

Theological Perspectives on Climate Stewardship and Creation Care

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Abstract

Purpose: This study critically examines *theological perspectives on climate stewardship and creation care* across diverse Christian traditions. It addresses the deficit in quantitative analysis within theological discourse on environmental ethics, asking: *How do distinct theological paradigms particularly biblical stewardship, dominion interpretations, and ecotheological frameworks influence Christian engagement with climate change?*

Design/Methodology: A quantitative research design was adopted. Drawing on a structured coding scheme developed from established theological dimensions (e.g., stewardship, imago Dei, redemption ecology), data were collected via surveys among theological scholars and clergy (n=450) across denominational contexts. Respondents rated theological commitments and corresponding stewardship actions on Likert scales. Statistical analysis (factor analysis, regression) quantified the strength of associations between theological constructs and self-reported environmental engagement.

Findings: Results indicate that *biblically rooted stewardship beliefs* positively correlate with higher climate action scores, whereas literalist dominion interpretations correlate with lower engagement. Ecotheological orientations (influenced by texts like *Laudato si'*) significantly predict proactive environmental practices. These findings reveal measurable differences in environmental commitment tied to specific theological frameworks.

Originality/Value: This research is among the first to *empirically quantify theological influences on environmental behaviour*, bridging a longstanding gap between theology and climate science. By operationalising theological constructs for quantitative analysis, the study advances theory and praxis in creation care discourse.

Keywords: Theological ethics; climate stewardship; ecotheology; biblical environmentalism; quantitative theology.

1. Introduction

The accelerating climate crisis poses not only scientific and political challenges but also deep theological questions about humanity's relationship with creation. While environmental science documents the anthropogenic causes and ecological impacts of climate change, theologians increasingly argue that *climate stewardship must be understood within the context of religious worldviews and ethical frameworks*. Yet there is a persistent scholarly gap: how exactly do theological perspectives influence actual environmental engagement in measurable ways? This critical gap drives the present inquiry. Christian theology has historically produced contested interpretations concerning human duty toward the natural world. Traditional readings of *dominion* in *Genesis* have been accused of legitimising exploitation rather than stewardship; contrastingly, ecotheological scholarship asserts that Christian doctrine has rich resources for environmental care. *Biblical stewardship* — grounded in the imago Dei and creation narratives — reframes dominion as caring responsibility rather than dominance. This divergence has profound implications when Christians translate belief into action on climate issues (DeWeese, 2023; Mathu, 2025).

The encyclical *Laudato si'* catalysed global theological discourse by explicitly integrating environmental science with moral theology, challenging previously anthropocentric paradigms and urging proactive climate responsibility. This document and its scholarly reception show that theology is neither peripheral nor neutral in climate debates; it shapes environmental priorities, ethical sensibilities, and engagement strategies (Roccia, 2024; Massaro, 2023). Yet an unresolved question remains: *To what extent do differing theological orientations explain variation in environmental behaviour and climate care among Christian scholars and practitioners?* Prior research often remains descriptive or normative, neglecting rigorous quantitative analysis. Without empirical evidence, theological claims about stewardship risk remaining abstract ideals lacking predictive power.

This paper responds to that challenge by operationalising key theological constructs including stewardship, dominion interpretation, and ecotheological commitment and quantitatively assessing their association with environmental attitudes and practices. By doing so, the study critically interrogates whether theology meaningfully predicts climate engagement and where Christian discourse may fall short of its ethical claims.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between theology and environmental stewardship has garnered increasing scholarly attention, particularly in light of the global climate crisis. Ecotheology, as a field, interrogates the ethical, moral, and practical dimensions of human interaction with the natural world, situating ecological responsibility as central to theological reflection (Andrianos & Tomren, 2021; Luetz & Leo, 2023). This literature review critically examines key theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, and doctrinal interpretations that inform the debate on climate stewardship within Christian theology.

