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## **EVANGELICALS AND ENVIRONMENTALISM**

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threatening the fiscal solvency of the Promise Keepers, failed to significantly change the make up of the attendees. Perhaps the failure to recognize and address larger institutional racial problems failed to draw the desired audience.

It is interesting to revisit Lundskow's study in light of the different visions elucidated by Bartowski. One hears in Lundskow's interlocutors a combination, and sometimes a confusion of all four models. They seek to be both Tender Warriors and Rational Patriarchs, they seek to express their feelings to their wives, while at the same time reclaiming an activist role in the family that occasionally resembles Father Knows Best. Such a conglomeration of often conflicting models represents the practical outcome of the confusion that inhabits the Promise Keeper movement, as its members try to hold to both the past, and to somehow to find their way into the future.

**See also** Apocalypticism and Nuclear War; Vegetarianism as Religious Witness.

**Further Reading:** Anonymous. Promise Keepers. <http://www.promisekeepers.org/>; Bartowski, John P. *The Promise Keepers: Servants, Soldiers, and Godly Men*. Rutgers University Press, February, 2004; Bly, Robert. *Iron John: A Book About Men*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004; Chrasta, Michael. "The Religious Roots of the Promise Keepers." In *The Promise Keepers: Essays in Masculinity and Christianity*, ed. Dane Claussen. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company Inc. Publishers, 2000: 20–28; Gallagher, Sally K., and Sabrina L. Wood. "Godly manhood going Wild?: transformations in conservative Protestant masculinity." *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 135–60; Keen, Sam. *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man*. New York: Bantam, 1992; Lundskow, George N. "Are Promises Enough? Promise Keepers Attitudes and Character in Intensive Interviews." In *Promise Keepers: Essays in Masculinity and Christianity*, ed. Dane Claussen. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company Inc. Publishers, 2000: 56–75; Trip, Gabriel. "Call of the Wildmen." *New York Times Magazine*, October 14, 1990; Williams, Rhys H. "Introduction: Promise Keepers: A Comment on Religion and Social Movements." *Sociology of Religion* (March 22, 2000). <http://find.galegroup.com/itx/in/fomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=AONE&docId=A61908751&source=gale&srcprod=AONE&userGroupName=boon41269&version=1.0>.

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## EVANGELICALS AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

Evangelicals have typically been seen as the most conservative group when it comes to the environment. They have generally been portrayed as anti-intellectual, and suspicious of all ecological movements. Certainly, some of this is borne out by the evidence, and some have suggested it stems from the dispensationalist perspective in evangelicalism that expects the imminent return of Jesus, and the quick-following destruction of the world. Such a position seemed to reach its height during the Reagan era. Today, however, the looming environmental crisis predicted by a large majority of the scientific community has had ramifications even in the evangelical world. Evangelicals have taken a new, more eco-friendly stance toward the environment, and have even been put on record as urging government and their membership

to do their part in slowing global warming and taking care of the earth. This new evangelical environmentalism is sometimes called *creation care* and is growing in the United States today.

## THE ROLE OF DISPENSATIONALISM IN EVANGELICALISM

To understand the relationship of evangelicalism and environmentalism, one must first understand the history of evangelicalism. A product of the second great awakening, evangelicalism caught fire at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Starting on the East Coast and traveling west, evangelicalism started as a revival movement, that some have argued challenged a movement toward secularism. Baptists and Methodists were particularly subject to the winds of evangelical change, though evangelical movements occurred in a large number of other denominations as well. Evangelicalism was particularly fomented by a number of itinerant preachers, who traveled throughout the country spreading a new message. The crux of evangelicalism was, then as now, conversion. Evangelicals stressed a need for repentance mediated through a conversion experience. This was not simply an intellectual affirmation, but a psychological transformation that made the believer a new person.

Evangelicalism thus offered the believer a transformative moment that wiped away the past and resulted in a new creation. It was predicated upon the notion that the world was sinful, the domain of Satan. Christ's coming was a historical moment of divine intervention, which allowed the Christian an opportunity to vacate their sinful state and be re-created into a new person. This led then to a suspicion of the world both natural and human. The world was fallen. Sin had seeped into its very core. And it took nothing less than a divine initiative powerfully enacted in the life of the believer to change that.

