

**Controversy:**

**Are Strong Protections of Private Property Rights  
Necessary for Species Preservation?  
A Response to Jay W. Richards \***

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My defense of Christian responsibility for endangered species and its implications for private property elicited a response on behalf of Jay Richards of the Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture at the Discovery Institute. Mr. Richard's response, unfortunately, relies more on rhetorical devices and verbal sleight of hand to make its points than substantial counterargument. Once one wades through the rhetoric, it can be seen that Mr. Richards's position does not have a scriptural, ethical, or spiritual leg to stand on. I realize that this metaphor is three-legged, but his argument seems to me to be as stable as a one-legged burro on a rope bridge over the Grand Canyon in a high wind. He is certainly aware that my position has the Bible and the entire weight of Christian ethics, theology, and spirituality in its corner. This is why his opening strategy is to divide his argument—arbitrarily and without any basis in my essay—into a “broad” and a “narrow” thesis.

The broad thesis, according to him, is the biblical witness for species preservation. The narrow thesis is the particular policy of protecting endangered species and preventing landowners from destroying species on their property. By placing the biblical principle that the earth is the Lord's and its ethical consequence, Christian responsibility for the earth's well-being, into the broad thesis box, Mr. Richards avoids having to argue against the Bible and the witness of the Christian tradition, which he would otherwise be forced to do. Then, by separating the biblical principle from its ethical consequences, he defends the position that the deracinated “Christian” morality of markets can ignore the devastating effect of contemporary market forces on the health and well-being of the entire earth.

Mr. Richards's two thesis gambit is only a debater's move: It is arbitrary and

without substance. My argument cannot be divided in this manner and neither can the biblical witness for creation be so divided. The Lordship of Jesus Christ over the earth and all creation is the foundation of the Christian's thought, word, and action in relation to the natural order. Mr. Richard's claim that I make an illegitimate translation from biblical principle to particular policy is not supported in any substantive way by his argument. It is merely a statement of opinion, nothing more than "spitting into the wind." Unfortunately for him, this wind is the Pneuma of the Holy Spirit, the Author of the scriptural principles that ground a biblical defense of species preservation. The entire point of my argument is precisely the truth that the Lordship of Christ begets the policy of species preservation. His real argument is not so much with me as with the Christian tradition and the very Spirit of the Bible.

Let me put this another way. No society can call itself Christian unless its policies are informed by biblical principles. Even granting that we do not live in a Christian society today, the cosmological and biblical principles of Divine Lordship and human stewardship of creation entails more from the individual Christian than a perfunctory nod while unconcernedly participating in a society's collective destruction of creation, species, habitat, and biodiversity. No Christian who genuinely seeks to bear witness to his faith, will resort to the artificial subterfuge of dividing his faith into broad theses to which he can blithely agree without consequence, and narrow theses that he can manipulate according to his own purposes and the prevailing cultural wind.

A generation ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer castigated the approach that Mr. Richards embodies as "cheap grace," and utterly worthless, like salt without savor. One would have thought, following his opening gambit, that Mr. Richards might move directly to the particular policy to which he is so opposed—the use of the powers of the federal government to mandate the protection of endangered species. Instead, he devotes nearly half of his response to an attempt to make a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against identifying the biblical "kind" with the modern notion of "species."

However, what strikes the reader endowed with common sense as absurd is not the recognition of a link between biblical "kinds" and modern notions of "species," but the belief that invoking the problematic nature of the scientific definition somehow renders "questionable" or "unlikely" any application of ecological principles based on the Bible's understanding of kinds to contemporary problems of species destruction or loss of biodiversity. Talk about "yawning *non sequiturs*," there is an old saying that if something looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it is a duck. If there happen to be thirteen varieties of duck on an island in the Pacific, they are still ducks and

under God's providential care, whether the casual observer sees them all as one kind or the scientist recognizes thirteen variations.

What the Christian should recognize—as distinct from both the casual observer and the scientist—is the wonderful wisdom and mercy and grace of Divine Providence that is revealed in the existence of such astonishing variety and richness in creation's economy. The same principle applies to the thirteen varieties of Galapagos finch. One wonders what Mr. Richards's point is here. His scientific discussion of species seems like nothing but a smokescreen. Neither the scientific complexities of taxonomy, nor the supposed difficulties of actually identifying a species, thwart God's command to Noah to preserve "two of every kind" from revealing essential facts about God's love for His creatures and our responsibility to steward the earth and to preserve species.

The poverty of Mr. Richard's argument is revealed in his distasteful descent into unnecessary inflammatory language. He says,

Mr. Krueger seems to confuse civil society with the state itself, even identifying the actions of the state with the common good. So he argues that the state can (effectively) confiscate property from its private owners without remuneration, since the land is "the heritage of humanity." Assuming the land is the heritage of humanity, it still does not follow that the state has the right to confiscate it.

He accuses me of something I never said. He uses loaded words such as "confiscate property" to short-circuit debate. My essay is civil and reasonable, unlike my colleague, who clearly uses "red flag" language to incite an emotional reaction to support his argument. The main point I am making is that animal species ought to be protected and that the individual Christian has a religious responsibility in this regard. Nothing in my essay can be construed to advocate "confiscating property." My argument is simply that the appropriate legal entity is charged with the responsibility of ensuring that property is not altered in such a way as to endanger species. This implies that every property owner must understand how his property fits into God's economy (the natural system) and to know as much as possible about the living things that occupy the land he temporarily holds in trust.

The entire thrust of the Old and New Testaments, as well as the witness of the early Church and the faith of our Pilgrim Fathers proclaims the fundamental Christian truth that all ownership is only temporary land holding. Every landholder has a responsibility to those who will hold the land after him—including the health and welfare of those who might be affected by the alteration of the land. Such is the Christian meaning of commonwealth.

Perhaps Mr. Richards (and the readers of *Markets and Morality*) need to be reminded that unless one lives somewhere other than the United States, all levels of government are representative of the people. The government is not “them”; it is “us.” Those of us who champion species preservation are less concerned about which governmental level makes the law protecting species than the fact of protection. We wholeheartedly support local, state, and federal regulations protecting species and ecosystems from destruction. We are not, however, champions of an unwieldy bureaucracy or of a large invasive federal government. We are champions of God’s creation. We support protective legislation at all levels but especially desire that every individual recognize his or her personal responsibility as God’s steward of the land and all its creatures. We champion individual personal land holding by responsible people who know their land and its place in God’s economy, who love and respect their neighbors and are responsible members of a community. That is why we are often at odds with builders and developers who purchase land only for the purpose of building on it or drastically altering its natural features. Such persons neither love the land nor do they usually care about the land’s natural functions. Yet it is the freedom of these entities to do whatever they please without considering the land’s total significance in God’s economy that the conservative think tanks seek to protect.

The primary question, which this controversy has sought to answer—Are strong protections of private property rights necessary for species preservation?—should be rephrased to read, Is an unqualified and wholehearted commitment to species preservation necessary for believers to overcome the deracinated religious faith of contemporary Christianity? My answer to the latter question is an unqualified yes.

The denatured Christianity that my colleague’s secular ethics reveals is not the religion of the Bible, nor of the Church Fathers, nor of the great Reformers, nor of anyone who believes that “God so loved the world (cosmos) that he gave His Only Begotten Son.”

## Note

\* Thanks to Vincent Rossi for his commentary and input on this response.