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Hayhoe, Douglas. "Creation as a Gift: A Neglected Approach to Creation Care." *Science and Christian Belief* 29, no. 2 (Oct. 2017): 93-120.

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## Creation as a Gift: A Neglected Approach to Creation Care

*Our Christian responsibility for ‘every living thing’ (Genesis 1) has long been framed as a matter of creation care. This frame fits well within the broader secular concepts of stewardship and sustainability that have been espoused by many, from development organisations to government funded schools. In recent years, Christian theologians and thought leaders have expanded on the frames within which to address issues of the environment and climate change. These include loving our global neighbours, sharing God’s mission, celebrating the community of creation and embracing a covenant framework. Here, I argue for placing more emphasis on another, complementary perspective, that of considering creation as a gift. Although this idea has been considered by postmodern philosophers and theologians<sup>1</sup> and Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic leaders and scholars,<sup>2</sup> it has only been briefly referred to in passing by conservative Protestant Christian theologians and scientists concerned with creation care.<sup>3</sup> I suggest, however, that only within biblical Christianity can this approach be fully appreciated, as one that motivates us both to give thanks and to give ourselves to the care for a creation that is under serious threat.*

Keywords: Creator, creation, stewardship, gift, Derrida, Gaia, care-giving, self-giving.

1 i.e., Manolopoulos, M. *If Creation is a Gift*, New York: State University of New York Press (2009); Primavesi, A. *Sacred Gaia: Holistic Theology and Earth System Science*, Routledge (2000); *Gaia’s Gifts: Earth, Ourselves, and God after Copernicus*, Routledge (2003); *Gaia and Climate Change: A Theology of Gift Events*, Routledge (2009).

2 Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, ‘Creation Theology: An Orthodox Perspective’, *Listening to Creation Groaning*, *op. cit.*, (See ‘Creation as Gift’, pp. 95–99); Bartholomew, Archbishop of Constantinople, and Ecumenical Patriarch, ‘The gift of Environment: divine response and human responsibility’, pp. 113–117, Howard, P. (ed.) *Natural Heritage: At the Interface between Nature and Culture*, Routledge (2008); Pope Francis, ‘God forgives: nature does not’, accessed on Dec. 11, 2016, at <https://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/flgenaud48.htm>; Burrell, D. B. ‘Creation as Original Grace’, in Rossi, P. (ed.) *God, Grace, & Creation*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books (2010), 97–106.

3 The topic of ‘gift’ does not appear in either extensive index to Northcott, M.S.’s *The Environment & Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1996) or *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books (2007), nor in the indices of two compendiums edited by Berry, R. J. *The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action*, Intervarsity Press (2000) and *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives – Past and Present*, T & T International (2006); DeWitt, C.B. refers to the gifts of creation in his paper, ‘God’s love for the world and creation’s environmental challenge to evangelical Christianity’, *Evangelical Review of Theology* (1993) 17(2), 134–149, but more commonly in his publications he uses the term ‘provisions of creation’; DeWitt’s contribution will be discussed further in Section 2.1 below.

## 1. Christian approaches to our relationship with the environment: a brief survey

### 1.1 Stewardship of Creation

The Christian approach to caring for creation has historically emphasised the stewardship mandate.<sup>4</sup> As humans made in God's image, we have stewardship implicit in our relationship with the earth. In the first chapter of the Bible, we read "Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals." (Gen. 1:26).<sup>5</sup> Contrary to what opponents of environmental or climate action may suggest, the phrase 'rule over' does not provide permission to plunder the earth and its biosphere, but to develop it in a sustainable way by looking after it. This is emphasised in the second chapter of Genesis, where it is written, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Gen. 2:15). Although the word 'stewardship' is not used explicitly, Christian scholars through the centuries have recognised that this is what Genesis teaches. John Calvin, for example, in his commentary on Genesis 2:15, wrote, 'let him who possesses a field ... endeavour to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even better cultivated ... let every one regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses.'<sup>6</sup> We see here that, for Calvin, stewardship included the concept of sustainability – passing things on to the next generation in as good or better a condition as when we received them.<sup>7</sup>

In the past fifty years, following the publication of Lynn White's influential article blaming our environmental problems on what he considered the Christian view of stewardship, that of domination and rule over creation,<sup>8</sup> many conferences have been held and publications have come out by conservative Christian scholars and associations both defending the concept of stewardship and giving it a much more nuanced and ethically responsible meaning, as well as presenting other aspects of creation care. These include a collection of essays from an Au Sable symposium, published in

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4 e.g. the Benedictine Monks practised stewardship and sustainability from the sixth century through to the twelfth century, as pointed out by Dubos, R. 'Franciscan conservation versus Benedictine stewardship', in Berry *Environmental Stewardship, op. cit.*, (3), pp. 56-59.

5 The NIV translations will be used for all quotations, unless specified otherwise.

6 *Commentary on Genesis*, Vol. 1, Part 5, accessed at [www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/mision/cvgn1-05.htm](http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/mision/cvgn1-05.htm) 11 Dec. 2016.

7 Karl Marx, who had little use for the Bible himself, seems to reflect on Calvin's statement here, when he says of Earth's societies 'They are only its possessors ... they must hand it down to succeeding generations in an improved condition', *Capital* (1967), vol. 3, p. 776, cited in Attfield, R. *The Ethics of the Global Environment*, West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press (1999), p. 56.

8 White, L. 'The historical roots of our ecological crises', *Science* (1967) 155 pp. 1203- 1207.

1987,<sup>9</sup> and a series of papers from another Au Sable conference held in 1992 with the World Evangelical Fellowship (the papers were published in 1993).<sup>10</sup> This latter conference resulted in ‘An evangelical declaration of the care of creation’, issued in 1994.<sup>11</sup> Some of these papers are referred to in this article.

Following these conferences and publications, R. J. Berry gave a classic defence of stewardship in his 1995 paper, ‘Creation and the environment’. Referencing Genesis 2:15, as well as Leviticus 25, Psalms 8 and 104, and Luke 12, he argues that ‘a full Christian approach to the environment does not need a re-vamping of traditional doctrines; it should be based firmly and squarely on our divine mandate to be stewards, responsible to God, who is creator, redeemer and sustainer.’<sup>12</sup> Following Berry, Sir John Houghton elaborated on the Genesis theme of stewardship, referring to the garden of Genesis 2 as a place that provides food and water to sustain life in all its forms including materials for human industry, a place where humans can develop science and technology, a place to be maintained in its beauty and preserved for future generations. Houghton also considers Joseph’s role in Egypt using the seven years of plenty to prepare for the seven years of famine that followed, as described in Genesis 37-47, as an example of stewardship along the lines of Jesus’s saying, ‘From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.’ Houghton argues that we should use our present resources to mitigate the effects of a similar climate crisis predicted by many scientists, by severely reducing our carbon outputs.<sup>13</sup>

Many other Christian and some non-religious scholars have written in support of the concept of stewardship over the last few decades,<sup>14</sup> although there has also been opposition to it, as will be discussed in the next section. But proof that the concept of stewardship is not being abandoned by

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9 Granberg-Michaelson, W. (ed.), *Tending the Garden: Essays on the Gospel and the Earth*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans (1987).

10 *Evangelical Review of Theology* (1993) 17.

11 Berry *Care of Creation*, *op. cit.* (3), pp. 17-22.

12 Berry, R. J. ‘Creation and the environment’, *Science & Christian Belief* (1995) 7, 21- 43. Berry subsequently edited compendiums that included further statements on stewardship and sustainability by other authors, in Berry *Care of Creation*, *op. cit.*, (3), *Environmental stewardship*, *op. cit.*, (3), and Berry, R. J. (ed.) *When enough is enough: a Christian framework for environmental sustainability*, Nottingham: Apollos (2007).

13 Houghton, J. ‘Climate change, justice and faith’, *The Guardian*, Wednesday 4 Nov. 2009, accessed 11Dec. 2016, at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/nov/04/climate-change-faith-religion-justice>.

14 Attfield *op. cit.*, (7); Bouma-Prediger, S. *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, Baker Academic (2001, 2010); Hall, D. *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, Wipf & Stock (1990, 2011); DeWitt, C. B. *Earthwise: A Guide to Hopeful Creation Care*, Faith Alive (2011); Van Dyke, F. *Between Heaven and Earth: Christian Perspectives on Environmental Protection*, Praeger (2010); and Wilkinson, L. *Earthkeeping in the Nineties: Stewardship of Creation*, Wipf & Stock (1991, 2003).

Christian leaders in general is found in Pope Francis's recent encyclical letter *Laudato Si': on care for our common home*,<sup>15</sup> largely recognised as the most important current document regarding Christian perspective and concern for the environment. In it he states: 'Our "dominion" over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship' (117) and 'the Eucharist is also a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation' (236). Governments, state funded educational institutions, and secular scientific societies also continue to use the concept of stewardship. The Ecological Society of America, for example, embarked on its *Earth Stewardship* project in 2009 to deal with the environmental crises besetting the Earth; and in September, 2016, the *Quarterly Review of Biology*<sup>16</sup> devoted a special issue to Francis's *Laudato Si'*, and to four major papers reflecting on it, one of which, by Calvin B. DeWitt, was entitled 'Earth stewardship and *Laudato Si'*'. In this paper DeWitt gives another masterful affirmation of stewardship, highlighting its deep historical roots, reminding us of the awe and wonder that comes from studying and caring for the environment, and pointing out that the metaphor of gardener and garden in mutual dependence brings a healthy balance to the concept.

