

HEAVEN AND NATURE SING: HOW EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY CAN INFORM THE TASK OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION (AND VICE VERSA)

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When asked about his earliest memories of growing up in the Mississippi Delta, Willie Morris talked about killing ants. Morris, the Southern essayist and former editor of *Harper's* magazine, told an interviewer about a time, early in his childhood in Yazoo City, when his friend Bubba walked up, to find Morris on the sidewalk killing ants, as Johnny Cash might put it, just to watch them die. Bubba looked at the ants, looked at Willie, looked back at the ants, and pronounced, “The Lord ain’t gonna like that.” Morris said, “And I guess he didn’t.”¹

It is hard to imagine things as inconsequential to the arc of history than the extinguished nervous systems of some insects a half-century ago. But, for some reason, Morris remembered that little rebuke. Perhaps the memory was random, as some are, but perhaps it was the beginning of a conscience awakening to how, in small things, a human person could learn to use power destructively and capriciously. Or perhaps it was because that memory reminded the writer facing his own mortality that there was an account to be had at the end of this age, by Someone who weighed all things in the balance.

Most evangelicals would affirm that the totality of human stewardship includes the shepherding of the creation around us. In light of the contemporary ecological movements, especially since the fractures of the culture wars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, conservative evangelicals and secular environmentalists often find ourselves talking about each other, though rarely with each other. Both sides are seeking to appeal to consciences, in different ways. I could prompt a cascade of “Amens” in a sermon—or retweets on a Twitter feed—by noting that our legal system protects darter snails but not unborn humans. A secular environmentalist could evoke cheers on “The Daily Show” by lampooning conservative Christians for claiming to be “pro-life” while ignoring toxins in the atmosphere that produce birth defects or spontaneous abortions. These are appeals to the conscience, but they are rarely a conversation from one conscience to the other so much as they are self-reinforcing “red meat” (or, I guess, “green leaf” as the case might be) for the already-convinced bases.

Recent years have forced evangelical Christians and ecological activists, at least in some communities, to engage with one another. Think, for instance, of

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¹ Jack Bales, ed., *Conversations with Willie Morris* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000) 58.

when the Deepwater Horizon oilrig exploded off the Gulf Coast, surging oil into the ecosystem of the Gulf and threatening the seafood and tourism industries of the communities there as well as the biodiversity of the Gulf itself. This story is repeated often, in a thousand different scenarios, where human lives and cultures are jeopardized by environmental calamity.

Our neighbors in the environmentalist activist community have interacted often, of course, with “people of faith.” Still, often these alliances were simply a matching of blue-state progressive secularists with blue-state progressive religionists around a common political agenda. Environmental catastrophes, though, just might reframe the dialogue, by including more evangelicals, real evangelicals, who know their way around a sawdust trail, in these conversations.

Yes, mainline Protestants have often and long been involved in questions of ecology, and often in helpful and constructive ways. But concern about the natural world is hardly limited to those for whom specific environmental policies are part of a faith-based legislative agenda. Again, the eco-catastrophes of recent years demonstrate how much is at stake for Christians of a much more conservative stripe. In Appalachia, these are not Unitarian Universalists facing the destruction of their communities to mountaintop removal but Southern Baptists and Pentecostals. And, as ecological crises of one sort or another hit everywhere in the developing world, usually there are evangelical missionaries—of the most supernatural worldview, soul-saving gospel kind—enabling tribes and villages and families to sort through the rubble and rebuild. These missionaries are the ones teaching children to sing Bible songs and preaching the way of eternal life while also training in sustainable agriculture and water conservation and so on. As those in the environmentalist activist community and those in the evangelical Christian community find themselves up close and personal together, we can learn some things from one another, and learn some things together.

I. TOWARD A BALANCED NATURAL THEOLOGY

The relationship between God and nature is complicated enough without Christians and secular environmentalists defining one another by the fringes of their respective movements. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite sees a cynical environmental motive behind even evangelical rejection of naturalistic Darwinism. It is not primarily about evolution or creation at all, she suggests, but a means to mobilize evangelicals to distrust science and scientists so that this “generalized anger helps mobilize the conservative base and get enough votes for the *real* political agenda.”² Others, such as broadcast journalist Stephenie Hendricks, suggest that evangelical views of Armageddon and the pretribulational Rapture sanctify human spoiling of the ecosphere, since we believe that God is going to burn everything up soon any-

² Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Dreaming of Eden: American Religion and Politics in a Wired World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 98.

way.³ Yes, I recognize that Secretary of the Interior James Watt appealed to the soon-coming apocalypse in order to dismiss concerns about his environmental policies. Bill Moyers tells secular audiences that American evangelicals believe that “Jesus will return when the last tree is felled.” For many on the Left, the conspiracy theory of a monolithic evangelical hostility toward nature, grounded in some caricature of theonomic Reconstructionism and dispensationalist apocalypticism, persists, ignoring evangelical concerns about ecology that predate Earth Day in 1970. I am not referring to Karl Rahner but to Carl Henry, not Francis of Assisi but to Francis of L’Abri.

Likewise, some evangelicals casually dismiss all environmentalists as unwitting dupes of a pantheistic nature-worshipping conspiracy, far down the Romans 1 downward slope. Some are, of course. But Paul’s point in Romans 1 is not simply that overt nature worship is the turn from the Creator to the creature. All of us, the Bible says, are, apart from Christ, nature worshippers. Some do so in divinizing the awe and wonder of the universe; some by divinizing the awe and wonder at human ingenuity, including human industry and technology. This sense of human limitlessness, self-theism, is what Wendell Berry calls “Faustian economics” of the same sort we see in Genesis 3.

