

## Article

*The Good of a Flourishing Creation: Seeking God in a Culture of Affluence*

# The Good of a Flourishing Creation: Seeking God in a Culture of Affluence

David Warners and Larry Borst



Dave Warners

Historically Christians have had difficulty formulating a widely accepted ethic and praxis regarding material wealth. This confusion has roots in the scriptures themselves, where material wealth is described in terms of both blessing and caution. The consumptive, affluent lifestyles enjoyed by many North American Christians today find strong affirmation in John Schneider's *The Good of Affluence* (2002). Our central response to Schneider's justification of material affluence is that its focus is too limited. By concentrating on the individual and his or her immediate material context, Schneider seems to overlook God's more encompassing desire for all of creation to flourish. We contrast Schneider's perspective with ours using a rubric based on the biblical concept of *shalom*. The distinctions include: the interpretation of God's primary desire for human beings (flourishing materially vs. flourishing in diverse ways); the fundamental nature of human beings (as individuals vs. as members of communities); a prescribed human-creation model (ruler over creation vs. servant within creation); and the character of our fundamental governing system (unrestrained capitalism/consumption vs. limit-bounded capitalism/sustainability). Neither blindly condemning nor uncritically condoning material affluence, we propose a model for assessing material affluence based on *shalomic* living. We hold that God's desire for human beings to flourish is subsumed within (but not replaced by) his desire for all of creation to flourish.

Material  
human  
affluence  
typically comes  
at a cost to  
nonhuman  
creation.

**F**or the past several years, I (Dave) have taught a spring course at the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, a Christian Biological Station in northern Michigan. When I teach at Au Sable, I stay at one of the small cabins they have in a little cluster of buildings on the shore of Big Twin Lake. On most days, after returning from field trips for supper, I stay in the classroom with students until dusk, at which time I walk the half-mile or so back to my cabin.

During these walks, I am treated to a host of evening forest sounds, including frog choruses, small mammal rustlings, and a variety of bird songs. Usually one of the birds I hear is the common loon—who makes an eerie, prehistoric sounding wail that is unmistakable. Without going into details of this bird's biology, it is important to note that loons nest on the shores of lakes that are typically found in remote, undisturbed locations. True to this pattern, the loons do not nest on Big Twin Lake by Au Sable, most likely because summer cabins and cottages surround it. Rather, the loons use Big Twin Lake to feed on the fish found in these waters.

A pattern I have noticed each spring is that human activity around the lake increases substantially as Memorial Day approaches. Many of the cottage owners make their pilgrimage to Big Twin Lake for this holiday weekend. The intensification of human activity is mirrored by a disappearance of loons

---

**Dave Warners** grew up in Grand Rapids, attended school with Larry Borst, including Calvin College, where he graduated with a major in biology and chemistry in 1985. Dave earned a Masters in Environmental Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a PhD in Botany from the University of Michigan. Between degrees Dave and his wife Teri lived and worked for the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee in Tanzania from 1990–1992. He has been teaching botany and ecology courses at Calvin College since 1997. Dave's research interests include restoration ecology, plant systematics and implications of intentional creation-care living. Dave enjoys a variety of outdoor activities with Teri and their three children, many of which are enjoyed with the Borst family. Dave can be contacted at [dwarners@calvin.edu](mailto:dwarners@calvin.edu).

from the lake during this same period. From Thursday night through Monday night there are no loon calls from the waters of Big Twin Lake. The human presence is too acute for the birds to enjoy comfortable fishing.

I tell this story as illustration that material human affluence typically comes at a cost to nonhuman creation. The structures around Big Twin Lake are second homes for the people who own them. The boats and jet skis that are ever-present during the holiday weekend are luxury items for individuals who enjoy a lifestyle well above that of subsistence living. While this increased material prosperity may be of benefit to human beings, it has a detrimental effect on the welfare of loons.

I know that I need to be careful in assessing this situation. My income, like that of many North Americans, is clearly at a level above that of subsistence living. Furthermore, one of the cabins on this lake that supports human activity is the one in which I stay. Yet the questions that emerge from this illustration require attention. Does God desire material affluence for human beings? Is the achievement of human affluence more important than the welfare of the broader creation? Does material affluence always necessitate a degradation of creation? Is our current governing economic system (modern capitalism) able to protect nonhuman creation as it responds to resource depletion by increased market prices?

John Schneider's *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Affluence*<sup>1</sup> has helped to bring me face to face with the challenge of affluence and the potential conflicts it raises for Christians today. This paper represents a working out of questions raised by the loon story, and in the end, offers a new perspective from which such questions can be more appropriately engaged.

## Introduction

When living in Tanzania, my wife and I encountered the notion that taking something one needs from a North American is like taking a bucket of water out of a large river: there will always be more water to replace the bucket that was removed. Ethical implications aside, this is a notion that accurately depicts the concept of affluence—"having a generously sufficient and typically increasing supply of material possessions."

A related, but more encompassing concept is "to flourish." This word bears the same root and image as the verb, "to flower." According to Webster's dictionary, "to flourish" is "to grow luxuriantly" or "to thrive."<sup>2</sup>

Affluence is a condition with which the church historically has struggled, and yet a condition that many North American Christians enjoy today at unprecedented levels. In this culture, affluence is seen as a precondition for flourishing, and at times the two concepts are treated as the same (consider the image raised by the phrase, "the good life"). However, recent studies indicate that in the midst of all this affluence, the actual flourishing of North Americans is remarkably low.<sup>3</sup> While material possessions have become a hallmark of our society, contentment and happiness (i.e., "thriving") have not.