### **1.2 Critiques of the stewardship approach and alternative approaches**

There have also been some important arguments made against the concept of stewardship, in the past few decades. One of the papers to set these forth in a clear manner was Clare Palmer's 'Stewardship: a case study in environmental ethics'.<sup>17</sup> Some of her objections can't be sustained, however. When she says that stewardship is not a biblical concept, since parts of Scripture such as Job 38-41 present another perspective on the relationship of humans to wild life, she misses the point. No one is saying that stewardship is the *only* relationship talked about in the Bible, just one of the most important. And when she questions whether humans know enough about environmental and atmospheric pollution to be capable of being good stewards, she fails to anticipate the future (i.e., today) when most climate scientists agree that we know enough about the relationship between increasing atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations and global climate change to be specific about what we need to do now to be good stewards. Also, when she insists that the word stewardship carries with it the owner-slave-possession implications of feudal society, she fails to recognise that words can change in their meanings, leaving behind old

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15 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*, Our Sunday Visitor (July 18, 2015).

16 *Quarterly Review of Biology* 91 (3), 271-284.

17 This paper first appeared in Ball, I., et al. *The Earth Beneath: A Critical Guide to Green Theology*, London: SPCK (1992), pp. 67-86. It was reprinted in Berry *Environmental Stewardship*, *op. cit.* (3), pp. 63-75.

associations and taking on new ones.<sup>18</sup>

Another group of Palmer's objections are dependent on the exclusion from consideration of a personal creator God and humans made in his image. For example, she clearly doesn't like the 'anthropocentric ethic' based on the belief that humans occupy a special place in God's creation, that the rest of the natural world is there at least in part for their benefit, or that they have been given a special function of caring for creation. Given the above caveats, however, some of her arguments do merit serious consideration by Christians. Does the concept of stewardship separate God too much from his creation, as if he has gone off leaving humans to manage it? Isn't God also immanent in the world, present in all parts of creation, constantly at work not just among people but throughout the universe? Psalm 148, for example, talks about animals, trees, mountains and even stars praising the creator. And aren't humans an integral part of the web of creation, made of the same stuff, with their DNA not too dissimilar from that of many animals, constantly depending on both biotic and abiotic components of our environment?

Palmer's arguments have been responded to by Robin Attfield and others.<sup>19</sup> Some of her points, however, do raise valid questions. To give us a broader context for these questions, Michael Northcott has categorised three different approaches taken by theologians who feel that the concept of stewardship fails in placing humans in a special position, minimising the importance of all of Earth's ecosystem members. He calls these approaches humanocentric, theocentric and ecocentric, and considers them as part of an overall 'ecotheology' that emerged in the past fifty years.<sup>20</sup>

Under humanocentric approaches, he includes not only the process theology of people such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and the orthodox stewardship view of Christian leaders such as Pope Paul John II, but also the feminist view of Rosemary Radford Ruether, although he admits that Ruether could fall into any of the three categories. He writes, 'I think we are justified in considering Ruether's ecofeminist theology as the basis not of a new account of nature, but of her critique of patriarchy and the ecofeminist account of the normative significance of the experience of women for human relations with the non-human world.'<sup>21</sup>

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18 Murray Rae comments, 'Clare Palmer's contrary suggestion that because the idea of stewardship originated in a society based on slavery or serfdom it represents a despotic and autocratic form of government seems to neglect the fact that the meanings of words do evolve over time, both shedding old connotations in the process and taking on new ones', *Environmental Stewardship*, *op. cit.*, (3), p. 292.

19 Attfield *op. cit.*, (7), pp. 46-55; Rae *ibid.*

20 Northcott *The Environment*, *op. cit.*, (3), chap. 4 'The flowering of ecotheology', pp. 124-163.

21 *ibid.*, p. 137.

Under theocentric approaches, he refers to Jürgen Moltmann, James Nash, Stephen Clark and others. Moltmann's view, according to Northcott, is that 'God as Spirit is indeed *in* creation; he inhabits the world of matter and ecosystems, plants and birds, animals and humans. But this immanence does not mean that God is entirely identified with the creation, for God as Trinity is both related to the creation as Son and Spirit, and distinguished from the creation as Father.'<sup>22</sup>

Under ecocentric approaches, his most extensive category, Northcott describes the view of John B. Cobb, Jay B. McDaniel, Matthew Fox and Sally McFague. Near the end of his discussion, however, Northcott concludes: 'Like Fox, McDaniel, and Cobb, McFague compromises or abandons central elements of Christian theism in her ecological theology in the hope that her new pantheistic metaphor of the relation of God to the world will inspire a new, more ecologically friendly civilization, and yet she actually offers little evidence for this belief.'<sup>23</sup> Not included in Northcott's review of ecotheologians, no doubt because her major work, *God and the Web of Creation*,<sup>24</sup> was first published in 1996, the same year as Northcott's publication, was Ruth Page. For her, every part of creation, from the smallest insect to the largest animal, lives in God's presence. She rejects both the pantheism and panentheism embraced by many of the ecofeminists and theologians referred to above, however, and formulates a new word, pansyntheism, to describe her viewpoint that God has an intimate relationship *with* every part of creation, while at the same time possessing an existence outside of creation.

Northcott himself also moves away from the stewardship approach. He writes, 'Stewardship is a highly problematic notion in ecological terms. The fundamental problem with this metaphor is the implication that humans are effectively in control of nature ... instead of stewards of nature we might be better advised to imagine ourselves as members of the community of life which includes humans and non-humans.'<sup>25</sup> He then replaces stewardship with covenant as the more important metaphor to use: "I will argue in subsequent chapters that a more important metaphor in the Hebrew Bible for humanity's relationship with nature is that of covenant, in which humanity as the people of God and nature as the Promised Land are both represented as members of the covenant community which God establish with Moses and his descendents.'<sup>26</sup> Although he refers only to Moses and the people of Israel at this point, he later extends this metaphor to that of a 'cosmic covenant' that applies to the relationship of all people

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>24</sup> Page, R. *God and the Web of Creation*, SCM (1996, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Northcott *The Environment*, *op. cit.*, (3), p. 129.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 130.

with creation and all non-human members of the earth, like the covenant God made with Noah and every living creature after the flood.<sup>27</sup>

Northcott's survey of the approaches of theologians who reject stewardship, including his own reservations about it, raise good questions for those of us who still hold to the historic Christian doctrines (unlike most of the scholars he reviews), and as a result still feel that humans do have a special place in creation and that the concept of stewardship still has an meaning. Does the Bible support various approaches to our relationship with creation, complimentary perhaps to stewardship? Can these also be categorised as anthropocentric, theocentric, and ecocentric?

### 1.3 Complementary alternatives to the stewardship approach

One anthropocentric approach that all Christians no doubt accept is that of caring for those who suffer the most from environmental degradation. In a paper published in 2000, Stephen Rand argues forcefully that the second great commandment, 'love your neighbour as yourself,' is a divinely mandated approach to caring for creation, especially in regards to helping to heal parts of it that have been degraded by human neglect, resulting in poverty to many people in countries such as Ethiopia. He recounts, for example, how in a Muslim area where twenty years of preaching the gospel had little effect, when churches came in to help with recovery of the landscape, many took notice, some became Christians, and a church was established among those people.<sup>28</sup> More recently, Katharine Hayhoe and Andrew Farley have argued along the same lines with regards to the effect of global climate change on the poor nations, in their book *A Climate for Change*.<sup>29</sup> They note that while the developed nations are mainly responsible for the build up of greenhouse gases over the past century, because of their consumption of fossil fuels, the poorer, developing nations are the ones that will suffer most from the climate change resulting from this atmospheric pollution. For them, our mandate and motivation to change is this: 'Love God, love others, and remember the poor: this was the unwavering mandate of the church nearly two thousand years ago.'<sup>30</sup>

Likewise, one theocentric approach that almost every Christian will accept as a complement to stewardship is that of considering God's overall mission on this Earth.

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27 *ibid.*, p. 168; see also Northcott *Moral Climate*, *op. cit.*, (3), p. 74.

28 'Love your neighbour as yourself', in Berry *Care of Creation*, *op. cit.*, (2), pp. 140- 146; before Rand, Larry L. Rasmussen had already applied the second commandment to our Christian responsibility towards the environment, and extended the concept of 'neighbour' to include all living things, following H. Richard Niebuhr's lead, in 'Creation, church, and Christian responsibility', in Granberg-Michaelson, W. (ed.), *op.cit.*, (9), pp. 114-131.

29 *A Climate for Change: Global Warming Facts for Faith-Based Decisions*, Faithwords (2009).

30 *ibid.*, p. 127.