In fact, Christian theology has much to contribute to an understanding of protecting the creation. Environmentalist activist and essayist Bill McKibben calls on society to recognize why nature is to be considered worthy of protection in these terms: “The chief lesson is that the world displays a lovely order, an order comforting in its intricacy. And the most appealing part of this harmony is its permanence—the sense that we are part of something with roots stretching back nearly forever, and branches reaching forward just as far.”⁴ This intuition is precisely right, and, I would argue, is grounded in a Christian account of the meaning of the world.⁵

The NT writings affirm that the meaning of all reality is encoded in something the apostle Paul called “the mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3:4). This mystery is that in Christ there is a “summing up” of everything—not simply the aggregate of all individual souls but “things in the heavens and things on earth” (Eph 1:10) in the person of the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. The order and harmony of the universe are described in the Genesis account of, for instance, the regularity of times and seasons. This order is described in terms of a manifold wisdom of God, by the nature Psalms and elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, and is grasped by non-Hebraic thought in the concept of the *Logos* or the *Tao* ordering the harmony of the cosmos. In the Christic mystery, the mud of the earth—which is

³ Stephenie Hendricks, *Divine Destruction: Wise Use, Dominion Theology, and the Making of American Environmental Policy* (Hoboken, NJ: Melville House, 2005).

⁴ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989) 62.

⁵ I recognize that McKibben is a United Methodist church member, who has written on religious themes (for instance, on the Book of Job). His primary audience, however, is within the more secular environmentalist communities and, secondarily, within mainline Protestant communities rather than within the conservative evangelical streams of Christianity.

the substance from which humanity is formed—is joined to the eternal nature of God himself so that the material world is now connected, without confusion but also without separation, from the focal point of creation and history.

This ordering mystery, far from fitting the caricature of a Christian rejection of nature, means that nature is, in fact, permanent—more permanent than any naturalistic account could conceive, given the laws of physics. “God has much more in mind and at stake in nature than a backdrop for man’s comfort and convenience, or even a stage for the drama of human salvation,” evangelical theologian Carl F. H. Henry asserted. “His purpose includes the redemption of the cosmos that man implicated in the fall.”⁶ In other words, Jesus comes not to bury the earth, but to raise it.

Orthodox (with a small “o”) Christians believe in the “end of the world,” if by “world” one means the present evil system under the tyranny of the criminal spirits. But orthodox Christianity does not believe in the “end of the world,” if by “world” one means the destruction of the ecosystem or of the material cosmos.

Yes, because the eschaton comes, ultimately and cataclysmically, in Christ there are limitations to the possibilities of environmental activism, but that is the case in any account. Secular environmentalism, based on scientific naturalism, after all, ends with the catastrophe of matter collapsing into itself. The permanence of the creation, as redeemed in Christ, matters to the task of environmental protection because it grounds the activity of earth-keeping in optimism and hope. Secular environmentalists often take note of the darker, more pessimistic forms of Christian eschatology, but the same tendencies in Christian theology show up just as often in the environmentalist movement as well, and for reasons that are not fundamentally the fault of environmentalist ideology, *per se*.

Some social conservative organizations find that they can raise money, and mobilize supporters more easily by appealing to a sense of conspiracy and impending doom. (The public schools will soon be teaching your children how to become lesbians and practice witchcraft, etc.) Some environmentalist groups sing with different lyrics but with the same tune (to use a metaphor coined in another context by David Frum).⁷ In addressing issues ranging from ocean protection to acid rain to climate change to population, some environmentalist groups speak as though we are “slouching toward Gomorrah,” meaning the fiery end of that story rather than its moral condition.

As philosopher Roger Scruton has observed, the doomsday perspective lends itself easily to a “salvationist” solution, which is why large-scale questions—such as global warming—are more often present in activist environmentalist rhetoric than smaller-scale issues that are addressable by persons, families, or local communities.⁸ “The great salvific religions proceed, first, by presenting sinners with a description

⁶ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Waco, TX: Word, 1976) 2:99.

⁷ David Frum, *Why Romney Lost (And What the GOP Can Do About It)* (Newsweek, 2012, e-book, location 147).

⁸ Roger Scruton, *How to Think Seriously About the Planet: The Case for an Environmental Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 86–87.

of their case that seems to allow no remedy but only despair, and then by offering hope in the form of a total doctrine, the path of purity and submission, which is the unique way to redemption,” Scruton writes. “The doomsday scenario has the effect of removing all belief in the small-scale and negotiated remedies, and creating in their place a great and comprehensive longing for salvation.”

My Baptist forebears might be tempted to say that this is precisely what is wrong with Scruton’s Church of England, which too often substituted “small-scale and negotiated remedies” to original sin, in form of an established state church, instead of a “comprehensive longing for salvation” called for by the evangelical counter-movements within the church. I would agree, though, that there is a difference indeed between the call to the gospel and the call to action on any issue, environmental action included.

The immediacy of apocalypse, it is thought, lends weight to the urgency to “act now.” But this can only work for so long, and we evangelicals know precisely why—because we have seen it in our cyclical prophecy conferences. One can only tell any given generation for so long that the signs of the times are clear that Jesus will return by 1948 or 1968 or 1988 or 2012, or that the Antichrist is alive right now and on his way. This can motivate immediate frenetic activity, but it cannot motivate a lasting, multigenerational movement because, when it is not in fact apocalypse now, the result is a burned-over constituency given over to apathy. This does not mean the issues are not important. A generation that grows cynical when it turns out that Mikhail Gorbachev was not the Antichrist after all can easily grow inattentive to the ways the Bible tells us the “spirit of antichrist” (1 John 4:3) is already at work. Conversely, the more nuanced and long-lasting effects of ecological decisions do not mobilize students to the streets or checks to be written, but, then again, when the motivation to action is a dystopian future envisioned in a fundraising letter, many will eventually realize that since Miami still is not under water, that “tomorrow will be just like today only more so” (Isa 56:12).