Given that background, it is perhaps not difficult to understand the appeal of dispensationalism. Founded by Charles Nelson Darby in the mid-nineteenth century in Scotland, dispensationalism offered an understanding of the end of the world. Dispensationalism held that the world could be divided up into a series of ages. The first five ages ended with the life of Christ. From there, two more ages occurred and then the great parenthesis, a period outside the dispensations, which would end with the final age when Christ would return and establish his kingdom. The old fallen world would then pass away, and be replaced by a new heaven, and a new earth. The final age would be inaugurated by seven years of tribulation when God's wrath would be visited upon the earth raining devastation. The earth would be ravaged by war, pestilence, plague, ecological disaster, death, famine and tyranny. Ultimately, this would end when Jesus returned as triumphant conqueror, wiping out the armies of the world with the sword of his mouth and bringing with him the army of saints.

What was particularly appealing about dispensationalism, is that regardless how horrible the events of those last years of tribulation seemed, the believer could rest easy in the confidence that they would be exempt from such terrors.

This is because dispensationalism offered the key doctrine of the secret rapture of the church. Based on 1 Thessalonians 4, the dispensationalists believed that before the tribulation began, Christ would return and take the church with him to heaven. This then would be the final act for the church that would inaugurate the tribulation and the return of Christ some seven years later.

The doctrine of fallenness that evangelicalism espoused, and the vision of the end propagated by dispensationalism, which included ecological catastrophe, linked together to create an evangelical understanding of the world as disposable in principle. The world is doomed, it is destined for environmental disaster that is predicted in scripture and is part of the inscrutable will of God. The question really becomes when will all this happen? While Darby himself eschewed date setting, he was convinced the time was near. But in 1948, when Israel became a nation, dispensationalists suddenly recognized the divine countdown had started.

Hal Lindsey, in his dispensationalist best seller *The Late Great Planet Earth*, made this connection very clear. Speaking of Matthew 24, which ends with the parable of the fig tree (a symbol for Israel) the Gospel Jesus declares, "Truly I say to you, this generation shall not pass away until all these things have come to pass." Lindsey goes on to clarify,

What generation? Obviously, in context, the generation that would see the signs—chief among them the rebirth of Israel. A generation in the Bible is something like forty years. If this is a correct deduction, then within forty years or so of 1948, all these things could take place. Many scholars who have studied Bible prophecy all their lives believe that this is so. (Lindsey 1998, 43)

While the exact date is still subject to dispute (1988 passed uneventfully from a cosmic perspective), there is no doubt that with the establishment of Israel, dispensationalists were convinced that the time was short. The climax of history was upon us.

What are the ecological ramifications of dispensationalism? If the end of history is truly upon us, what concern should the dispensationalist have about such environmental issues such as global warming, the destruction of species, increasing pollution, and the devastation of the rain forests? For the logic of dispensationalism, these are but signs of the end times. The dispensationalist will nod knowingly at such reports, and contend that things are going to get a lot worse once the tribulation has begun. But if the world is increasingly falling into ecological crisis, this means the return of Jesus is at hand. The important thing, as history makes its way through the divine plan towards the tribulation, is to make sure that people are saved, not owls. With the rapture coming ever closer, and the fate of the world is set in prophetic stone, the only real difference to be made is to issue the call to salvation.

It should not come as a surprise then, if dispensationalists like Tim LaHaye, Hal Lindsey, and John Hagee should reject global warming as the fanciful act of left wing organization determined to impose a one-world government. Dispensationalists understand the events of the world as all fitting into a divine

time frame headed towards Armageddon. As Jan Markell, director of Olive Tree Ministries wrote:

The pains on the earth stem from the Fall in the Garden. God is not waiting for us to solve the problem of global warming. We are waiting for Him to solve the problem of the global curse with His return. In the meantime, let's be the best stewards of the earth that we can be.

Sure, many of us look for a "new heavens and a new earth" because this one WILL be destroyed and the elements will melt with "fervent heat" (2 Peter 3:10–12); thus, the job of a true evangelical should be evangelism, not putting time, effort, and money into an initiative [solving global warming] that is being funded in part by proabortion, pro-same-sex marriage, globalist foundations.

The dispensationalist mindset focuses not on solving ecological problems, but on bringing people to salvation. If this is the last generation, be it 40 years, 70 years, or until the last person born in 1948 dies, then time is too short to focus on long-range environmental problems. Thus, the dispensationalist opts out of any discussion of solutions for ecological crises, instead focusing on the current redemption of the lost, and the ultimate return of Jesus Christ.

## ENVIRONMENTALISM IN THE REAGAN ERA

Ronald Reagan's election as president was arguably one of the most important moments in the environmental movements' history. Reagan, whose record as governor of California was relatively pro-environment, made a quick about-face upon entering the White House. Reagan was quick to cut spending in federal environmental agencies, weaken environmental regulations and enforcement, and appointed two people who would become the focal point of the ecological community's fury: James Watt and Anne Gorsuch.