Perhaps it was Francis Schaeffer who first drew attention to this, in his 1970 book, *Pollution and the Death of Man*. He pointed out that, just as human sin had caused four different separations (between man and God, man and man, man and nature, and man and self), so God's mission in salvation was meant to reconcile each of these separations. With regard to the separation between man and nature, which has caused so much environmental degradation in our world, Schaeffer argued that although only the future will bring total reconciliation, we should expect and work for *substantial* healing now. Howard Snyder further developed Schaeffer's theme in his 2011 book, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*.<sup>31</sup> Arguing from Romans 8 and other Scriptures, Snyder states that 'the mission of God is to heal all creation,' and that 'full reconciliation with God, ourselves, and one another depends upon reconciliation with the land'.<sup>32</sup> He does not reject the concept of stewardship, but rather argues that 'Christians should view creation care as faithful human stewardship *and* as Christian mission.'<sup>33</sup> It may be Chris Wright's pioneering 2006 book *Mission of God*, however, that most clearly places humans on a parallel footing with the rest of creation, not in a position above.<sup>34</sup> Instead of focusing on Genesis, he builds on two sermons by the apostle Paul, in the Jewish synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41) and before a Gentile audience in Athens (Acts 17:24, 26). From these Wright develops two similar conceptual diagrams, where the first fits inside the other as a small representation of it (Figure 1). By placing humanity and the earth at the two lower vertices of the triangle and God at the top vertex (and, on a smaller scale, Israel as an example of humanity and the land of Palestine as an example of the Earth), Wright is saying that *the* mission of God includes all the earth just as much as it includes all humanity. He further adds that all creation is good, that God's glory is the goal of all creation and that God's redemption includes all creation. Given this, humans indeed have a strong mandate for creation care.

As an example of the third category of approaches, the ecocentric approach of Richard Bauckham will commend itself to many conservative Christians, even though it departs more radically from stewardship than the two described above. Although he has presented aspects of this over the past few decades,<sup>35</sup> it is most fully developed in his *Bible and Ecology* (2010).<sup>36</sup> He begins by recognising (approvingly?) various criticisms of

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31 Snyder, H. A. *Salvation means Creation Healed*, Wipf & Stock (2011).

32 *ibid.*, pp. 117, 83.

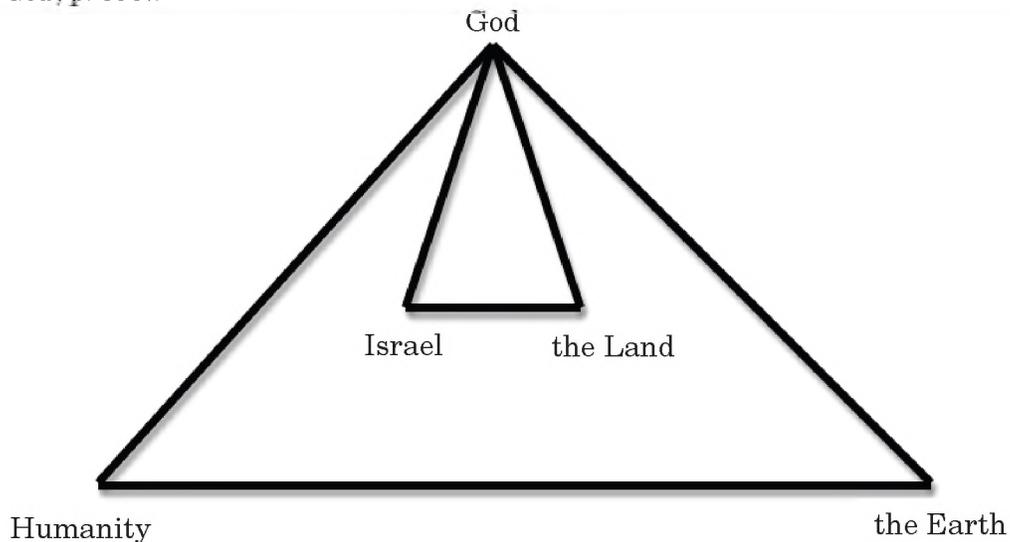
33 *ibid.*, p. 215.

34 Wright, C. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, IVP Academic (2006), pp. 393-402.

35 See e.g. his 'First steps to a theology of nature', *Evangelical Quarterly* 58(3), 245-256; and 'Modern domination of nature – historical origins and biblical critique', *Environmental Stewardship, op. cit.*, (3), pp. 35-50.

36 Bauckham, R. *The Bible and Ecology*, Baylor (2010); see also, Bauckham, R. *Living with*

**Figure 1:** Conceptual framework of Paul’s sermon to the gentiles in Athens, with the conceptual framework of his sermon to the Jews in Antioch inside (*Mission of God*, p. 395).



stewardship: it is seen as *hubris*, especially if Lovelock’s *Gaia* hypothesis of a self-regulating Earth proves to be true, it excludes God’s own activity in the world, it is too flexible a term, it sets humans over creation not within it, and it isolates one Bible verse (Gen. 1:26-28).<sup>37</sup> He then moves on from stewardship to embrace ‘the wider vision of the Community of Creation’. After contrasting the human ‘arrogance’ of stewardship with the humility God taught Job, in Job 38-40, Bauckham builds on Wendell Berry’s idea and the Bible (Ps.104; 148; Matt. 7:25-33) to argue that we are ‘fellow-members with God’s other creatures ... participating [with them] in an interrelated and interdependent community, orientated above all to God our common Creator’.<sup>38</sup> Norman Wirzba shares Bauckham’s view that we need to view ourselves primarily as members of the community of creation, receiving and giving in the many environmental interactions that take place constantly, like other parts of the web of creation.<sup>39</sup>

A potential criticism of the idea of humans as fellow members of the community of creation is that it may homogenise things too much, placing

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*Other Creatures*, Baylor (2011).

<sup>37</sup> The title of the 2006 Sarum Theological Lectures that the book is based on, tellingly, was ‘Beyond Stewardship: the Bible and the Community of Creation’.

<sup>38</sup> *The Bible and Ecology*, *op. cit.*, (36), p. 64.

<sup>39</sup> *From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving Our World*, Baker Academic (2015); Wirzba’s concern with the naturalness of giving and receiving is part of his critique of the postmodern philosopher Derrida’s view of the gift, which will be considered in Section 2.

humans on the same level as the other species, with the same status in God's sight. As much as we may feel that the idea of stewardship has been abused through the years, there is a biblical teaching of our God-given role, that can't be avoided. While it is true that we are fellow-members of the creation community, continually giving and receiving energy and matter from other parts of nature, both biotic and abiotic, and carrying a DNA not too dissimilar from many other animals, we also have a unique function within that creation not possessed by any other members, as well as a unique relationship with the Creator, being made in his image.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the community of creation idea may help restore a more scriptural balance to our thinking about the place of humans in the universe.

## 2. Creation as a gift: a biblical, scholarly, and anecdotal study

### 2.1 Is creation a burden or a gift?

If being just one among many members of a community of creation places too little emphasis on our moral obligations, an overemphasis on stewardship may place too great a burden on us. I remember feeling quite depressed the first time I read through DeWitt's seven degradations and thought about the dismal state we have allowed the environment to fall into. For, like most of my readers, I have a deep love for creation. Thus, to be confronted with how fast our environment is being degraded by us was indeed quite depressing to me; I felt as if a heavy burden had been placed on me.<sup>41</sup>

This burden was somewhat lifted when I read DeWitt's book, *Earthwise*, and discovered that he carefully describes 'Seven provisions for creation' in chapter 1, before he devotes chapter 2 to the seven degradations we are causing.<sup>42</sup> The seven provisions include soil building, cycling and recycling in the biosphere, water purification and detoxification, fruitfulness and abundant life, global circulations of water and air, human ability to learn from creation, and, on the cosmic scale, Earth's perfectly balanced energy

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40 One reviewer writes, '[He] claims that it is debatable whether the interdependence between human and nonhuman parts of creation imposes moral obligations on us, but he dismisses this as something that need not detain him (p. 88)', Kaltner, J. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (2012) 74(3), 568.

41 This idea of overexposure and overemphasis of responsibility inducing anxiety and even eventual disassociation and disengagement has been documented by psychologist Renee Lertzmann, with respect to climate change; see e.g. *Pacific Standard: Stories that matter*, 24 Nov. 2015, accessed on 11 Dec. 2016, at <https://psmag.com/in-climate-change-psychology-often-gets-lost-in-translation-ca4f9d0bc7f9#.o72vr63ps>.

42 In fact, DeWitt described the seven provisions of creation as well as the seven degradations of creation at least as far back as 1993, DeWitt *op. cit.*, (3); but it may be that, like many, I passed over God's provisions in my cursory reading, focusing instead on all the negative things happening to our environment.

exchange with the sun and space.<sup>43</sup> When I began with this perspective of the ‘provisions of God’, I was able to wonder at and appreciate deeply how God had gifted the Earth in so many ways, how he had provided for creation so completely and minutely, before I became occupied in chapter 2 with how we had so severely degraded these same systems. But this made me curious. Why were these wonderful and intricate conditions and networks in creation necessary for all of life just called ‘provisions’? Wouldn’t it be simpler to call them the gifts of creation, or, even simpler, God’s gift of creation?