Conservatives, Christian and otherwise, are defined by our commitment to conserve the “permanent things”—such as order, tradition, virtue, community, and so on. In a Christian account of history, the earth, and the universe, is also a “permanent thing” and so we give attention and due reverence to its cultivation and care, just as we do the virtues. The earth will eventually be restored, yes. That no more discourages ecological protection than the resurrection from the dead motivates Christians to eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we shall die. Because the body is important to God, indeed the temple of the Holy Spirit, it matters what we do with it. And because the earth is the permanent dwelling place of Christ Jesus, the point where heaven and nature meet in the rule of Jesus, it matters what we do with it, now.

II. TOWARD A BALANCED HUMAN ECOLOGY

Evangelical theology and environmental activism can also be in dialogue on the question of the meaning of humanity in relation to the natural order. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that much of the secular environmentalist

movement is informed at this point, perhaps surprisingly, by the same moral intuitional foundation employed in other ways by the Religious Right. He calls this the “sanctity foundation” of moral reasoning. “Many environmentalists revile industrialism, capitalism and automobiles not just for the physical pollution they create but also for a more symbolic kind of pollution—a degradation of nature, and of humanity’s original nature, before it was corrupted by industrial capitalism.”⁹ Evangelicals and this sort of eco-theorist both believe in a fall of humanity, and we agree this fall has cosmic consequences, but we disagree on the meaning of this original sin and how in light of it humanity fits within the larger fabric of the universe. The scary word at this point is, of course, “dominion.”

The concept of “dominion,” found first in the opening passages of Genesis, sometimes alarms non-Christians because it seems to connote a sense of rapacious power. But that is not what the Christian tradition intends. Biblical dominion is not, in Carl Henry’s words, “pharaoh-like,” but instead is Christlike. Jesus, the One who fully restores human nature in his person, does not come to serve his own appetites but to serve others. The dominion over the creation is in the context of cultivation, and that in the context of a mandate to be “fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28). Dominion, then, by definition, is done with future generations, with others, in view.

In explaining the Kuyperian understanding of culture, Richard Mouw distinguishes between the “primary environment,” a natural one, fashioned by God, and the “secondary environment,” a cultural one, cultivated by humanity as God’s vice-regent.¹⁰ This point is seen in Gregory Wolfe’s contention that the Lord’s Supper itself reveals both nature and culture in a kind of sacramental humanism. The Eucharist, he argues, is not wheat and grapes, but bread and wine. “In other words, the gifts offered to God at the altar are not the untouched products of the earth but artifacts, transformed through human hands through an art.”¹¹ At the table of communion, we see God’s wild and free nature, and we see the dominion of humanity—all in the broken body and poured-out blood of the One who is fully God, fully human.

Because human dominion is grounded in the image of God, this dominion reflects God’s dominion, which is not predatory. God, in the biblical narrative, creates the raw materials of the universe, he shapes these materials, and he cultivates and conserves them. God’s dominion is seen not only in his dynamic creative activity, but also in his Sabbath rest, withdrawing from such activity. God commands human cultivation of agriculture, but also specifies rest for the land. He is seen in the taming of animals, but also in the cycle of predator and prey. As environmentalist Scott Russell Sanders rightly notes, wilderness in Scripture serves to demon-

⁹ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012) 152.

¹⁰ Richard J. Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship: Essays in the Line of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) 109.

¹¹ Gregory Wolfe, *Beauty Will Save the World: Recovering the Human in an Ideological Age* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2011); cited in Elias Crim, “Culture Without the War,” *The American Conservative* (August 2012) 52.

strate the limits of man's sovereignty over space just as the Sabbath demonstrates the limits of man's sovereignty over time. Human dominion does not, therefore, mean that every stretch of land should be paved over, and the night sky permanently eclipsed by neon; God forbid. Dominion is represented not only in the cultivation of a field for food, but also in the cultivation of a wilderness refuge for future generations. The Hoover Dam represents human dominion and creativity, but so does the fact that there is not a *Bed, Bath, and Beyond* situated on the Grand Canyon.

Environmentalists are correct that dominion presupposes human uniqueness among the other life forms, but this is not necessarily an impediment to environmental stewardship. I would argue it is a necessary component of environmental protection, one that even the most secular environmentalist activists share at the most primal presuppositional level. The call to environmental activism is, after all, a call to activism, and, beyond that, a call to accountability.

Secular environmentalists are not irrational when they conclude that humanity is such a small anomaly in a vast universe that there is no reason to find anything distinctive about humanity. When environmentalist Barry Lopez writes that "the world has no investment or interest in the triumph of *Homo sapiens*," he is pondering the same mystery David of Israel pondered when he looked at the night sky and asked, "What is man that you are mindful of him; the son of man that you care for him?" (Ps 8:4).¹² The Psalmist, of course, sees the answer to that question through God's revelation of human dominion, that all things are "under the feet" of humanity. And yet, even that is not immediately obvious to the senses. The writer of Hebrews remarks that we "do not see all things under his feet" (Heb 2:8). Nature seems at some points disinterested and at other points actively hostile to human dominion.