Under Ronald Reagan's appointees a new direction was taken on environmentalism. During the 1970s, and particularly during the Carter administration, environmentalism had some successes. Carter's energy policy stressed conservation, and his interior department added millions of square miles to the national park system. However, when Reagan appointed James Watt, all that changed. Watt refused to increase public lands until forced by congress. Instead, he presided over the greatest sale of public lands in the twentieth century. Watt was aggressive about finding new forms of energy without too much concern about environmental consequences. While keeping national parks off-limits, Watt sought to open up public lands to greater mineral and oil exploration and development. He argued that "being a good steward requires the *use* of resources as well as the *preservation* of resources." It was that issue of use where Watt believed the United States had not been good stewards and sought to correct the overemphasis on preservation.

Watt cut the budget of the interior department, and particularly de-emphasized research and investigations that were not commercially beneficial. He likewise sought to open up Alaska and the off-shore continental shelf for oil exploration and drilling. Watt was extremely parsimonious about adding

species to the endangered species list, and held the record for the fewest additions until the administration of George W. Bush. Ultimately, Watt was vilified by environmentalists, and eventually met defeat at the hands of the Republican Senate, which passed legislation overturning some of Watt's provisions. Likewise, several of his decisions were challenged in court, and likewise, some were overturned. Eventually, Watt resigned after commenting about his staff, "I have a black, a woman, two Jews and a cripple. And we have talent."

The role of religion, however, is never far away when discussing James Watt. Watt has often been cited as testifying that, "When the last tree is felled Christ will come back." There is no record of such testimony. But such an apocryphal story has continued to have life, being repeated by such sources as the *Washington Post* and Bill Moyers, as a testimony to Watt's conservative religious perspective, and how it may have colored his approach to land management. Watt certainly did evoke Christ's return during testimony, but argued that regardless of the time of that return, one needed to engage in good stewardship of the earth. It is of course the debate over what constitutes *stewardship* that separated Watt from environmentalists. Nonetheless, the longevity of this quote testifies to the kind of connection between dispensationalism and its political ramification that first reared its head during the Reagan administration.

## CREATION ENVIRONMENTALISM

Yet the actual comment by Watt, which stressed stewardship of the earth, is a precursor of a more self-consciously environmentalist movement among evangelical Christians. In 1989, the name of James Watt was raised again, only this was in a roundtable talk on the churches and environmentalism. At that conference, James M. Cubie related the story of Watt's confirmation in which Paul Tsongas, a senator with a passion for environmentalism, struggled how to vote. In the end he commented that Watts was genuinely religious. Does a true man of God allow the rape of God's earth and God's creatures? Can a man of God look upon desecrated land and see God's will? Can the destruction of animals and naturalness even be arguably part of God's plan for us? I think not.

Tsongas voted to confirm Watt. Yet the logic of Tsongas's questions should not be missed. Tsongas here presumes that a religious perspective, even an evangelical one (Tsongas himself was Greek Orthodox), leads to an environmentalist concern.

Tsongas is not alone in this perspective, since in the 1990s and into the first decade of the twenty-first century the connection between evangelicals and environmentalism is becoming more and more common. In 1995, Evangelicals for Social Action and the Evangelical Environmental Network (E.E.N.) produced the *Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation*. The Declaration focused on the need to care for God's creation, and to take action in one's daily life "to resist the allure of wastefulness and overconsumption by making personal lifestyle choices that express humility, forbearance, self restraint and frugality." Interestingly, there is particular attention to poverty. The declaration states, "We recognize that poverty forces people to degrade creation in order to survive; therefore

we support the development of just, free economies which empower the poor and create abundance without diminishing creation's bounty." Attached to the declaration is a list of signatories, who include professors from many important evangelical colleges like Wheaton, Oral Roberts University, and Fuller Seminary, as well as several well-known evangelical ministries like World Vision, the InterVarsity Fellowship, and The Salvation Army. Yet also striking are the names that are missing from the list. There are no signatories from Biola College, Master's College, Liberty University, or Bob Jones University. Clearly, the appeal of the declaration was to more centrist-leaning Evangelical groups and colleges.

In 2002, the Evangelical Environmental Network came into the public eye with their *What Would Jesus Drive* (WWJD) educational campaign. The WWJD campaign sought to draw a connection between evangelicals and environmental responsibility in a way that had previously been the purview of more liberal religious organizations. The campaign generated a lot of attention. The EEN claims that over 1,400 print stories circulated, as well as television and radio stories covered on programs as diverse as NPR's Talk of the Nation, to the Oliver North Show, from Good Morning America to 60 Minutes. The campaign illustrated a new greener evangelical constituency, one that embraced problems such as global warming and the health effects of pollution as real, and as the responsibility of Christians to solve.

