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Toward a Theology of Sustainability: Linking Peace, Justice, and the Environment

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Abstract

Sustainability has emerged as a pressing global concern in the 21st century, particularly as ecological crises, climate change, and resource depletion intensify. This paper proposes a theology of sustainability that integrates peace, justice, and environmental stewardship as interdependent dimensions of God's creation mandate. Drawing on biblical perspectives, particularly the prophetic and wisdom traditions, the paper highlights how justice and peace are foundational to ecological well-being. The study adopts a qualitative theological approach, engaging biblical texts, eco-theological scholarship, and contextual analysis of Nigeria, especially Jos Plateau, where resource exploitation has led to degradation and conflict. Findings reveal that theological frameworks emphasizing shalom, stewardship, and justice can inspire faith-based responses to environmental challenges. The paper concludes with recommendations for integrating sustainability into church practice, education, and policy advocacy.

Keywords: *theology, sustainability, peace, justice, environment, Climate change*

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary ecological crisis has become one of the greatest moral and existential challenges of the 21st century. Climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation threaten not only ecosystems but also the survival and dignity of human communities (Tucker & Grim, 2016). In many discussions of sustainability, the emphasis has been primarily technical, focusing on policies, technologies, and economic strategies. However, a growing body of scholarship recognizes that ecological sustainability also requires moral and theological foundations. Bauckham (2010) asserted that a theology of sustainability, therefore, seeks to ground ecological responsibility in the biblical vision of justice, peace, and stewardship of creation. The biblical concept of shalom provides a holistic framework for understanding sustainability. Shalom goes beyond the absence of conflict to describe harmony, flourishing, and right relationships between God, humanity, and creation. Wright (2010) highlighted that the prophetic tradition reinforces this vision by linking justice with ecological well-being. For example, Amos denounces exploitation and calls for justice to "roll down like waters" (Amos 5:24), while Isaiah envisions peace that extends to all creation (Isaiah 11:6–9). These biblical perspectives suggest that peace, justice, and ecological care are inseparably linked. In theological terms, sustainability emerges as a moral imperative rooted in God's purposes for creation.

In the African context, and particularly in Nigeria, sustainability takes on an urgent dimension. The Jos Plateau region, once a hub of tin and columbite mining, now suffers from widespread land degradation, soil erosion, and water pollution (Musa & Jiya, 2011; Oruonye et al., 2024). Environmental exploitation has also fueled social conflicts, displacing communities and exacerbating poverty. According to Wapwera (2024). These challenges reveal that ecological crises are also justice crises, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. Therefore, any theology of sustainability must address the interconnection between ecological degradation, injustice, and the lack of peace in society.

This paper argues that sustainability must be understood as a theological imperative linking peace, justice, and environmental care. Using biblical insights, eco-theological scholarship, and the Nigerian context as case study, the paper highlights how Christian theology can contribute to building sustainable futures. By retrieving biblical themes of shalom, stewardship, and prophetic justice, this study aims to articulate a theology of sustainability that is both theologically robust and practically relevant. It also emphasizes the role of the church in mobilizing communities toward sustainable practices, ecological justice, and the pursuit of peace.

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Statement of the Problem

The global pursuit of sustainability has often been dominated by scientific, technological, and policy-driven approaches, with limited attention to the moral and spiritual dimensions of ecological responsibility. While these approaches are important, they frequently overlook the deeper ethical and theological roots of unsustainable practices—such as greed, exploitation, and disregard for justice. This neglect has created a gap in sustainability discourse, where ecological crises are treated merely as technical problems rather than moral and spiritual challenges requiring a holistic response (Tucker & Grim, 2016; Bauckham, 2010). Without a theological foundation, efforts at sustainability risk being fragmented, short-term, or unable to transform values at the heart of human interaction with creation. In many parts of Nigeria, particularly the Jos Plateau, the consequences of unsustainable practices illustrate this gap. Decades of tin and columbite mining have left vast scars on the land, destroyed vegetation, and polluted water sources. Musa & Jiya, (2011) and Oruonye et al., (2024) believed that these environmental impacts have also fueled social tensions, poverty, and conflict among local communities The degradation of land and ecosystems is not only an ecological issue but also a justice issue, as it disproportionately affects vulnerable populations who depend directly on natural resources for survival. Wapwera (2024) declared that the absence of a justice-centered framework for sustainability exacerbates inequality and undermines peace.

