

# **Ecological Ethics and the Involvement of the Contemporary Church**

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## **Abstract**

This study delves into the symbiotic relationship between environmental ethics and the role of the church in fostering ecological responsibility. The thesis posits that the church, as a moral and social institution, plays a pivotal role in shaping environmental attitudes and behaviors within its community. The purpose of this research is to examine the ethical teachings embedded in Christian doctrine and assess their practical implications for environmental stewardship. Major findings underscore the potential of the church to serve as a catalyst for positive environmental change, harnessing its moral influence to inspire sustainable practices. The study recommends strengthening environmental education within church communities, integrating ecological considerations into theological discourse, and encouraging collaborative initiatives between churches and environmental organizations. By leveraging the Christian Bible's moral authority, this research advocates for a more profound integration of environmental ethics into the fabric of religious communities.

**Keywords:** Ecological ethics, church, environment[al] stewardship, Bible, creation-care

## **Introduction**

Ecological ethics also known as environmental ethics, examines the moral relationship between humans and the natural environment, and seeks to address ethical issues

related to the environment and our interactions with it. It has become an increasingly important topic in the modern world as concerns about environmental sustainability and the impact of human activities on the planet continue to grow (Brennan, 2010). The contemporary Church, as a significant influencer of societal values and behaviors, has the potential to play a crucial role in promoting ecological ethics and stewardship of the environment. However, understanding the involvement of the contemporary Church in ecological ethics is essential for addressing environmental challenges and fostering a more sustainable future. The purpose of this study is to examine the involvement of the contemporary Church in promoting ecological ethics and environmental stewardship. By exploring certain Bible principles and teachings, this research aims to provide insights into the role of the Church in addressing environmental issues and promoting sustainable practices. Additionally, the study seeks to identify potential areas for improvement and collaboration between the Church and environmental initiatives.

The study will focus primarily on the involvement of Christian denominations and organizations in ecological ethics, with a particular emphasis on the perspectives and actions of the contemporary Church. While the influence of other religious traditions and secular organizations is acknowledged, the scope of this study will be limited to the Christian faith. Additionally, the study may be limited by the availability of relevant data and the willingness of Church representatives to participate in research activities.

Some of the questions the study seeks to answer include: Is there a theological rationale for environmental stewardship? How are Christian denominations and organizations in Nigeria actively involved in promoting sustainable practices and addressing environmental challenges? What are the perceived barriers and opportunities for the Church to enhance its involvement in ecological ethics and environmental stewardship? In what ways can the contemporary Church

collaborate with other stakeholders to advance ecological ethics and sustainable initiatives?

The study adopted the qualitative research method. Thus, interviews and focus groups were used to gain in-depth insights into the perspectives of Church leaders, theologians, and church members. These methods helped the researcher to explore the motivations, challenges, and potential opportunities for the Church's involvement in ecological ethics. Also, official documents, statements, and teachings of Christian denominations and organizations were analysed in order to gain valuable insights into their stance on ecological ethics and environmental stewardship. This method helped the researcher to identify common themes, differences, and potential areas for improvement.

### **Understanding the concept of ecological ethics**

Ecological ethics is an interdisciplinary field of study that addresses the ethical and moral issues arising from human interactions with the environment. It encompasses a broad range of issues, including environmental protection, conservation, sustainability, climate change, and animal welfare. Ecological ethics is a relatively new field of study that emerged in the mid-20th century in response to the growing environmental problems caused by human activities. Ecological ethics is rooted in the philosophical tradition of ethics, which deals with questions of morality and right conduct (Brennan, 2010; Curtin, 2011). However, ecological ethics goes beyond traditional ethical theories that focus on human-to-human relationships and extends ethical considerations to non-human entities, such as animals, plants, and ecosystems.

Ecological ethics is guided by several core principles, which according to Curtin (2011), and Brennan and Lo (2010) include the following:

**Ecocentrism:** Ecological ethics is based on the principle that the natural world has inherent value and is not merely a resource to be exploited for human benefit. It recognizes that humans are part of a larger ecosystem and that their actions can have profound effects on the environment.

**Sustainability:** Ecological ethics emphasizes the importance of sustainability, which is the ability of a system to maintain ecological balance over time. It recognizes that the natural world has limits and that humans must live within those limits to ensure the long-term health and well-being of the planet.

**Stewardship:** Ecological ethics emphasizes the importance of stewardship, which is the responsible management of natural resources. It recognizes that humans have a duty to protect and preserve the natural world for future generations.