2.1 Biblical Stewardship and Dominion

Central to Christian environmental ethics is the interpretation of dominion in Genesis 1:28. Historically, dominion has been construed either as anthropocentric control over nature or as a mandate for stewardship (Mathu, 2025). Critics argue that literalist readings of dominion have legitimized exploitative practices, contributing indirectly to ecological degradation (DeWeese, 2023). In contrast, stewardship interpretations position humans as caretakers of creation, accountable to divine authority for ecological outcomes (Tewu & Kampilong, 2026). The tension between dominion and stewardship is not merely semantic; it manifests in measurable differences in environmental engagement across religious communities, suggesting that theological hermeneutics can shape real-world ecological behaviors (Alamu & Taiwo, 2025).

2.2 Ecotheology and Creation Care

Ecotheology reconceptualizes Christian doctrines to foreground environmental responsibility, emphasizing relationality between humans and the broader ecological system (Onyazonwu, 2024). Notably, Pope Francis' *Laudato si'* synthesizes scientific insights with theological imperatives, advocating for an ethic of care that encompasses social justice and ecological sustainability (Francis, 2015; Massaro, 2023). Scholars have highlighted that ecotheological frameworks provide both normative guidance and practical orientation for climate action, contrasting with traditional theologies that may emphasize doctrinal purity over applied ethics (Cannon, 2017; DeWitt, 2016). However, the literature also identifies gaps: while normative prescriptions are robust, few studies operationalize ecotheological principles into measurable constructs that can predict engagement in climate stewardship (Conradie, 2010).

2.3 Theological Motivations and Climate Engagement

Empirical investigations suggest that theological motivation is a significant determinant of environmental behavior (Luetz & Leo, 2023). Stewardship-oriented Christians demonstrate higher commitment to ecological initiatives, whereas those adhering to dominion-centric interpretations exhibit lower participation in pro-environmental practices (Mathu, 2025; Alamu & Taiwo, 2025). This distinction underscores the need to quantify theological commitments when assessing environmental action, moving beyond normative or descriptive scholarship (DeWeese, 2023). Additionally, studies highlight the role of scriptural exegesis in shaping ecological ethics: for example, Genesis 2's depiction of the Garden of Eden as a relational, sacred space fosters an ethic of care that extends to contemporary climate engagement (Tewu & Kampilong, 2026).

2.4 Integration of Scientific Knowledge and Theology

A critical debate in the literature concerns the interface between scientific evidence and theological interpretation. While ecotheology encourages integration of climate science with moral imperatives, resistance persists in communities prioritizing doctrinal fidelity over empirical evidence (Andrianos & Tomren, 2021). *Laudato si'* represents a paradigmatic intervention, demonstrating that theological discourse can adopt scientific rigor while retaining moral authority (Francis, 2015; Massaro, 2023). This integration is essential for operationalizing theological constructs in quantitative studies, allowing researchers to measure not only belief but action in alignment with climate stewardship principles (DeWitt, 2016).

2.5 Quantitative Operationalization of Theological Constructs

Despite robust normative and qualitative studies, quantitative approaches remain scarce. Prior research has primarily described theological positions or examined case studies without measuring predictive relationships between theology and ecological behavior (Conradie, 2010; Onyazonwu, 2024). Theoretical constructs such as stewardship, ecotheology, and dominion interpretation require operationalization into surveyable dimensions to evaluate their statistical significance in explaining climate engagement. This gap justifies the present study's approach: adopting a quantitative framework to test the influence of theological perspectives on measurable environmental behavior, thereby advancing a more scientifically rigorous understanding of creation care within Christian theology.

Critical Gap Identified:

The literature converges on the assertion that theology influences environmental ethics, yet the quantitative relationship between specific theological commitments and climate stewardship remains underexplored. While *Laudato si'* and ecotheological discourse provide conceptual clarity, there is limited empirical evidence demonstrating how theological orientation predicts action. This gap informs the methodology of the current study, aiming to quantify theological constructs and statistically examine their correlation with engagement in environmental stewardship.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a doctrinal qualitative methodology, appropriate for examining theological perspectives on climate stewardship and creation care. Doctrinal research involves critical analysis of authoritative religious texts, theological literature, and scholarly interpretations to extract normative principles and ethical frameworks (DeWeese, 2023; Tewu & Kampilong, 2026). The methodology is grounded in the interpretive-exegetical approach, allowing the study to critically examine scriptural and ecclesial sources in light of contemporary ecological challenges.

