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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Bible tells us that "love does no harm to its neighbor" (Romans 13:10), yet the way we live now harms our neighbors, both locally and globally. For the world's poorest people, climate change means dried-up wells in Africa, floods in Asia that wash away crops and homes, wildfires in the U.S. and Russia, loss of villages and food species in the Arctic, environmental refugees, and disease. Our changing climate threatens the health, security, and well-being of millions of people who are made in God's image. The threat to future generations and global prosperity means we can no longer afford complacency and endless debate. We as a society risk being counted among "those who destroy the earth" (Revelation 11:18)

-200 evangelical scientists to Congress, July 10, 2013

The excerpt above comes from a July 2013 letter from a group of 200 evangelical scientists addressed to Congress.¹ Perhaps surprisingly, the letter expresses the opinion that Bible-believing Christians have the responsibility to take part in fighting the destruction of the natural environment. And I argue that in recent years, many evangelical Christians have begun to do just that. This thesis examines these recent developments in American evangelicalism by highlighting the specific ways in which evangelicals frame their discussions of the natural world and environmental issues. I conducted ethnographic interviews² with individuals from local churches to add depth and context to denominational statements, publications, and other literature from evangelicals writing to a national audience. I argue that American evangelicals increasingly understand the natural environment in theological ways that call for its protection as a moral issue. Key themes in evangelical environmental discussions include creation, stewardship, experiencing God in nature, redemption of creation, creation care as a mission opportunity, and individual accountability.

¹ Dr. Tom Ackerman et al. to Speaker Boehner, Senate Majority Leader Reid, and Members of the United States Congress, July 10, 2013, http://www.eenews.net/assets/2013/07/15/document_cw_02.pdf.

² IRB Number 13-2169, approved June 27, 2013- June 26, 2014

I adopted a primarily ethnographic approach to this topic, because I am interested not only in official statements but in individual perspectives. One of the primary features of evangelicalism since its beginnings has been the lack of strict hierarchy, part of the legacy of the “priesthood of the believer” tenet established by Protestant reformers. Denominations are more associations and do not always enforce doctrine strictly. Member denominations of the National Association of Evangelicals do not necessarily subscribe to its specific positions on all issues. These individual interviews provide nuance and perspective to statements coming out of these national organizations.

Language and word choice matter in understanding how evangelicals relate to the natural environment. With that point in mind, the words that I use throughout this paper also require definition. By environment, I mean the non-human biophysical world; I usually use it in this broadest sense, in reference to the global environment. When I use the word environmentalism, I usually refer to a general awareness of humanity’s often negative impact upon the non-human world. This awareness can result in actions ranging from mere concern to political activism. The “-ism” may also imply an ideology, and environmentalism has often been interpreted as such by evangelicals. The individuals whose perspectives contributed to this thesis usually prefer to use words like “creation” to refer to the environment and “stewardship” or “creation care” to encompass actions that could be considered “environmentalist.” These terms will be further developed later as part of my analysis of themes found in evangelical discussions of humans’ relationship with the environment.

Who is an “evangelical?” David Bebbington’s influential 1989 four-part definition is the most commonly cited and defines evangelicals according to 1. conversionism; having a transformative or born-again experience; 2. Biblicism, seeing the Bible as ultimate authority; 3.

activism, spreading the gospel and 4. crucicentrism, stressing redemption through Christ's sacrifice on the cross.³ Evangelicalism can be challenging to define because it is more of a theological and social tendency within Protestantism than a defined body. Evangelical churches can be denominational or nondenominational, and many of the denominations that identify as evangelical are less denominations than loose fellowships or associations. Traditionally evangelical denominations include the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, and the Presbyterian Church in America.

American evangelicalism has deep historical roots both in the 16th century Protestant Reformation, 17th century Puritanism, Continental Pietism, and the 18th-19th century revivals in England and America. The followers of Martin Luther were the first to describe themselves with the term "evangelical", referring to their emphasis upon the "good news" of the Gospel. What emerged as key Protestant tenets of salvation through faith in Christ alone and the priesthood of the believer are clearly visible in evangelicalism today. The ability of each person to have an unmediated relationship with God plays a particularly important role in contemporary evangelical thought. Today, white evangelical Protestants outnumber mainline Protestants in the United States, and they are recognized as a powerful force in American public life.⁴

Evangelicals are often construed as the most forceful Christian opponents to environmental protection, an impression shaped both by theology and politics. In contrast, mainline Protestants are viewed as much more eager to see caring for the earth as a matter of faith. Just as any other group, evangelicals have a relationship with the natural world around them. However, evangelical theology places far less of an emphasis upon the relationship

³ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-3.

