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**GENESIS 1:26-28 - A PANACEA TO
ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN
NIGER DELTA, NIGERIA**

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Introduction

Whether the cornucopians (those who argue against imminent threat to human life by environmental pollution) or their cautious optimistic (those who hold that with good management the resources of the earth can take care of all humanity) allies accept it or not there is a serious threat to the continued existence of the earth. This results largely from the reckless exploitation of the earth's resources which has in turn culminated into environmental degradation. Experts warn that, if measures are not taken and urgently too, humans and other occupants of the environment stand the risk of total destruction. In the Niger Delta, various forms of environmental degradation are prevalent and with far reaching negative impacts. This is occasioned by the discovery of oil at Oloibiri in 1956. Before this discovery, the natives were polluting the environment but at a minimal level.

The divine injunction in Genesis 1:26-28 is erroneously being indicted for the recklessness with which humans are plundering the resources of the earth. For scholars like Lynn White, this act of irresponsibility by humans is traceable to this Biblical passage. This paper

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recommends a proper understanding of the passage as it could serve as a panacea for environmental degradation in the Niger Delta.

Ethics, the normative science and the systematic study of human conduct requires that humans conduct their affairs in such a manner that they would be fair to each other. In their frantic search for an acceptable touchstone to judge human conduct as "right" or "wrong," "good" or "bad," ethicists have come up with diverse ethical theories. These ethical theories are grouped along the lines of ideological similarities. Into one of these groups falls the divine command theory which holds that whatever the divine commands is right and what he forbids is wrong. Genesis 1:26-28 contains a command and that command forms the thesis of this paper. This paper thus, examines the divine command in this passage aligning it with the recklessness with which the Niger Delta environment is being exploited.

Niger Delta

The Niger Delta is found in the southern part of Nigeria. It includes the entire expansive mangrove forest zone and the entire coastal region directly bordering the ocean. The term Niger Delta has come to mean different things depending on the context. Politically, it has come to represent a political configuration, otherwise known as the South-South geo-political zone. This comprises Rivers, Cross Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Edo, Delta and Bayelsa States. Economically, it refers to the oil producing states made up of Rivers, Abia, Imo, Cross Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Ondo, Edo, Delta and Bayelsa States. The term, Niger Delta, as employed in this paper refers to the geographical area comprising those states - Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States located along the delta of the Niger River in Nigeria. This paper however, covers the two major states - Rivers and Bayelsa only.

Genesis 1:26-28

In the face of the massive degradation of the environment, experts and religious leaders have been drawn to re-examine critically the biblical text that is often been quoted to justify human's exploitative tendencies of the resources of the earth. Howbeit, some scholars like Lynn White, Tonybee and Ikedia either out of ignorance or outright misreading of the scriptures have blamed the environmental abuse experienced globally on Judeo-Christian tradition. Conversely, some Jewish and Christian theologians like John Passmore, Steven,

Bruggeman, Aloy Hutterman among others have rallied round to proffer a more critical and profound view of the issue. As Gordon Wenham puts it the first step in addressing this problem is “to carefully distinguish between what the Bible describes and what it prescribes.”¹ It is true that numerous biblical passages make references to humans’ relationship with the environment but the most controversial and most misunderstood is Genesis 1:26-28 which states:

Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’²

According to Jerome’s Biblical Commentary, the climax of creation was reached with the creation of humans. God created the other things in nature and saw that they were good before he created humans to tend and nurture them. Man was created in the image of God after his likeness. However, his “dominion over the animals is expressed in strong verbs (*radah*, “trample” [v.26]; *kabas*, “tread down” [v. 28]). This implies that human’s rule would not be easy as it was with God for man is merely an ambassador.³ Though the words “subdue” (*kabash*) and rule (*radah*) in the passage paint the picture of conquest, the word “work” or “till” (*abad*) on the other hand means to serve. This is actually what God asked humans to do.⁴

There are two contradicting and contrasting creation stories. First, is the priestly account which states that God created the earth *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). The second is the Yawehist account in Genesis 2 which presents God as forming Adam from the earth. This makes Adam (human) a part of the earth.⁵ This accounts for the confusion in

¹www.jri.org.uk/.bible_wenham.htm

²Quotation is from the Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible

³Brown, Fitzmyer and Murphy *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, London: Cassel Ltd. 1980:11

⁴N. L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, England: Apollos, 1995, 305.