The curse that Christian theology places on nature is not, in Lopez's words, "an Albigensian hatred" of the material world, but is instead a protection of nature from fallen humanity. The Creator subjects the creation to the kind of "futility" under which the creation groans, the apostle Paul writes (Rom 8:20), but this is given "in hope." After the flood, God allows humanity to eat the flesh of the beasts for food but he does so by simultaneously putting the "fear of you and the dread of you" (Gen 9:2) within the instinctual center of the animals. This is to show that animals are not mere fodder for humans, to be harvested like grain. The fear of humanity in animals—and beyond that the bucking of the inanimate natural order against human rule—is to signify that the image-bearer is now, in some sense, a twisted interloper in this order. It gives the animals a sporting chance in the arena of hunter and hunted.

The frustration of human dominion resonates both with environmentalist warnings of human rapaciousness and the damage this causes, and the Christian insistence that the cosmos is anthropocentric. The creation groans, Paul writes, for "the revealing of the sons of God" by resurrection from the death curse. We do not see all things under the feet of humanity around us, but we see Jesus "crowned

¹² Barry Lopez, "Waiting for Salmon," *Granta* 90 (2005) 85.

with glory and honor because of the suffering of death” (Heb 2:9). When orthodox Christians say that the universe is centered around humanity, we do not mean centered around the fallen human appetite, which, after all, sentences us to return to the ground from which we came in death. We mean that the universe is anthropocentric because it is centered around one particular *anthropos*, the human Christ Jesus. Human uniqueness exists not because of our raw power over the world around us, but because all human persons bear the stamp of his image and potentially share in his inheritance of the earth.

Again, while this human uniqueness may be difficult to see in a vast natural order, red in tooth and claw, it is, in fact, recognized generally. Naturalist Jane Goodall, advocating the humane treatment of animals, said that cruelty was, in her view, “the worst human sin.” When asked how that could be sinful when human beings displayed the same sort of cruelty seen in other primates, say chimpanzees, Goodall rejected the comparison. She said that a chimpanzee “doesn’t have the intellectual ability, or I don’t think it does, to deliberately inflict pain. You know, we can plan a torture, whether it’s physical or mental. We plan it, and in cold blood we can execute it. The chimpanzee’s brutality is always on the spur of the moment. It’s some trigger in the environment that causes this craze, almost, of violence.”¹³ Goodall’s point is precisely correct. Human accountability, including accountability for ecological degradation, presupposes human uniqueness. And the appeals to stewardship are not to carbon-based life-forms generally, but to intelligent, rational human beings to utilize self-control and empathy and creativity in order to conserve and honor the ecosystem.

Environmental protection, then, only functions as a movement if it is embedded in a deep love of human nature as dependent on, and yet with some responsibility for, the rest of nature. Evangelical and Catholic and other Christian voices are therefore not seeking to impede the ecological advance but to save it when we refuse, for example, to see “fruitfulness and multiplying” of humanity as a curse, or when we reject the notion of some in the fringes of the environmentalist movement that humanity is itself a “cancer” or a “parasite” on the earth. This shows up in the way so many secular environmentalist organizations include population control seamlessly within the web of ecological causes, usually in terms of first-world funding measures in keeping third-world birthrates down while simultaneously creating a culture of suspicion of large families, as though children were a consumer excess.

I would argue that a focus on the rearing of children is, at the most primal level, the same impulse that drives humanity to check a reckless, selfish form of dominion in order to cultivate an other-directed, limited, future-oriented dominion, one that preserves and protects ecosystems and cultures for generations to come. This is found in the concept of inheritance, a concept that Scripture uses to speak of the eternal destiny of the children of God. An “inheritance” in the biblical view

¹³ Interview with Bill Moyers, *Bill Moyers Journal: The Conversation Continues* (New York: New Press, 2011) 305.

is not a sum of money (as so many contemporary Westerners think of it), but a way of life. This inheritance was typically a plot of land, cultivated by one generation and left to the next, or a boat, nets, and the knowledge of fishing, handed down from father to son to grandson. The mistreatment of the land or of the waters or of the air would be to assert that one is the alpha and the omega of one's existence, a denial of the future and a rejection of one's place in the inheritance. It would be a prodigal father who leaves his sons for the far country, and it would be shameful. The generation of children reminds us that we are not self-creating gods. The child emerges, as Paul Ramsey says, not through the "cool, deliberate act of man's rational will" but through the wildness of nature in the sexual union.¹⁴ Procreation is pro-creation.

Moreover, the assumptions behind population control are premised upon a certain technological malleability both of human sexuality and of human nature, both of which, I would argue, have ecological consequences of their own. Wendell Berry is correct that, though the feminist movement has yielded some needed social gains, the turbulent gender and sexual revolutions of the last century have done the same sort of damage, if not more so, as the industrial and financial revolutions to an understanding of ecological economy. After all, part of what it means to learn to live in an economy of nature is found in marriage, which Berry says has been reduced often to merely emotional and utilitarian categories. Marriage is now, he says, is "two successful careerists in the same bed," each asserting their rights, which he says is now itself a form of slow-train divorce: "a prolonged and impassioned negotiation as to how things shall be divided."¹⁵ Moreover, Berry indicts the sexual freedom of the contemporary age for denying the very same natural economic categories that disconnect humanity from the land, and lead to the commodification of life and relationship. He notes the frequency of the use of the term "sexual partner" instead of "husband" or "wife." In sexual libertarianism, Berry asserts, one practices "safe sex," which means protecting oneself, "not one's partner or the children that may come of the 'partnership.'"¹⁶

In the case of sexual ecology, it is not a simple "culture war" issue in which evangelical Christians see it correctly and secular environmentalists do not. In some cases, secular environmentalists themselves testify more directly than some evangelical Christians of what is at stake in turning sexuality and gender and fidelity and family "against nature." Scott Russell Sanders, for instance, notes the dangers of disconnecting masculinity from husbandry. "In a traditional society, a boy coming of age would be taught how to do the necessary work—hunting, fishing, trapping, farming, building shelters, caring for animals," Sanders writes. "He'd be told, 'Because you are no longer a child, you can no longer merely seek your own pleasure. Now you are responsible for the welfare of other people.'" Sanders identifies a loss here. "In our society, a boy coming of age hears from the media, 'Have fun!' In

¹⁴ Gilbert Meilaender, "The Blessing of Children," *The New Atlantis* 36 (2012) 95.