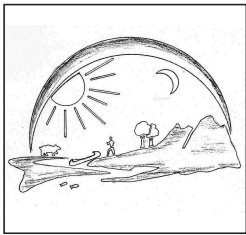
Into this peculiar situation, Schneider articulates a bold and thoughtful justification for lifestyles enjoyed by many North American Christians, lifestyles that too often are simply assumed without the careful thought and assessment they demand.<sup>4</sup> In so doing, he gives the often-neglected business community a theological voice in discussions on resource use and creation care. Schneider raises several legitimate points that environmentalists would benefit from acknowledging. He notes that God desires material affluence for his human subjects; God expects and desires for us to delight in the goodness of his creation; North American capitalism has made valuable contributions to the environmental movement; and, much good can result from material affluence. In sum, we believe a theological perspective on wealth generation, such as Schneider offers, is a perspective that must be engaged when stewardship is considered. Today material affluence comes with too great a cost to the creation and holds too much potential benefit for the creation for it any longer to be left out of discussions on creation care.

*Affluence is a condition with which the church historically has struggled, and yet a condition that many North American Christians enjoy today at unprecedented levels.*



Larry Borst

**Larry Borst** graduated from Calvin College in 1984 with a major in philosophy. He then graduated from Calvin Seminary in 1989 with a Masters in Theological Studies. He received a teaching certificate from Grand Valley State University in 1990 and has studied World Religion at Western Michigan University. Since 1992, Larry has taught religion at Grand Rapids Christian High School. Larry and his wife, Gretchen, have three children and live next to Calvin's Nature Preserve where he fights the ravages of invader species such as Buckthorn and Garlic Mustard. Larry enjoys reading, camping, hiking, building wooden kayaks and talking with his still close friend Dave about the world, issues of the day, and life in general. Larry can be contacted at [lborst@gcrs.org](mailto:lborst@gcrs.org).



## Article

### *The Good of a Flourishing Creation: Seeking God in a Culture of Affluence*

Yet, while we find Schneider's contribution valuable, we think the context within which Christians ought to be thinking about material affluence is much larger than he considers. We will proceed by identifying four fundamental starting points on which we find common ground with Schneider; then with each we will offer an expanded interpretation that will bring us to a different endpoint. To conclude, we provide a new, yet simple construct of how affluent Christians can assess their material wealth, and in so doing suggest ways that can bring our wealth into a spiritual and practical framework that is more consistent with our Christian faith.

Although this paper is largely a response to Schneider's book, it parallels the wider tension that has been present for decades between environmentalists and the business/economics community.<sup>5</sup> It is our hope that these efforts will not contribute added divisiveness to this tension, but will instead bring these two groups into closer dialogue.

### Points of Common Ground and Expansion

#### *God's Desire for Human Beings*

At the outset of his book, Schneider makes clear that his interpretation of God's desire for human beings is, at its core, one of material blessedness: "... God's primary will is that his human creatures should flourish materially."<sup>6</sup> While we agree that God desires human beings to enjoy life and that a certain level of material affluence is necessary for such enjoyment, we would like to expand Schneider's notion by suggesting this is not God's *primary* goal for us. Words such as "prosper," "prosperity," and "flourish" that appear frequently in Scripture<sup>7</sup> connote more than material flourishing; they refer to a broader notion of flourishing that we defined above. A brief illustration here may help.

When a Tanzanian friend who came to Columbus, Ohio, for graduate work was asked what she thought about living in the United States, she told us she was terribly homesick and wanted very badly to return to Tanzania. Tanzania is one of the poorest countries in Africa, and the place to which she longed to return was Mwanza, a city of one million people with dirt roads in its

downtown district, and desperately poor people living in shacks all along its stony hillsides. But this woman would choose Mwanza over Columbus because, as she explained, none of the North Americans she met had any time to get to know her.<sup>8</sup>

For this woman, and countless other global citizens, the flourishing of relationships means more than affluence of finances and possessions. Emphasizing material affluence as God's "primary will" for his human creatures de-emphasizes so many other aspects of our humanity.<sup>9</sup> It is good for us to recognize that while our North American society is rich in material possessions, we can learn much from cultures less blessed with material prosperity, but richer than us in other ways. While we recognize that God is concerned with our affluence, or our *material* flourishing, we do not think this aspect of our personhood is more important than our social or psychological or spiritual flourishing.

Furthermore, God's desire for human beings to flourish occurs within his desire for the whole creation to flourish. His command, "Be fruitful and increase in number," was not only given to human beings but to birds and fish as well (Gen. 1:22). It follows that mere human flourishing is a hollow flourishing; a flourishing that by itself falls short of God's desire for the creation.

There is now little doubt that the current impact of human beings is seriously jeopardizing the ability of the broader creation to flourish. One line of evidence (among many) is that we are currently in the midst of an epic extinction period. Although estimates of the total number of species on earth vary widely from 6 to 30 million (or more), low estimates for extinction rates are in the range of 6 to 10 *per day*.<sup>10</sup> This rate is far in excess of any prior times, including the most recent mass extinction period that occurred at the end of the dinosaur age.<sup>11</sup> While these numbers may be startling enough as they stand, more troubling is the primary cause of extinctions today—habitat loss from the alteration of creation exacted by a single species, *Homo sapiens*. This situation is documented by a host of scientists and also increasingly recognized as a significant problem by economists,<sup>12</sup> business leaders,<sup>13</sup> politicians,<sup>14</sup> philosophers,<sup>15</sup> and theologians,<sup>16</sup> including Joseph Sittler who notes:

*God's desire for human beings to flourish occurs within his desire for the whole creation to flourish. ... There is now little doubt that the current impact of human beings is seriously jeopardizing the ability of the broader creation to flourish.*



The American epic has come to a turning point in the spirit of our minds. We have, while solving some problems, ignored others. We have fashioned a society and an industrial order at a cost, and the bill is due and payable. The magnificence of our endowment has been cleverly used and appallingly abused. The accumulated garbage of the achievement has befouled the air, polluted the water, scarred the land, besmirched the beautiful, clogged and confused our living space, so managed all human placement and means of movement as to convenience us as consumers and insult us as persons.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, even beyond limiting the ability of other creatures to flourish, we are the cause of their extermination.<sup>18</sup> In a time such as this, when God's masterpiece of biodiversity is suffering unprecedented degradation, a call for human beings to strive for even greater material prosperity seems tragically (for the broader creation and ourselves)<sup>19</sup> misguided.