**Non-maleficence:** Ecological ethics acknowledges that humans have a moral obligation not to harm the natural world. It recognizes that human actions can have negative impacts on the environment and that humans must take steps to minimize those impacts.

**Justice:** Ecological ethics emphasizes the importance of justice, which is the fair distribution of benefits and harms. It recognizes that environmental problems often have disproportionate impacts on marginalized communities and that environmental policies must take these impacts into account.

The central concern of ecological ethics is the relationship between humans and the natural world. Ecological ethics acknowledges that humans are not the only beings with intrinsic value and that the natural world has value in its own right. It recognizes that humans have a moral responsibility to

protect and preserve the natural world for its own sake, as well as for the benefit of future generations.

### **Implications of Ecological Ethics**

Ecological ethics has significant practical implications for environmental policy and decision-making. It has led to the development of new ethical frameworks and decision-making tools aimed at promoting environmental protection and sustainability. Some of the practical implications of ecological ethics include the following:

**Environmental Protection:** Ecological ethics has led to the development of new environmental protection policies and regulations aimed at reducing pollution, conserving natural resources, and protecting endangered species.

**Sustainable Development:** Ecological ethics has led to the development of new models of sustainable development that balance economic growth with environmental protection.

**Climate Change:** Ecological ethics has led to increased recognition of the moral imperative to address climate change and has spurred action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

**Animal Welfare:** Ecological ethics has led to increased concern for the welfare of animals and has led to the development of new animal welfare policies and regulations.

### **Cases of ecological crises in contemporary world**

Ecological crises have become a major concern in contemporary society due to the increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters, climate change, biodiversity loss,

and pollution. These crises have resulted in significant economic, social, and environmental consequences, affecting not only human populations but also the natural world.

One of the most pressing ecological crises in the contemporary world is climate change, which has been caused by human activities such as burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial agriculture. The impacts of climate change are widespread and include rising sea levels, more frequent and severe weather events, and changes in precipitation patterns. For instance, the Arctic sea ice has been melting at an alarming rate, resulting in the loss of habitat for polar bears and other species that rely on it for survival (Steffen et al., 2018). Additionally, climate change has been linked to food insecurity, water scarcity, and the spread of vector-borne diseases such as dengue fever and malaria (Watts et al., 2017).

Another ecological crisis that has received significant attention in recent years is the loss of biodiversity, which has been caused by habitat destruction, pollution, and overexploitation of natural resources. The impacts of biodiversity loss are far-reaching and include the degradation of ecosystem services such as pollination, carbon sequestration, and nutrient cycling. For example, the decline of pollinators such as bees and butterflies has been linked to reduced crop yields and increased food insecurity (Potts et al., 2016). Additionally, the loss of biodiversity can lead to the emergence of zoonotic diseases such as Ebola and COVID-19 (Daszak et al., 2020).

Another ecological crisis that has been a cause for concern is the pollution of air, water, and soil, which has been caused by industrial activities, transportation, and agriculture. The impacts of pollution are widespread and include respiratory illnesses, waterborne diseases, and soil degradation. For instance, air pollution has been linked to increased rates of lung cancer, heart disease, and stroke (Cohen et al., 2017). Additionally, water pollution can lead to

the contamination of drinking water sources, resulting in the spread of waterborne diseases such as cholera and typhoid fever (Prüss-Ustün et al., 2019).

While these ecological crises have significant impacts on human populations and the natural world, there are possible solutions to mitigate their effects. For instance, reducing greenhouse gas emissions through the use of renewable energy sources, improving land-use practices, and promoting sustainable agriculture can help to address climate change (IPCC, 2018). Additionally, protecting and restoring natural habitats, reducing the use of pesticides and fertilizers, and promoting sustainable fishing practices can help to address biodiversity loss (CBD, 2010). Finally, improving waste management practices, reducing the use of single-use plastics, and promoting green transportation can help to address pollution (UNEP, 2018).

### **Historical Perspectives on Ecological Ethics in the Church**

The issue of ecological ethics, particularly as it pertains to the Christian church, has a long and complex history. This history can be traced back to the earliest days of Christianity, and it has evolved over time in response to changing cultural, political, and environmental conditions.

#### **Early Christian Perspectives**

Early Christian perspectives on ecological ethics can be traced back to the teachings of Jesus Christ and the writings of the early Church Fathers. In the Bible, there are numerous passages that emphasize the importance of caring for the environment and living in harmony with nature. For example, in the book of Genesis, God instructs Adam and Eve to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28), which can be interpreted as a call to stewardship and responsible management of the earth’s resources.

