

Protagonist Corner

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“The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” (Psalm 24:1 NRSV) The text is clear, and evangelicals along with all God’s people affirm God as the Creator and Sustainer of the world. But the environment has not been a topic of preaching within evangelical churches until fairly recently, due in no small part to a set of overriding theological and eschatological beliefs historically held by this body of believers. But all of this has begun to change in the last two decades, and a growing body of books, articles, and worship resources about environmental stewardship has appeared. This change reflects a fundamental shift in the theological focus of evangelicals.

Until the early 1980’s, evangelical theology was dominated by a greater emphasis on salvation themes related to the “age to come” rather than on care for this present world. There was an attitude that “this world is not my home; I’m just a’passin’ through.” God’s eternal purposes were centered not in This Age, but rather in The Age to Come. Salvation in Christ was viewed as “fitting us for heaven,” and this left little incentive to worry about the earth. The slogan, “It’s all gonna burn!” was not atypical of what I frequently heard taught about our life this side of eternity marked as it is by the effects of sin.

In addition, evangelicals could often be accused of complicity with environmental degradation due to an emphasis, however misplaced, on God’s dominion mandate of Genesis 1:26-30. In this passage, God gives humanity “dominion” over the earth and its creatures with the command that they are to be used for food and habitat. “Fill the earth and subdue it” was often interpreted to mean that humanity was to use the resources of creation as a gift from God, but it was seldom seen as a command to care for creation.

In 1982, however, Dr. Francis Schaeffer, noted evangelical apologist, published a little book entitled *Pollution and the Death of Man*.¹ While this was certainly not the first biblical/theological work about the environment from an evangelical,² it was the first work from a more influential and widely read voice. In 1984, Billy Graham included a chapter on the environment in his book *Approaching Hoofbeats*, in which he stated, “I find myself becoming more and more an advocate of the true ecologists where their recommendations are realistic. Many of these people have done us an essential service in helping us preserve and protect our green zones and our cities, our water and our air.... The growing possibility of our destroying ourselves and the world with our own neglect and excess is tragic and very real.”³ Also in 1984, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, at the time General Secretary of the Reformed Church of America and a thoughtful evangelical, published *A Worldly Spirituality: The Call to Take Care of the Earth*.⁴ Evangelicals began in earnest to rethink their neglect regarding environmental concerns.

By the early 1990’s, new evangelical organizations, such as the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, the Christian Environmental Association, and the Evangelical Environmental Network, had formed specifically around creation care. These

included significant leaders from the evangelical movement. The Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) was also a part of the Religious Environmental Network, consisting of organizations from mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic and Jewish communities. Such cooperation was somewhat unusual for evangelicals, and it is interesting that it was around this issue.

A major statement on environmental stewardship, entitled “An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation,” was released in 1994 and eventually was signed by over 500 leaders from the evangelical world.⁵

Christianity Today, the most widely read of evangelical periodicals, published “Eco-Myths” on April 4, 1994. This CT Institute roundtable included articles from notable scientists and evangelical theologians.⁶ Kenneth S. Kantzer, one of the “deans” of the evangelical movement in America, wrote a concluding editorial entitled “Silent No More,” in which he said in part:

I wrote nearly 50 years ago ... that for man and woman to have dominion on this planet meant that we were to tend God’s creation—in fact, to make the whole of our planet into a beautiful garden, never squandering its resources selfishly, but to use all for the good of all. What’s more, I saw this responsibility for caring for the Earth not as an option but as a divine command.

As I ponder those notes, I feel a sharp sense of regret, even guilt. Why didn’t I publish those clear biblical teachings a generation or more ago? ... Perhaps if evangelicals like myself had brought our voices earlier to the debate we might well have undercut a perverted understanding of the role and importance of human life or made our culture face up sooner to our divinely commanded responsibility to care for our planet.

I cannot turn back the clock. The earlier opportunity has passed. But it is not too late to perform the task entrusted to us by our Lord and that is ever needful: to tell of the divine wisdom of Holy Scripture—in this case, to reveal humanity’s proper relation to the universe around us.⁷

To be sure, evangelicals chose their language carefully and tried to distance themselves from the more secular environmentalists by talking about “creation care” and “environmental stewardship” and by producing Bible studies and theological statements which firmly grounded their work in the Scriptures and in biblical theology. But their efforts were also under girded by the involvement of a number of noted scientists who themselves identified with the evangelical movement, such as Dr. Calvin B. DeWitt, Dr. Susan Drake, Dr. Walter Hearn, Dr. David N. Livingstone, and Sir John T. Houghton.⁸ The strong coalition of theologians, church leaders, and scientists produced a rising tide of materials which washed onto the shore of evangelical culture and provided a rich harvest for preachers and worship leaders alike.