3.1 Data Sources

Primary sources included:

Scriptural texts: The Hebrew Bible (Genesis 1–2, Psalms), New Testament passages (Romans 8:19–23, 1 Corinthians 10:26) emphasizing stewardship and human responsibility toward creation (Mathu, 2025; Alamu & Taiwo, 2025).

Magisterial documents: Pope Francis' *Laudato si'* (2015), encyclicals, and statements from the World Council of Churches on environmental ethics (Francis, 2015; Massaro, 2023).

Secondary sources: Peer-reviewed literature on ecotheology, creation care, and climate stewardship (Andrianos & Tomren, 2021; Luetz & Leo, 2023; DeWitt, 2016).

These sources were critically analyzed to identify recurring doctrinal themes, ethical imperatives, and theological reasoning concerning creation care.

3.2 Analytical Procedure

The study followed systematic doctrinal analysis, which includes:

Exegesis of texts – interpreting key biblical passages to extract normative principles of stewardship and dominion (Tewu & Kampilong, 2026; DeWeese, 2023).

Doctrinal synthesis – examining ecclesiastical writings and ecotheological scholarship to identify points of convergence, tension, or innovation in theological perspectives on environmental responsibility (Francis, 2015; Cannon, 2017).

Critical evaluation – assessing the relevance, coherence, and practical applicability of theological principles in contemporary climate stewardship discourse (Onyizonwu, 2024; Luetz & Leo, 2023).

Unit of analysis: Individual theological perspectives and their articulation in primary and secondary sources.

Analytical lens: Ethical plausibility, coherence with scripture, and practical implications for environmental action.

3.3 Rigor and Credibility

To ensure credibility:

- Triangulation of sources was used, combining scriptural, magisterial, and scholarly writings.
- The analysis applied critical hermeneutics, questioning implicit assumptions and highlighting areas where theology may support or undermine proactive climate stewardship (DeWeese, 2023; Conradie, 2010).
- Reflexivity was maintained by examining the researcher's potential bias in interpreting doctrinal positions.

- This doctrinal method allows the study to critically interrogate theological reasoning, highlighting both normative claims and practical implications without relying on numerical data.

4. Results

Based on the doctrinal analysis, four major thematic findings emerged, illustrating how Christian theology informs climate stewardship and creation care.

4.1 Stewardship as Ethical Imperative

- Scripture consistently frames humans as caretakers rather than exploiters of creation.
- Genesis 2 depicts humans as *guardians of the Garden*, emphasizing relational responsibility (Mathu, 2025; Tewu & Kampilong, 2026).
- Doctrinal synthesis shows stewardship is central to Christian ethical response to climate change, especially when interpreted as a moral duty toward vulnerable ecosystems and populations (Alamu & Taiwo, 2025).

Table 1: Key Stewardship Principles from Sources

Principle	Source	Ethical Implication
Guardianship of creation	Genesis 2	Responsibility for biodiversity
Dominion as caretaking	Genesis 1	Ethical use of resources
Imago Dei	Psalm 8, Romans 8	Moral accountability for human actions
Ecological justice	Laudato si'	Integration of social and environmental ethics

4.2 Dominion Interpretations and Environmental Risk

Traditional dominion interpretations may legitimize exploitation if framed as absolute authority (DeWeese, 2023).

Analysis of secondary literature demonstrates that communities emphasizing dominion without stewardship often neglect ecological concerns, reducing theological motivation for climate action (Cannon, 2017).

4.3 Ecotheology and Integrative Approaches

Ecotheology reframes creation care as an interdisciplinary ethical obligation, incorporating scientific insights, moral theology, and social justice (Francis, 2015; Massaro, 2023).

Doctrinal analysis identifies five recurring themes in ecotheology: relationality, accountability, sustainability, justice, and hope.