### *The Fundamental Nature of Human Beings*

One of the great comforts and great mysteries of Christianity is that the Creator of all things concerns himself with the welfare of individual creatures such as us. God wants each and every human creature to flourish, and part of that flourishing includes having basic needs met so that we can enjoy and delight in the fruits of creation. On this note, we share common ground with Schneider. However, the concern that our three-in-one, relational God has for individual human beings does not occur in an existential vacuum.<sup>20</sup> He is concerned with us as we exist within a physical and social context, and these contexts are of deep concern to him as well. God's creation is one in which there is no mere existence, only co-existence.<sup>21</sup> We co-exist in relationship with God, with our fellow human creatures and with the broader creation in which we exist, and God is the loving caretaker of all these interconnections.<sup>22</sup>

In *Creating a Just Future*, German theologian Jurgen Moltmann further emphasizes that as community members we are also in relationship with future generations.<sup>23</sup> Moltmann suggests our generation exhibits selfishness with regard to the generations to come. We are exhausting resources, losing precious topsoil, and injecting poisonous chemicals and nuclear wastes into the earth, all at levels that seriously endanger the quality of life for future human beings.<sup>24</sup>

This emphasis on relationality (in space and time) seems largely absent from Schneider's work. His suggested goal for individuals today is one of achieving personal material prosperity, with apparently little regard for the cost it exacts on others. He states:

It is no doubt why delightful physical actions like getting in good shape, buying a fine new dress or suit, having one's hair done well, shaving and putting on a good aftershave, or getting behind the wheel of a

finely tuned car elevate us from various states of depression and discouragement. The same is true of curling up in a pleasurable sitting room in front of a fire in winter, and of grilling steaks on a cedar deck on a warm spring evening ... And it is the condition of affluence alone that makes full delight possible.<sup>25</sup>

While Schneider's images of personal adornment, choice of personal transportation, personal leisure, and food choice may have the ability to make us as individuals experience some degree of "delight," these lifestyle choices may have significant detrimental effects on our relationships with future generations, the earth, our fellow humans today, and on our relationship with the Creator.<sup>26</sup> Recognizing ourselves as relational beings dependent on the integrated communities within which we exist, should have significant consequences for the lifestyle choices we make. God desires "full delight" not only for us as individuals, but also for the communities we necessarily exist within. For many North Americans, leading lifestyles of restraint will likely be more relationship-affirming than leading lifestyles of increasing luxury.<sup>27</sup>

### *A Prescribed Human-Creation Model*

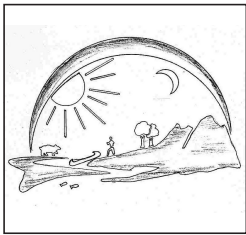
In the second chapter of *The Good of Affluence*, Schneider comments beautifully on the dangers of consumerism and the power that material affluence can exert over human beings, even those "who sincerely profess faith in the true God."<sup>28</sup> We find strong agreement with these comments, as we do when Schneider goes on to describe God as a loving Creator who finds great joy in the things he has made. However, somewhat peculiarly, Schneider writes that this image of a God who deeply loves and rejoices in his non-human elements of creation is an image we should keep in "the background" as we consider *imago Dei*. If this is who God is, and we are created in his image, we wonder why such a revelation should be kept in the *background*. Instead, we believe this aspect of God's nature is of utmost importance as we think about and live out our relationships within the created world.

---

*... in the context of modern consumer capitalism, there is little danger of failing to recognize human dominion. Indeed, the danger seems to be the opposite ...*

---

In his ensuing discussion of *imago Dei*, Schneider follows J. Richard Middleton's emphasis on the image of God as connoting God's royal representative, one who holds a kingly dominion over creation.<sup>29</sup> When considering the Babylonian creation account (and the perspective



## Article

### *The Good of a Flourishing Creation: Seeking God in a Culture of Affluence*

*If our model  
for creation  
care comes  
from Christ  
who gave up  
his life for the  
entire creation,  
then instead  
of viewing  
creation as a  
resource for  
our expanding  
affluence,  
we should  
address the  
question,  
what can we  
give up so that  
the creation  
can better  
flourish?*

of some deep ecologists today who deny any special status for *Homo sapiens*), this emphasis is needed. However, in the context of modern consumer capitalism, there is little danger of failing to recognize human dominion. Indeed, the danger seems to be the opposite, where a notion of royal dominion over creation needs to be balanced by the other voices present in Genesis.

Schneider's treatment of dominion heavily emphasizes the concept of "rule" (*radah*). To *radah* is certainly to *rule*, but to rule in a manner that reflects how the Creator rules. This is where the notion of a God who loves and takes joy in his creation is paramount and should not be relegated to "background" status. A good ruler is one who truly loves and rejoices in the subjects being ruled. A good ruler will insure that the subjects being ruled are allowed to flourish.<sup>30</sup>

God gives additional stewardship directives in Gen. 2:15 where Adam is told to "work" (*abad*) the garden and to "take care of it" (*shamar*). The Hebrew word *abad* is translated elsewhere in the Old Testament as "to serve," as in Josh. 24:15, "But as for me and my household, we will *abad* the Lord." Likewise, *shamar* is rendered with a variety of English translations, including "to keep," "to protect," or "to preserve." The Aaronic blessing common at the conclusion of many worship services from Num. 6:24 uses this same word, "The Lord bless you and *shamar* you." By advocating a utilitarian understanding of *radah* and omitting Gen. 2:15 from his concept of dominion, Schneider develops an image of stewardship that is predominantly nonrelational, controlling and ultimately self-serving.<sup>31</sup>