⁵www.uwsers.drew.edu/.eco-theology.pdf

the interpretation of the Genesis creation account which is readily quoted to support the ruthless plunder of the earth.⁶

The Genesis passage is viewed among Christian theologians as the most grossly misinterpreted. Abogunrin, for instance, observes that health and wealth gospels are based on this passage. He notes that often times the passage is interpreted as though God has given humans the mandate for a tyrannical control of nature. He points out that a careful reading of Genesis 1:26-28 shows that far from charging humans to be tyrants using the resources of the earth wantonly, God instructed them to be stewards of the earth and all its other occupants.⁷ This misreading of the passage, Abogunrin asserts, makes it controversial, especially, when considered against humans' expected relationship with the environment.

Unfortunately, Lynn White, Tonybee and others accuse the Genesis passage for the ecological crises experienced globally. Writing from an historical background White argues that current ecological crises are due primarily to "the orthodox Christian arrogance towards nature."⁸ Tracing the environmental crises being experienced worldwide to Western Judeo-Christian thinking he adds, "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen." White argues further that, the Judeo-Christian idea of human beings created in the image of God who is supernatural, transcendent and separate from nature makes humans also separate or removed from nature. This ideology gave humans the impetus to exploit nature with impunity. White also notes that the term "dominion over all the earth" is the religious proof of a destructive, anti-ecological Western world-view.⁹

On the contrary however, scholars like Lewis W. Moncrief, Uzochukwu Njoku, Patrick Dobel, Passmore, Hargrove and others hold that neither the Genesis passage nor Judeo-Christian doctrines are responsible for the present environmental menace the world is facing. Moncrief argues that White's analysis tends to lose sight of the

⁶We are not doing an exegesis of the passage.

⁷S.O. Abogunrin, "Biblical Studies and the Environment," *African Journal of Biblical Studies* 27,1 (April 2009) 5.

⁸L. White Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967) 1207.

⁹L. White, "The Historical Roots Our Ecological Crisis," in L. Pojman, *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Practice*, California: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2008, 15.

fact that humans have been altering their environment from the beginning. For him environmental crisis has to do with the nature of capitalism, technology, democracy, urbanization and individualism and has its roots in the cultural background of the people.¹⁰ Ian Barbour like Moncrief, notes that in some cultures that were outside Christian influence, anthropocentrism was not alien. Aristotle, he observes, viewed plant and animal as existing solely for humans, the Stoics believe that since animals are non-rational, one need not respect them.¹¹ According to Njoku, "nobody engages in explorations simply because he/she read about it in the Bible."¹² The environmentally unfriendly ideas in western philosophical thought originated not in religion but in western philosophy itself.¹³ Foltz on the other hand notes that Genesis 1:28 is the most notorious biblical passage in environmental discourse with its "Subdue the earth commandment." To Foltz fusing biblical interpretations into repeated Judeo-Christian traditions is therefore delusory.¹⁴

Christian leaders like Pope Benedict XVI and Pope John Paul II all support the fact that Genesis 1:26-28 does not give humans the leverage to use the earth's resources wantonly. For example Pope Benedict XVI points out that, "The earth is a precious gift of the creator who has designed its intrinsic order; thus giving us guidelines to which we must hold ourselves as stewards of his creation." He states further that, "Indeed we are all called to exercise responsible stewardship of creation, to use resources in such a way that human beings and the environment should mirror the creative love of God."¹⁵ Also at the 2010 World Day of Peace, Pope Benedict XVI emphasized that the environment must be seen as God's gift to all people, and that the use we make of it should entail a shared

¹⁰L.W. Moncrief, "The Cultural Root of Our Ecological Crisis," in L. Pojman, *Environmental Ethics: Reading In Theory and Practice*, 1970, 512.