One of the key principles of early Christian ecological ethics is the idea of stewardship, which is the belief that humans are entrusted with the care of the earth by God. This idea is reflected in the writings of St. Basil the Great, who wrote, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it” (Psalm 24:1), emphasizing the belief that humans are not the owners of the earth, but rather its caretakers (Basil, n.d).

Another important aspect of early Christian ecological ethics is the concept of interconnectedness, which is the idea that all living beings are interconnected and dependent on each other for survival. This idea is reflected in the writings of St. Francis of Assisi, who saw all of creation as a reflection of God’s goodness and beauty, and urged his followers to treat all creatures with respect and compassion (Francis of Assisi, n.d).

The early Christian church had a complex relationship with the natural world. On the one hand, early Christian fathers such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas saw the natural world as a reflection of God’s glory and a source of spiritual insight. On the other hand, early Christian writers also saw the natural world as fallen and corrupted by sin, and they often viewed it with suspicion and contempt (Berry, 1999; McFague, 2008).

Despite these mixed attitudes, early Christian writers did articulate some principles that can be seen as precursors to modern ecological ethics. For example, St. Francis of Assisi, who lived in the 13th century, is often cited as an early advocate for environmental protection. He saw the natural world as a manifestation of God’s love and argued that humans had a moral obligation to protect and preserve it (Pope Francis, 2015).

## **The Reformation and Enlightenment**

The Reformation and Enlightenment periods marked a significant shift in the way that Christians thought about the



natural world. The Reformation, which began in the 16th century, emphasized the importance of individual conscience and personal responsibility, and this emphasis eventually led to a greater concern for social justice and the common good. The Enlightenment, which began in the 17th century, emphasized reason and empirical observation, and this emphasis eventually led to a greater appreciation for the natural world and its inherent value (McFague, 2008). During this period, Christian writers began to articulate more explicitly ecological ethics principles. For example, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, saw environmental stewardship as a key component of Christian discipleship. He argued that humans had a moral obligation to care for the earth and its inhabitants, and he called for a more responsible use of natural resources (Wesley, 1744).

### **The Modern Era**

The modern era, which began in the 19th century, saw a growing concern for environmental protection and sustainability. This concern was driven in part by the industrial revolution and its negative impacts on the environment. In response, many Christian writers began to articulate more explicitly ecological ethics principles. For example, in his 1967 encyclical letter “*Populorum Progressio*,” Pope Paul VI called for a more responsible use of natural resources and a greater concern for the welfare of future generations. Similarly, in his 2015 encyclical letter “*Laudato Si'*,” Pope Francis called for a more integrated approach to environmental protection, one that recognizes the interconnectedness of the natural world and the importance of social justice (Pope Francis, 2015).

### **Development of contemporary church’s involvement in environmental ethics**

The contemporary church’s involvement in environmental ethics can be traced back to the mid-20th century, when

concerns about the environmental impact of human activities began to grow. Since then, the church has increasingly recognized the importance of ecological ethics and has become more involved in promoting environmental protection and sustainability.

### **Catholic Tradition**

In the Catholic tradition, the modern church's involvement in environmental ethics can be traced back to the 1967 encyclical letter “*Populorum Progressio*” by Pope Paul VI. In this letter, Pope Paul VI called for a more responsible use of natural resources and a greater concern for the welfare of future generations. He argued that environmental degradation was a threat to social justice and that promoting environmental protection was an essential part of the church’s mission (Vatican, 2001).

Since then, the Catholic Church has continued to be involved in environmental ethics through a variety of initiatives and statements. For example, in 2001, the Vatican issued a statement on climate change, in which it recognized the scientific consensus on the issue and called for urgent action to mitigate its impacts. As already mentioned, in 2015, Pope Francis issued the encyclical letter “*Laudato Si'*,” in which he called for a more integrated approach to environmental protection, one that recognizes the interconnectedness of the natural world and the importance of social justice (Pope Francis, 2015).

### **Protestant Tradition**

In the Protestant tradition, the modern church's involvement in environmental ethics can be traced back to the 1970s, when a growing number of Protestant theologians began to articulate ecological ethics principles. For example, in 1973, the World Council of Churches issued the “*Declaration on the Environmental Crisis*,” in which it called for a more

responsible use of natural resources and a greater concern for the welfare of future generations (WCC, 1973).