The church, as a moral and spiritual authority, has the potential to bridge this gap by articulating and practicing a theology of sustainability rooted in biblical principles of peace, justice, and stewardship. However, many churches remain silent or under-engaged in ecological matters, often treating them as secular or peripheral to their mission. This lack of theological engagement according to Onwuka & Anwana (2021) has left communities without a faith-based framework for responding to environmental crises. There is, therefore, an urgent need to develop a theology of sustainability that integrates biblical insights, eco-theological scholarship, and contextual realities to guide the church and society in promoting ecological justice, peace, and sustainable futures.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to develop a theology of sustainability that links peace, justice, and environmental stewardship, using biblical insights, eco-theological scholarship, and the Nigerian context to propose a framework for sustainable living and ecological justice. The study seeks to:

i. Examine biblical foundations that connect peace (shalom), justice, and ecological well-being as integral to God's vision for creation.
ii. Explore theological perspectives on sustainability and their relevance for contemporary ecological challenges.
iii. Analyze the environmental and social impacts of unsustainable practices in Nigeria, with a focus on Jos Plateau.
iv. Assess the role of the church in promoting ecological justice, peace, and sustainability.
v. Propose practical strategies for integrating a theology of sustainability into faith-based education, advocacy, and community development.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Biblical Theology and Environmental Stewardship

Biblical theology presents creation not as a random product of natural processes but as the intentional handiwork of God, imbued with purpose and order. The opening chapters of Genesis, particularly Genesis 1:26–28 and Genesis 2:15, set the foundation for human responsibility toward the environment. While some interpreters have historically read "dominion" (Genesis 1:28) as license for exploitation, contemporary scholarship emphasizes stewardship—an ethic of care that recognizes both the dignity of human beings and the integrity of creation (Bauckham, 2010). Thus, the biblical text provides a theological lens that shapes a moral responsibility toward the environment. This perspective is reinforced by texts such as Psalm 24:1, which affirms that "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it." Here, ownership belongs to God, and humans are entrusted as caretakers rather than proprietors. Habel (2011) explained that this understanding not only challenges exploitative tendencies but also emphasizes accountability. The recognition that creation has intrinsic value according to Deane-Drummond (2008) because it belongs to God reframes humanity's environmental role from one of consumerism to one of service and protection Such theological grounding provides a moral vision that resonates with modern sustainability discourses. Furthermore, biblical theology recognizes the interconnectedness of creation. Romans 8:19–22 presents a vision of creation groaning in anticipation of redemption, underscoring the ecological consequences of human sin and negligence. Conradie (2015) argued that this passage reflects not only eschatological hope but also a present call to ecological responsibility When viewed through this lens, biblical theology does not merely provide abstract principles but offers an urgent call for human participation in God's redemptive plan for creation.

2.2 The SDGs and Global Environmental Ethics

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, provide a comprehensive framework for addressing global environmental, social, and economic challenges. Of particular relevance to this study are SDG 13, which calls for urgent action to combat climate change, and SDG 15, which emphasizes the sustainable managemen.t of terrestrial ecosystems, forests, and biodiversity (United Nations, 2023). These goals highlight the interconnectedness of human flourishing and ecological health, affirming that sustainability is a moral and existential imperative for all societies.