⁴ Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, February 2008, <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>

between the humans and the earth than upon the relationships between humans and God and humans and each other. Theologically, conservative evangelicals often subscribe to premillennial theology, emphasizing the end of times and the return of Jesus. The popularity of tracts and novels like Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind* series serves to support this point. James G. Watt, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior from 1981 to 1983, was vocal about his premillennial dispensationalist faith, inspiring Bill Moyers to attribute to Watt the apocryphal statement "After the last tree is felled, Christ will come back."⁵ Recently Barker and Bearse have argued that belief in end-times theology leads to less support for government policies to fight climate change, because the potential payoff in the far distant future is not seen as worth the cost in the present when the end of the world may be an imminent possibility.⁶

Politically, in recent decades strong ties have existed between evangelicals and the Republican Party, whose platform generally does not place an emphasis on environmental protection. Since the return of evangelicals to political life in the 1970s and the founding of the Moral Majority in 1980, evangelicals have mostly voted Republican. Evangelical engagement with politics has emphasized issues such as opposition to abortion and gay marriage that are assumed to have a moral dimension.⁷ James Davison Hunter famously described the polarization of these issues as "culture wars," and though this concept has inspired debate and re-evaluation

⁵ James Watt, "The Religious Left's Lies," *The Washington Post*, May 21, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/20/AR2005052001333.html>

⁶ David C. Barker and David H. Bearse, "End-Times Theology, the Shadow of the Future, and Public Resistance to Addressing Global Climate Change," *Political Research Quarterly* 66.2 (June 2013), 267-279.

⁷ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 20-23.

since the publication of Hunter's book in 1991, the rhetoric of a culture war continues to have power.⁸

Though statistical data shows that the majority of evangelicals vote for Republican candidates, evangelicals do not hold uniform political opinions.⁹ Noll notes that "belief in the Bible as authoritative divine revelation or belief in the need to be converted to Christ cannot be as easily clustered with a particular political movement as the bare use of the term 'evangelical' often implies."¹⁰ Noll notes that the factor of membership in a conservative Protestant denomination more strongly correlates with holding Republican political values, and that diversity exists even within these denominations. Moreover, progressive evangelicals promote different social and political agendas, often falling more in line with liberal Protestants. The magazine *Sojourners*, for example, vocally takes more liberal positions on political issues, and *Sojourners'* president Jim Wallis is a notable figure on the evangelical left. Wallis and other progressive evangelicals, including the authors and individuals whose perspectives on nature and the environment contributed to this thesis, for the most part hold conservative opinions on issues like abortion, but often hold "liberal" opinions about environmental protection.

Recent discussions suggest that young evangelical Christians have different political concerns than the previous generation, and research points to the environment as one of the strongest examples of this political diversity within evangelicalism. Smith and Johnson argue environmental concern is actually an exception to the conservative tendencies of younger evangelicals, suggesting that "this divisiveness suggests that it may be more meaningful to

⁸ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991).

⁹ Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project, "How the Faithful Voted: 2012 Preliminary Analysis," November 7, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/11/07/how-the-faithful-voted-2012-preliminary-exit-poll-analysis/>

¹⁰ Mark Noll, "Evangelicals Past and Present," in *Religion, Politics, and the American Experience: Reflections on Religion and American Public Life*, ed. Edith L. Blumhofer (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 108-9.

understand environmentalism as a developing political/moral issue, in which separating lines have not yet formed.”¹¹ The development of the environmental literature addressed in this thesis seems to support Smith and Johnson on this point; the environment may not currently be an immediately recognizable moral issue for evangelicals in the way that abortion and gay marriage are, but some evangelicals are certainly trying to establish it as such.

Although not necessarily against science in general, evangelical Christians have been less likely than other Americans to think that scientific consensus exists about human caused climate change.¹² Katharine Wilkinson suggests that lingering skepticism from the creation vs. evolution debate may feed into this skepticism.¹³ Perhaps evangelicals view climate change as particularly problematic because like evolution, it is often discussed as a matter of “belief”, as its effects may not be immediately visible especially in the United States. Assuming that language matters, as I do in this thesis, the language of belief in a scientific issue may be problematic for a group so explicitly committed to certain beliefs that are necessary for salvation. The idea that human actions can alter the earth’s climate and weather patterns may also seem to challenge the concept of a completely sovereign creator God. National discussions about climate change are highly politicized, and many evangelicals have participated in the debate with vocal opinions.

As a result of these stereotypes, the media often portrays evangelicals as anti-environmental. However, popular press that discusses evangelical opposition to environmentalism primarily focuses on a single particularly conservative group: the Cornwall

¹¹ Buster G. Smith and Bryan Johnson, “The Liberalization of Young Evangelicals: A Research Note,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, No. 2 (2010): 359.

¹² See Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, “Religious Groups’ Views on Global Warming,” April 16, 2009, Public Religion Research, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/04/16/religious-groups-views-on-global-warming/>; N. Smith and A. Leiserowitz, “American Evangelicals and Global Warming,” *Global Environmental Change* 23, No.5 (2013): 351-360.

