

Principles of Land Ownership and Development for Christians

Dean Ohlman

A few years ago I was struck with one of those Eureka experiences—a moment when truth flashes into your mind like a great revelation. It was when I was singing the patriotic song "America, the Beautiful" and came to the familiar words in the second stanza: "Confirm thy soul in self-control; thy liberty in law."

I think I had missed the truth because the meter of the song kept writer Katharine Lee Bates from repeating the word "confirm." What she was actually saying was this:

Confirm thy soul in self-control;
[Confirm] thy liberty in law.

When you consider it this way, as a couplet of balanced phrases, you realize how significant the principle is. It relates to the unique aspect of human nature: Contrary to animals, which act on instinct, people act on their volition. We act willfully, and the result of our behavior is either soul enriching or soul degrading. For the Christian, of course, we understand that to mean how well our wills conform to the will of the Creator.

Consider how this applies to the American system of democracy. If people are able to restrain themselves from harmful and sinful behavior, there is less need for laws and ordinances to protect us from the results of such behavior: more self-control, less law; less self-control, more law.

By our willful behavior we eventually mandate what laws we have. If general behavior is marked by biblical standards and Christian compassion, there is almost no need for law. We realize, however, the reality of the fact that there will always be self-centered people from whom the government must protect us. The government is mandated to protect us from physical harm and theft by the criminal element.

Yet when we examine this in a complex society, we realize that physical harm and theft can happen in a multitude of ways, some of which is totally unintentional. For instance, if I were a builder of fine custom homes, I could find that after investing \$150,000 in a home I built to sell, a man on neighboring land had decided to turn his property into a pig farm. If he were permitted to do so, not only would I likely make no profit on my investment, I would probably lose a significant amount of money.

To avoid such circumstances, most incorporated communities have zoning ordinances—laws that prohibit unintentional harm or "theft" of this nature. More recently, such laws have included protecting the "commons": the elements of the natural world that we all depend upon such as air, surface water, and underground aquifers. The precedent for such laws goes back over a hundred years to the notorious water-rights battles of the Western plains.

These laws form the core of a recently expanded group of environmental regulations that have created a great deal of controversy. For many land owners, such laws seem to violate what they consider to be private property rights. Private property rights are the

basis of America's free enterprise system. What makes the market work in our capitalistic economy is the right of individuals to own materials, manufactured products, intellectual matter (books, patents, etc.), land, minerals, and so forth—and dispose of them as we wish for profit or any other legal purpose. It is how the majority of us make a living; so such rights are important.

As we know from American history, environmental regulations relating to water in streams and aquifers that are shared by several landowners are nearly as old as the nation and are clearly understood and accepted. Few would argue about the right—indeed the necessity—of our government to protect downstream land owners from upstream landowners wanting to dam the stream in order to use most of the water for their own profit or somehow make it unfit for use downstream. Such protection is well understood.

In the past half-century, however, with the development of the science of ecology, we have discovered that there are more threats to our common health and well-being than the depletion or pollution of streams and ground water. Unfortunately, many of these threats have become political and ideological footballs tossed back and forth by opposing groups of individuals—usually private landowners and environmental advocacy groups. One of these controversies, for instance, relates to the importance of wetlands to environmental health and species preservation. In fact, even the definition of a "wetland" is hotly debated. Most landowners are intelligent enough to recognize the clearly established facts about the need of wetlands for flood control and for water filtration. They also recognize that several species of plants and animals can survive only if such wetlands are preserved. In addition, because of increased scientific research and significant discoveries, we are learning new ecological facts at an increasing rate. The ancient belief about all things being connected is proving itself to be true in ways that are both fascinating and fearful.

A further complication in considering the balance of self-control and law is population-increase and the rapid increase in the technological "multipliers of power." Multipliers of power, for the most part, are the tools mankind has developed to make work easier, faster, and more efficient. The simple progression of earth-moving tools provides an example: from hands to a sharp stick to a wooden tiller to an iron shovel to a horse-drawn grader to a motor-driven grader to a bulldozer to a giant land plane. The latter end of this progression, beginning with motorized tools, has had its most profound impact upon our environment in only the past one hundred years, and it has coincided with exponential population growth—growth measured not by addition, but by multiplication.