Koehrsen (2020) have noted, however, that while the SDGs establish a strong secular framework for sustainability, they

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often lack explicit engagement with the moral and spiritual dimensions of environmental responsibility). Ethical motivations for climate action and biodiversity conservation require more than policy instruments they need deep cultural, moral, and spiritual grounding. Without such roots, sustainability risks being reduced to a technocratic exercise detached from the values and convictions that inspire lasting transformation. This gap opens space for faith traditions, particularly Christianity, to contribute.

Biblical theology offers resources that can complement the SDGs by providing ethical depth and spiritual motivation. The vision of shalom in scripture encompassing peace, justice, and ecological harmony parallels the holistic aspirations of sustainable development Boff (1997) buttressed that by framing environmental responsibility as an act of obedience to God and love for neighbor, biblical theology provides enduring motivations for climate action and ecosystem protection. Thus, integrating the SDGs with biblical insights creates a more comprehensive approach to global environmental ethics, one that blends policy with moral conviction.

2.3 Environmental Degradation in Nigeria

Nigeria faces some of the most severe environmental challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa, with climate change, desertification, deforestation, and flooding affecting millions of lives and livelihoods. Adebayo (2022) asserted that in the northern regions, desertification and drought threaten agricultural productivity, while in the south, flooding and oil pollution devastate ecosystems. The Jos Plateau presents a unique case, where decades of tin mining and deforestation have left a legacy of ecological destruction, soil erosion, and biodiversity loss (Okonkwo, 2022). These environmental realities not only impact natural systems but also exacerbate poverty, conflict, and migration. The drivers of Nigeria's environmental crisis are both structural and cultural. Weak enforcement of environmental policies, combined with unsustainable agricultural practices and urban expansion, has worsened ecological degradation. At the same time, cultural attitudes often view land and resources as commodities to be exploited for immediate gain rather than as gifts to be sustained for future generations. Eze (2021) agreed that this combination of poor governance and exploitative practices undermines efforts toward sustainable development, making the need for alternative ethical frameworks urgent.

Faith-based approaches, grounded in biblical theology, offer a promising avenue for addressing Nigeria's ecological crisis. With Christianity holding significant moral influence, especially in Jos and other regions, churches can mobilize communities toward tree planting, waste reduction, and climate awareness campaigns. Nwafor (2022) argued that by linking environmental stewardship with biblical mandates, faith-based organizations can provide both theological legitimacy and practical direction for ecological responsibility Thus, Nigeria's ecological challenges present not only a crisis but also an opportunity for the church to engage meaningfully with the SDGs.

2.4 The Role of the Church in Ecological Sustainability

The Christian church has long been a central institution in shaping values, ethics, and practices across societies. In the context of environmental sustainability, the church has the potential to serve as both a moral guide and a mobilizing force. Francis (2015) explained that globally, movements such as Pope Francis's Laudato Si' have highlighted the theological imperative of caring for creation as a matter of justice, faith, and human survival. Such initiatives demonstrate how religious communities can amplify ecological concerns in ways that resonate deeply with moral and spiritual convictions.

In Nigeria, churches have begun to take small but significant steps in ecological engagement. Nwafor (2022) opined that many congregations organize tree-planting exercises, environmental sanitation drives, and campaigns against indiscriminate waste disposal. However, these initiatives are often fragmented and under-resourced, limiting their long-term impact. Theological education rarely integrates eco-theology, leaving many pastors ill-equipped to articulate a robust biblical case for environmental stewardship. Addressing these gaps requires deliberate integration of environmental themes into liturgy, catechesis, and community outreach. Moreover, the church's capacity to promote sustainability extends beyond local communities to advocacy at national and international levels. By aligning their ecological mission with SDGs 13 and 15, churches can influence environmental policy, hold governments accountable, and collaborate with civil society and NGOs. Koehrsen (2020) notes that such partnerships enhance legitimacy and effectiveness, ensuring that sustainability becomes not just a technical or political agenda but a deeply moral one The church's prophetic voice, grounded in scripture, can thus play a pivotal role in reshaping global environmental ethics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Objective 1: Analyze selected biblical passages on peace, justice, and ecology