¹⁵ Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point, 1990) 180.

¹⁶ Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1992) 141.

other words, ‘Stay a child,’” Sanders writes. “Only now the boy has a strong body, an alert penis, a car, a charge card, maybe a gun, and it’s dangerous to keep encouraging him to act with a child’s selfishness.”¹⁷

The conversation about humanity, though, will not yield simply disagreements but also some surprising and fruitful points of connection. Jeremy Rifkin in *The Nation* magazine noted a growing alliance between social conservatives and environmentalist progressives on questions of the cloning of human embryos. He called this “fusion biopolitics.” While these unlikely allies disagree strongly about such matters as abortion rights and sexual liberation, they see the dangers in creating a market for the commodification of human beings. “What unites social conservatives and progressives on cloning issues is their commitment to the intrinsic value of life and their opposition to what they perceive to be a purely utilitarian perspective on biotech issues.”¹⁸ The progressives no doubt view the conservatives as inconsistent, because the free market is not the measure of all things. And we conservatives would see the progressives as inconsistent in understanding the threat to human dignity in the buying and selling of cloned human embryos, but not in seeing the threat to the legal denial of personhood to naturally conceived embryos. Nevertheless, it is a start, and the same questions about human dignity in a technological age mean that opposite groups are having similar conversations about the limits of human dominion through technology and commerce. Both Christian theology and deep ecology teach that human dominion is limited, and that when these limits are transgressed awful things happen. The question is limited by what, or by whom? The only long-term sustainable answer, it would seem to be, would be in what Thomas Jefferson would call “nature and nature’s God.”

Environmentalist Bill McKibben, for instance, warns of the “frontiers” of genetic engineering, robotics, and nanotechnology and what techno-utopian culture will do to human dignity. He recognizes that the motives behind “post-human” technologies are often simply the second, third, or three hundredth step behind a sexual revolution that sought to deny the createdness of gender. He cites those who celebrate the fact that a cyborg would “transcend” the old “patriarchal dualisms” of the past. Free from manhood or womanhood, such a being would be “liberated” for “perversity,” which in the post-human account is a good thing. McKibben may or may not recognize Romans 1 on the printed page, but he recognizes a flight from one’s Creator when he sees it.

McKibben also seems to recognize who his allies are, at least on this, and they are those who worship. Worship for McKibben seems to point to the central truth of human existence: “Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” Thus, McKibben asks: “Whom *would* you worship as your creator if your genes came from Pfizer? If your daily bread came from a magic nanobox? If you had been programmed? Eventually, like all other meanings,

¹⁷ Mark Allister, “‘To Be a Man’ in the Common Life of Nature: An Interview with Scott Russell Sanders,” in *Eco-Man: New Perspectives on Masculinity and Nature* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2004) 48–49.

¹⁸ Jeremy Rifkin, “Fusion Biopolitics,” *The Nation* (February 18, 2002) 7–23.

religion would wither away. That's a lot of human legacy to dispense with, but we might well do it. According to the techno-utopians, we *will* do it. We have no choice; we inevitably push forward. It is our destiny, and destiny is inescapable. We aren't special."¹⁹ That is not quite the Gospel of John, but it is not Nietzsche either, and that is a good start. Wendell Berry warns that "the next great division of the world will be between people who wish to live as creatures and people who wish to live as machines."²⁰ And that might be more literal a scenario than even Mr. Berry envisioned.

Christian theology is consonant with environmental protection precisely because Christianity maintains the uniqueness of humanity as image-bearer. Thus, while human beings have dominion over the creation, we have no dominion over one another, or indeed over our createdness itself. What is often called environmental protection is often simply the outworking then of neighbor love.

God knows that humanity needs the natural creation. We are not made of ether, after all, but of Spirit-enlivened mud. We come from the earth, and we must receive from the earth what we need to survive. There is also a spiritual component to the relationship between human beings and the environment. Jesus continually retreated into the silent places of the mountains and the hills and the deserts, sometimes in the fellowship only of the wild beasts. The Bible enjoins us to recognize God in creation, and it should be obvious that, in order to thrive, we need more than what Thomas P. Hughes calls "the human-built world."

Pollution kills people. Pollution dislocates families. Pollution upends cultures. These are the things conservatives care about. As social conservatives, evangelical Christians ought to understand that the traditions and mores we seek to conserve are virtually always rooted in a natural order of place and rootedness. These traditions we seek to conserve are formed by bonds across the generations, not simply by some social contract among the negotiating parties now alive, but by a compact, as Russell Kirk said, "reaching back to the dead and forward to the unborn." Liberalism wants to dissolve those traditions, and make every generation create itself anew; not conservatism.

Every human culture is formed in a tie with the natural environment. When the natural environment is used up, unsustainable for future generations, cultures die. When seas are killed, when mountaintops are left as stumps, when forests are uprooted with nothing left in their place, local cultures die, too. And what is left in their place too often is an individualism defined by the appetites for sex, violence, and the accumulation of things.

¹⁹ Bill McKibben, *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003).

