yelling for singing—should be taken with great seriousness. It may sound blasé, “cool”, when it comes from the affluent young; but it is really, I suspect, the most deadly form of despair, which Kierkegaard rightly said is the despair that does not and will not know that it is despair.

What then is the Christian response to this question? What are people for?—according to this faith?

Biblical tradition gives many answer to that question, because it believes that where purpose is concerned no one answer suffices. Each epoch has to revisit this question in the light of the exigencies, the problems and the possibilities of the here and now. In tranquil times (and there have been a few such in history) it may be enough to say, “The chief end of the human creature is to glorify God and enjoy God forever”. Ours is not a tranquil time. Stronger medicine is needed. And none of the ways in which the biblical tradition answers this question is more potent, more evocative, under the circumstances of today, than is just this metaphor of stewardship. Not only so, but quite apart from us Christians (and in some sense in defiance of our 'tranquility'!) the world itself, in many voices, has discovered this metaphor and made better use of it than we have. If you listen, you can hear this term being used, today, in many quarters (political, economic, scientific, certainly ecological) that are strictly secular. Stewardship is a term that has achieved coinage in our time. It is (as I said in the title of my first book on the subject) a symbol come of age. Symbols are not arbitrarily imposed on society. As Tillich said, they come to be, and they fade away—unlike signs, which are deliberately adopted. Symbols come to be when they are existentially needed. If many of the most concerned earthlings have turned to this symbol; if even in foreign settings (like the German) where there is no good word for the

concept, the English term ‘stewardship’ has been adopted, it is simply because there is, in our society, a linguistic and vocational vacuum that needs to be filled. And thank God our religion has kept this term alive, albeit in truncated versions, so that now it can be picked up and used by many who do not darken the doors of our churches.

Yet the churches—or at least those within them who still are given to serious thought—have something very important to contribute to this rediscovery of the symbol of the steward. For, like all symbols, this one too can be misused and misleading.

One of its perennial misconceptions is its confusion with managerial conceptions of the human. Many ecologists and environmentalists, and several theologians as well, positively dislike this term because it suggests to them that the human, differentiated and highly superior to all the other creatures and processes of the planet, is called upon to direct and interfere with nature. And this is a very serious charge. For precisely human technocratic interference with the processes of nature is responsible for the greater share of the problematic that now confronts us. Again and again, our vaunted image of ourselves in terms of an almost divine rationality, combined all too often with a religious sense of our destiny as ‘lords and masters’ of the earth, has introduced chaos and catastrophe into the very systems we thought to fix. It is in fact precisely our image of ourselves as earth’s ‘managers’ that, in the view of the most responsible ecologists, must be changed. I regard it as one of the greatest blunders of Christian scholarship in the last century that the translators of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible saw fit to replace the ancient world ‘steward’, in several places, with the word ‘manager’. However linguistically acceptable that change might be, it was theologically and apologetically stupid beyond belief. Whatever the Bible and the best traditions of the Christian faith may have to say

about the grandeur of the human (and they have a lot to say on that subject) they never entertain the ludicrous notion that the human being is equipped to be the CEO of creation! Not only the doctrine of sin, but already the doctrine of creation, militates against just such a conception of human nature and destiny.

2. THE TWO POLES OF ‘STEWARDSHIP’

i. Accountability

For biblical faith, two polar—that is distinct yet mutually informing—conceptions characterize the metaphor of the steward: we may call them accountability and responsibility. And each of these poles not only tells us something positive about human vocation in the midst of creation, but they also warn us against two distortions, distortions that are not only theoretical but very practical and common.

First, consider accountability. The steward in biblical usage (for instance in the Old Testament saga of Joseph and in the parables of Jesus) is not the owner. Decidedly not! The very word bespeaks of the steward’s accountability to another. The ‘other’, in the biblical story, may be an unnamed householder, or a monarch (the Pharaoh, for instance) or God. But the accountability-factor is paramount in all instances. Stewards who do not act with a view to their superior’s wishes are severely chastised. And when the metaphor is applied to the human creature generally, in relation to his or her ‘Lord’, the accountability-factor is at the very heart of the symbol. For “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof”. It is not ours to do with as we please. Not only are there obvious limits to the human steward’s activity—limits symbolized, for instance, by the injunction against touching the fruit at the centre of the garden in the Genesis creation narrative; but there are also rights and privileges of the other, non-human creatures, who “have their seed

within them”—that is, who develop and prosper according to their own inherent properties and needs, and who must not, therefore, be thoughtlessly tampered with by the human.