The study revealed that 78% of respondents in Jos Metropolis were familiar with passages such as Amos 5:24 and Isaiah 11:6–9, while 21% could directly relate these texts to ecological concerns. Similarly, only 15% interpreted Romans 8:19–22 as a mandate for environmental stewardship. This indicates that the majority of Christians interpret these texts spiritually but often neglect their ecological dimensions. Theologically, this reflects a need for renewed hermeneutics. Bauckham (2010) argues that the biblical narrative places humans within creation, tasked with responsibility rather than exploitation. Moltmann (2012) further emphasizes that eschatological hope is not only about human salvation but also the renewal of creation. The data thus demonstrate a gap between biblical teaching and ecological application in local contexts, confirming Brueggemann's (2001) assertion that shalom true peace cannot exist apart from justice, which includes care for the land. Therefore, while biblical foundations for ecological sustainability are strong, empirical

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evidence suggests limited awareness among Christians in Jos. Churches must intentionally link these scriptures to ecological realities to close the interpretation-practice gap.

Objective 2: Investigate exposure of Christian communities in Jos to Proverbs-based teaching on sustainability

Out of 250 respondents, only 32% recalled sermons or Bible studies where Proverbs was applied to ecological issues. However, 64% affirmed that Proverbs' teachings on moderation (Proverbs 21:20) and justice (Proverbs 11:1) could influence responsible consumption and fair resource use if properly emphasized. This shows untapped potential for Proverbs to shape sustainable practices.

Theologically, Proverbs emphasizes wisdom in daily life, connecting moderation, justice, and stewardship with human flourishing (Wright, 2010). Mwale and Chita (2021) highlight that these themes resonate with African communal values of balance and stewardship. By overlooking these teachings, churches miss an opportunity to bridge theology with ecological sustainability.

Thus, the empirical evidence confirms the theological claim that wisdom literature provides a moral compass for ecological responsibility. Integrating Proverbs into church teachings could reshape attitudes toward consumption, conservation, and justice in Jos.

Objective 3: Assess relationship between biblical values and sustainable behaviours

The study found that 41% of respondents practiced waste segregation, 38% conserved water, and only 27% engaged in tree planting. Those who linked their behaviours to biblical values (e.g., stewardship in Genesis 2:15 or moderation in Proverbs) were twice as likely to sustain these practices compared to those who saw them as secular duties. This highlights the motivational power of scripture when applied to ecological issues. Theologically, Habel (2011) critiques the neglect of ecological readings of scripture, while Oruonye et al. (2024) note that sustainability in Nigeria suffers because religious teachings are not adequately integrated into practice. This finding corroborates the empirical evidence: biblical values can influence ecological action but remain underutilized in practice. Hence, strengthening faith-based ecological education could significantly increase sustainable behaviours. This aligns with Moltmann's (2012) vision of a redeemed creation and suggests that theological motivation may be more effective than secular appeals in shaping ecological ethics in Jos.

Objective 4: Explore challenges and opportunities for faith-based organizations

Survey responses indicated that 62% of church leaders identified lack of theological training as a barrier, 55% mentioned financial constraints, and 49% cited low prioritization of ecology in ministry agendas. On the other hand, 71% recognized opportunities in using church structures such as sermons, youth fellowships, and women's groups as platforms for ecological education.

Theologically, Conradie (2011) laments the underutilization of African churches in ecological advocacy, while Ikechukwu and Ugwu (2022) highlight the transformative potential of faith-based organizations if adequately resourced. These scholarly insights affirm the empirical reality: despite challenges, churches possess unique authority and reach that could drive sustainability efforts.

The findings thus confirm a dual reality constraints limit current ecological engagement, but opportunities for transformation are abundant. Churches in Jos could play a leading role in linking peace, justice, and sustainability if these opportunities are strategically harnessed.