So my question was this: Why wasn’t it more common for Christians in general, and especially those studying God’s creation, to talk about it as a wonderful gift of God’s grace to us, in a similar way to how we talk about God’s free gift of salvation (Eph. 2:8)? This led to a second question: Does the Bible support the idea that we view creation primarily as a gift? And if so, does this cause us to actively care for creation? My curiosity was further piqued when I discovered that this idea of viewing creation as a gift has recently been a topic of interest among some postmodern scholars also concerned for the environment. And so a third question arose: Do these scholars have something to contribute to our discussion?

## **2.2 The gracious gift of creation in the Scriptures**

Few themes are as pervasive in the Old Testament as that of a giving God. We read of him giving a wide variety of things to people, mostly in the form of material ‘creation’ gifts that contribute to a good life. Some of these are listed in Table 1, over the page. In addition to all these, God gives ‘the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and stars for light by night’ (Jer. 31:35) to guide people in their work and travel. The gift mentioned more frequently than any other is the land of Palestine, which the Lord gave to his people Israel (Gen. 12:7 et al.). Almost half of the forty Old Testament references to it describe it as a land flowing with ‘milk and honey’. God is a good God who loves to give richly.

In his book, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Walter Brueggemann develops in some detail the theme of the land of Palestine being a gift from Yahweh to Israel.<sup>44</sup> He writes, ‘The land to Israel is a gift. It is a gift from Yahweh and binds Israel in new ways to the giver ... the flections at the boundary affirm that the land is a gift of his word ... [the land] is made for our satiation. You will be satisfied! ...

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43 DeWitt places this last provision, earth’s energy exchange, first in his list of the seven provisions, just as he places climate change first in the list of the seven degradations. I have placed them last, here and in section 1.1 of the paper, to emphasise that they encompass and provide for, or negatively influence, all of the other provisions or degradations.

44 Brueggemann, W. *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Fortress Press (1977).

**Table 1:** Some of the things explicitly mentioned as gifts in the Old and New Testament

Gifts in the Old Testament	Gifts in the New Testament
<p><i>Creation gifts</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• seed-bearing plants (Gen. 1:29)</li> <li>• animals of every kind (Gen. 9:3)</li> <li>• sheep and cattle (Gen. 24:35)</li> <li>• grain and wine (Gen. 27:28)</li> <li>• bread (Ex. 15:16)</li> <li>• meat (Ex. 16:8; Dt. 12:15)</li> <li>• rich, watered soil (Ps 65:9-10)</li> <li>• flour, oil, and honey (Ez. 16:19)</li> <li>• water for animals and humans (Num. 21:16; Ps 104:10-13)</li> <li>• rain to make the crops grow (Jer. 5:24; Zec. 10:1; Joel 2:23)</li> <li>• ice in its season (Job 37:10).</li> <li>• children to the barren (Gen. 29:33; Ruth 4:13; 1 Sam. 1:11; 2:20; 1 Ch. 28:5; Ps 113:9)</li> <li>• life and breath to everyone (Job 33:4; Is. 42:5)</li> <li>• the land of Palestine (Gen. 12:7 et al.)</li> </ul>	<p><i>Creation gifts</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• bread to the hungry (Matt. 6:11)</li> <li>• ‘good things to those who ask’ (Luke 11:9)</li> <li>• rain for the crops (Acts 14:17)</li> <li>• life and breath to everyone (Acts 17:25)</li> <li>• life to all things (1 Tim. 6:13)</li> </ul> <p><i>Gifts of redemption</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jesus, God’s Son (John 3:16; Rom. 8:32)</li> <li>• forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:31)</li> <li>• eternal life (John 4:10-14; 5:21; 6:27, 33; 17:2; Rom. 2:7; 6:23; Eph. 2:5, 8)</li> <li>• spiritual light (2 Cor. 4:6)</li> <li>• wisdom (Luke 21:15; Eph. 1:17; 2 Tim. 2:7; Jas 1:5; 1 John 5:20)</li> <li>• peace (John 14:27; 2 Thess. 3:16)</li> <li>• promises (Gal. 3:22)</li> <li>• spiritual gifts (Rom. 1:5 etc.)</li> <li>• strength to use these gifts (1 Tim. 1:12)</li> <li>• the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13 et al.)</li> </ul>

Israel lives under gift – not gift anticipated, but gift given.<sup>45</sup> He also points out, however, that Israel was also living under *Torah*, God’s words. ‘The gifted land is covenanted land ... [Yahweh] gives gifts and makes claims ... the same land that is gift freely given is task sharply put. Landed Israel is under mandate ... ‘Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required’ (Luke 12:48).<sup>46</sup> Notice how Brueggemann refers to the same statement of Jesus as Houghton does, in his consideration of Joseph’s stewardship role in Egypt (Section 2.1).<sup>47</sup>

The New Testament refers to a giving God as frequently as the Old Testament, although the focus may seem to be more on gifts of redemption (Table 1). But the gifts of creation are also mentioned there, although not nearly as often, as we see in the table. Jesus clearly appreciated the things of creation and taught his disciples to do the same, including the daily food we receive from God and the beauty of the flowers that appear in the fields (Matt. 6:11, 28-29). The apostle Paul warned his disciple Timothy against those who forbid the eating of certain foods ‘which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth’ (1 Tim. 4:3). He then gave Timothy a broad statement referring to all creation gifts: ‘for everything God created is good’ (1 Tim. 4:4), and sums it up by saying that God ‘richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment’ (1 Tim. 6:17). Such is the apostle’s belief in the good gifts of creation that he instructs the new Christians in the idolatrous city of Corinth to ‘eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience [i.e., whether it was first offered to idols] ... for the Earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it: (1 Cor. 10:25-26). The apostle James, no doubt, includes the wonderful provisions of God in creation in his thinking when he writes, ‘Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows’ (Jas 1:17).

The thing that distinguishes New Testament gifts from Old Testament ones, in addition to their focus on redemption’s gifts rather than on material benefits,<sup>48</sup> is their relationship to God’s abundant grace. This is true

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45 *ibid.*, pp. 45-48.

46 *ibid.*, pp. 50, 51, 56.

47 In his preface to the second edition of *The Land* (2002), Brueggemann notes the changes in Old Testament studies that had occurred in the 25 years following the first edition. Although he feels his approach is still valid, he now recognises other lines of interpretation. One of these is ‘the recognition that the claim of “promised land” in the Old Testament is not an innocent theological claim, but is a *vigorous, ideological assertion* on an important political scale.’ Another is ‘the awareness that “land theology” readily relates to the environmental crisis ... the care for or abuse of creation is readily recognized as a biblical and theological concern’. These are not against the idea that the land or earth (*eres*) is a gift, but reinforce the fact that the Earth is a gift to be shared by all people – the fact that earth’s atmosphere and oceans are global commons, shared by all nations, should remind us of this – and that it is a gift that is meant to be cared for, not abused.

48 We should also note that God gave ‘spiritual’ gifts in the Old Testament, even if they are not explicitly described as such, for he gave gifts of redemption and relationship with himself

not only of the central gift of salvation (Acts 15:11; 18:26; Rom. 3:24; 5:15-17; Eph. 2:5, 8; 1 Tim. 1:14; Tit. 3:17), but also the gifts of our inheritance (Acts 20:32), eternal comfort and hope (2 Thess 2:16), and many other blessings (1 Cor. 2:12). Even the communication of these gifts to us is by God's grace (Acts 14:3; 20:32). His grace is so closely interwoven with his gifts that in many places it is substituted for gift or salvation as the subject or object of the action (Acts 11:20; 20:24; Tit. 2:11; Eph. 2:8; 1 Pet. 1:10, 13).

We see, therefore, a very strong biblical support for the idea that we should view, as a starting point, creation as God's wonderful gift to us. Furthermore, just as God's gifts of redemption are strongly linked to God's grace in the Scriptures, as we showed above, it is not too far a stretch to argue that God's gift and gifts of creation are also a result of his marvelous grace to us. (This will be argued more philosophically in section 2.3 below, regarding God's initial gift of the universe.) We should still recognise, of course, that God's greatest gift spoken of in the New Testament is that of his Son. Without doubt, the apostle Paul refers to this when he says, 'Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift' (2 Cor. 9:15). Without Christ, the greatest expression of God's love, none of us would have any hope of life, either for the present or for the future (John 3:16; Rom. 8:32). Nevertheless, if Christ is God's greatest gift, then surely creation is God's second greatest gift, as Katharine Hayhoe puts it, 'Here's the way I see it. On Easter, we celebrate God's greatest gift, his Son, who came to give us spiritual life, and all that life entails. On Earth Day, we celebrate God's second-greatest gift to us: this planet, which gives us our physical life.'<sup>49</sup>

Some important basic questions regarding creation as a gift still remain to be discussed from a biblical point of view. First, to whom is the gift of creation given, only to humans or to all creatures equally? On the one hand, Psalm 104 and Job 38-39 might imply that all of God's creatures benefit from God's gifts in creation, completely apart from human presence or interference. On the other hand, some might argue that a true gift is only given if there is a recipient who acknowledges it and is capable of being thankful (see Zizioulas, in the next section). The majestic opening chapters of Colossians and Hebrews take this question to a higher level by pointing us to Christ, the Son of God, as the one *for whom* creation exists and *to whom* it will ultimately be given: 'all things were created for Christ' (Col. 1:16) and 'the Son ... is appointed the heir of all things' (Heb. 1:1). The apostle Paul also points out, however, that believers in Christ are coheirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17). The fact that he then proceeds to talk about the creation being set free from its present bondage and corruption

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to his people.