By contrast, we suggest a broader understanding, infused with the rich meanings of these three Hebrew words, but also based on the model of the incarnate Christ, who took on the very nature of a servant so that all things could be reconciled to God.<sup>32</sup> Stewardship modeled after an embedded, servant Christ will lead to human activity within the creation that foundationally exhibits gentle ruling, serving and preserving.<sup>33</sup> This type of behavior is not consistent with a lifestyle of acquiring ever-increasing material affluence at the cost of creation's integrity. Furthermore, if our model for creation care comes from Christ who gave up his life for the entire creation, then instead

of viewing creation as a resource for our expanding affluence, we should address the question, what can *we* give up so that the creation can better flourish?<sup>34</sup>

#### *The Character of Our Fundamental Governing System*

Schneider is clear in his belief that the material prosperity he promotes is best achieved by a capitalistic, technology-based, growth-driven economy. There is little doubt that such a connection has some validity. Quality of life is greatest in capitalist nations, where income levels and health services are high on a global standard. Schneider's point that it is the affluent members of the world that are at the forefront of most environmental movements also deserves consideration (although not blind acceptance).<sup>35</sup> Yet, to simply stop here (as Schneider largely does) is to ignore the costs associated with such an economic system, costs that typically demand significant sacrifice by both the underprivileged of these societies, as well as the natural world in which these societies exist.<sup>36</sup>

We advocate a broader understanding of economy than what Schneider, and many others, typically consider. At its core, "economy" (from the Greek, *oeconomia*) refers to management of the "household." When the household is recognized to be the biosphere,<sup>37</sup> then a proper economy will insure the welfare of the commodities (monetary included, but not explicitly included) of the entire biosphere.<sup>38</sup> In this vein, North American capitalism falls short of what a proper economy should be for at least three reasons: first, it demands an economy that must continue to grow to be successful even though it is dependent on a finite resource base,<sup>39</sup> second, it focuses on human material (financial) welfare, to the exclusion of so many other aspects of humanity (including personal health, peaceful existence, social relationships, etc.),<sup>40</sup> and third, because it only addresses the welfare of one of the members of the household, human beings.<sup>41</sup>

While not dismissing capitalism as the best system for promoting human welfare, we contend that the manifestation of this system in North America is too unilaterally profit (growth) driven and at its core, unsustainable. Schneider writes:

Eden set the man and woman free from servitude to want, it unleashed them ...

to take human pleasure in the whole of life ... Capitalism has brought us closer to recreating that condition than has any other economic system in the history of the world.<sup>42</sup>

While there is some legitimacy here, the type of unrestrained capitalism promoted these days is far from Eden-esque. It is good to be reminded that even in Eden there were limits, limits that were part of God's good and perfect creation. The temptation of overstepping good and healthy limits is pervasive in our consumer-based culture. We hold out hope that capitalism can become bounded and re-formed in such a way that good limits are set and respected, and where today's key economic concept of consumption becomes replaced with the more shalomic notion of sustainability.<sup>43</sup>

Several economists provide descriptions of just what such an economy may look like. One of the leading voices is Herman Daly, senior economist in the Environment Department of the World Bank until 1994. Daly advocates a steady-state economy based on ecological principles of limits and sustainability.<sup>44</sup> Among Daly's ideas to promote an environmentally sustainable economy are to stop counting the consumption of natural capital as income, to tax labor and income less while taxing resource depletion more, and to support and develop more local markets, instead of promoting global markets.<sup>45</sup>

Two other current voices that deserve serious consideration are Lester Brown and Bob Goudzwaard. Brown echoes Daly's call for an economy that is ecologically sustainable.<sup>46</sup> He emphasizes that our current economic system erroneously assumes that nature falls under its jurisdiction, but instead, the more appropriate understanding is that any economic system exists within and is limited by its natural context. His emphasis that ecologists and economists work closely together is a development we see as vital to move capitalism into a more sustainable arena. Goudzwaard, a Christian economist from the Netherlands, calls for a conversion of a profit-driven economy to an economy of *care* and an economy of *enough*. He suggests that businesses first use their profit to improve the lives of their workers and the community in which they exist (environmental and social), before using profit to grow the business itself.<sup>47</sup>

Discussions such as this on the relative benefits of various manifestations of an economic governing system run the risk of remaining esoteric, and personally "safe." But we must be reminded that any economic system is made up of individual persons who make daily decisions about their behavior, behavior that will have implications (financial and otherwise) on their surroundings. Therefore, in closing this section, we emphasize that while converting an economic system from the top down is an intimidating prospect, changing personal daily decisions in how we live our lives is something about which we all can be more intentional.

Our encouragement is for individuals to realize that the way we earn or spend or save our financial resources will necessarily have an effect on our relationships within the creation. The lifestyle choices we make on a daily basis are indeed significant, and will speak clearly of our commitment or lack thereof to the welfare of the creation.<sup>48</sup> Carving out a lifestyle in this age of North American material affluence that gives evidence of our devotion to a Creator who deeply loves everything he has made, is a challenging agenda. At times, the implications of our lifestyles for the broader creation are not easily identified; at other times, they are clear but we choose to ignore them. Yet, if our faith truly matters, then it will become manifest in our daily decisions.

For example, we all know that riding a bicycle, walking, car pooling, or using public transportation is better for the creation than driving our individual automobiles. And certain automobiles themselves are less taxing on the environment than others. Supporting local and/or organic farmers is better for the earth than purchasing food grown by industrial agriculture. Being satisfied with one home demands less from the creation than having multiple dwellings. This list can go on and on. What becomes clear in these considerations is that the best choice for the creation is not always the most convenient choice for us, or always the most economically expedient. Yet, if our faith truly matters, then such decisions will transcend convenience and economics, and will lead to lifestyles that bear fruits of blessing for the creation. The significance of these daily decisions is affirmed by Wendell Berry who says:

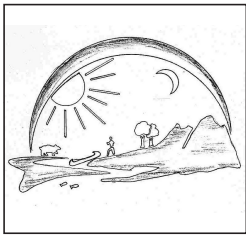
How we take our lives from this world, how we work, what work we do, how well we use the materials we use, and what we do with them after we have used them — all these are questions of the highest and gravest religious significance. In answering them, we practice, or do not practice, our religion ...

