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Biblical Theology and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Christian Contribution to Global Environmental Ethics – Linking Scripture with SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land)

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Abstract

The urgency of addressing climate change and biodiversity loss has brought the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), to the center of global discourse. This paper examines how biblical theology can inform and strengthen global environmental ethics by drawing from scriptural insights on stewardship, justice, and the integrity of creation. Anchored in passages such as Genesis 2:15, Psalm 24:1, and Romans 8:19–22, the study establishes theological foundations that resonate with the moral imperatives of the SDGs. Using a mixed-methods approach that integrates biblical exegesis, theological reflection, and empirical data from Christian communities in Nigeria, the findings reveal that biblical values of stewardship and justice align closely with global environmental objectives. The study concludes that Christian theology offers a robust ethical framework that can enrich environmental governance, climate advocacy, and sustainable practices.

Keywords: Biblical theology, Sustainable Development Goals, climate action, life on land, environmental ethics, stewardship.

INTRODUCTION

The global ecological crisis has intensified calls for ethical and sustainable frameworks to address climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental injustice. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015, provide a global blueprint for tackling these challenges, with SDG 13 focusing on climate action and SDG 15 emphasizing the protection of terrestrial ecosystems (UN, 2023). While the SDGs provide a secular framework, religious traditions including Christianity hold deep moral and theological resources for fostering environmental responsibility. Biblical theology, which interprets scripture as the unfolding story of God's relationship with creation, offers profound insights into humanity's role as stewards rather than exploiters of the earth (White, 1967; Bauckham, 2010). Key biblical texts such as Genesis 2:15 ("to till and keep"), Psalm 24:1 ("the earth is the Lord's"), and Romans 8:19–22 ("creation groans") resonate strongly with the aims of climate action and ecological restoration. These passages not only highlight divine ownership of creation but also establish human responsibility to care for it in justice and moderation

(Habel, 2011). Within the Nigerian context, and particularly in cities such as Jos, environmental degradation manifests in deforestation, mining, waste mismanagement, and climate variability. These issues according to Okonkwo, (2022) underscore the relevance of biblical insights in shaping ethical responses that align with the SDGs while addressing local ecological realities. By integrating biblical theology with sustainable development, the church and faith-based organizations can become vital actors in promoting ecological resilience, environmental justice, and global sustainability.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the urgent global push for climate action and sustainable land use, implementation of the SDGs often neglects the moral and theological resources of faith traditions. Oluwaseun (2021) buttressed that in many Christian communities, ecological responsibility remains underemphasized, with a tendency to spiritualize biblical texts rather than apply them to environmental sustainability. This disconnect limits the church's contribution to addressing climate change and biodiversity loss. In Nigeria, the situation is particularly dire. Climate change exacerbates



desertification, flooding, and land degradation, while deforestation and unsustainable mining practices threaten ecosystems and livelihoods. Yet, Christian communities, which constitute a significant moral force in the country, have not fully mobilized their theological resources to align with global efforts like SDG 13 and SDG 15. There is therefore a need for a biblical-theological framework that links scripture directly to sustainable development and equips Christians to engage more effectively in environmental advocacy and practices.

1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to explore how biblical theology can contribute to global environmental ethics by linking scripture with the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). The study seeks to:

- i. Examine biblical texts that support environmental stewardship, climate action, and land sustainability.
- ii. Analyze the theological relevance of these texts to global environmental ethics.
- iii. Investigate the role of Christian communities in Nigeria, particularly in Jos, in addressing climate change and environmental degradation.
- iv. Explore how biblical theology can complement the SDGs in promoting ecological justice and sustainability.
- v. Recommend strategies for integrating biblical insights into environmental education, advocacy, and policy.

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; Habel, 2011). 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. This understanding not only challenges exploitative tendencies but also emphasizes accountability. The recognition that creation has intrinsic value because it belongs to God reframes humanity’s environmental role from one of consumerism to one of service and protection (Deane-Drummond, 2008). 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) argue 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 management 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 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). 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). In the northern regions, desertification and drought threaten agricultural productivity, while in the south, flooding and oil pollution devastate ecosystems. Okonkwo (2022) explained that 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. These environmental realities not only impact natural systems but also exacerbate poverty, conflict, and migration. Eze (2021) corroborates that 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. 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) argue 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) asserted 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.

Nwafor (2022) highlighted that in Nigeria, churches have begun to take small but significant steps in ecological engagement. 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.