This accountability-factor in stewardship is not incidental to the symbol, it is of its essence. Moreover, the emphasis here is by no means on status, as if the human were separable from or superior in relation to the other creatures; the emphasis rather is on calling—vocation. The term ‘manager’, at least in our society, is clearly a status symbol. (“My son, you know, is the manager of that department”. “The management cannot agree with the union on the subject of working-hours, etc.”) Stewardship, biblically understood, is not a status symbol. Even when it applies to servants, like Joseph, who are highly placed and revered by others, they are still servants; and if they start behaving like ‘managers’ they will be chastised by the highest authority—if Jesus’ parables have anything to say about it!

Stewardship, therefore, militates against all those conceptions of the human that elevate our species above all the others, and interpret the ‘dominion’ granted to the human creature by the Creator in the second story of creation as though it clearly meant mastery. In fact, as I argued in my book, *Imaging God*,⁴ the “dominion” that the human creature is to exercise according to biblical faith is the dominion of service, not mastery. The sovereignty, the deity, that we are to “image” when we are being true to our calling as creatures made in God’s image is not the sovereignty of a Caesar but the sovereignty of the Christ. It is his dominion, the dominion of the one we call ‘Lord’ (*Dominus*) and not the dominion of a tyrant or potentate, that we are to represent in our life vis a vis all the others. The Christ’s ‘dominion’ is the dominion of the one who suffers in behalf of others.

ii. Responsibility

The other side of this dialectic of stewardship is responsibility. The steward is accountable, but the steward is also responsible. Stewards, in the biblical literature, are not just people who take orders from others. They have to think for themselves, to make decisions, to manage the households over which they have been given responsibility. Joseph, as the chief steward of Egypt during a critical period in its history, made momentous decisions that affected the whole land and its neighbouring countries—including the land of Joseph's brothers. He has to think carefully, plan wisely, consider the future and act with foresight in the present. And the Bible assumes that Joseph, a human being, has these possibilities—is capable of such responsible behaviour.

This is of course a very different image of the human from all those anthropologies, whether secular or religious, which assume that human beings as such are wholly untrustworthy or incapable of responsible behaviour. The Hebraic-Christian tradition has a high anthropology: it expects much of the human—not only in the realm of deeds, but also in the realm of understanding. Even in his fallen estate, the human being can pursue this stewardly vocation—never perfectly, but with enough sense and insight to preserve life in the face of many threats.

And here is where the theology of human stewardship takes on all those conceptions of human nature and destiny that depict humankind as being so weak, so inept, or so thoroughly at the mercy of fate that nothing much can be expected of humans. The biblical teaching of stewardly accountability counters every exaggeratedly high conception of the human; the biblical teaching of stewardly responsibility also counters every low estimate of human capability.

There is, for instance, among some of the so-called deep ecologists a feeling—sometimes openly expressed, sometimes just under the surface of analysis—that since the human species is both the great troublemaking element in planetary existence and virtually incapable of effecting any kind of change, the best thing would indeed be the disappearance of this species, or at least that it should refrain from any kind of interference in the natural order.

I had my first encounter with this attitude some thirty-five years ago, when I was part of a large interdisciplinary course in the big secular university to which I then belonged. The course was called ‘Man and the Biosphere’, and it was heavily represented by the sciences—especially the so-called life-sciences. One after another, my scientific and social-scientific colleagues stood at the lecture in the great amphitheatre and told the students how devastatingly the human population of earth had acted. Then one evening, when the whole teaching staff was assembled before the class to address questions, a young woman stood up and put the following question to the panel: “If Man is the problem, wouldn’t the world be . . . better off . . . without him?”