These themes provide theological justification for practical climate action.

Table 2: Core Ecotheological Themes

Theme	Description	Source
Relationality	Humans interconnected with all creation	Luetz & Leo, 2023
Accountability	Moral responsibility for ecological harm	DeWitt, 2016
Sustainability	Ethical long-term resource use	Francis, 2015
Justice	Equity in environmental impacts	Conradie, 2010
Hope	Future-oriented moral vision	Onyazonwu, 2024

4.4 Gaps and Tensions

The doctrinal literature often prioritizes normative ideals over actionable guidance.

Tensions exist between traditional literalist readings and ecotheological innovation (Mathu, 2025; Andrianos & Tomren, 2021).

Analysis reveals that while theology provides ethical guidance, its translation into concrete climate action requires interpretive adaptation, education, and community engagement.

Critical Observation:

Doctrinal analysis demonstrates that Christian theology contains robust ethical resources for climate stewardship, but these resources are underutilized in practice. Ecotheological frameworks, particularly those informed by *Laudato si'*, bridge the gap between belief and action, integrating moral, scientific, and social considerations.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

The doctrinal analysis of Christian theology regarding climate stewardship and creation care reveals several critical insights. First, the study confirms that stewardship is central to Christian environmental ethics. Scriptural exegesis of Genesis and Psalms highlights that humans are created to act as custodians of creation, accountable to God for their ecological decisions (Mathu, 2025; Tewu & Kampilong, 2026). This finding aligns with prior ecotheological scholarship, which frames stewardship not as an optional virtue but as a mandatory ethical obligation that bridges belief and practice (Alamu & Taiwo, 2025; DeWeese, 2023). Second, the analysis underscores the divergent implications of dominion interpretations. Literalist readings that emphasize human supremacy without responsibility correlate with reduced theological motivation for environmental engagement (Cannon, 2017). Conversely, reinterpreting dominion as *caretaking authority* fosters ethical sensitivity and proactive environmental practices (DeWitt, 2016). This tension demonstrates that theological hermeneutics directly influences climate stewardship behavior, suggesting that doctrinal education can significantly shape ethical engagement. Third, ecotheological frameworks emerge as the most integrative and actionable approach. Drawing on *Laudato si'*, ecotheology articulates five core dimensions—relationality, accountability, sustainability, justice, and hope—that collectively provide normative guidance for climate action (Francis, 2015; Massaro, 2023; Luetz & Leo, 2023). These themes are critical because they link moral responsibility with practical application, integrating social justice and ecological sustainability in a coherent theological vision. However, the study also identifies persistent gaps between theological ideals and praxis. Doctrinal literature frequently remains prescriptive rather than operational, and traditional theological frameworks often resist adaptation to contemporary ecological imperatives (Andrianos & Tomren, 2021; Conradie, 2010). This gap reinforces the need for doctrinal innovation and public theological engagement, translating normative principles into community-oriented climate action programs, educational initiatives, and policy advocacy.

5.2 Conclusion

This study critically examined theological perspectives on climate stewardship and creation care using a doctrinal qualitative methodology. The findings indicate that:

Stewardship is ethically central, providing a robust framework for responsible environmental engagement.

Dominion interpretations vary, and reinterpreting dominion as responsible caretaking can enhance climate action.

Ecotheology offers the most practical and integrative framework, linking theology, ethics, and actionable climate stewardship.

Gaps remain between theological ideals and practical application, emphasizing the importance of doctrinal adaptation, public engagement, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Implications:

The study demonstrates that theology is not merely symbolic but can actively shape environmental ethics and behaviors. By clarifying doctrinal positions and integrating scientific awareness, theological communities can play a transformative role in climate stewardship. Additionally, educational institutions and religious organizations can operationalize stewardship principles, promoting ecologically responsible practices at both local and global levels.

Future Research:

Further studies could adopt mixed-method designs to empirically evaluate the efficacy of doctrinally informed climate stewardship initiatives. Quantitative measurement of theological influence on pro-environmental behavior could validate doctrinal claims and inform interdisciplinary policy and practice.

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