¹¹I. Barbour, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, California: Addison-Wesley, Menlo Park, 1973, 15.

¹²U. Njoku, "Understanding Genesis 1:26-28 in the Light of *Sollicitudo rei Socialis* nos. 26 and 34," 5.

¹³E. Hargrove, *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*, New Jersey, Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, 1989, 15.

¹⁴R. C. Foltz, ed., *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment: A Global Anthology* Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003, 279.

¹⁵Benedict XVI, General Audience, *Safeguarding of Creation* August 26 2009 www.vaticana.va/.../benedict_xvi/.../2009(retrieved, 21/1/2012).

responsibility for all humanity, especially, the poor and the future generation.¹⁶

In the same vein Pope John Paul II argues that the dominion granted to humans by the Creator is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of the freedom to "use and misuse," or to dispose of things as it pleases any individual. The limitation imposed from the beginning by the Creator himself and expressed symbolically by the prohibition not to "eat of the fruit of the tree"¹⁷ shows clearly enough that, when it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones which cannot be violated with impunity.¹⁸

Njoku reading John Paul II explains that John Paul II inserts responsibility as a modifier of freedom by arguing that the divine command to overcome nature imposes on humanity a demand to responsibility; to care for it, nurture it and enhance it. *Sollicitudo rei Socialis'* interpretation of the divine command of Genesis 1:28 would necessarily imply a responsible use of the earth's natural resources rather than an outright plundering. This text therefore must be understood within the context of rights and obligations. In his contribution, Njoku emphasizes that protection of the atmosphere is both a moral responsibility and a spiritual answer to the divine invitation for humanity to contribute to the creation of a more inhabitable world.¹⁹

The Pontifical Biblical Commission of the Catholic Church argues that the dominion mentioned in Genesis 1:26-28 carries with it a responsibility. This responsibility must be exercised in a wise and caring manner in the similitude of the Sovereignty of God himself over his creation. Humans, the Commission argues, can utilize scientific methods in improving their wellbeing but this must be done within the limits appointed by the creator and anything contrary would reduce the earth to a mere object of exploitation, and this could destroy the delicate balance and harmony of nature.²⁰

¹⁶Benedict XVI, Message on the World Day of Peace January 1, 2010 www.zenith.org (retrieved, 21/1/2012).

¹⁷Cf. Gen 2:16-17.

¹⁸John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei Socialis*, 34.

¹⁹Njoku, "Understanding Genesis 1:26-28 in the Light of *Sollicitudo rei Socialis* nos. 26 and 34," 5.

²⁰Pontifical Biblical Commission, www.zenith.org.

Though scholars like Lynn White Jr. have continued to blame the environmental crisis being experienced the world over on Judeo-Christian understanding, it is glaring that, it is not the Christian worldview that encourages the abuse of nature, but rather the materialistic pursuit around the world. Hence, it is those who see resources of nature as unlimited, and humans as the ultimate authority in the use of the resources who are exploitative. Neither Judaism nor Christianity encourages the mindless over-exploitation of the environment.

Environmental Issues in the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta is one region in the world that is encumbered with diverse forms of environmental issues. These issues range from land degradation through water to air pollution. All these are associated with oil exploitation activities which started in the region in the late 1950s. Oil related activities from start to finish degrade the environment. Starting from seismic activities (such as site location, line cutting, laying of pipes) to drilling activities and extraction processes all degrade the environment. Though there are different categories of environmental degradation they are interrelated. They may start as air pollution and may end up polluting the waters and degrading the land. We will start with air pollution, then water pollution and end with land degradation.