In short, the population of the earth has virtually exploded in the past one hundred years, and it has been accompanied by unprecedented technological development. This means that there are more people using more tools and more effective tools to alter the face of the earth more rapidly and extensively than at any other time in human history. One does not need to study the data to realize that such a phenomenon is going to change our environment drastically. The rapid depletion of the world's rain forests is a clear example.

How do these facts, then, relate to the issue of private property rights in America—and in particular to Christian landowners and developers?

First, we must study and be ready to deal responsibly with new facts about the impact of human behavior upon the integrity of the earth's ecosystems. For beings with a will and created in the image of God, *knowledge implies responsibility*: when we come to know the truth, we are required to act on the basis of that truth. And we do not confine truth to the Bible. We recognize that "all truth is God's truth." What this means is that Christians seek to live in alignment with the truth from God's *special* revelation, His written Word—and with the truth from God's *general* revelation, the truth available to all people in the created world and in the record of time (God's sovereign work in natural and human history). We could term these two revelations the Book of *God's Word* and the Book of *God's Works*

Second, we must understand what our role is as beings created in the image of God. That role is made clear in the Genesis mandates. First we recognize that God gave Adam and Eve the task of "dominion. . . over every living thing that moves on the earth." They were to "be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28.). While this seems to make man absolute sovereign, we know from the remainder of Scripture that our dominion is always under God's dominion and in God's domain. God owns the earth (Psa. 24:1). A further elaboration of man's role is found in the second chapter of Genesis: "Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it" (Gen 2:15)

When we combine the words "dominion," "subdue," "tend," and "keep," and consider their Hebrew connotations, we recognize that Adam and Eve were to rule over the living things of the earth as benevolent sovereigns, bringing the untamed earth into subjection that it may be developed to God's glory and for the benefit of mankind. And in the process the earth was to be cultivated, protected, guarded, preserved, and saved through the faithful service of husbandry.

Very simply, Adam and Eve were to be stewards of God's creation. Then came the Fall. At the Fall, the earth was cursed by God to put natural resistance in opposition to creative, but now self-centered, mankind. As a result, all of these mandates were severely affected. The task of stewardship was now made more difficult by the presence of noxious plants like thorns and thistles and the turning of man's will to himself instead of God.

It is impossible for us to know for certain everything we lost at the Fall. Nor can we understand how radically the creation has changed from the Fall to the Flood to Babel and through recorded history to the present day. But we do have clear indication from the Word of God that the creation suffers: "It is plain to anyone with eyes to see that at the present time all created life groans in a sort of universal travail" (Rom. 8:22 Phillips).

But there is also hope. That hope comes through the Person and work of the "second Adam," Jesus Christ who through His death on the cross and His resurrection provided for the restoration of everything the first Adam lost. As the Apostle Paul tells us, "It was in [Christ] that the full nature of God chose to live, and through him God planned to reconcile in his own person, as it were, everything on earth and everything in

Heaven by virtue of the sacrifice of the cross" (Col. 1:19-20 Phillips). Paul also refers to this same hope in his letter to the Romans:

"In my opinion whatever we may have to go through now is less than nothing compared with the magnificent future God has planned for us. The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own. The world of creation cannot as yet see reality, not because it chooses to be blind, but because in God's purpose it has been limited -- yet it has been given hope. And the hope is that in the end the whole of created life will be rescued from the tyranny of change and decay, and have its share in that magnificent liberty which can only belong to the children of God!" (Rom. 8:19-21 Phillips).

Many believe that such change in the natural world will not happen—even in part—until after the return of Christ. Influential missionary and theologian Francis Schaeffer did not believe this. In his book *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* published in 1970, Schaeffer elaborates: “

As Christ's death redeems men, including their bodies, from the consequences of the Fall, so His death will redeem all nature from its evil consequences, at the time when we are raised from the dead.

Now in Romans 6 Paul applies this future principle to our present situation. It is the great principle of Christian spirituality. Christ died, Christ is your Savior, Christ is coming back again to raise you from the dead. So by faith -- because this is true to what has been in Christ's death and to what will be when He comes again, by faith, in the power of the Holy Spirit -- you are to live this way substantially now. 'Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. . . . Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.' So we should be looking now, on the basis of the work of Christ, for substantial healing in every place affected by the Fall. . . .