Since then, the Protestant church has continued to be involved in environmental ethics through a variety of initiatives and statements. For example, in 2004, the National Association of Evangelicals issued the “Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility,” in which it called for a more responsible use of natural resources and a greater concern for the welfare of future generations (National Association of Evangelicals, 2004). In 2006, the United Church of Christ issued a resolution on climate change, in which it recognized the scientific consensus on the issue and called for urgent action to mitigate its impacts. Today, many churches, especially in the West, are working to promote environmental protection and sustainability in their communities and beyond, through a variety of initiatives and statements (United Church of Christ, 2006).

### **Theological basis for environmental stewardship**

The theological basis for environmental stewardship is deeply rooted in Christian beliefs and teachings. In the Bible, the concept of stewardship is central to understanding humanity’s relationship with the environment. In Genesis 2:15, God commands Adam to “tend and keep” the Garden of Eden, indicating a responsibility to care for and preserve the natural world. This idea of stewardship is further reinforced in Psalm 24:1, which states, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.” This verse highlights the fundamental theological principle that the Earth and all its inhabitants belong to God. In the context of environmental stewardship, Psalm 24:1 serves as a reminder that humans are not the ultimate owners of the Earth, but rather caretakers entrusted with the responsibility to protect and preserve God’s creation.

When examining Psalm 24:1 through the lens of environmental stewardship, it emphasizes the concept of stewardship as a divine mandate. DeWitt (1994) underscores the significance of this verse in shaping our understanding of environmental stewardship. He argues that recognizing the Earth as belonging to the Lord implies a sense of sacredness and responsibility towards the natural world. He writes, “The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (p. 19).

Furthermore, the verse from Psalm 24:1 challenges humans to acknowledge their role as stewards of God’s creation. It calls for a shift in perspective from viewing the Earth as a resource to be exploited for personal gain to recognizing it as a sacred trust to be nurtured and protected for future generations. By embracing the message of Psalm 24:1, individuals are called to practice environmental stewardship by caring for the Earth and all its inhabitants in a manner that honors the divine ownership of creation.

Another important key theological principle that underpins environmental stewardship is the belief in the interconnectedness of all creation. In his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and the environment, stating that “everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity” (Francis, 2015, p. 91). This interconnectedness highlights the importance of caring for the environment as a way of honoring God's creation and respecting the inherent value of all living beings.

Another theological basis for environmental stewardship is the understanding of humans as co-creators with God. Wilkinson (1980) argues that humans have a responsibility to care for the earth as partners in God's ongoing creation. He writes, “We are called to be co-creators with God, working in harmony with the natural world to bring about flourishing and

abundance for all of creation” (p. 35). By embracing these theological principles, Christians can fulfill their calling to be faithful stewards of the earth and work towards a more sustainable and just future for all.

### **Importance of the contemporary church in promoting ecological ethics**

As the world faces ever-increasing environmental challenges, the contemporary church has a crucial role to play in promoting ecological ethics, as it has a significant influence on the beliefs and behaviors of its members. The church can help to shape the attitudes and values of its members towards the natural world, encouraging them to be good stewards of the environment and to take action to address ecological crises.

**Theological Approach:** One of the key roles of the contemporary church in promoting ecological ethics is through its theological approach. The church can draw from its religious teachings to help its members understand the importance of the environment and their responsibility towards it. For instance, many Christian denominations believe that God created the world and that it is therefore sacred and worthy of protection (Genesis 1:1-31, NIV). Additionally, many Christian teachings emphasize the importance of social justice, which includes the protection of the environment and natural resources. The church can use these teachings to promote ecological ethics and to encourage its members to take action to address ecological crises.

**Educational Approach:** Another role of the contemporary church in promoting ecological ethics is through its educational approach. The church can provide its members with information and resources on environmental issues, helping them to understand the causes and consequences of ecological crises. The church can also provide education on sustainable practices and conservation efforts, encouraging its members to adopt more environmentally-friendly behaviors.

For instance, churches can organize workshops, seminars, and other educational events to promote eco-friendly practices such as recycling, reducing energy consumption, and using sustainable transportation.

**Activism-oriented Approach:** The contemporary church can play a role in promoting ecological ethics through its activism-oriented approach. The church can use its influence and resources to advocate for environmental policies and to support conservation efforts. For instance, the church can partner with environmental organizations to promote conservation efforts, such as reforestation, habitat restoration, and wildlife conservation. Additionally, the church can use its platform to raise awareness about environmental issues and to engage in political activism aimed at promoting environmental protection.