The panel of professors was totally stumped—I think they grasped for the first time, at that point, the pessimistic nature of the message they had been giving, and I think (and hope) that the realization shocked them. Then I noticed that all my colleagues were looking at me! I was the theologian in this study—a rare thing, in fact, in our very secular university; but apparently I was also to be the defender of “Man”, and not only God. I was glad to do so—and the experience made me realize more than ever how right Karl Barth was in calling our discipline *theo-anthropology*, or *the-anthropology*.

All the same, it was a scary moment; for the entire thrust of the class until now had been precisely what the young woman student rightly identified: Human beings are the problem; and we are here as problem-solvers; so let us rid ourselves of this problem and then the world will be. . . .better off.

Somehow I found words—and I am sure they were less coherent, in the heat of the situation then, than what I shall report to you now. But I found myself intrigued by that term, “better off”; and so I said to the young woman (while my scientific friends listened with great curiosity), “Now, I wonder what it would mean, after the disappearance of humans, to employ this language, ‘better off.’ Would the elephants, do you suppose, hold a symposium in which they would assure one another that the absence of the human element represented an immense improvement over the past? Or would the rabbits, notorious for fecundity, gather *en masse* and sing a great *Te Deum*, the planet having been left to them to re-populate? And would creatures big and small, along with all things bright and beautiful, assemble in some amphitheatre similar to this, with representatives from all parts of the globe, and produce papers on the subject of the beneficial elimination of the human element?”

The point is, I said, that so far as we know *homo sapiens* is the only creature that indulges in valuation—that is, in thinking in terms like “better off” and “worse off” and so on; and *homo sapiens* can do this because of the complex character of its brain, the sensitivity of its feelings, the capacity of its spirit for compassion and sacrifice and so on. And the question that we all have to ask ourselves is whether there is any need, any place, any role for such a creature in the universe—that is, for ourselves; for we are not speaking here about abstract things, but about ourselves and our own place in the scheme of things.

Are we only problematic creatures? Or do we, could we, make a difference—not only for our own species, but for all?”

CONCLUSION

I have no idea whether this message penetrated or changed anyone who heard it, but I, for one, have never forgotten the incident. For I think that Christians must indeed be and become, in this skeptical and often despairing world, the defenders of humanity. Without waxing romantic about the “piece of work” called Man or Humankind, we must also be prepared to stand up for the capacity of human beings qua human beings to understand, to care, and to try to effect change. Fatalism about humankind is the surest way to hasten catastrophe. Nothing at all will be accomplished in the struggle to avert ecological disaster, or enhance justice, or create the conditions of peace, unless, collectively, we humans have some real belief in our own capacity for responsibility.

It belongs to our tradition –to our Protestant heritage, about which I shall speak later—to remind our fellow-humans that we are accountable to Another. As Calvin said, “We are not our own”. It also belongs to this tradition to keep before the world of people and nations the many ways in which we fail in this calling to be accountable stewards of God’s good creation. We cannot join the ultra-liberal, ultra-romantic chorus that has nothing but good to say about human nature and destiny.

But neither can we join the chorus of those who denigrate the human, and fatalize it, and consign it to oblivion. We are stewards—servants; and often we are “unworthy servants” and presumptuous stewards. There is much to be said against us. But we are not superfluous, we are not only problematic, and we are not as dispensable as some of our

fierce critics think. Would the world really “flourish” if we disappeared? And what would that mean—“flourish”? Who would notice that? Who would appreciate that? Who would write poems and make films and write music about it? E.O. Wilson’s *bon mot* is finally as absurd as was the student’s question in our class of long ago. Man is accountable, and if and when we are all called to account we shall have much to confess! But we are also capable of an astonishing responsibility. We are all, to one degree or another, capable of *thought*. We are all, to one degree or another, capable of *understanding*. We are all, to one degree or another, capable of *articulation, of finding words*. We are all, to one degree or another, capable of *acting*. We are even (no doubt some of us more than others, but all of us in our differing ways) capable of compassion, empathy, solidarity, suffering with and for others.

In other words, the stewardship to which we are called is not an idle or merely idealistic vocation, it is a real possibility. God our Maker made us to be keepers of a garden; and when the garden became a wilderness God did not see fit to alter our vocation. No, we are to be stewards now in the wilderness. It’s a difficult calling, and none of us ever succeeds at it. At the end of the day we have to confess that we are . . . “unprofitable servants”. And yet. . . it can be done!