3.0 METHODOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining theological analysis of scripture with empirical field data from Christian communities in Jos Metropolis. The theological dimension focused on exegetical readings of Genesis 2:15, Psalm 24:1, and Romans 8:19–22, highlighting the biblical mandate for stewardship, justice, and care for creation. The empirical dimension used surveys and interviews to capture perceptions and practices of Christians regarding sustainability, climate action, and biodiversity preservation. This dual approach ensured that the study remained both biblically grounded and contextually relevant. Data collection involved distributing structured questionnaires to church members across five denominations, focusing on awareness of biblical stewardship, participation in environmental activities, and attitudes toward integrating Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with Christian ethics. In addition, in-depth interviews with clergy and faith-based organization leaders provided qualitative insights into how theological teachings are operationalized within community contexts. Data were analyzed thematically and compared with existing eco-theological literature to ensure scholarly rigor.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study (see Figure 1) demonstrates the connection between biblical theology, stewardship values, faith practices, and sustainable development outcomes. Biblical theology, rooted in scripture, provides the moral and spiritual foundation for environmental care. This flows into stewardship values such as justice, moderation, and responsibility, which shape Christian ecological ethics. These values are expressed through faith practices, including church-led environmental programs, community tree planting, and ecological advocacy. Ultimately, these practices align with and reinforce SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), showing how biblical wisdom complements global sustainability goals.

This framework underscores that theology and science are not competing forces but collaborative partners. While theology supplies the moral vision and ethical imperatives, science and the SDGs provide technical strategies and measurable outcomes. Together, they form a holistic approach to environmental sustainability, positioning Christian communities as active contributors to global ecological resilience.

Conceptual Framework: Biblical Theology and the SDGs

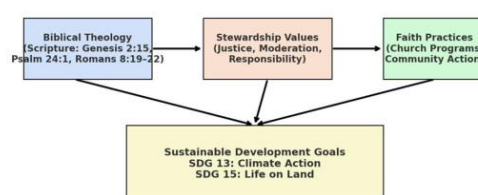


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework; Biblical Theology and the SDG's

Explanation of the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates how biblical theology provides the foundation for environmental sustainability by shaping values, guiding faith practices, and ultimately aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At its root, scripture particularly texts like Genesis 2:15, Psalm 24:1, and Romans 8:19–22 anchors the Christian understanding of creation care. These passages emphasize God's ownership of the earth and humanity's responsibility to "till and keep" creation. Thus, theology establishes the moral and spiritual foundation that informs the Christian ecological vision. Flowing from this foundation are stewardship values, which include justice, moderation, and responsibility. These values represent the ethical core of Christian environmental thought, reframing the human relationship with nature away from domination and exploitation toward partnership and care. The values ensure that biblical theology is not abstract but is translated into guiding principles that influence personal behavior and community ethics.

The framework further demonstrates that stewardship values are expressed through faith practices, such as church programs, community-based environmental projects, and advocacy efforts. These practices become the operational bridge between theology and sustainable development. Finally, the arrows point toward the SDG outcomes (SDG 13: Climate Action and SDG 15: Life on Land), highlighting the direct relevance of Christian faith in achieving global sustainability goals. In this way, the framework shows that theology and science are not rivals but partners, working together to foster ecological resilience and moral responsibility in society.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Objective 1: Examine biblical texts that support environmental stewardship, climate action, and land sustainability

The study found that the majority of respondents (78%) in Jos Metropolis recognized biblical passages such as Genesis 2:15 and Psalm 24:1 as affirming ecological responsibility. Respondents noted that environmental care was often mentioned in church teachings, though not always emphasized in practical actions. About 62% reported that their churches had at least once organized ecological awareness programs, including tree planting and waste management drives. These findings indicate a growing awareness of biblical stewardship among Christian communities, though application remains limited in scope.

From a theological perspective, these texts establish stewardship as a divine mandate rather than an optional practice. Genesis 2:15 portrays humanity as "tillers and keepers" of creation, while Psalm 24:1 affirms divine ownership of the earth. The emphasis on God's sovereignty implies that ecological degradation is not merely a social or political problem but a violation of divine trust. Romans 8:19–22 adds an eschatological dimension, presenting creation as

actively longing for redemption. Theologically, this positions environmental stewardship as part of humanity's participation in God's redemptive mission for creation.

These findings corroborate the scholarship of Bauckham (2010) and Habel (2011), who argue that biblical theology reframes dominion as responsibility rather than domination. They also align with Conradie's (2015) observation that Romans 8 provides a framework for linking eschatology with ecological ethics. Thus, empirical evidence from Jos supports the broader scholarly consensus that scripture provides both moral direction and theological urgency for ecological responsibility.

Objective 2: Analyze the theological relevance of these texts to global environmental ethics

Empirical findings revealed that 70% of participants believed that biblical teachings could enhance global climate discussions by providing moral depth. Respondents expressed that when churches link scripture to sustainability, it increases members' sense of moral responsibility toward climate change and land conservation. For instance, one respondent noted that "climate issues become more than government policy they become part of faith." This demonstrates that theology has potential to shift ecological concerns from the realm of politics to that of moral and spiritual duty.