If ... we believe that we are living souls, God's dust and God's breath, acting our parts among other creatures all made of the same dust and breath as ourselves; and if we understand that we are free, within the obvious limits of mortal human life, to do evil or good to ourselves and to the other creatures — then all our acts have a supreme significance.<sup>49</sup>

## A New Model for Assessing Material Prosperity

For the reasons stated thus far, a new model of assessing our affluence is necessary. Such a model should be embedded in the understanding that we are relational creatures, created by a relational God who allowed his Son to be sacrificed for the reconciliation of everything he created (Col. 1:15–20). Acquisition and enjoyment of affluence, while neither inherently evil nor cosmically good, must be considered in light of its costs to our relationships with other people and our relationships with the broader cre-





## Article

### *The Good of a Flourishing Creation: Seeking God in a Culture of Affluence*

*Acquisition and enjoyment of affluence, while neither inherently evil nor cosmically good, must be considered in light of its costs to our relationships with other people and our relationships with the broader creation. Shalom is the guiding principle ...*

ation. Shalom is the guiding principle here — thus affluence should be assessed as proper or improper depending on its ability to promote right relationships that lead to a clearer reality of shalom.

And what is the nature of this coming shalom? Shalom is the condition of God's final kingdom of righteousness and integrity, a condition that began to unfold with Christ's sacrifice, but which will become complete when he returns. That is, we exist in an exciting intermediate time, where we catch glimpses now of the coming glory, but a time in which the coming glory is all too often obscured yet by sin. David Wise notes:

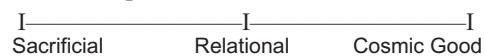
Kenneth Maahs identifies the future peace of creation ... to imply the fullest manifestation of life as God intends it.

"*Shalom* (peace) is God's dream and promise for the fulfillment of his creation ... the knitting together of all the brokenness in the cosmos, in the relations between man and man, a man and himself, man and nature, within nature, and between man-nature and God."

This image of peace is the peace of the original creation. Much of the prophetic image of the coming creation speaks of peace understood in these terms — all creatures dwelling together without violence.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast to Schneider's notion of human flourishing coming from material delight,<sup>51</sup> the biblical vision of shalom gives us a model of integrity for all of creation, humans and nonhumans together living in a way where the entire creation can flourish — materially, ecologically, socially.<sup>52</sup> God's desire for humans to flourish (materially or otherwise) should not preempt the ability for the broader creation to flourish; instead, in shalom such blessing will be realized by all. This shalomic vision of an integrated, flourishing creation should be at the heart of discussions on proper lifestyles and should be the litmus test by which material affluence is evaluated.

Based upon this vision, our proposed model for assessing material affluence begins with a simple illustration:



The Cosmic Good position (Schneider) calls on people to free themselves of guilt and to

uncritically enjoy their affluence. The Relational perspective (largely ours) encourages redirection of the fruits of affluence outward from consumption by individuals to benefit the broader community (creation) in which they exist. While this paper is largely a comparison of the Cosmic Good and Relational categories, we also recognize a Sacrificial perspective that calls on affluent persons to feel guilty about their wealth and to give up their affluence for the welfare of others or for the welfare of the earth. Occupying the middle ground between guilt and affirmation, the Relational perspective regrets and works to minimize the cost on creation that humans have exacted, yet also promotes joyful lives that celebrate sustainability as an intrinsic element of shalom.

For assessing material affluence, we suggest three initial questions that arise from the model: (1) Where are we located on the continuum? (2) Would movement on the continuum result in a more shalom-promoting outcome? and (3) In today's world, to what extent should we, as Christians, be expected to relinquish the material goods our affluence makes possible?

Developing honest and informed answers to these three questions is a challenging task. This appraisal is best done in community, where the wisdom of others can balance our self-interests. Again, this underscores the importance of recognizing our personhood as foundationally relational. In a culture that affirms and rewards individualism, the witness of the church, that we are fundamentally dependent upon one another and the whole of creation, is desperately needed. We must evaluate our material affluence with acknowledgment of these interdependencies and then develop lifestyles that promote the welfare of all of creation.

There is no doubt, in any case, that our way of life will change. The question is whether it will change in an avalanche of evil consequences, or before it, because we have changed our minds, that is, whether necessity will change us or whether, by repenting, we retain some freedom to choose a better way.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

We conclude that a theological perspective on wealth generation needs to be present in discussions on creation care. Schneider's

contributions are valuable in this regard, yet they arise from a limited, human-centered context that we feel should be more expansive. Although some degree of material affluence is part of human flourishing, God desires that we flourish in many ways beyond mere material flourishing. God also desires for his entire creation to flourish, including the relationships that are inherent in the creation. Our current economic system of unrestrained capitalism does more to degrade relationships and the natural world than it does to promote shalom. A more controlled and earth-affirming capitalism is needed. Finally, assessment of our material affluence should recognize the costs and potential benefits of affluence, using Shalom as a guiding principle. ♦

### Acknowledgment

We are deeply grateful for the support received from the many friends and colleagues who have constructively responded to our ideas as well as to our manuscript. Among these reviewers are Jan Curry, John Wood, Steven Bouma-Prediger, Mark Bjelland, Randall VanDragt, and John Schneider. Dave was a participant in the Calvin College Seminars in Christian Scholarship program, Christian Environmentalism With/Out Boundaries, and he received additional support from the Council for Christian College & Universities (CCCU) Initiative Grants to Network Christian Scholars project, *Living as Part of God's Good Earth*.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>John Schneider, *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Affluence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>2</sup>*Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.).

<sup>3</sup>Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1992); Alan Durning, *How Much is Enough? The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992); and Paul Wachtel, *The Poverty of Affluence: A Psychological Portrait of the American Way of Life* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1989).

<sup>4</sup>John Schneider, "Small Luxuries of Necessity," *Perspectives* (Aug/Sept 2003): 5-7.

<sup>5</sup>Irwin M. Stelzer, "Irrational Elements of Environmental Policy Making," in *Making Environmental Policy: Two Views*, ed. Irwin Stelzer and Paul Portney (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1998), 1-29.