On the basis of the fact that there is going to be total redemption in the future, not only of man but of all creation, the Christian who believes the Bible should be the man who -- with God's help and in the power of the Holy Spirit -- is treating nature now in the direction of the way nature will be then."

This same belief was expressed centuries ago by Francis Bacon in his seminal work, *Novum Organon*: "Man by the fall fell at the same time from his state of innocency and from his dominion over nature. Both of these losses, however, even in this life, can in some part be repaired; the former by religion and faith, the latter by the arts and sciences."

In his perceptive poem "Choruses From the Rock" written in 1934, T.S. Eliot hinted at the same thing: "'Our citizenship is in Heaven.' Yes, but that is the model and type for our citizenship on earth."

Perhaps in no more significant way can Christians demonstrate their Christianity than in their treatment of the land they own and/or have the honor and responsibility to develop.

The following principles of land ownership and land development have been reviewed and carefully considered by several Christian land owners and developers, by environmental scientists, by students of science, and by a number of evangelical Bible scholars and seminary professors. I trust that they may be a catalyst for careful consideration on the part of Christian land owners and developers who are blessed with the opportunity to be God's stewards:

Principles of Land Ownership for Christians

“The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land.”

(Leviticus 25:23-24, NIV)

1. Being created in God's image, I have a wonderful capacity to utilize the land for great benefit—for God's glory, for my needs and those of my family, and for my neighbor in need. Yet I do not truly own the land; it belongs to God, and I am merely the land holder or steward of His property.
2. If I deliberately diminish or destroy the land's capacity to fulfill God's purposes as I have come to know them, there is a good possibility I am acting sinfully. One of those purposes is for the land and all that is on it to offer up praise to God. This is done by allowing the land to carry out its own work in maintaining the natural order—the God-created order that guarantees life and health to all the earth's living creatures.
3. I must recognize that the land is a vital part of a vast and complex ecosystem that keeps all land healthy and productive. If I alter its function and nature without carefully considering its impact on the surrounding ecosystem, I am acting sinfully.
4. God expects me to use the land to meet not only the needs of my own family, but also the needs of its other inhabitants and of those who will be its stewards after me when I am gone.
5. I have a responsibility to care for and respect the living things that occupy the land. If I act without considering their needs and purposes, I am acting sinfully. Remaining ignorant of the ecological characteristics and importance of my land to excuse irresponsible behavior is not Christian.
6. I must not knowingly use the land in a manner that deliberately diminishes my neighbor's landholdings and/or his livelihood.

7. As much as I can control the factors, I have no right to deliberately pollute or degrade the air that passes over the land or the water that passes through or under it.
8. If the previous tenants abused the land, I should consider doing all I can to restore it to its highest purpose for the glory of God.
9. I recognize that no use of the land is 100 percent sustainable, but understanding my responsibility to consider future generations and to avoid wastefulness, I must seek to keep the level of matter and energy loss on the land at a minimum.
10. While the idea of the rigidly ritualistic Sabbath seems to apply specifically to Israel in Old Testament times, there is a "Sabbath Principle" that goes back to the Genesis mandates regarding the need to cease work every seventh day—for our personal benefit and the benefit of the land. Land must not be pressed beyond its capacity to remain fruitful.
11. I must never let the land become a god to me. It is not the land I worship, but its Creator. My relationship with the land is brief; my relationship with the Creator is eternal.

*"The true possession of anything is to see and feel in it what God made it for,
and the uplifting of the soul by that knowledge
is the joy of true having."
-George MacDonald*

Principles of Land Development for Christians

1. **Development.** Most Christian Bible scholars understand the Genesis mandates to indicate that mankind is to work creatively to draw out the potentialities of the creation. An apt word to describe this process is "development." Development is not only a privilege, but also a responsibility of those created in God's image.
2. **Creativity.** The capacity of people to work and be creative is considered to be an aspect of our being made in God's image and a means to honor the Creator. Human creativity utilizes both the fruit of the land and the land itself to develop the potentialities of the creation. However, when this capacity is used in self-centered ways, it is more likely to become a weapon against the earth than a means of responsible stewardship of the earth.
3. **Culture.** We must always ask how our development of the creation will honor God. Human culture requires all to be done to advance God's purposes: the construction of buildings and roads, the extraction of minerals, the cultivation of land, the pasturing of livestock, the harvesting of trees. It is sobering to remember, however, that the very

first city was built to advance mankind's purposes alone, and that the first two world cultures were judged by God for rebellion against His will, nature, and purposes.