49 Hayhoe, K. 'Easter and Earth day: celebrations of God's gifts', *Planet Experts*, 11 Dec. 2016, accessed 11 Dec. 2016, at <http://www.planetexperts.com/easter-and-earth-day-celebrations-of-gods-gifts/>.

might imply that in Christ we will also receive a renewed creation (Rom. 8:19-21).

Second, is the gift of creation an absolute gift, or is it a gift given in trust? We have seen above Brueggemann's explanation of how the land of Palestine was presented in the Old Testament as a gift to the people of Israel, although it was a gift to a people under Torah, in a covenant relationship with Yahweh. And we know what happened when Israel forsook that relationship: they lost the land. While some might argue that the New Testament emphasis on gifts and God's grace might suggest that God's gifts to believers are unconditional, we know that this doesn't always hold true. We have already seen Jesus's words in Luke 12:48, 'Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required,' referred to several times in the context of stewardship. It's interesting to see that in the same chapter where Paul says that 'the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable' (Rom. 11:29), he also points out that the gift of God's kindness in sending the gospel to the Gentiles might end if they do not continue in his goodness (v. 22). Perhaps only in the future, when we receive as coheirs with Christ a liberated creation (Rom. 8:17-21), might we be able to expect that the gift of creation is an absolute gift.

### **2.3 Christian leaders and scholars views of creation as a gift**

Leaders of the largest Christian denominations across the globe have recently written very clearly about viewing creation as a gift from God, as I intimated at the beginning of this paper. The Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, Bartholomew I, for example, states that 'the world we enjoy comprises a gift we have received ... [it] is a gift from God the Creator, a healing gift, a gift of wonder and beauty'.<sup>50</sup> He then points out that the fourth-century archbishop Chrysostom considered the world as 'the fruit of divine generosity and boundless grace'.<sup>51</sup> Pope Francis, in his address on 21 May 2014, said that 'creation is a gift, it is the marvellous gift that God has given us'.<sup>52</sup> And, again, in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, 'Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all'.<sup>53</sup> Previous popes Benedict and John Paul II expressed similar views.

While both Bartholomew and Francis wrote in the context of caring for creation, they clearly support the idea of creation as a marvellous, gracious gift to be appreciated, almost as being an obvious point. Metropolitan John

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50 Bartholomew *op. cit.*, (2).

51 *ibid.*, p. 114.

52 Pope Francis *op. cit.*, (2).

53 Pope Francis *op. cit.*, (15).

(Zizioulas) of Pergamon, who was present at the Vatican when Pope Francis first delivered his *Laudato Si'*, develops at length this idea of creation being a gift in his paper 'Christian theology: an orthodox perspective'.<sup>54</sup> He writes, "The world is not eternal and self-explicable, but owes its existence to a *personal* God who brought it *freely* into existence. In other words, creation is, for those who believe in the Bible, *the gift of* [i.e., from] *a person*."<sup>55</sup> He then emphasises that a gift is always free, is an expression of love, exists only in communion with the giver, *always* implies a recipient and calls for gratitude and thanksgiving.<sup>56</sup> Zizioulas is careful to recognise that "the human being is itself an organic part of creation and cannot exist outside it".<sup>57</sup> But he also insists that "the fact that the human being was created at the end, and not at the beginning, indicates that there is *purpose* in creation, and that this purpose is *entrusted* to the human being ... it is in this capacity as the only free being in the material creation that the human being is the recipient of creation as a *gift* from God".<sup>58</sup> These are strong words, indeed, from the Metropolitan of Pergamon and ones that will not find ready acceptance by most philosophers and theologians today, as we have seen in Section 1.

Orthodox and Catholic theologians point out that the giftedness of creation is a necessary logical deduction from the Christian belief in *creation ex nihilo*, that God existed before the universe came into being and chose freely to create it out of nothing and place people in it. It is a pure act of grace. Zizioulas took this view, as we have just seen. Andrew Shepherd further describes Zizioulas's viewpoint in these words: "that God is "Other", means that God's act of creation is not an action of necessity or obligation, but rather is an action - event of absolute freedom. Creation receives its being and existence as a free gift from God, a "gift" of free, excessive, ecstatic love."<sup>59</sup> In a similar vein, the Catholic scholar, David B. Burrell, writes, "Avowing that the origin of the universe is free means, of course, that it is an utterly gratuitous act of God, a grace. And that means that the origin of the universe has to be personal, with the resulting emanation totally undeserved, revelatory of a good and gracious God."<sup>60</sup> And fellow Catholic Philip Rossi follows up on this when he says "Creation, apprehended as gifted in its unique and singular entirety ... "a gratuitous miracle", displays the enacted graciousness of God to which fitting re-

54 *op. cit.*, (2).

55 *ibid.*, 95.

56 *ibid.*, 95-98.

57 *ibid.*, 97.

58 *ibid.*, 97-98.

59 Shepherd, A., "The "Other", the "Gift", and "Priesthood": Zizioulas' eucharistic and eschatological theology of creation', *Stimulus* (2007) 15(4), 4-8.

60 Burrell, D. B. 'Creation as Original Grace', in Rossi, P. (ed.) *op. cit.*, (2), pp. 97-106, (p. 99).

sponses are wonder, thanks, and praise.<sup>61</sup> If the creation of the universe in its entirety is a free, gratuitous gift from a gracious God, then, the various parts of creation that we depend on and appreciate are also gifts of grace.

Some evangelical scholars have more recently written in a similar vein.<sup>62</sup> In his 2013 book, *God's Good World: Reclaiming the Doctrine of Creation*, Jonathan R. Wilson notes, 'In our times, we often experience the cosmos as a burden. We are weighed down by economic, health, and environmental woes ... [but] creation is a gift, not a burden, because creation is the substance of God's redemptive work that leads to the new creation.'<sup>63</sup> Wilson also notes, like Zizioulas, Burrell and Rossi, that since there was no necessity that God create the world, he did it as a free gift; but he goes further, tying it to our concept of the Trinity. Since Father, Son and Holy Spirit already have life and are in relationship with each other, God is complete in himself and there is no need for anything else: 'Because of God's Trinitarian life, God creates not out of a need for life or relationship but simply as the gift of life and relationship.'<sup>64</sup> Norman Wirzba also makes a strong case for viewing creation as a gift, in *From Nature to Creation* (2015).<sup>65</sup> As the title implies, a theme of the book is that we need to consider the Earth and its resources not as *nature* or natural resources of land and minerals, 'so much virgin territory and raw material waiting to be turned into a possession that could be modified to enrich its holders,' but rather as *creation*, something very valuable, to be received as a gift of God's love.<sup>66</sup> Wirzba also points out that to think of creation as a gift really requires us to believe in God as Creator: 'without God as Creator it simply makes no sense to think of the world as a place of divinely cherished gifts'.<sup>67</sup> It is in his last chapter, however, that he focuses in on the question 'Is Creation a Gift?' and discusses how this thinking should result in thanksgiving, gratitude, forgiveness and self-giving in caring for creation: 'To acknowledge and engage creation as the place of God's gifts is to find oneself repositioned in

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61 Rossi, P. 'Contingency and the giftedness of creation: Enacting grace in a fractured world,' e-Publications@Marquette (2013); accessed 11 Dec. 2016, at [http://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1354&context=theo\\_fac](http://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1354&context=theo_fac). see also, Hanby, M. 'Saving the appearances: creation's gift to the sciences', *Pro Ecclesia* (2013) 22(1), 29-54.

62 Scientists such as Berry, DeWitt and Houghton, whose views we considered in Section 1.1 regarding stewardship, would no doubt all agree with this concept of viewing creation as a gratuitous gift, although I haven't noticed it emphasised in their writings. DeWitt's phrase, 'seven provisions for creation', in particular, implies creation is a gift, and without doubt a gift of God's grace.

63 Wilson, J. R. *God's Good World: Reclaiming the Doctrine of Creation*, Baker Academic (2013), pp. 98-99.

64 *ibid.*, p. 99.

65 *op. cit.*, (39), see chap. 4 'The human art of creaturely life'. Wirzba wrote on this theme previously, e.g. in a 2011 paper and in a beautifully illustrated book, Wirzba, N. (ed.) *The Gift of Creation: Images from Scripture and Earth*, photos by Tom Barnes, Acclaim Press (2009).

66 *ibid.*, pp. 5, 50, 124.