<sup>6</sup>Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 4.

<sup>7</sup>See Deut. 29:9; Prov. 28:13; Jer. 29:11; John Tiemstra, "Spiritual Poverty, Material Wealth, Conservative Economics," *Perspectives*, (June/July 2002): 6-9; and in *Gods that Fail, Modern Idolatry and Christian Mission* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996], Vinoth Ramachandra quotes John Calvin as using the term "flourish" to connote something very different from material affluence:

The earth was given to man, with this condition, that he should occupy himself in its cultivation ... The custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam, to show that we possess the things which God has committed to our hands, on the condition that, being content with the frugal and moderate use of them, we should take care of what shall remain. Let him who possesses a field, so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence, but let him endeavour to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even better cultivated. Let him so feed on its fruits, that he neither dissipates it by luxury, nor permits it to be marred or ruined by neglect. Moreover, that this economy, and this diligence, with respect to those good things which God has given

us to enjoy, may flourish among us: let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses. Then he will neither conduct himself dissolutely, nor corrupt by abuse those things which God requires to be preserved (p. 70).

<sup>8</sup>Josephine Mushi, personal communication with David Warners, May 1999.

<sup>9</sup>In *The Poverty of Affluence*, Wachtel writes:

So long as we persist in defining well-being predominantly in economic terms and in relying on economic considerations to provide us with our primary frame of reference for personal and social policy decisions, we will remain unsatisfied. A central task of this book will be to show how our excessive concern with economic goals has disrupted the *psychological* foundations of well-being, which in a wealthy society like ours are often even more critical (p. 2).

<sup>10</sup>Most ecology and biology texts stress the connection between species loss and human influence; with human influence coming both from overpopulation and overconsumption. Among recent publications that discuss this connection are: Mark B. Bush, *Ecology of a Changing Planet*, 2d ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 2000); D. A. Falk, C. I. Millar and M. Olwell, *Restoring Diversity* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1996), 4-48; Richard T. Wright and Bernard J. Nebel, *Environmental Science: Toward a Sustainable Future*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2002); Robert E. Ricklefs, *The Economy of Nature*, 4th ed. (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1997), 593-638; John VanderMeer, *Reconstructing Biology: Genetics and Ecology in the New World Order* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1996), 211-54.

<sup>11</sup>This is a rate well documented by paleontologists and ecologists. The best popular author on the topic of extinctions and the likely fallout if this extinction rate continues is David Quammen. See his "Planet of Weeds, Tallying the Losses of Earth's Animals and Plants," *Harper's Magazine* (October 1998): 57-69; and —, *The Song of the Dodo* (New York: Scribner, 1998).

<sup>12</sup>Lester Brown, *Eco-economy: Building an Economy for the Earth* (New York: Earth Policy Institute and W. W. Norton and Co., 2001); Herman Daly, *Steady-State Economics*, 2d ed. (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1991); —, *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996); Bob Goudzwaard, *Idols of Our Time* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981); and Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange, *Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Toward and Economy of Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995).

<sup>13</sup>Richard DeVos, *Compassionate Capitalism: Helping People Help Themselves* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

<sup>14</sup>Albert Gore, Jr., *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

<sup>15</sup>Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*; Calvin B. DeWitt, "Seven Degradations of Creation," in *The Environment and the Christian*, ed. Calvin B. DeWitt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 13-23; and Holmes Rolston III, *Conserving Natural Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>16</sup>Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001); Scott Hoezee, *Remember Creation: God's World of Wonder and Delight* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998); and Jurgen Moltmann, *Creating a Just Future: The Politics of Peace and the Ethics of Creation in a Threatened World* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1989).

<sup>17</sup>Joseph Sittler, *Evocations of Grace: Writings on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics*, ed. Steven Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 74.

<sup>18</sup>Given such a context, these words from Hosea should command our attention:

There is no faithfulness, no love,  
No acknowledgment of God in the land.  
There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery;  
They break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.  
Because of this the land mourns,



# Article

## The Good of a Flourishing Creation: Seeking God in a Culture of Affluence

And all who live in it waste away;  
The beasts of the field and the birds of the air and  
the fish of the sea are dying (Hosea 4:1b–3).

<sup>19</sup>In this paper, we largely omit discussion on the potential dangers of an affluence-driven lifestyle on the individual person engaged in such pursuit. Surely, there is much to be said about this; Schneider himself addresses this danger quite clearly and we agree with his warnings (*The Good of Affluence*, 42). What remains unclear to us is how Schneider can so clearly warn against materialism, yet then proceed as if human beings are somehow immune to such dangers.

<sup>20</sup>Colin Gunton is a leading theological voice in promoting a relational understanding of God and of human beings as his image bearers. See especially Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 212–36. Also, Loren Wilkinson, professor of interdisciplinary studies at Regent College, has commented extensively on Gunton and expanded on Gunton's theology. See Loren Wilkinson, "The New Story of Creation: A Trinitarian Perspective" *Crux* XXX, no. 4 (Dec. 1994): 26–36.

<sup>21</sup>Steven Bouma-Prediger, personal communication with David Warners, July 2003.

<sup>22</sup>In *Evocations of Grace: Writings on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics*, Sittler describes this mutual co-existence:

I am stuck with God, stuck with my neighbor, and stuck with nature (the "garden"), within which and out of the stuff of which I am made. I may love God, hate God, ignore God. But I can't get unstuck from God. I may love my neighbor, hate my neighbor, or ignore my neighbor. But I can't get unstuck from my neighbor. And I may love the world, hate the world, or try to ignore the world. But I cannot get unstuck from the world (pp. 203–4).

<sup>23</sup>In *Creating a Just Future*, Moltmann writes:

In fact people are not only social beings; they also come in generations. They are created as generations. They live with one another and for one another as generations. Therefore human life stands and falls with the preservation or breach of the contract between the generations which is unwritten but lies at the basis of all life (p. 11).