4. **Stewardship.** Our responsibility regarding the land and the wider creation is that of stewardship. We are stewards of the land and creation, not really its owners. It is for the purpose of human economic relationships only that we consider ourselves owners. Jesus points us constantly to our higher calling and responsibility. If we had a greater understanding of and concern for our property *responsibilities*, we would significantly reduce disputes over our property *rights*.

5. **Life affirmation.** The land and all that lives on it are part of the divinely created and sustained ecosystems that keep our environment sound and health-giving. Good stewardship must preserve the life-sustaining functions of the land. It is a serious matter to decide to prevent the land from fulfilling its ecological functions. Where the land is needlessly degraded and its ecological functions disabled, restoration is required. When for higher and biblically sound purposes the land is completely covered or made unproductive, its lost ecological functions must be otherwise compensated for.

6. **Values.** We must not hastily come to the conclusion that the best use of the land is to make money from it and then count the "tithe" from such profit to be the best stewardship. It may be significantly better stewardship to help the land to fulfill its primary ecological functions. Many who develop land consider only what such development may return financially and never consider the other values of the land (ecological, agricultural, spiritual, aesthetic, therapeutic, etc.).

7. **Self-centeredness.** There are strong warnings in the Old Testament regarding self-centered use of land and joining plots of land one to another in order to disenfranchise others. The biblical principle of justice requires that all people have access to the fruit of the land. Land development must not be used to deprive others of that right or to selfishly gain wealth while impoverishing others.

8. **Responsibility.** New information often requires new responsibilities. Recent facts about the earth's ecosystems and how they are affected by human behavior now require land developers to examine more critically the uses they plan for the land. It is short-sighted and foolish to resist sound laws and sensible regulations which are designed to protect us all from selfish and irresponsible use of the land.

9. **Government.** Responsible environmental regulation relating to land development is not to be written off as governmental "intrusion." God has ordained government in part to ensure the common good of all its citizens. Katharine Lee Bates, in writing "America the Beautiful" reminded us to "confirm thy soul in self control, and [confirm] thy liberty in law." When people refuse to act in a personally responsible manner, the legitimate reaction of a God-honoring government is more law and more official restraint. Fortunately, the other half of the equation is also true: with more self-control and

voluntary restraint, fewer laws are required. Wise Christians understand the importance of self-restraint and self-control as the chief characteristic of liberty.

10. **Change.** Many standards and practices that are suitable when land is plentiful and human impact is limited will necessarily become obsolete when land is scarcer and human impact is more extensive. It's illogical and reactionary to expect the same rules and practices of development to apply from generation to generation when there is significantly increasing human pressure on the land and its fruitfulness.

11. **Praise.** The flora and fauna of the earth are pleasing to the Lord and are under His sustaining care, regardless of their perceived value to mankind. God delights in all that He has created and has, as the psalmists remind us, given even the non-human elements of the creation capacity to praise Him. Therefore, stewardship-based development requires a clear understanding of the impact of human actions on all living things. The Bible says clearly that God provides for the needs of all the living things He created. While *locally* such needs may sometimes clash, humanity has the intelligence and capacity to ensure that *regionally* all the requirements for a healthy environment for all living, God-praising creatures are met.

12. **Compassion.** The words of Jesus about loving God and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves require us to always ask how our stewardship and development of the land will impact our neighbors. The psalmist David reminds us that, "The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made" (Psa. 145:9, NIV). If the Creator has compassion on all He has made, should we not love the creation as well?