The Niger Delta suffered minimal air pollution before the discovery of oil in the late 1950s. With the detection of oil in the Niger Delta, air pollution took a dangerous and damaging dimension. The main progenitors of this are gas flaring and pipeline fires. Gas flaring in the Niger Delta has continued unabated since the late 1950s. By the first quarter of 2007, a total of 139 fields were producing 2.2 million barrels of oil per day and 6.2 billion standard cubic feet (scf) of associated gas per day. Out of the 139 producing fields, only 22 are utilizing up to 90% of the associated gas produced. Over 2.5 billion standard cubic feet is flared which accounts for 80% of the total quantity produced.²¹ There has been intensified outcry against the flaring of gas in the Niger Delta. In response to this outcry, most multinational companies rather than stopping gas flaring out-rightly now flare gas horizontally. The effect of the horizontal method is

²¹Awajiusuk, *Environmental Degradation in the Niger Delta: An Ethical Appraisal*. A doctoral dissertation at the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria, 2011, 126.

more damaging as the heat from the flares hit directly on the vegetation burning it out and causing de-coloration. Nocturnal animals migrate from such environments as there seem to be no difference between the night time and the day time. Such is the case in communities like Imiringi, in Bayelsa State, and Rumuekpe in Rivers State. At Shell Agbada Flow Station in Aluu Rivers State, the gas flare which has been on since 1960 is turned off during the day and turned on at night. This flare burns on the ground without any pool of water to reduce its effect on the environment. At Ikuru Town a community in Andoni, Rivers State, Mr. Finomo, a part time hunter, complains that animals like hyena, grass cutter, have disappeared.²²

Pipeline fires, another factor that causes air pollution in the Niger Delta, are caused by pipeline and wellhead explosions, tanker accidents, artisanal refining of petroleum products, vandalization of oil facilities and sabotage. Pipeline fires are quite precarious as they degrade the environment. At Rukpokwu the fire from the Mini-Ihie Mgbuchi end of Trunk A pipeline exploded on December 3 2003 and burnt for days.²³ On Monday November 7 2011, a spill occurred causing an outbreak of fire at Ikarama. Off the shores Kuloama 1 and 2 in the Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State a case of Chevron Gas Wellhead which exploded catching fire. This occurred on January 16, 2012 and the fire burnt for over a month before government and Chevron officials visited. Dead fishes of varied sizes litter the environment. The air is polluted as natives complain of cough resulting from the smell of paraffin in the air. Sometimes the inhabitants themselves vandalize the pipelines causing the oil to spew into the environment. These, in most cases explode resulting in infernos.

Water pollution, another kind of environmental degradation facing the people of the Niger Delta, is the product of several factors. These include wrongful deposition of effluents and formation water into creeks, rivers and other water bodies, oil spillages and acid rain. Human Rights Watch observed that in Abiteye on Escravos River in Delta State, Chevron reportedly pumped hot untreated formation water directly into mangrove creeks. The water was not piped into the main tidal channel where it would be diluted and cause less

²²Mr. A. B. is a headmaster who took to hunting as a hobby.

²³Awajiusuk, *Environmental Degradation in the Niger Delta*, 126.

damage.²⁴ Bralatei and Manila at the end of a research maintain that effluents being pumped from the Eleme refinery into the Okrika River have an unpleasant impact on the Total Hydrocarbon Content (THC) of sediments from the river.²⁵

Water pollution in the Niger Delta, like other environmental issues, is attributable to oil related activities especially oil spillages. In a report published by Amnesty International it was stated that over 1.5 billion tons of oil has been spilt in the Niger Delta in the past 50 years.²⁶ A look at the spill log book of the Department of Petroleum Resources reveals that between 2003 and August 2009, 2,745 spills occurred and 219,116.00 barrels of crude oil littered into the Niger Delta environment.²⁷ For communities like Kalaba and Ammusa in Bayelsa State oil spillages have become a part of their daily living. Oil spillages still occur in Ogoniland even after Shell Development Company had parked out of the area 17 years ago.²⁸ The same goes for other Niger Delta communities; worse still those within which oil exploitation activities are still on-going.