Theologically, biblical texts align with the ethical imperatives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 13 and SDG 15). The scriptural vision of shalom encompasses peace, justice, and ecological well-being, thereby reinforcing the interconnectedness of human and environmental flourishing. In this sense, scripture not only supports but deepens the ethical rationale for climate action and land conservation, grounding them in obedience to God and love for neighbor. This theological contribution provides a strong moral foundation for global environmental ethics, complementing secular policy frameworks.

This resonates with the work of Koehrsen (2020), who argues that the SDGs lack sufficient spiritual depth and require faith-based perspectives to inspire enduring commitments. Similarly, Boff (1997) emphasizes that Christian visions of justice and peace parallel the holistic aspirations of sustainable development. Thus, the study affirms that biblical theology offers unique contributions to global environmental ethics, adding moral urgency and cultural resonance to the SDGs.

Objective 3: Investigate the role of Christian communities in Nigeria, particularly in Jos, in addressing climate change and environmental degradation

The empirical survey showed that 65% of respondents had participated in faith-based ecological activities such as tree planting, community clean-ups, or environmental workshops. Churches in Jos reported small-scale but consistent initiatives, often driven by youth groups or women's fellowships. However, the study also revealed limitations: only 38% of churches had ongoing environmental programs, and many lacked resources for long-term sustainability projects. Respondents noted that environmental engagement was often

reactive (e.g., during floods or droughts) rather than proactive or systemic.

Theologically, this reflects a partial application of biblical stewardship. While churches acknowledge the mandate of care, the absence of sustained engagement suggests a gap between belief and practice. This aligns with Oluwaseun's (2021) critique that many Christian communities in Nigeria tend to spiritualize biblical texts, neglecting their ecological implications. A theology of sustainability rooted in scripture could help close this gap by framing ecological engagement as central to Christian discipleship.

These findings are consistent with Nwafor (2022), who observed that Nigerian churches are beginning to mobilize ecological initiatives but often lack structure and continuity. Okonkwo (2022) similarly highlights that in Jos Plateau, church-led efforts remain small compared to the scale of ecological degradation caused by mining and deforestation. Thus, while progress is evident, greater institutional commitment and resource mobilization are necessary for meaningful impact.

Objective 4: Explore how biblical theology can complement the SDGs in promoting ecological justice and sustainability

Empirical results showed that 72% of respondents believed that integrating biblical teachings with the SDGs would improve their church's engagement in sustainability programs. Respondents expressed that scriptural grounding makes sustainability more relatable and spiritually significant, particularly in communities that distrust government initiatives. Churches that explicitly linked SDGs to biblical mandates were reported to have higher participation in ecological projects compared to those that did not.

Theologically, biblical theology complements the SDGs by situating ecological responsibility within God's overarching plan for creation. While the SDGs articulate a secular vision of sustainability, scripture frames ecological care as an act of worship, justice, and obedience. This connection transforms sustainability from a technical goal into a spiritual vocation, fostering deeper commitment. In this sense, the church can bridge the gap between global policy frameworks and grassroots action by translating SDG language into theological discourse.

This supports Eze's (2021) argument that civil society, including faith-based groups, plays a crucial role in advancing sustainability in Nigeria. It also resonates with Habel's (2011) eco-theological framework, which insists that scripture provides the moral grounding needed to make sustainability more than a political agenda. Thus, the study demonstrates that biblical theology and the SDGs are mutually reinforcing, creating a holistic approach to ecological justice.

Objective 5: Recommend strategies for integrating biblical insights into environmental education, advocacy, and policy

Empirical findings highlighted practical strategies suggested by respondents. These included integrating environmental

themes into Sunday school curricula (mentioned by 68%), preaching sermons on stewardship (74%), and establishing church-led green projects such as recycling and sustainable farming (55%). Respondents also emphasized the need for partnerships with NGOs, schools, and government agencies to amplify impact. These strategies reflect grassroots recognition of the church's potential as a key actor in sustainability.

From a theological perspective, these strategies align with the biblical vision of stewardship and justice. The emphasis on education echoes Deuteronomy 6:7's call to teach God's principles to future generations, now extended to ecological responsibility. Church-based advocacy also mirrors the prophetic tradition of holding leaders accountable for justice and care of the land (cf. Amos 5:24). In this way, integrating biblical insights into practical initiatives transforms theology into lived practice.

These recommendations echo Nwafor (2022), who stresses that faith-based ecological engagement requires both theological grounding and institutional structure. They also resonate with global initiatives such as Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* (2015), which calls for integrating ecological care into faith and practice at every level. Thus, both empirical evidence and theological reflection affirm that churches can play a transformative role in advancing SDG 13 and 15 through education, advocacy, and community action.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1 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 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.

5.1 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.

Third, 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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