67 *ibid.*, p. 10.

the world so as to love it and give oneself to it.<sup>68</sup>

### 3. Creation as a gift: a postmodern critique

Before considering the practical implications of viewing creation as a gift, I first look at several postmodern critiques: of the very notion of a gift versus another exchange, the introduction of Gaia removing the need for humans to have a unique role, and the possibility of oscillating between viewing creation as a gift and taking care of it in an exchange cycle.<sup>69</sup>

#### 3.1 Can a pure gift exist?

While the idea of treating creation as a gift appeals even to some non-Christians,<sup>70</sup> the very concept of a true gift has received a strong challenge from the well-known postmodern philosopher, Jacques Derrida. In his talks and writings, he explored the unsolvable paradox or ‘aporia’ present in some of our common ideas, such as giving, hospitality, forgiving and mourning. His views on ‘the gift’ were published in his 1992 book, *Given Time*.<sup>71</sup> Although Derrida never talked about the gift of creation per se, his critique of the idea of a true gift was taken up by some postmodern philosophers and theologians who were concerned with the gift of creation, and who felt they needed to respond to his critique, as we will see.

In *Given Time*, Derrida is responding to the work of the French sociologist, Mauss, who analysed the cycle of gift exchange in different cultures around the world.<sup>72</sup> We still participate in this cycle today, when we’re

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68 *ibid.*, p. 152.

69 At the opposite end of the spectrum to postmodern critiques of creation as a gift, much less a gift to humans, we have the reactionary statements of a group of mainly American conservative Christians, represented by the Cornwall Alliance, and its founder and national spokesman, E. Calvin Beisner, who considers that the resources in creation are indeed gifts that we should continue to use up at the same rates as always. Although subtitled ‘For the Stewardship of Creation’, in reality it takes a strong position *against* those most concerned about the degradation humans are causing to creation, including the threat of serious climate change; e.g., in opposition to the united conviction of 97% of the world’s climate scientists, it unabashedly asserts ‘There is no convincing scientific evidence that human contribution to greenhouse gases is causing dangerous global warming’, in *An Evangelical Declaration on Global Warming*, accessed 11 Dec. 2016 at <http://cornwallalliance.org/2009/05/evangelical-declaration-on-global-warming/>. This is not the place, however, to refute the many false statements and unscientific viewpoints presented in the various documents of the Cornwall Alliance.

70 e.g. Postmodern philosopher, Mark Manolopoulos writes about creation as a gift (*ibid.*), though he says he is neither a Christian nor an atheist, Trakakis & Manolopoulos, *Part 1: Faith and Doubt*, accessed 11 Dec. 2016 from <http://churchandpomo.typepad.com/conversation/2010/05/trakakis-manolopoulos-part-1.html>.

71 Derrida, J. *Given Time: Counterfeit Money Vol. 1*, University of Chicago (1992).

72 Mauss, M. *The Gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*, 1st Eng, edn., Cohen & West (1954).

invited to some friends' place for dinner, for example, and we reciprocate by bringing a gift of a bottle of wine, or by inviting them to our house the next time. Derrida argues that this kind of gift is not a gift at all, just a payback to satisfy the indebtedness or obligation that is ours after receiving the first dinner invitation. 'For there to be a gift,' he writes, 'there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt. If the other gives me back or owes me or has to give me back what I gave him or her, there will not have been a gift.'<sup>73</sup> Even the act of thanksgiving vitiates its being a true gift, Derrida argues, because it gives us self-satisfaction as a payback, and we are just reverting to the economic exchange cycle. In fact, even if the gift is anonymous, it can't really be a true gift:

The simple recognition on the part of the donor that he has made a gift vitiates against its being a true gift, as this self-recognition inevitably brings self-satisfaction, self-praise, or self-congratulation, and in doing this the donor 'gives' back to himself symbolically the value of what he thinks he has given or what he is preparing to give ... he thinks, 'How wonderful I am to give this person that which they have always desired, and without even letting them know that I am responsible?''<sup>74</sup>

A gift, then, by its very nature, shouldn't be reciprocated, even by a note of thanks. In fact, it shouldn't even be recognised either by the giver (who will then congratulate himself, even if the gift is anonymous) or by the receiver (who will be compelled to recognise and give thanks for it). The idea of a gift, then, is a puzzle, a paradox, an *aporia*.<sup>75</sup>

Derrida, being an atheist, was most likely not thinking about God's gifts, and especially not about the gift of creation. We might respond that when God gives, even anonymously, the idea of self-satisfaction or self-congratulation does not fit the biblical concept of who the Trinitarian Creator God is. He is totally sufficient in himself, and needs no recognition from us. And for us, as receivers, when we give thanks to God for the gifts of his grace to us, this is not to be compared to the exchange cycle of gifts that Derrida and Mauss have in mind. Again, God has no *need* of receiving our thanksgiving. Existing before the universe was created, complete in himself, he is outside any economy of gift exchange. Giving thanks to him for his gifts is for our good, not his, though, when we are in a relationship

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<sup>73</sup> Derrida *op. cit.*, (71), p. 12.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14; I leave undeveloped the question of how this statement of Derrida's, and his argument in general, differs from Robert Trivers's concept of reciprocal altruism, as presented in his 1971 paper 'The evolution of reciprocal altruism', *Quarterly Review of Biology* 46: 35-57.

<sup>75</sup> In a moment of despair, Derrida suggested that the only true gift is 'The Gift of Death', the title of one of his books. He found it hard to acknowledge this 'true gift', however, when he was in the last stages of cancer and apparently didn't record much in his memoirs or journals when close friends died; Manolopoulos, M., 'Derrida's gift to eco/theo/logy: a critical tribute', *Crosscurrents* (2005) 54:4.

with him through Christ, he is pleased to receive our thanksgiving and praise, as the Scriptures make clear. In fact, thanksgiving seems to be the one thing that other postmodern philosophers replying to Derrida agree is acceptable, without endangering the ‘gift’ status of what our Creator continually provides for us, as we will see.<sup>76</sup>

### **3.2 Whatever is given is a gift, but who is really there to appreciate the gift in ecosystems?**

Jean-Luc Marion, another postmodern philosopher and student of Derrida’s, doesn’t agree either with his conclusions about the impossibility of there being a true gift, or with his atheism. In *Being Given* (2002), Marion proposes ‘a redefinition of the gift not in terms of economy [i.e., how Derrida looks at it], but of givenness’ (i.e., ‘what shows itself first gives itself’).<sup>77</sup> He then suggests ways that a giver or receiver might maintain the true giftedness of the giving. In contrast to Derrida, he also cites Scripture to give an example of how this might work (Matt. 25:31-45).<sup>78</sup> Unlike Derrida, Marion also sees no conflict between thanksgiving and the nature of a true gift.<sup>79</sup> Although he doesn’t address the question of creation being a gift, his argument could be extended to say that since creation is a ‘given’ it must also be a gift.

The eco-feminist theologian, Anne Primavesi, on the other hand, explicitly espouses creation as a gift, when she uses Gaia as a foundation,<sup>80</sup> along with her liberal Christian theology, to attempt to solve Derrida’s puzzle, in her books *Sacred Gaia* (2000) and *Gaia’s Gifts* (2003);<sup>81</sup> for she, like Marion, considers creation a given. The solution to Derrida’s paradox, she suggests, is in the mutual interchange of matter and energy between

76 Wirzba provides a more detailed response to Derrida’s gift critique, in the section of his book called ‘Is creation a gift?’ and refers to Robyn Horner’s point that ‘[gift] giving depends on freedom, the freedom of the giver to give and the freedom of the receiver to receive. If there is compulsion of any kind, then gratuity has disappeared.’ Wirzba *op. cit.*, (39), p. 145; Horner, R. *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology*, Fordham (2001), p. 7. The theologian Miroslav Volf gives a strong, biblically-based response to Derrida’s views on gift and thanksgiving, in Volf, M. *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, Zondervan (2005), pp. 33-44.

77 Marion, J.L. *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* (Cultural Memory in the Present), Stanford University Press, (2002), pp. 85 ff.

78 *ibid.*

79 See Manolopoulos *op. cit.*, (1), p. 67. Other modern philosophers such as Schmitz, K. *The Gift: Creation*, Marquette (1982), and Webb, S. *The Gifting God*, Oxford (1996), also allow for gratitude in gift giving and receiving.

80 According to Wikipedia, ‘The Gaia hypothesis, also known as Gaia theory or Gaia principle, proposes that organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings on Earth to form a synergistic self-regulating, complex system that helps to maintain and perpetuate the conditions for life on the planet.’ accessed 11 Dec. 2016, at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaia\\_hypothesis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaia_hypothesis).