On December 17, 2011 a spill occurred at Kalaba community in Okordia Clan of Yenagoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Agip Taylor Creek pipelines have suffered innumerable number of spills resulting in the pollution of land, water and air. In 2011 alone ten spills were recorded.²⁹ On Wednesday December 21, 2011 Shell announced the occurrence of a spill at its Bonga Oilfield. The Bonga oilfield is located 120 kilometers off the Nigeria coastline. Shell claimed that 40,000 barrels of oil were spilled into the Atlantic Ocean while oil was being loaded into a vessel. The spill has spread from Akwa Ibom State through Rivers and Bayelsa States to Delta State.

The inhabitants of the Niger Delta region also pollute the environment causing harm to themselves and others. They vandalize

²⁴Human Rights Watch, *The Price of Oil: Corporate Responsibility and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria's Oil Producing Communities*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999, 9.

²⁵E. Bralatei and P. N. Manila, "Chemical Study of Sediment Samples from Okrika River, Rivers State, Nigeria," *Journal of Nigerian Environmental Society*, (2008) 148.

²⁶Coasta, report published by Amnesty International entitled *Petroleum, Pollution and Poverty in the Niger Delta*, 2009, 1.

²⁷E. J. Awajiusuk, *Environmental Degradation in the Niger Delta*, 88.

²⁸United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), *Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland*, Nairobi: United Nations Environment Programme, 2011, 89.

²⁹Eraction field report no. 304, www.eration.org (retrieved 21/10/2011).

oil facilities; carry out acts of sabotage and artisanal refining of petroleum products. They cut through pipes and siphon oil from the facilities into boats in an act popularly known as bunkering in the region. They also sabotage the government by attacking oil facilities in the region. The various militant groups in the region such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) and several others carry out these acts of sabotage. The inhabitants of the region refine petroleum products locally. Unfortunately, all these acts end up degrading the environment land, water and air. All these acts whether bunkering or sabotage or even artisanal refining of petroleum are traceable to several factors. These factors include a feeling of disgust, lack of confidence in both the oil companies and the government, the feeling of being cheated, marginalized and deprived, economic hardship and unemployment.

Governments at all levels could also be responsible for environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. The government tactfully turns her eyes away from the polluting activities of the oil companies. This is obviously because they own 60% of the shares of most of these oil companies. For example, when oil spillages occur government agencies do not respond rapidly neither do they get the firms responsible to clean up the affected area. Gas flaring which has been declared illegal by a Benin High since 1984 is still ongoing. In fact new flare stacks are being lighted. The government has declared "zero gas flare" a moving target.

All these environmental issues in the Niger Delta leave indelible marks on the people and environment of the region. The net effect of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta is an ecosystem so mangled, raped, and denuded that the region has been labelled the most endangered delta in the world.³⁰ Oil related environmental problems, especially oil spillages, have diminished the productivity of oil producing communities. This has resulted in occupational and income losses. For example, at the World Conference of Indigenous Peoples on Environment and Development during the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 the Kings, Chiefs and community leaders of the Niger Delta states:

³⁰Environmental Pollution of the Niger Delta, www.nigerdeltacampaign.com.

Apart from air pollution from the oil industries' emissions and flares day and night, producing poisonous gases that are silently and systematically wiping out vulnerable airborne biota and otherwise endangering the life of plants, game and man himself, we have widespread water pollution and soil and land pollution that respectively result in the death of most aquatic eggs and juvenile stages of life of fin-fish and shell-fish and sensible animals (like oysters) on the land, whilst on the other hand agricultural land contaminated with oil spills become dangerous for farming, even where they continue to produce any significant yields.³¹

The collapse of local economies, induced by oil spillages, has displaced many people from their occupations. Acid rain which corrodes roofs and causes pollution of water and land is an aftermath of gas flaring. Diseases such as cancer of the breast and skin, asthma, bronchitis, are now prevalent in the Niger Delta. Above all, life expectancy in the Niger Delta has reduced drastically.