²⁰ Wendell Berry, *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000) 55.

III. TOWARD A BALANCED POLITICAL ECOLOGY

So what is to be done? The first practical step in a conversation is to recognize the roadblocks to further dialogue.

Like apocalypticism, utopianism is a persistent temptation for environmentalism, as for every movement (including the evangelical Christian movement to “reclaim America” or to “fulfill the Great Commission in our lifetime”). Environmentalist utopianism is often easy for evangelicals and other conservatives to recognize. But there is more than one form of utopianism. Many conservative Christians reflexively disengage from ecological husbandry issues because of a kind of economic libertarianism characteristic of some of our allies on other issues in the public square. Rod Dreher argues that it is “a sign of conservatism’s intellectual decline that to call someone a ‘social conservative’ today is in most cases to identify a churchgoer who opposes abortion and gay marriage but is otherwise functionally libertarian.”²¹

As those who believe in natural rights, we believe the role of the state is necessarily limited. But a full libertarian account is problematic for a conservative, and especially a Christian, understanding of community and order. Libertarian scholar Brink Lindsey describes the dominant strain of libertarianism as “radical and utopian.” The problem, he contends, with hyper-libertarianism with its quest for autonomous freedom is summed up in a phrase from the (libertarian-friendly) television program *South Park*: “Step one, articulate Utopia. Step three is Utopia. Step two is a big question mark.”²²

Conservatism necessarily rejects such a blanket trust in blind market forces and individual autonomy. George Will defends the market as “a marvelous mechanism for allocating resources” but a poor arbiter of more ultimate values. The market, he contends, represents the wishes of people alive at the moment, while a conservative government “exists not merely to serve individuals’ immediate preferences.” Will argues, “Government must take the long view” and “look down the road and consider the interests and needs of citizens yet unborn.”²³ This is the equivalent of what the Christian Kuyperian tradition would call the government’s responsibility for mediation of “inter-sphere” disputes.

Most American evangelicals support a free market economic system because this system better ensures economic growth and upward mobility, and deals with human nature as it is. A free market commitment, though, does not entail a laissez-faire view of government regulation. Regulation should be minimal and as non-intrusive as possible, but simply trusting corporations or individuals to protect society from harmful pollutants is an inadequate view of human sin, akin to the youth minister who lets the teenage boy and girl share the same sleeping bag at church camp because he “believes in young people.”

²¹ Rod Dreher, “Philosopher Prince,” *The American Conservative* (March 2012) 18.

²² Christopher Beam, “The Trouble with Liberty,” *New York* (January 3–10, 2011) 39.

²³ George Will, *Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983) 120.

A Christian view of human depravity means that there are limits to every claim to sovereignty, even legitimate claims, whether from church, family, state, business, or labor. A commitment to a free market does not mean unfettered license any more than a commitment to free speech means hardcore pornography ought to be broadcast in prime-time by our local network television affiliate. Caesar's sword is there, by God's authority, to restrain those who would harm others (Romans 13). When government fails or refuses to protect its own people, whether from nuclear attack or from toxic waste spewing in life-giving waters, the government has failed. This recognition is only the start of the conversation. After all, we all recognize a legitimate government authority in punishing theft and preventing terrorism. We do not agree on whether government ought to have the power to tap telephones or detain potential terrorists indefinitely. A commitment to a legitimate but limited government necessitates that the measures of action will be constantly debated and reevaluated.

A recognition of common ecological solidarity still must face the larger question of defining the scope of the issues. Bill McKibben writes that the tone of the environmentalist agenda has heightened due to what is at stake. He says: "Unlike, say, clean drinking water, where simple, practical wisdom was enough to offer you an answer, global warming almost demanded a theological response."²⁴ Therein, I think, is the problem. I am not denying that we face huge, global issues. I am simply saying that such issues, disconnected from locality and place, tend toward the kind of abstraction that make them seem like an alien theological or philosophical system, irrelevant to the practical outworking of life.

Humanity is designed to love the universal through the particular, the global through the local, the abstract through the concrete—and here is where much of contemporary environmentalist appeals tend to fail to persuade (even when they are right). We do not love "the family" as a concept by cerebral appeals to the importance of the family unit. We learn to love the family in the "little platoons" of our own families, whether biological or ecclesial. In order to understand a concept, we must connect that concrete particular to the abstract universal.²⁵ We understand compassion by caring for the hungry girl in kindergarten, and we care for the little girl not randomly or capriciously but because of human compassion and a concern for the common good. This is what Jesus does repeatedly. He does not call his hearers to "mercy" in the abstract but to "go and do likewise" in the rescue of a man beaten and left for dead by roadside pirates. The biblical ethic tells us, abstractly, to "love neighbor" and to "love God" but we learn to do this in a thousand smaller ways—from honoring father and mother, to singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, to leaving the overflow of the fields for the poor.

Wendell Berry is an exception to this tendency in the contemporary ecological movement. Even without adopting all of Berry's solutions, evangelicals can understand that the issue, as Berry puts it, "all turns on affection." Thus, his call to honor

²⁴ Bill McKibben, *The Bill McKibben Reader: Pieces from an Active Life* (New York: Holt, 2008) 228.

²⁵ Jefferson Bates, *Writing with Precision* (New York: Penguin, 2000) 52–53.

and protect the natural order is communicated not primarily in statistics or poll data or dystopian future scenarios, but in the storytelling of those who are connected to, and called to love, a place called home. I would argue that evangelical and environmentalist cooperation will begin in the small and long-term cultivation of communities learning to rethink connection and stewardship rather than primarily in the short-term activism of signed manifestoes and legislative checklists. Evangelicals learning to “save the earth” will do little good for the earth, or for evangelicals. But evangelicals learning about how, as Berry puts it, to “live upstream” with love for those who are living “downstream” can bring about long-lasting change.