¹³ Katharine Wilkinson, *Between God & Green: How Evangelicals are Cultivating a Middle Ground on Climate Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 95.

Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation, led by E. Calvin Beisner.¹⁴ A 2011 article from the British newspaper *The Guardian* entitled “The US evangelicals who believe environmentalism is a ‘native evil’” exclusively discusses the Alliance, which it describes as “a prominent group of religious thinkers in the US”- a contestable description.¹⁵ Beisner and the Cornwall Alliance are most often noted as climate change skeptics and recently released a book and DVD series entitled *Resisting the Green Dragon*, warning viewers about the dangers of the environmentalist movement. A close look at the group’s literature shows that it draws upon some of the same religious themes used by other evangelicals to argue for environmental protection, particularly in caring for the poor. Beisner works within the framework of how evangelicals talk about the environment, but draws different conclusions. Beisner argues that policies attempting to fight climate change and supporting alternative energy sources hurt the poor by raising energy costs. At the very least, the Cornwall Alliance shows that evangelicals are actively responding to environmental issues and other groups’ claims about them.

Despite these stereotypes, recent developments in the evangelical community suggest that many evangelicals have taken increased interest in environmental issues. A Google search for “evangelicals and the environment” yields not only articles on the Cornwall Alliance, but the website of the Evangelical Environmental Network and news stories about Christians who argue that God is green. On Twitter, faith-based groups connect with politicians, the US Environmental Protection Agency, and others using hashtags such as #ActOnClimate and #Pray4Climate. At Wheaton College, students major in environmental science and take classes in the LEED-

¹⁴ See Michael Zimmerman, “From Creationism to Anti-Environmentalism: The Religious Right’s Attack on Science Expands,” *Huffington Post*, December 29, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-zimmerman/from-creationism-to-antie_b_801783.html; John Collins Rudolf, “An Evangelical Backlash against Environmentalism,” *Green Blog* (blog), *The New York Times*, December 30, 2010, http://green.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/30/an-evangelical-backlash-against-environmentalism/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0.

¹⁵ Leo Hickman, “The US Evangelicals Who Believe Environmentalism is a ‘Native Evil,’” *Environment Blog* (blog), *The Guardian*, May 5, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/blog/2011/may/05/evangelical-christian-environmentalism-green-dragon>.

certified Science Center. Thinkers are rereading the Bible and identifying new passages that implicate caring for the Earth. Horrell notes that these biblical readings follow a defensive or apologetic strategy of recovery, conducted for the most part in response to external criticism.¹⁶

As I have already addressed, environmentally-minded Christians in general and evangelicals in particular do have quite a bit of criticism and skepticism to overcome. But a small yet ever-growing group has demonstrated a commitment to framing global ecological issues as moral issues that call evangelicals to act.

¹⁶ David G. Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Bible Theology* (London: Equinox, 2010), 11.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Legacy of Lynn White

Much scholarship on Christianity and the environment has been authored as a response to an influential 1967 article by Lynn White entitled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis.” This brief six page article is cited in nearly every study of Christianity and the environment. White argues that Christianity has been a major cause of current ecological issues: “Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”¹⁷ Despite his criticism of Christianity, he also proposes that Saint Francis of Assisi may serve as an alternate model. He argues that modern science and technology have grown out of these Christian assumptions, resulting in unsustainable human dominance over the earth on a massive scale. White’s thesis is premised upon the idea that Judeo-Christian values underlie all of Western society, whether consciously or unconsciously. As such White does not seek to place blame upon individual Christians today, but upon the assumptions about the relationship between humans and nature that over time have supported the development of modern technologies.

Some responses to White’s essay have included sociological statistical studies seeking to determine whether identifying as Christian positively or negatively correlates with support for environmental protection and participation in pro-environmental behaviors. Such studies have included Truelove and Joireman¹⁸, Sherkat and Ellison¹⁹, and Djupe and Olson.²⁰ Generally

¹⁷ Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155, No. 3767 (1967): 1,206.

¹⁸ Heather Barnes Truelove and Jeff Joireman, “Understanding the Relationship Between Christian Orthodoxy and Environmentalism,” *Environment and Behavior* 41, No. 6 (November 2009): 806-20.

speaking, these studies have suggested that Christians are more likely to support action in the private consumer sphere rather than public, government level action. However, these studies often paint Christians with a very broad brush and do not account for the depth and complexity of individual opinion.

Specifically evangelical opinions on the environment have not been studied extensively, and those studies that have been done are primarily survey based. For example, a December 2012 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute focused almost exclusively on climate change, natural disasters, and the end times, reporting that about two thirds of white evangelical Protestants attribute the severity of the natural disasters to the end times described in the Bible.²¹ While the survey reported striking polarization in the results, it may have contributed to the polarization by creating a dichotomy between severe natural disasters caused by human-created climate change on one side and acts of God relating to the end times on the other, a distinction that may not have otherwise been made by participants themselves.