Discussion

It is expedient as Gordon Wenham advises "to carefully distinguish between what the Bible describes and what it prescribes" thus in this section we are examining what the Bible prescribes in Genesis 1:26-28 in line with the environmental situation in the Niger Delta. The Divine Command Theory holds that morality is ultimately based on the commands or character of God. This implies that the morally right action is the one that God commands or requires. A morally wrong action on the other hand is that which God forbids. The divine command in Genesis 1:26-28 is very clear making humans managers of God's estate, the earth. As we saw earlier, biblical experts maintain that the passage gives humans the responsibility of caring, nurturing and protecting the earth. The Bible permits humans the use of the resources of the earth both flora and fauna and not to destroy them. Rather than take this divine command into cognisance, the multinationals operating in the Niger Delta behave as though it does not exist. They behave more like unfaithful servants who do not care about their master's instructions. Thus, oil exploitation activities in the Niger Delta flout the divine command.

³¹An NGO Memorandum of the Rivers Chiefs and Peoples Conference, Port Harcourt, Nigeria submitted to the World Conference of Indigenous Peoples on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, June 1992, 59.

When environmental degradation in the Niger Delta is weighed in the scale of the divine command in Gen. 1:26-28, it becomes glaring that human's reckless use of the environment contradicts God's command. The interpretation of the divine command in Genesis 1:26-28 as we saw earlier would necessarily imply a responsible use of earth's natural resources rather than an outright plundering. This means that over-exploitation of the environment will have a boomerang effect on humans in the long-run. The divine duty of humans to nurture and tend nature implies then that they should both employ the resources available in nature and also be its manager. This text therefore must be understood within the context of rights and obligations. It emphasizes that protection of the atmosphere is both a moral responsibility and spiritual answer to the divine invitation for humanity to contribute to the creation of a more inhabitable world.³²

The behaviour of humans (the oil companies, government and even the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region) towards the environment can be likened to a first son whose father gave charge of his siblings. He, rather than take good care of the children, bullies them in his bid to establish his position as first son. Responsibility is a modifier of freedom. The refusal to cleanup or the delay in cleaning up oil spills and the continuous flaring of gas in the Niger Delta are all acts of irresponsibility. The destruction of aquatic lives and other biotic and abiotic occupants of the environment is tantamount to irresponsibility.

Interestingly, some scholars have raised objections to the divine command theory. One of such scholars is Barcalow who asked the question: How do we know the command of God?³³ The divine injunction in Gen. 1:26-28 is an appropriate example of what the divine commands. Especially concerning the expected relationship between humans and the environment. In the light of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, the command of the divine (God) in Genesis 1:26-28 is very clear. Furthermore, God's command that humans should be stewards and caretakers of the earth is to restrain them from destroying the environment, and subsequently themselves.

³²Njoku "Understanding Genesis 1:26-28," 4.

³³E. Barcalow, *Moral Philosophy: Theory and Issues* Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1994, 26.

Conclusion

Admittedly, God has given humans dominion over the earth, but not without responsibility. Every right goes with obligation. He has made humans the crown of all creation but that does not rule out the fact that other occupants of the earth do have intrinsic values. But the essential meaning of this “kingship” and “dominion” of humans over the visible world, which the creator himself gave them for a task, consists in the priority of ethics over technology, in the primacy of the person over things, and the superiority of spirit over matter. It is clear that the most serious threats to the Niger Delta region lie in the growing priority of technology over ethics, the growing primacy of things over persons and the superiority of matter over spirit. Materialism and greed are the essential ingredients causing both the multinationals and Federal Government of Nigeria not to invest in the replacement of oil facilities in the Niger Delta region.

The twin principle of solidarity and subsidiarity must be systematically applied to the reformation of the institutions of public life. Above all, humans must see themselves as ambassadors of God and managers who are representing God. It is then and only then they can be good stewards of God’s estate “the earth.” Then will the commandment in Genesis 1:26-28 be properly understood.