This sort of long-term local transformation is part of what Francis Schaeffer was talking about when he ended his book on *Pollution and the Death of Man* with a call for local churches to serve as “pilot plants” of what it means for the community to show that “in this present life man can exercise dominion over nature without being destructive.”²⁶

This is difficult in the contemporary era, because we see our primary identities, too often, in terms of electoral politics. Former Democratic Party national chairman Howard Dean, for instance, presented evangelical environmental concern among the young as a means to mute evangelical concerns on issues of human dignity in the controversies over legalized abortion and sexual liberation. “People don’t want to go to church anymore ... and come out feeling bad because they know someone who’s gay,” Dean said. “People want to go to church because they want to know what they can do about poverty, about Darfur, about the environment.”²⁷ As an evangelical who is concerned about poverty, about Darfur, and about the environment—as well as about unborn babies, their mothers, and intact families—I would respond that most Christians go to church to do none of these things, but instead to know Christ and to live together as an obedient outpost of the coming kingdom of God.

In order to learn from one another, both evangelical Christians and environmentalist activist groups must learn to be more complicated than just another partisan interest group. One temptation in the task of environmental protection is that of turning the issue into one of mere brand identity, in either direction. A Republican United States congressman told me recently about a conversation he had had with one of his party’s most elite political consultants. When the congressman asked him why questions of climate change—previously addressed by conservative politicians from Newt Gingrich to Tim Pawlenty—were now so far from the agenda, the consultant replied that the issue was one of “tissue rejection.” The idea of environmental protection, even before one arrived at the specifics of any policies, seemed alien to the DNA of a conservative party, and therefore would be rejected out of hand. The concept of environmentalism as “DNA test,” it seems to me, rings true on both sides of the question.

²⁶ Francis Schaeffer and Udo Middleman, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1970; repr. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011) 80–81.

²⁷ Carla Marinucci, “DNC Chair Dean Says Party Needs to Invite Young Evangelical Christians,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (May 11, 2007) B2.

Journalist Jonathan Last pointed to this sort of environmentalism as corporate brand trend several years ago in an essay about his stay in a Las Vegas hotel. Last wrote about the card in the bathroom asking him to help the hotel conserve water by using his towels more than once. He wrote that his bedside nightstand had another card asking him to “protect our environment” by opting not to have his bed linens changed. “I was moved by these pleas, I really was,” Last wrote. “Except that outside the hotel are two gigantic fountains spewing precious water into the arid, desert air, 24 hours a day. It struck me that the Monte Carlo’s concern for the environment might simply be an attempt to save on laundry costs.”²⁸

Last’s point is that ecological sensitivity can often simply be a marketing strategy to enable consumers to consume, while simultaneously assuaging their consciences that they are protecting the planet. Corporations have learned, in various venues, that there are large dividends to be racked up exploiting the fallen human tendency toward self-righteousness. Call it the “Pharisee tax.” Just as the religious leaders cross-examining Jesus ignored their responsibility to their parents while claiming they were giving their money for religious purposes (Mark 7:10–12), we love to spend money on ourselves while believing we are really humanitarian heroes in the doing of it. That is why, on the Left, an SUV-driver sports in large letters that the mammoth vehicle uses “flex-fuel” and why, on the Right, the motorist sports a fish symbol on the bumper. Neither are in hopes of persuading others to the cause as much as they are about signaling membership in a tribe.

Evangelicals must be conservative—conserving traditions, which means conserving cultures, which means conserving communities, which means conserving nature. Sometimes that will coincide with whatever passes for “conservative” by the copyright-holders of that name for the moment, and sometimes it will not. The Christianity which simply finds Bible verses to fit the agenda of politicians is bankrupt and compromised, whether on the Right or the Left.

And environmentalists, if they are concerned with persuading others outside their camp, must disconnect the cause of earth-care from the standard litany of liberal interest group demands. Yes, there are going to be some professional evangelical dissidents who will join hands with the whole partisan package in order to prove that they are not Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson. One can always find those with metaphorical, and sometimes literal, Daddy issues to be the token evangelical ridiculing the concerns of evangelicalism. But no real evangelical Christian is going to sacrifice concern for the unborn, the elderly, and other vulnerable persons for any agenda, even one with which we largely agree.

Some conservative evangelicals and some secular—even radical—feminists have worked together on issues of human trafficking and pornography because, while we disagree on some rather fundamental issues, we agree that these things hurt women and girls (and, I would argue, men and boys, too). There’s no good reason why, at some points of intersection, evangelicals and secular environmentalists cannot cultivate conversation and cooperation. Environmentalist activists—

²⁸ Jonathan Last, “Death of the Environment,” *Weekly Standard* 11/42 (July 24, 2006).

even those who do not agree—could listen when eco-conservatives say that the first environment to be protected is that of the womb. Conservative evangelicals should listen to our critics—again, even when we do not agree with their particular policy proposals—when they tell us it seems as though we have a doctrine of sin that extends to persons but exempts corporations—at least corporations not named Planned Parenthood or the Playboy Foundation.