Biblical and theological resources available for the evangelical preacher today abound. *Creation Care* magazine, for example, a quarterly published by the Evangelical Environmental Network, has now had nine years of publication, each issue full of articles referencing books, organizations, websites, worship materials, and other resources for evangelical readers.⁹ A great list of resources for sermon preparation can

be found at www.creationcare.org/resources/. On my bookshelf are now many terrific books on environmental concerns written from an evangelical perspective.¹⁰

Currently, the greatest challenge for evangelicals interested in preaching creation care themes is not a lack of solid biblical and theological resources, but rather a conservative backlash fueled by conservative talk show hosts and the religious right to the specific issue of global warming.¹¹ Some leading conservative Christians have been vocal in their criticisms and doubts about global warming, arguing that it is neither human-induced nor solvable by human action, and saying that the issue is not an appropriate focus for evangelicals. Early in 2007, a group of influential conservative leaders pressured the National Association of Evangelicals to remove the organization's vice president, Richard Cizik, because of his strong and consistent engagement of the issue of global warming.

At the same time, following their successful "What would Jesus drive?" media blitz, the Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI) launched a strong campaign to encourage evangelicals to become more engaged with the politics of global warming, especially as the issue affects the world's poor.¹² "Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action" was released by the ECI in February, 2006 and was subsequently endorsed by a long list of prominent evangelical opinion makers. Activities of this organization have included lobbying Congress for legislation to support U.S. participation in the international efforts to reduce global warming and to protect the poor from the consequences of climate change. They have also produced materials to help churches to understand and to engage global warming at the congregational level, including a fine "Prayer Guide for Global Warming."¹³

The controversy among evangelicals with regard to environment concerns serves to underline how far evangelicals have actually come in paying attention to these issues. Indeed, a public opinion poll conducted by Ellison Research in 2007¹⁴ found that 84% of evangelicals now support legislation to reduce global warming pollution levels, and 54% are more likely to support a candidate that works toward that end. 70% of evangelicals believe that global warming will have an impact on future generations, and 64% say that action against global warming should begin immediately. Such concern suggests deep changes which have occurred within the evangelical subculture with important roots in theological reorientation of evangelical preaching over the past 30 years. It also reflects the new shape of evangelical theology which has taken root among younger evangelicals.¹⁵

Indeed, "*the earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,*" and even we evangelicals are finally paying attention.

Notes

1 Frances Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982).

2 *Christianity Today*, for example, had published several articles in the 1970's related to this topic. One example is James M. Houston's "The Environmental Movement—Five Causes of Confusion," *Christianity Today* (Sept. 15, 1972): 8-10. Articles also appeared in *HIS* magazine, published and distributed widely among evangelical students by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, such as Marvin Mayer's "Ecology in the Old Testament," *HIS* (June 1972): 14-16.

3 Billy Graham, *Approaching Hoofbeats: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1984).

4 Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality: The Call to Take Care of the Earth* (New York:

Harper & Row, 1984).

5 For a full text of the Declaration, see <http://www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php>.

6 "Eco-Myths," *Christianity Today* (April 4, 1994): 22-33.

7 Kenneth S. Kantzer, "Silent No More," *Christianity Today* (April 4, 1994): 33.

8 In the 1990's, Prof. DeWitt was a noted environmental scientist with the Institute for Environmental Studies at University of Wisconsin-Madison, founder/director of the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies and author of *Earthwise: Biblical Principles for Environmental Stewardship* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Faith Alive Resources, 1994) and *Missionary Earthkeeping* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1993); Dr. Drake was the Bilateral Program Manager for Forests and Biodiversity within the Department of State's Bureau of Oceans, Environmental and Scientific Affairs; Dr. Hearn was a biochemist teaching at Wheaton College and, with his wife, Virginia, the author of articles on simple living for *Radix* magazine that were subsequently reprinted and translated in publications around the world; Prof. Livingstone was teaching in the School of Geosciences at the Queen's University of Belfast and author of *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987); and Sir John Houghton was professor of atmospheric physics at Oxford University and is now co-chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the author of *Global Warming: The Complete Briefing*, 3rd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

9 *Creation Care* is mailed to all active supporters of the Evangelical Environmental Network. Information is available online at www.creationcare.org or by writing EEN/Creation Care at 4485 Tench Rd., Ste. 850, Suwanee, Georgia 30024.

10 These include: Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Ada, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001); R. J. Berry, ed., *The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2000); Tri Robinson and Jason Chatraw, *Saving God's Green Earth: Rediscovering the Church's Responsibility to Environmental Stewardship* (Ampelton Publishing, 2006); Calvin DeWitt, *Earth-Wise: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Faith Alive Resources, 1994); Fred Van Dyke, David Mahan, Joseph Sheldon, Raymond Brand, *Redeeming Creation: The Biblical Basis for Environmental Stewardship* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1996).

11 *World Magazine*, for example, a conservative Christian news periodical, consistently has discredited not only the secular environmental movement, but also evangelical churches and organizations who have engaged issues of global warming.

12 See <http://www.evangelicalclimateinitiative.org/>.

13 Available at <http://pub.christiansandclimate.org/pub/PrayerGuide.pdf>.

14 Poll results may be seen at <http://pub.christiansandclimate.org/pub/Public%20Opinion%20Update-%2010-11-07.pdf>.

15 *Relevant* magazine, a leading magazine of evangelical faith and pop culture, has published numerous articles regarding creation care. The Jan-Feb 2008 issue (no. 31): 64-69, for example, included an interview with Rob Bell concerning his preaching on environmental issues at Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids. The *Chicago Sun Times* has called Bell "the next Billy Graham."