<sup>24</sup>Drawing from writings of Thomas Jefferson and Aldo Leopold, David Orr in "2020: A Proposal," *Conservation Biology* 14, no. 2 (April 2000) develops an ethical principle regarding our responsibility to future generations:

No person, institution, or nation has the right to participate in activities that contribute to large-scale, irreversible changes of the earth's biogeochemical cycles or undermine the integrity, stability, and beauty of the earth's ecologies—the consequences of which would fall on succeeding generations as an irrevocable form of remote tyranny (p. 340).

<sup>25</sup>Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 61.

<sup>26</sup>See Durning, *How Much is Enough?* for a thoughtful treatment of the variety of associated costs implicit in a lifestyle of ever-increasing material affluence.

<sup>27</sup>In *Beyond Poverty and Affluence*, Goudzwaard and de Lange write: Therefore, in all areas, including education, we must promote the notion that human well-being, both of ourselves and of others, requires first and foremost a life-style of restraint, not luxury (p. 160).

Also, Herman Daly in *Beyond Growth* comments beautifully on how restraint should be part of a lifestyle of gratitude:

The world and our lives within it are the gifts of God, for which we should be grateful. Our gratitude and thanksgiving are expressed in worship, but should also be expressed in restraint. If we love God we will love God's world. If we are grateful for God's gift of life we will not waste the capacity of God's world to support life. If we love God's world we will try to understand how it works, so that we will not ignorantly harm it, like a curious child playing with a grasshopper. We will learn self-control before presuming to control Creation—taking seriously the Buddhist meditation "Cut down the forest of your greed, before cutting real trees" (our emphasis, pp. 216–7).

<sup>28</sup>Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 42–5.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid. Schneider writes:

... not just some, but *all* human beings have this authoritative status before God, and *all* human beings are thus called upon to represent on earth God's rule over heaven. To be made in God's image most basically means to have been given dominion over the earth, under God ... Our realm of rule is ultimately not our kingdom, but God's. But as God's, it is ours, too. The peculiar theme of dominion is thus the dominant one in this part of the story (pp. 47–8).

<sup>30</sup>In *Evocations of Grace*, Sittler writes:

One can rule in many ways. One can rule by "careless" domination; one can rule by subjecting everything to oneself; one can rule by assuming that everything that isn't oneself is good and has value only as it helps oneself. The first is brutish, the second is arrogant, the third is cynical. That kind of rule, in the creation as in a family, is a kind of ruling that is catastrophic. It ultimately destroys the ruler.

But man is to "rule" the earth as God's earth, not man's. It is for man, supports man—but it isn't *man's*. Man, who didn't make himself, is placed in a garden that he didn't make, and he is commanded to care for that garden so that God's creation may *be*, so that he himself and his neighbor may *be*. The command to care is gentle; the results of not caring are violent and fatal (pp. 205–5).

For a beautiful biblical description of just what such a ruler will be like, see Psalm 72 where under the ruling of a just king, the afflicted are defended, the needy and their children are saved, and the land will supply the people with bountiful food and beauty.

<sup>31</sup>The etymology of "*radah*," "*abad*" and "*shamar*" has been brought to light by several authors, among whom are Bouma-Prediger (*For the Beauty of the Earth*, pp. 74, 154). A key word that we do not discuss is "*subdue*" (*kabash*). This concept underscores the participatory influence human beings have in the creation and also suggests that the relationship between human beings and the natural world will at times be difficult. Our omission of *kabash* in this discussion is only because the concept is not specifically raised by Schneider.

<sup>32</sup>The image of a servant runs deeply throughout the scriptures, see Phil. 2:7; Col. 1:20.

<sup>33</sup>While arguing against the enlightenment view that humans are solely individuals, Janel Curry and Steven McGuire give a voice to what Colin Gunton refers to as an "ethic of createdness," arguing that human beings are essentially creatures embedded within community and place. Curry and McGuire present empirical evidence that such embeddedness can be disrupted by the effects of unrestrained global capitalism, particularly as they assess its effects on farming communities. See Janel M. Curry and Steven McGuire, *Community on Land* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2002), especially pp. 182–90; and Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, 228–34.

<sup>34</sup>As a brief addendum to this section, we acknowledge that at times Schneider seems to agree with this interpretation. He writes:

Since it is dominion that represents God's view of nature, and since God's view of nature is that it is sacred, it follows that humans must rule over nature with a respect that is commensurate with that truth. Our role is to set the creation free from harm, to bring out its potential—not to inflict evil upon it (*The Good of Affluence*, p. 53).

It is difficult to understand how Schneider can promote material affluence as a cosmic good yet also hold to such a statement. Our best interpretation of this apparent conflict is that he may not believe that human material affluence has a detrimental effect on the creation. However, as mentioned earlier, we find this connection irrefutable. For further reading we suggest Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*; Brown, *Eco-economy*; Bush, *Ecology of a Changing Planet*; Daly, *Beyond Growth*; Durning, *How Much is Enough?* Hoezee, *Remember Creation*; Tom Tietenberg, *Environmental and Natural Resource Economics* (Boston, MA: Addison Wesley, 2003), especially pp. 583–93.

<sup>35</sup>Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, pp. 30, 31 and elsewhere. Our suggestion that this statement should not be blindly accepted comes from personal experiences in developing countries including Tanzania, Kenya and Belize, where very poor people who recognize their quality of life is dependent on a healthy environment have made great progress in protecting and enhancing their environmental surroundings.

<sup>36</sup>Rolston in *Conserving Natural Value* comments extensively on the unsustainability of our current economic direction. Here are two quotations:

Perhaps there looms before us what some call, rather dramatically, "the end of nature" (McKibben 1989). Formerly, we could count on the natural givens. "A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever" (Ecclesiastes 1:4). But not any more. In this century, humans have stressed these natural systems to the breaking point. The water is polluted; the soil is degraded; the wildlife are gone or going; forests are cut down; deserts advance on overgrazed lands. Humans are upsetting, irreversibly, even the climate; the change will be disastrous because it will be so rapid that natural systems cannot track it. In the twenty-first century, there will only be nature that has been tampered with, no more spontaneous nature (p. 197).