Objective 5: Recommend strategies for integrating biblical wisdom into sustainability initiatives

When asked about effective strategies, 68% of respondents recommended integrating ecological themes into sermons, 59% suggested youth and women's fellowships as drivers of change, and 47% proposed partnerships with NGOs and government agencies. Additionally, 72% agreed that Proverbs and prophetic texts could serve as theological anchors for environmental education.

Theologically, Tucker and Grim (2016) argue that religion must be central in shaping ecological ethics, while Wapwera (2024) demonstrates the effectiveness of faith-based interventions in restoring degraded environments in Jos. These perspectives support the empirical findings, confirming that integrating biblical wisdom with practical initiatives can reshape sustainability outcomes. Thus, both data and theology affirm the need for a comprehensive framework where churches embed ecological teaching into worship, education, and community outreach. Such integration would ground sustainability not only in environmental science but also in Christian theology, thereby increasing its acceptance and effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that biblical theology offers a profound foundation for engaging with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 15 (life on land). Scriptural passages emphasizing stewardship, justice, and care for creation underscore the Christian responsibility to protect the environment as part of God's mandate. Findings from the empirical survey in Jos Metropolis revealed that a majority of Christians acknowledge these biblical teachings and recognize their relevance in addressing today's ecological crises, confirming the interconnectedness between theology and environmental sustainability. Furthermore, the study highlighted the practical role of Christian communities and faith-based organizations in translating theology into action. Churches were shown to not only provide theological reflections but also promote concrete sustainability practices such as waste management, tree planting, and awareness campaigns on climate change. However, the findings also revealed that while theological recognition is strong, there remains a gap in long-term programming, policy advocacy, and structural integration of environmental ethics within

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church institutions. Ultimately, the paper concludes that a biblical-theological contribution is indispensable in shaping global environmental ethics, complementing secular frameworks such as the SDGs. Integrating scriptural wisdom into sustainability discourse can enrich both faith-based and global responses to ecological degradation. By bridging faith and science, theology of stewardship can inspire grassroots action, foster intergenerational responsibility, and strengthen moral imperatives for sustainable living, thus ensuring that Christian communities actively contribute to the global pursuit of environmental justice and ecological integrity.

Recommendations

First, there is a need for faith-based environmental education that explicitly integrates biblical teachings on stewardship with the goals of climate action and ecological preservation. Churches and theological institutions should develop curricula, workshops, and sermons that emphasize passages such as Genesis 2:15, Psalm 24:1, and Romans 8:19–22, connecting them directly to the urgent realities of climate change and biodiversity loss. This will ensure that theological knowledge is not abstract but is translated into practical wisdom guiding daily Christian living and environmental responsibility. Second, Christian communities should strengthen grassroots sustainability initiatives as expressions of biblical stewardship. These may include tree planting campaigns, water conservation practices, recycling programs, and advocacy for clean energy use. Such practices not only demonstrate the church's relevance in addressing contemporary ecological challenges but also contribute directly to achieving SDG 13 and SDG 15. Faith-based organizations in Jos and beyond can serve as models by institutionalizing sustainability practices within their worship spaces, schools, and community programs. Thirdly, the church should intentionally engage in policy advocacy and interfaith collaborations on ecological matters. By leveraging its moral authority and extensive networks, the church can influence national and local policies on climate action, land use, and conservation. Collaboration with government, civil society, and other religious groups can amplify the call for sustainable practices rooted in justice, peace, and care for creation. This aligns with the prophetic tradition in scripture, where faith leaders spoke against societal injustices that harmed both people and the land.

Finally, it is recommended that Christian communities bridge theology with scientific and local knowledge in responding to environmental degradation. Sustainable development requires holistic approaches, and theology can provide the moral and ethical foundation, while science contributes technical expertise. Together, these perspectives can shape innovative and context-specific responses to environmental challenges, particularly in regions like Jos where land degradation, deforestation, and climate change directly threaten livelihoods. By doing so, the church affirms its relevance not only as a spiritual institution but also as a vital partner in the global pursuit of environmental sustainability.

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