

The Green Old Theology
Psalm 148:1-14

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The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it Ps. 24:1a
The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. Gen.2:15
Praise the Lord! . . . Praise him, all Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Ps.
148:1a, 2a, 9

One of the best ways a local church can address the climate crisis is to sign on to what I am calling The Green Old Theology.

The Green Old Theology, as I envision it, is green because it cares for the environment; it is old because it is rooted in the Bible; and it is theology because it is grounded in God.

The beauty of The Green Old Theology is that it bypasses altogether the debate over whether climate change is real or a hoax. It says it is your God-given responsibility to take care of creation whether you believe in climate change or not.

The heart of The Green Old Theology is found in a cluster of three texts.

Ps. 24:1a: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” *This is the principle of divine ownership.*

Robert Frost tells about someone stopping his horse beside a wooded area one evening and watching it fill with snow. It is a peering as though into a deep mystery. The poem begins
Whose woods these are I think I know.¹

The 24th psalmist knows who owns not only the woods but everything else besides. “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it. . . .” God owns the land, the sky, and the sea. God owns the rolling hills, the flowing rivers, every clod of dirt, and every rock that pokes from the ground. There isn’t anything that isn’t God’s. “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” An older translation may be more expressive: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (RSV)

Because everything belongs to God, it commands reverence. I have had the privilege three or four times of being in archives holding the papers of old preachers I have admired. And each time when I was first in the reading room and about to open the first file to go through, the moment took my breath away at the thought of being in the presence of handwritten notes that were once in the hands of their creator.

¹ Robert Frost, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. by Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1969), p. 224.

Awe like that ought to come over us when we handle anything in nature. None of it is ours. When we touch any of it we are handling something that belongs to Another. The landscape is God's, so are the seas and the mountains and the over-arching skies. It is all God's property. That is the principle of divine ownership, and it commands reverence for nature.

That is the first text in The Green Old Theology. Here comes the second text.

Gen. 2:15: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” *This is the principle of human stewardship.* This stewardship commands responsibility.

The owner of all nature places us in nature with a commission to care for nature on God's behalf.

We are to till God's garden. Tilling refers to work that moves toward a productive use. Tilling suggests plowing, planting, cultivating, and other work called for in order to enjoy a harvest. Tilling by humans is intended to aid the land in bearing fruit and in achieving the land's potential under God.

Calvin B. DeWitt, an environmental scholar at U.W.-Madison and a committed Christian, points out that the Hebrew word for *till* used in Genesis 2:15 can also be translated *serve*.² If that is the case, then our use of the land, our tilling of it, cannot be allowed to degenerate into a raping of it for selfish purposes. It has to be, if it is faithful, a serving of the land, a working with it and not an overriding of it.

So Genesis 2:15 says we are placed on the earth not simply to till the garden that belongs to God but also to keep it. The work of keeping is akin to the work of God. The Aaronic Benediction from Numbers 6 begins, “The Lord bless you and keep you” (Num. 6:24), and Psalm 121 speaks of God's keeping several times over, and ends with the line, “The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore” (Ps. 121:8). God is the keeper of all things. Keeping, in this sense, is safeguarding, protecting, looking after, and exercising care.

Stewards work the way God works. We are to keep creation, to safeguard it, to protect it, to watch over it lovingly. Our task in the garden that belongs to God is use nature in a way that serves it and to protect it in a way that preserves it. This is our stewardship: to be responsible tillers and keepers of the natural world.

The first two texts of The Green Old Theology give us the principle of divine ownership which commands reverence, and the principle of human stewardship which commands responsibility. Here now is the third text in The Green Old Theology.

Ps. 148:1a, 2a, 9: “Praise the Lord! . . . Praise him, all . . . Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! This is the principle of fellowship and it commands respect.

Psalm 148, which is a call to worship, is addressed to nature as well as to human beings. It says at one point that kings and commoners are to worship God, men and women are to

² Calvin B. DeWitt, *Earthwise: A Guide to Hopeful Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2011), p. 79.

worship God, and young and old are to worship God (11-12). But nowhere does it limit worship to human action. All that exists in nature is called to worship God. If you are a tree, you are to worship God; if you are a mountain, you are to worship God; if you are a hillside meadow, a grazing cow, a flying bird, or a wild animal of the wilderness, you are to sing out your praise to the one God of glory who is your Maker, and to whom you belong in body and soul, in life and in death. What Psalm 148 does is treat everything nature as a fellow worshiper of God right alongside of us as if it is standing in the sanctuary, too, hymnal in hand and voice lifted up.

That principle of earthly fellowship under God commands respect for nature. An Open and Affirming Congregation does not treat any fellow worshiper rudely or cruelly. We wouldn't think of mistreating anyone who walked into our sanctuary; instead we would welcome them and be glad that they join us in prayer and praise and song. Just so! No aspect of creation should be treated with disregard. That grand stand of trees is a congregation of praise, worshiping God in the way they know. The rushing river and babbling brook are sharing in their litany of devotion. So all creation is singing its hymn, joining us in praise to the Creator God who made us all! Mistreatment of any of creation should be totally out of the question.

Here, then, is The Green Old Theology. It ought to be adhered to and confessed by climate change denier and activist alike.

The principle of divine ownership, issuing in a command for reverence: The earth is the Lord's!

The principle of human stewardship, issuing in a command for responsibility: Till and keep the earth!

The principle of earthly fellowship, issuing in a command for respect: Praise God all creation!

Let us sign on to this Green Old Theology and develop programs and initiatives that put into practice its reverence, responsibility, and respect.