... The challenge of the next millennium is to contain those cultures within the carrying capacity of the larger community of life on our planet. On our present heading, much of the integrity of the natural world will be destroyed within the next century. To continue the development pace of the past century for another millennium will produce sure disaster. If we humans are true to our species epithet, "the wise species" needs to behave with appropriate respect for life ... Ultimately, it will involve an Earth ethic, one that discovers a global sense of obligation to this whole inhabited biosphere (p. 206).

<sup>37</sup>Wendell Berry expands considerably on this understanding of "economy" where he refers to the broader economy as "The Kingdom of God" (Berry, "Two Economies," in *Home Economics* [New York: North Point Press, 1987], 55-75).

<sup>38</sup>Calvin B. DeWitt, *The Just Stewardship of Land and Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Reformed Ecumenical Council, 1996), 124-5.

<sup>39</sup>Herman Daly quotes the Russian author and philosopher, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who states this notion quite candidly:

Society must cease to look upon "progress" as something desirable. "Eternal Progress" is a nonsensical myth. What must be implemented is not a "steadily expanding economy," but a zero growth economy, a stable economy. *Economic growth is not only unnecessary but ruinous*" (*Steady-State Economics*, 9).

<sup>40</sup>Wachtel, *The Poverty of Affluence*, 141.

<sup>41</sup>Brown, *Eco-economy*, 11.

<sup>42</sup>Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 59.

<sup>43</sup>Wachtel, *The Poverty of Affluence*, 160. Schneider in *The Good of Affluence* is correct in pointing out that while many environmentalists are quick to criticize capitalism, they offer little in the way of alternatives. His emphasis on the good that capitalism has and can produce is also well taken.

<sup>44</sup>Daly, *Steady-State Economics*; and —, *Beyond Growth*.

<sup>45</sup>Herman Daly, "Farewell Speech to the World Bank" (1994), [www.whirledbank.org/ourwords/daly.html](http://www.whirledbank.org/ourwords/daly.html). With regard to Daly's third point here, Lionel Basney's writing is enlightening:

What are the words of the solution? They sound like this: boots, dirt, watershed, beetle, tomato, compost, rot, stink and shovel. These are the words of proper scale and proper means. For "serving justice" substitute "feeding"; for "community" substitute "Chet" and "the Smiths down the block." For "nature" substitute "backyard" (Lionel Basney, *An Earth-Careful Way of Life: Christian Stewardship and the Environmental Crisis* [Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994], 149).

<sup>46</sup>While Lester Brown's whole book *Eco-economy* unfolds the author's concept of what an eco-economy will look like, the following quotation offers an overview:

... if the operation of the subsystem, the economy, is not compatible with the behavior of the larger system—the earth's ecosystem—both will eventually suffer. The larger the economy becomes relative to the ecosystem, the more it presses against the earth's natural limits, the more destructive this incompatibility will be.

An environmentally sustainable economy—an eco-economy—requires that the principles of ecology establish the framework for the formulation of economic policy and that economists and ecologists work together to fashion the new economy. Ecologists understand that all economic activity, indeed all life, depends on the earth's ecosystem—the complex of individual species living together, interacting with each other and their physical habitat (p. 4).

<sup>47</sup>We have found Goudzwaard's writing particularly compelling. His voice is one that is beginning to find application in Holland and Germany and one we hope will find an audience here in North America:

If we take the demands of stewardship seriously, then human dignity in work must be primary. Stewardship, a basic principle of the Torah, requires the use of technologies which are sufficiently labor intensive and which suit human beings and their realm of responsibility. It sets strict limitations on the plunder of the environment. If one honors these requirements (thus having enough flexibility to reject objectionable defense contracts or to abandon risky forms of energy development), then income and consumption levels will indeed drop. On the average these levels will be lower than the levels to which we are now accustomed. But we will have deliberately chosen them for the sake of meaningful work, a clean environment and a sufficient amount of extra income for transfer to the poorest countries. We will have moved from biblical norms to responsible production and consumption levels.

Our current economic thinking and social system work in the opposite direction of the Torah. Maintaining economic growth is our first priority. Then arise questions of what to do with the resulting unemployment, the dehumanization of work, the rape of the environment and other problems. Our priorities constrain us to use increasingly large-scale technologies and to accept weapons contracts from wherever they come. These are obvious signs of our slavery to an ideology of prosperity.

No shalom awaits those who follow this ideology (Goudzwaard, *Idols of Our Time*, 104-5).

<sup>48</sup>Steven Bouma-Prediger inspiringly writes:

Christian eschatology is earth-affirming. Because the earth will not be "burned up" but rather purified as in a refiner's fire, we can act with confidence that our actions today are not for naught. Because we await and yearn for a renewed heaven and earth, we can work in expectation that our faithful deeds here and now will be gathered up in the eschaton. Because we rely on God's promises despite the despoliation of our planetary home the whole world is, as the song says, in God's hands. In practical terms, if our news is truly good, then recycling and composting and bicycling to work are not whistling in the dark. They are, rather, hope-filled ways of living in harmony with God's own loving, restorative way with the world (Bouma-Prediger (2002), 126).

<sup>49</sup>Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, 109-10; See also —, "The Idea of a Local Economy," *Orion* (Winter 2001): 28-37.

<sup>50</sup>David Wise, "A Review of Environmental Stewardship Literature and the New Testament," in *The Environment and the Christian: What Can We Learn from the New Testament?* ed. Calvin B. DeWitt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 126.

<sup>51</sup>Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 63.

<sup>52</sup>The book of Isaiah is rich in imagery showing that when God blesses, this blessing will be realized not only by people, but the land itself will also benefit. Numerous texts give indication of what this coming shalom will look like. See, for example, Isa. 35:1-7.

<sup>53</sup>Basney, *An Earth-Careful Way of Life*, 161.