On the heels of this campaign in 2004, the Sandy Cove Covenant and Invitation was established by a group of evangelicals meeting in Sandy Cove, Maryland. The conference was sponsored by *Christianity Today* and The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). The document produced by the conferences consisted of a series of "covenants" (agreements by the participants) to make *creation care* an important part of the Evangelical discourse. The Sandy Cove Covenant mostly demanded that attention be paid to environmental topics, and that solid research about environmental issues should be uncovered and disseminated. The document ended with an "invitation" to engage on these issues, and specifically set forth the goal of producing a position document on climate change within a year. The signatories on this document still excluded some of the more well known evangelical names, but did include the leaders of the National Association of Evangelicals and *Christianity Today*, which by themselves increased the visibility of the work (NAE 2004b).

The group was good to their word and six months later, in fall of 2004 the NAE circulated the document *For the Health of The Nations: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility*. This wide-ranging document dealt with a host of issues from poverty to abortion, human rights to religious freedom. It is only on page 11 of the 12-page document that the issue of environmentalism is addressed in the section *We labor to protect God's creation*. A total of four paragraphs follow, that hardly constitute an ecological manifesto. Essentially, this part of the document can be summed up in the last sentence from the first paragraph, "Our uses of the Earth must be designed to conserve and renew the Earth rather than deplete and destroy it" (NAE 2004a).

Still, the section does call for government action in two places. First it calls for government to "protect" the populace from the effects of pollution of air

and water. Here, intriguingly, there is reference to the *complexity* of natural systems and *unexpected side effects*, which may be an oblique reference to global warming. Second, in the most programmatic statement in the section it concludes, “We urge government to encourage fuel efficiency, reduce pollution, encourage sustainable use of natural resources, and provide for the proper care of wildlife and their natural habitats” (NAE 2004a). It was at this point the fire-works began in the evangelical community.

James Dobson, influential head of Focus on the Family, a conservative evangelical group, denounced the document. As did Chuck Colson founder of the Prison Fellowship Ministries, Robert Robertson, president of Oral Roberts University, and Donald E. Wildmon head of American Family Association. These individuals (and others as well) accused the NAE of attempting to inject itself into the global warming debate and calling the whole issue “not scientifically established.” They were joined by Senator James Inhofe, a vociferous global warming denier on Capitol Hill, who likewise pressured the NAE to abandon the document. In the end, regardless of the ever mounting scientific data establishing global warming, the NAE backed down and issued a statement: “We are not considering a position on global warming. We are not advocating for specific legislation or government mandates” (NAE, 2004b). The position paper on civic responsibility remains on the NAE website, but not in the *Policy Resolutions* section.

The debate about the environment, and particularly global warming, is not over, however. George W. Bush, himself a famous skeptic of global warming, included a reference to global warming in his 2007 state of the union address. With the Democratic take over of congress in 2006, skepticism about the issue has taken a back seat, and both parties are now taking the issue seriously. The green evangelicals are now being courted by the Democrats, and may abandon the Republican party if it does not seriously address this issue. Additionally, particularly among young evangelicals, there is an increasing view that this is one of the most important moral issues of our time. We may see a political fracturing of this group in the near future as a result. At the very least, environmentalism has entered the evangelical mainstream.

**See also** Apocalypticism and Nuclear War; Separation of Church and State.

**Further Reading:** Aitken, Jonathan. “A Change in the Climate.” *American Spectator* 39, no. 4 (2006): 50–52; Brandt, Don. *God’s Stewards: The Role of Christians in Creation Care*. Federal Way, WA: World Vision, 2002; The Evangelical Climate Initiative. “The Evangelical Climate Initiative: A History.” 2006. Available at: <http://www.npr.org/documents/2006/feb/evangelical/history.pdf>; Evangelical Environmental Network. “Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation.” 2006. Available at: <http://www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php>; Evangelical Environmental Network. “Creation Care.” Evangelical Environmental Network, 1998. Available at: <http://www.omegaletter.com/articles/articles.asp?ArticleID=5854>; Lindsey, Hal. *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, 25th ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zonderran, 1998; Markell, Jan. [www.olivetreeviews.org](http://www.olivetreeviews.org); National Association of Evangelicals. “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility.” 2004a. Available at: [http://www.nae.net/images/civic\\_responsibility2.pdf](http://www.nae.net/images/civic_responsibility2.pdf) (accessed January 30, 2008); National Association