81 *op.cit.*, (1).

all living species, including humans, and their non-living environment, in such a way that Earth is a self-regulating system. She then argues that ‘Respect for Gaia,’ not the fear of the Lord (Prov. 9:10), ‘is the beginning of wisdom.’<sup>82</sup> And, ‘Theology becomes, from this [Gaian] perspective, another Earth science, one which raises important questions about human status before God.’<sup>83</sup> Gone is the idea that humans have a special mandate for stewardship and care of the environment, as made in God’s image. Instead, ‘We are called to see ourselves as one species among many within the whole community of life on Earth ... [in] the context of consistent and continuous relationships between organisms and their environments which constitute our world.’<sup>84</sup> She does allow, however, that we should at least express gratitude: ‘I am alive because I am continuously gifted with what I need to live. I am gifted because other organisms and species have not evaded or ignored the demands I make on them ... this fact does not allow me to evade or ignore my dependence on the Earth, or ignore my responsibility to return it, at the very least, the gift of gratitude.’<sup>85</sup> She also accuses orthodox Christianity – unfairly, I would argue – of having no real sense of gratitude for Earth’s gifts.<sup>86</sup>

Primavesi’s proposals can be criticised on several points. First, as Christopher Southgate has noted in his review of *Sacred Gaia*, the author ‘simply does not make sufficient contact with the Christian theological tradition to draw on its resources’.<sup>87</sup> Instead, she criticises traditional religion, while ‘her own synthesis [of religion, Earth science and Gaia] is patchy and unsatisfying’. In addition, I note, that although two of her three books are subtitled ‘theologies’,<sup>88</sup> there’s not much about *theos* (God) in them at all. He doesn’t speak, doesn’t listen, isn’t transcendent, isn’t a Personal God, doesn’t really do anything, hardly exists outside of the intricate, symbiotic ecosystems with the species that mutually interact and evolve together. All she can say is that God must be love, but doesn’t explain how this means anything.

A second criticism that can be made of Primavesi’s theory is that, by reducing humans to the same status as other species, not recognising their unique self-consciousness or consciousness of a Creator, her world-view leaves us without any sense of gift or gifts whatsoever. Imagine a planet

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82 *Sacred Gaia*, p. 33.

83 *Gaia’s Gifts*, p. 124.

84 *ibid.*, p. 120.

85 *Sacred Gaia*, p. 160.

86 *Gaia’s Gift*, p. 134.

87 Southgate, C. *Reviews in Religion and Theology* (2001) 8(3), 309-311. Anthony Battaglia shares the same concerns as Southgate, but is slightly more positive, in his review in *Theological Studies* June 2003; while Heather Eaton is almost bubbling with enthusiasm in her review in *Ecotheology* (2005) 10(1), 122-124.

88 Primavesi *op. cit.*, (1).

with a complete ecosystem, like ours, teeming with living things in harmony with their non-living environment, but with no humans present, no self-conscious or God-conscious creatures. How could you talk about gifts being given, when there is no one present able to think of them as being gifts, not even a personal God? Who is there 'to return the gift of gratitude,' as Primavesi suggests? Who in that planetary world would be there to see it as 'a world infused with a sense of wonder and awe, strange and yet familiar,' as she describes it?<sup>89</sup> Gaia may be an important scientific hypothesis, but its founder, James Lovelock, never intended it to become a religion. Truly the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom – and of any valid religious perspective – not respect for Gaia!<sup>90</sup>

### **3.3 *Whatever is given is a gift, but do we need to oscillate back and forth between viewing it as such?***

Another postmodern philosopher, Mark Manolopoulos, has more useful suggestions to contribute. In his book, *If creation is a gift* (2009),<sup>91</sup> he interacts with the ideas of Derrida and Marion about gifts, as well as those of Schmitz, Webb<sup>92</sup> and Caputo, and applies them to creation and ecotheology. As a starter, he agrees with Marion that since creation is a given, it must be a gift, though this requires faith: 'The world is a given, but to say it is a gift requires a leap of faith.'<sup>93</sup> He suspends any question of grace in creation, however: 'Creation is mysterious and perplexing enough without bringing in other mysteries such as Grace,'<sup>94</sup> although he then goes on to talk about grace in scripture as the 'perfect form of the gift in its gratuity.'<sup>95</sup> It is the way he suggests that we respond to the gift of creation, however, that I find particularly novel. Derrida thinks there can be no real gift, while Marion insists that since creation is a given it must be a gift. Manolopoulos finds a way out of the conflict by suggesting that we continually oscillate between receiving creation as a pure gift (not reciprocating in any way, but just enjoying it as 'divine excess'), and taking care of it in gift exchange (we must reciprocate by taking care of creation,

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89 *Sacred Gaia*, p. 23.

90 Bauckham and Wirzba's view of the community of creation, discussed in Section 1.3, is similar to that of Primavesi in some ways, but radically different in other ways, for their perspective is founded on a Personal God speaking to creatures in relationship with him through the divinely inspired Word of God. Primavesi's perspective is really an example of the *ecocentric* views described by Northcott in Section 1.2 of this paper. Primavesi's views are described in much more detail than those of other eco-feminists such as Ruether, McFague and Page (see Section 1.2), because she directly addresses the question of how creation might be considered a gift, which is the theme of this paper.

91 Manolopoulos *op. cit.*, (1).

92 Schmitz and Webb *op. cit.*, (80).

93 Manolopoulos *op. cit.*, (1), p. 1.

94 *ibid.*, p. 21.

95 *ibid.*, p. 24.

or it will soon cease to be a gift and will waste away).<sup>96</sup> We can't collapse one term into the other, or replace both with a middle mediating term. We must preserve the duality and accept an oscillatory path in our response to creation ... 'between gratuity and gratitude, excess and exchange, freedom and indebtedness'.

How does this work in practice? How can I oscillate between thinking of creation as divine excess that I just revel in, and thinking of it as gift that requires, in reciprocal exchange, my care of it? Manolopoulos gives specific, if still vague, suggestions.<sup>97</sup> Thinking of creation as excess can lead to silence, bewilderment, wonder, and humility, mystery and just 'letting be'. Thinking of creation as exchange, on the other hand, leads to recognising it but returning it without using it, using it sustainably (stewardship) with thanksgiving, playing gently with it, and giving a religious return (to avoid hyper-individualism). One of the things that I enjoy, for example, is skiing. When I descend a mountain, enjoying fresh snow, concentrating on turning and controlling my descent, while enjoying beautiful mountain views, I feel the divine excess of creation at its best! I may be silenced at its beauty, or humbled by the opportunity to enjoy its excess. On the other hand, when I drive through the mountains, observing large tracts of land cleared for new ski resorts, I feel the other side of the oscillation, my responsibility to support creation care, not denuding the mountains beyond recognition, preserving natural habitats. I'm not sure, however, that my oscillation between these two viewpoints is as incessant, as Manolopoulos suggests!<sup>98</sup>

This theme of moving back and forth between two apparent extremes – enjoying the gift of creation and taking responsibility for it in exchange – may in fact not be that different from what Brueggemann noted with regard to Israel, as described above in Section 2.2. On the one hand the people of Israel were under gift, having received the land as a pure gift of God's grace; on the other hand, they were also under covenant, having received Yahweh's words as to how they were to live, including treating the land in a sustainable manner. Perhaps there is no solution to Derrida's paradox as to whether a free gift can really exist. We may have to live with the duality in the same way that physicists had to learn to live with the wave-particle duality of light, even though they didn't really understand it, but had been convinced by the evidence that photos continuously displayed both wave-like and particle-like behaviours, even though to our senses these seemed as contrary to each other as billiard balls hitting each

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96 *ibid.*, p. 91.

97 *ibid.*, pp. 113-120.

98 *ibid.*, pp. 93-96. Wirzba doesn't find Manolopoulos very useful and writes, 'the book is hampered ... by a weak theological understanding of creation and a too-willing acceptance of Derrida's framing of the question.' *op. cit.*, (39) p. 146, fn. 27; see also Wirzba's review in *The Bible & Critical Theory* (2011), 7 (1), pp. 126-127.

other on a table versus water wave crests crossing over each other on the surface of a lake.

Before finishing this section, I note that although Derrida forbids any kind of thanksgiving for a true gift, the others mentioned here, Marion, Primavesi and Manolopoulos, disagree with him, for different reasons, and see the need for thanksgiving.

#### **4. Thanksgiving, care-giving, and self-giving – a deep approach to creation care**

If we focus on creation as a gift, enjoying its amazing beauty, grandeur, intricacies and harmony, is there a danger that we will neglect the ‘other side of the coin’ and not be interested in creation care, or actively involved in carrying out our stewardship mandate? Or do we have to continually oscillate between the two, as Manolopoulos suggests? As Christians, we will first want to give thanks to God for his gift of creation; but, much more than this, we should also be deeply motivated to give back to creation, by caring for it, giving ourselves in whatever way possible for the maintenance and care of this amazing gift.

##### **4.1 Thanksgiving**

Although Marion, Primavesi and Manolopoulos all disagreed with Derrida’s assertion that a true gift is annulled by the receiver’s giving thanks for it, their reasons for allowing for thanksgiving when receiving a gift, and especially the gift of creation, vary. In responding to Derrida myself, in Section 3.1, I argued that God, being complete in himself before the creation, is outside of Derrida’s exchange cycle. He needs no ‘self-satisfaction, self-praise or self-congratulation’ from us, by our giving thanks. Rather, thanksgiving is for our benefit.