Evangelical concern for the natural order will also disappoint our environmentalist neighbors if what they are seeking is simply the imprimatur of Bible verses on particular pieces of legislation. I do not hold to the idea that the mission of the church is narrowly “spiritual” and apolitical. In fact, I think such approaches are hyper-political, as they baptize the status quo, whatever it is. The church speaks to the totality of human life because part of the church’s mission is to shape the believing conscience. There are times when the clarity of the injustice or harm involved means that the church speaks with specificity and acts with official discipline. A missionary in 1825 India must speak to the question of the burning of widows on their husbands’ funeral pyres. This is a clear issue of moral injustice, and cannot be cordoned off as a “political issue.” A church in 1925 Alabama that does not address the lack of prosecution of murderers for lynching is an unfaithful church. James speaks with specificity about the obvious injustice of landowners refusing to pay the workers of their fields (Jas 5:4–5)—and in so doing he is in continuity with the OT prophets who did the same thing. Often there are so-called environmental issues that are clearly unjust and in which the solution is not one of mere prudential wisdom but of prophetic rebuke. A company dumping toxic waste into the community water supply would be an example of such.

In other cases, however, the question is not one of goal but of the best prudential option in getting to that goal. Most Americans agree at this point that tobacco causes cancer, and is a deadly thing that should not be marketed to children. Most of us agree that second-hand smoke can be dangerous. We do not agree on some of the specifics in every case of what legislation is appropriate. Is an immediate cessation of all agricultural subsidies to tobacco farmers right if it means the uprooting of entire farming communities, and the economic tearing apart of families, in North Carolina and Kentucky? Is the banning of smoking in all public places the right thing to do or will it have unintended consequences? These questions are ones of prudence and are much more complicated than the advertising executive who is intentionally plotting to find ways to addict children to nicotine.

In the same way, an evangelical concern for creation care does not mean that we will all line up in the same place on specific legislative proposals. A rejection of, for example, the Kyoto treaty is not necessarily a rejection of the need for accountability in the husbandry of the earth; such rejection is just as likely a rejection of the kinds of global mechanisms that would ensure such accountability but with potentially disastrous consequences for national sovereignty and the global economy. A recognition of the scientific validity of human-caused climate change does not mean that we will agree on, for instance, a carbon tax or a “cap and trade” proposal. We have to weigh whether such measures would, for instance, unduly harm Ameri-

can communities—especially in coal-producing regions—while empowering the pollution of unaccountable (and hyper-competitive) countries such as China.

Communitarian philosopher Michael Sandel, whose work I appreciate greatly even when I disagree with him on specific policies, notes one possible conundrum with carbon offsets. While he supports the impulse behind them, he worries about whether such policies will empower greater irresponsibility because the carbon tax, as a “fine” easily becomes a “fee.” Sandel argues that “fines” become “fees” when the thing being “punished” by the “fine” starts to be simply paid for by the “fee.” He gives the example of a school that fines parents who are late picking up their children with a \$25 fine. Parents eventually see the \$25 as a babysitting fee and feel no responsibility to avoid coming late because after all they are paying for this service. Carbon offsets, he worries, could easily become the contemporary equivalent of indulgences, “the monetary payments sinners paid the medieval church to offset their transgressions.”²⁹ And, as evangelical Protestants, we all know where that led.

“The distinction between a fine and a fee for despoiling the environment is not one we should give up too easily,” Sandel writes. “Suppose there were a \$100 fine for throwing a beer can into the Grand Canyon, and a wealthy hiker decided to pay \$100 for the convenience. Would there be nothing wrong in his treating the fine as if it were simply an expensive dumping charge?”³⁰

This is not to argue for or against carbon offsets, simply to say that one cannot move simply from an awakened environmental conscience to specific policy in an easy move.

Again, simply because something is a measure of prudential wisdom does not mean the church plays no role. The church disciplines her members into wisdom and prudence, and Christian theology and biblical revelation inform such prudence and wisdom. But there is an ascending scale of specificity with which the church informs and disciplines such consciences. We already see this in, for instance, the church’s stance toward family policy. Some things are quite clear. A man who abandons his wife for a younger woman is to be disciplined. We speak clearly against fornication and adultery and abuse and neglect. A concern for fidelity and purity will inform a conscience on all sorts of matters. But the church does not set a mandatory age for marriage, or speak to the specifics of whether, for instance, it is permissible for parents to allow their teenage daughter to have a Facebook page.

Just because we do not have a biblical blueprint for energy policy or wind power subsidies does not mean that the conversation is left in the secular wildness of everyone doing what is right in his own eyes, with no king in Israel. It means that the church does the long work of cultivating generations of people with consciences awake to their dependence on land and water and air, and their responsibilities to generations yet unborn. More important than specific policies, which are no doubt important in the short-term, is the long view of cultivating the instincts

²⁹ Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012) 76–77.

³⁰ Michael J. Sandel, *Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality in Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005) 94.

and intuitions of people who recognize the meaning of creational stewardship, of human dominion, of the limits of the appetite, of the responsibilities to generations to come. That does not motivate donors, but it just might form some consciences.

The contemporary environmentalist movement has often been flawed and clumsy and sometimes evil; as any movement made up of fallen sinners tends to be. But, at the core of it, is a concept Christians ought to recognize. It is that of creatureliness, and dependence, and longing for the permanent things. And, in the face of an earth often ravaged by human sin and rapaciousness, it can be a call to the kind of ultimate accountability that only makes sense in a Christian story of the universe.

I would argue that a renewal of a sense of where we fit in the universe will mean a conversation about natural, human, and civil ecology that puts human flourishing at the center of our concern. This has implications for clean water, clean air, animal husbandry, the cultivation of renewable resources, and the conservation of non-renewable resources, but it also has personal implications for community life together, consumption of resources, and realism about both human dignity and human sin. That means we disagree sometimes with our environmentalist neighbors, but we also listen to them, because sometimes what we might hear is a voice to the uneasy evangelical conscience: "The Lord ain't gonna like that."