13. **Technology.** Science and technology have made it possible for people today to multiply their impact on the land a thousand times more than those who lived in pre-industrial times. But merely because we *can* do something does not mean we *should*. Technology has made it possible for people to accomplish great good—and evil—in a very short time. Even though it is now *possible*, it is not *necessary* to develop land for human occupation or extensive use in rare and delicate biological communities or in areas prone to natural extremes like flooding, land subsidence, and frequent fires. What we often call "disasters" or "acts of God" would never have happened if we hadn't used modern technology to develop human habitation in such areas with little regard to how we will continue to survive in them.

14. **Economics.** Biblical stewardship principles are prior to and authoritative over human economic principles. Christian developers, as true stewards, claim to answer to a higher Authority than do those who ignore biblical values. This Authority says that you cannot "serve God and mammon." We must keep in mind Jesus' story of the rich young man whose development plans were thwarted by his arrogant disregard for the nature and mandates of God.

15. **Materialism.** Consideration of (1) the impact of the American way of life on the remainder of the world, (2) biblical warnings about materialism and laying up treasure on earth, and (3) the spiritual anemia created by affluence must temper every decision we make about the development of any land we are privileged to manage as God's stewards. We must keep in mind that standards of living that destroy the sources of life are not *high*, they are *evil*.

16. **Abuse.** Study of God's Word and God's World indicates that the earth has both great resilience and abundance. While it can tolerate some abuse and some waste, it does have natural limits. Exceeding those limits has serious consequences. Sadly, what we no longer value and appreciate, we quickly come to abuse. Christians, of all people, should value and appreciate God's creation.

17. **Divine guidance.** God's guidance must always be sought in decision-making—including land development decisions. Land use decisions often have far more significance spiritually and materially than many of the other issues we pray over. For instance, if the truth were known, millions more hamburgers have likely been prayed over than square feet of God's land being considered for development.

18. **Beauty.** Human appreciation of beauty is an aspect of being created in God's image. For instance the trees of the Garden of Eden were seen first for their beauty, and second for their utility (Gen. 2:9). Thus a Christian land developer who ignores the aesthetic aspects of land alteration often becomes a negative witness for the Creator he says he loves and wants to obey.

19. **Goodness.** Good land development honors the name of God and does not violate His nature or His ordinances. However, this does not lead to easy decision making. For instance, while developing land for houses may appear to be God-honoring, such development in a flood plain would not be *good*. Similarly, draining a wetland for the purpose of building a church may appear to be God-honoring, but if that wetland is vital for good regional water quality, for flood prevention, or for maintaining the fruitfulness of the land and adjacent waters, it would not be *good*.

20. **The future.** There are Scripture passages that speak of future "destruction" or purging of the earth by fire. However, many more passages speak of a restored earth. And there are several unanswered questions about the meaning of the "new" earth. Regardless of how a Christian interprets the "end times" prophecies, nowhere does Scripture condone careless use and abuse of God's creation gift because "it's all going to burn anyway." In reference to "heavenly" thinking, T. S. Eliot made a significant point in his poem "Choruses from 'The Rock'": "Our citizenship is in Heaven; yes, but that is the model and type for our citizenship on earth."

21. **Restoration.** The atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ provided not only for the salvation of mankind, but also for the restoration (Rom. 8:21), unification (Eph. 1:9-10), and

reconciliation of the whole creation (Col. 1:20). Our non-human co-worshipers—the rivers, the mountains, the land, the animals, the plants—will share our return to Eden-like conditions, which, as suggested by John Wesley, may even exceed the glories of the original creation. What remarkable things might we accomplish if we lived on the sin-cursed earth today like we will be expected to live on the restored earth tomorrow?

*"Then I heard **every creature** in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!'"*
(Rev. 5:13, NIV).

"On the basis of the fact that there is going to be total redemption in the future, not only of man but of all creation, the Christian who believes the Bible should be the man who—with God's help and in the power of the Holy Spirit—is treating nature now in the direction of the way nature will be then. It will not now be perfect, but it must be substantial, or we have missed our calling. God's calling to the Christian now, and to the Christian community, in the area of nature—just as it is in the area of personal Christian living in true spirituality—is that we should exhibit a substantial healing here and now, between man and nature and nature and itself, as far as Christians can bring it to pass.

—Francis Schaeffer
*Pollution and the Death of Man:
The Christian View of Ecology*