These approaches can be illustrated in the work of various Christian denominations around the world. For instance, the Catholic Church has been a vocal advocate for environmental protection, with Pope Francis releasing the encyclical “Laudato Si” in 2015, which called for a “global ecological conversion” (Francis, 2015). The document emphasized the interconnectedness of social justice and environmental protection and called on Catholics to address the root causes of ecological crises. Similarly, the Anglican Communion has been active in promoting environmental protection, with its 2015 “Lambeth Declaration on Climate Change” calling for immediate action to address climate change (Anglican Communion, 2015). Additionally, many individual churches and congregations around the world have taken action to promote ecological ethics through education, conservation efforts, and political activism.

**Leadership:** The contemporary church can also provide influential leadership on environmental issues. The church has a significant presence in many communities around the world and can use its influence to promote environmental

protection and sustainability. For example, most churches in Nigeria has a vast network of schools, hospitals, and social service organizations, which can be leveraged to promote environmental education and advocacy.

**Community engagement:** The contemporary church can also play a crucial role in engaging communities on environmental issues. Churches are often at the center of communities and can provide a space for dialogue, education, and action on environmental issues. For example, many churches are involved in local environmental initiatives, such as community gardens, recycling programs, and energy conservation projects (Sider & Unruh, 2004).

### **Challenges with promoting ecological ethics in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, the promotion of ecological ethics faces several challenges, ranging from lack of awareness to limited resources and government policies.

**Lack of Awareness:** One of the major challenges in promoting ecological ethics in Nigeria is the lack of environmental awareness among the people. According to Okonkwo and Nwosu (2017), many Nigerians are not aware of the negative effects of environmental degradation and climate change. This lack of awareness makes it difficult for the church and other stakeholders to promote ecological ethics, as people do not see the need for it. As noted by Akinpelu (2018), the church has a critical role to play in creating environmental awareness and educating the people on the importance of ecological ethics. However, this cannot be achieved without first addressing the issue of environmental illiteracy.

**Limited Resources:** Another challenge facing the promotion of ecological ethics in Nigeria is the limited resources available to the church and other stakeholders. As noted by Akinpelu (2018), many churches in Nigeria operate in poor communities and struggle to meet the basic needs of their members. This

makes it difficult for them to invest in environmental protection and promotion of ecological ethics. Additionally, the government and other stakeholders often prioritize economic development over environmental protection, leaving little resources for ecological ethics promotion.

**Lack of Political Will:** The promotion of ecological ethics in Nigeria is also hindered by the lack of political will on the part of the government. According to Ogunrinola et al. (2019), the government's policies and actions often prioritize economic growth over environmental concerns, making it difficult for the church and other stakeholders to promote ecological ethics. This lack of political will has contributed to environmental degradation in Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta region, where oil exploration and exploitation have led to widespread pollution and environmental degradation.

**Inadequate Legal Framework:** The promotion of ecological ethics in Nigeria is also hindered by inadequate legal frameworks. According to Ogunrinola et al. (2019), Nigeria's legal framework for environmental protection is weak and poorly enforced. This has created a situation where individuals and corporations can engage in activities that harm the environment without fear of legal consequences. The weak legal framework has also made it difficult for the church and other stakeholders to hold the government accountable for its environmental policies and actions.

**Inadequate Funding:** The promotion of ecological ethics in Nigeria is also hindered by inadequate funding. According to Akinpelu (2018), many churches and other stakeholders lack the financial resources needed to invest in environmental protection and promotion of ecological ethics. This makes it difficult for them to undertake environmental projects such as reforestation, waste management, and renewable energy development. Additionally, the government funding for environmental protection is often inadequate, making it



difficult for them to implement policies and programs aimed at promoting ecological ethics.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, ecological ethics is a critical component of environmental sustainability, and the contemporary church has a crucial role to play in promoting ecological ethics. The church can promote ecological ethics by creating environmental awareness, investing in environmental protection, engaging in advocacy and lobbying, strengthening legal frameworks, and engaging in fundraising activities. The promotion of ecological ethics requires a collective effort from the church, government, and other stakeholders to overcome the barriers hindering its promotion, including lack of awareness, limited resources, and lack of political will, inadequate legal framework, and inadequate funding. With collective efforts, the contemporary church can promote ecological ethics and contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in Nigeria and beyond.

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