No one argues so consistently and persuasively that we should continually give thanks to God for his gifts, including his gifts of creation, than the apostle Paul (Acts 27:13; Rom. 14:6; 1 Cor. 10:25, 30; 2 Cor. 8:16; 9:11; Eph. 5:4, 20; Phil. 4:6; Col. 3:17; 4:2; 1 Tim. 4:3-4; 2 Tim. 1:3; 1 Thess. 5:18; 2 Thess. 2:13; Phile. 1:4). The fact that God’s gifts are a result solely of his grace never suggests to Paul that God, therefore, doesn’t need to be thanked. It is true he doesn’t *need* it, but we need to give it. It is remarkable also that Jesus is seen so many times in the New Testament giving thanks to his Father (Matt. 15:36; 26:27; Mark 8:6; 14:23; Luke 22:17, 19; John 6:11, 23), in many cases, for the creation gift of bread, even though he was declared to be the very ‘Son of God’, capable of multiplying the loaves of bread, or even turning stones into bread. Then, of course, the Old Testament has hundreds of prayers and psalms of thanksgiving for God’s gifts.

Giving thanks to God plays many roles in our lives. It keeps us humble

and dependent, and no one argues that humility is not a good thing! Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount, 'Blessed are the meek; for they will inherit the Earth', (Matt. 5:5) are meant to be taken in all seriousness, as Wilson reminds us in the chapter he devotes to this verse.<sup>99</sup> We are humbled, realising that we need to receive both God's help and the help of others; we aren't meant to do it alone. Lack of humility and lack of thanksgiving can quickly lead to idolatry, as the apostle Paul points out is true of the Gentiles before Christ: 'For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him ... [they] exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images ... [they] worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised' (Rom. 1:21, 23, 25). Wirzba puts it this way, 'when we pin unrealistic hopes on the things of this world, forgetting that it is God alone who provides and sustains us all, we turn a gift into a god'.<sup>100</sup>

Giving thanks 'in all circumstances' (1 Thess. 5:18) reminds us that the things of creation are blessings from God, not to be taken for granted. It makes us content with a modest lifestyle and guards us against consumerism, as many have pointed out. Even the difficult things of creation, 'the hard, impossible, nonsensical parts of life', as Wilson puts it, 'become gifts through the redemption of creation'.<sup>101</sup> Thanksgiving is a natural part of celebrating the love and joy that come with the gifts of creation, the first fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16).<sup>102</sup>

#### 4.2 Care-giving

It is important to remind ourselves that we start with grace, not only in regards to our salvation, but also in regards to the entirety of creation itself. The idea that if we regard creation as a gift of grace we will not feel obligated to care for it, however, is as mistaken as the argument that because we are saved by grace we are not obligated to discontinue sinning. The apostle Paul makes short shift of this argument with reference to God's grace in salvation, in Romans 6: 'What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!' (Rom. 6: 1, 15). He then points out, in the rest of the chapter, that God's salvation through grace has brought us into a place of serving God in obedience, not serving ourselves. We *want* to serve God now, having been saved by grace. This

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99 Wilson *op. cit.*, (63), pp. 225-234.

100 Wirzba *op. cit.*, (39), p. 49.

101 Wilson *op. cit.*, (63), p. 99.

102 Wirzba argues that thoughtfully saying grace at meals, a custom that is rapidly disappearing in our technologically-oriented consumer society, 'can be a vital source in the renewal of communities and the created world', in 'Saying Grace: transforming people, transforming the World', *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* (2009), 3(2), 195-212 (p. 195); Wirzba's paper gives many helpful suggestions on how to enrich our thanksgiving at mealtime.

same thought is also central to Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, a generic letter thought by many to have circulated among the first churches. He again emphasises that the gift of salvation is by grace: 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast' (Eph. 2:8-9); and then immediately goes on to point out that, although we were not saved by our works, we indeed have work to do: 'For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do' (Eph. 2:10). So the same grace that first gave us the gift of creation, has created us anew in Christ Jesus (as part of his gift of salvation) to do 'good works', not least among which is that of caring for God's first creation.

Brunner, Butler and Swoboda emphasise this in their recent book, *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology*, 'All creation is a place of grace';<sup>103</sup> and 'beginning from a point of grace makes it less likely that we will respond to the ecocrisis out of guilt and shame'. Because of gratitude, we are more able to shift our mindfulness 'from what's missing to what's there: as we cultivate our ability to experience gratitude'.<sup>104</sup> However, like the apostle Paul in Romans 6 and Ephesians 2, Brunner and his co-authors also remind us that 'grace and ethical action go hand in hand. Without grace our actions become exhausting and unfruitful; without action, cheap grace leads to passive support of global systems.'<sup>105</sup>

We also note that the documents in which the viewpoints of global church leaders Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Francis are found, as described previously in this paper, are centred on our responsibility to take action in caring for creation *precisely because* it is a free gift of God.<sup>106</sup>

### 4.3 Gift-giving and self-giving

Appreciating God's gift of grace, rather than making us complacent, actually turns us into gift-givers ourselves, and even self-givers, if we truly receive that grace and forgiveness deep down in our lives. No one has emphasised this more eloquently than the Christian philosopher, Miroslav Volf, in his ground-breaking book, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (2005).<sup>107</sup> He first addresses the question of whether God's gifts oblige us in any way while still being a gift, in respond-

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103 Brunner, D.L., Butler, J.L. & Swoboda, A.J. *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology: Foundations in Scripture, Theology, History, and Praxis*, Baker Academic (2014), p. 120.

104 *ibid.*, p. 244.

105 *ibid.*, p. 160.

106 Bartholomew *op. cit.*, (2); Francis *op. cit.*, (2).

107 *op. cit.*, (77).

ing to Derrida:<sup>108</sup>

They do – but not in the way a dinner invitation obliges us to have our hosts over for a ‘payback’ dinner ... The circle [of exchange] cannot close in regard to God. We cannot return benefits to God for the simple reason that everything we return to God was God’s to begin with ... God already has everything. God enjoys unsurpassable plenitude and lacks nothing that a gift from humans would satisfy ... God only receives delight.

He then shows conclusively that rather than being a legal obligation, God’s gifts actually transform into our gifts that we then give to others, in an ongoing flow of grace. He begins this final argument by referring to the great reformer, Martin Luther:

When Luther described the nature of God’s love, he used the metaphor of flowing ... What happens to the flow when it reaches us? Does it then stop, having bestowed the gift and fulfilled its purpose? We would then be unlike what is most divine in God. God would be a pure giver, and we would be no givers at all. We would receive from God, but instead of giving, we would only acquire through legitimate exchange or take by force.<sup>109</sup>

So, rather than God’s gift stopping when it arrives at us, our life ‘becomes extraordinary, because God’s own gift giving flows through the giver ... We are not just the intended recipients of God’s gifts; we are also their channels.’<sup>110</sup> In fact, we give because we are givers, because Christ living in us is a giver.

## 5. Caring for the Earth in a serious way

The Scriptures support many approaches to caring for the Earth, including that of human stewardship, garden cultivation, loving our global neighbours, fulfilling God’s mission and viewing ourselves as members of the community of creation. The Scriptures also teach us, however, that creation is a gift, as even some postmodern philosophers and theologians recognise. If we can reorient ourselves (in this consumer society we live in) to view Earth in all its bountifulness as God’s special gift of grace to us, and appreciate that gift as much as we appreciate God’s gracious gift of salvation, this has the power to transform our attitude towards creation, how we use (and abuse it), and how we can care for it and contribute to its healing. Yes, God has gifted us with many creation gifts of grace and he means us to enjoy them, to revel in them, to be full of wonder. He doesn’t

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108 *ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

109 *ibid.*, p. 49.

110 *ibid.*, p. 54.

need us to give back anything to him, as he is sufficient in himself. But his presence comes with his gifts. And he does intend us to pass them on, as channels of his grace, caring for other people and for the world he has created. He also surely wants us to care for the wonderful gift of creation he has given.<sup>111</sup>

One suggestion in this regard is that the local church, as a close fellowship of God's people, take on a creation care project in addition to other common 'giving' projects such as overseas missionary support, neighbourhood foodbanks, or local building projects. Such 'giving' times in a church's yearly calendar are often celebrated with a spirit of thankfulness at how much we have received from God redemption blessings. Why not also include a time of thankfulness for creation blessings that results in giving back into that very creation God has given us in a practical way.<sup>112</sup>

Christ dwelling in us by his Spirit, and his love living inside us, is the real power in our living and giving as authentic Christians (see Eph. 3:16-20). And when we give to others and look after his creation, when we give ourselves to the task, we are most like him as the Lord of creation. We do this in liberty, not under compulsion, because it is what Christ living in us wants to do. It may look like an obligation, but it is our new life doing what is natural. And, without doubt, it will appear to others as very serious stewardship of God's creation, but with a deep sense of humility, freedom, joy, love and unselfish giving of self for others.

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111 One obvious way to show our care for creation is to offset the carbon we put into the atmosphere in our burning of fossil fuels at home, in our cars and in our air travel, carbon that contributes to the environmental degradation starting to affect all of the globe, including the poor in many countries. Most airlines will accept carbon offset donations; but there are also Christian organisations that do the same, such as Climate Stewards in the UK and the US. In Canada, where I live, we can donate to the Canadian Food Grains climate fund to help mitigate the effects of climate change on poor farmers around the world.

112 Christian creation care organisations such as A Rocha, and many others, welcome the involvement of local churches in their various projects.