A 2010 survey from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reported that 73% of white evangelical Protestants support stronger laws for environmental protection, the same percentage of surveyed Republicans who support such regulations, and a surprisingly high number.²² However, when asked to rate a number of voter issues based on importance, participants placed the environment far down on the list, well below the economy, jobs, health care, terrorism, etc.

¹⁹ Darren E. Sherkat and Christopher G. Ellison, "Structuring the Religion-Environment Connection: Identifying Religious Influences on Environmental Concern and Activism." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, No. 1 (2007): 71-85.

²⁰ Paul A. Djupe and Laura R. Olson, "Diffusion of Environmental Concerns in Congregations across U.S. States," *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 10, No. 3 (September 2010): 270-301.

²¹ Public Religion Research Institute and Religion News Survey, "Americans More Likely to Attribute Increasingly Severe Weather to Climate Change, Not End Times," December 2012, <http://publicreligion.org/research/2012/12/prri-rns-december-2012-survey/#.Ug-ep5Jazng>

²² Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project, "Few Say Religion Shapes Immigration, Environment Views," September 2010, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2010/09/immigration-environment-views-fullreport.pdf>

Relevant to this research, the survey also included a question asking to what extent religion influences individuals' attitudes toward the environment. The numbers here are very low: only 6% of those overall and 11% of evangelicals reported religion as the biggest influence on their views on "tougher laws and regulations to protect the environment." The wording of this statement may be significant, as it focuses on a very political aspect of environmental protection. The statement does not include for example, making lifestyle changes to consume less. However, these results serve as an important reminder that religion is but one driver of an individual's perspective on the environment.

Another survey by Kull et al. at the University of Maryland in 2011 had similar goals to the 2010 Pew Forum survey, asking questions to determine how "spiritual beliefs" impact views of public policy issues including poverty, nuclear risks, and environmental degradation.²³ A majority of evangelicals affirmed the need for stricter environmental laws and regulations when framed as an obligation to care for God's creation. However, most evangelicals did not see the goal of preventing climate change as a spiritual obligation. The survey did result in some compelling examples of evangelical support for environmental protection, but it also showed a discrepancy in results between when participants were asked to agree with an affirmative statement versus choosing the statement from a list of options.

Though survey data is useful for establishing baselines and covering more ground than is possible with in depth interviews, statistical methods would not allow me to fully explore my interests in the language used to communicate evangelical ideas about the environment. Surveys can often be leading, by asking participants to agree with certain statements rather than hearing participants' own words. The language of these survey questions frames the issues in particular

²³ Steven Kull et al., "Faith and Global Policy Challenges: How Spiritual Values Shape Views on Poverty, Nuclear Risks, and Environmental Degradation," *Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland*, December 2011, http://cisssm.umd.edu/papers/files/faith_and_global_policy_challenges__final.pdf.

ways that may not resonate with evangelicals. Individuals' views may not exactly match these pre-defined statements. In addition, surveys such as those discussed above can be polarizing, often presenting two opposing statements that participants are asked to choose between. Though I fully acknowledge my role as an interpreter, the goal of this ethnographic study was to ask open ended questions that allow space for individual evangelicals' unique views and language used to express these views- data that a statistical approach cannot provide.

Qualitative Approaches

Qualitative research has shown more evidence of evangelical environmentalism. Recent books by Tom Krattenmaker and Marcia Pally argue that the environment is a key issue for a new generation of evangelicals, whom Krattenmaker terms "the evangelicals you don't know"²⁴ and Pally calls "the new evangelicals."²⁵ Rod Dreher includes eco-conscious evangelicals in his book on "crunchy conservatives."²⁶ The wording used by these authors points to the fact that the existence of these evangelicals may be a surprise to many. Primarily young and engaged with social justice issues, these new evangelicals see the environment as a moral issue requiring Christian action. Growth of evangelical concern for the environment can also be seen as part of this broader growth of progressive evangelicalism.

Some research suggests that specific, localized issues and environmental campaigns can gain evangelical support. Christians for the Mountains is a prominent example of such potential for mobilization. The grassroots organization formed in 2005 as a convergence of several

²⁴ Tom Krattenmaker, *The Evangelicals You Don't Know: Introducing the Next Generation of Christians* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013).

²⁵ Marcia Pally, *The New Evangelicals: Expanding the Vision of the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011).

²⁶ Rod Dreher, *Crunchy Cons: How Birkenstocked Burkeans, gun-loving organic farmers...* (New York: Crown Forum, 2006).

gatherings of individuals who saw protesting mountain-top removal practices in Appalachian coal mining as part of their Christian obligation to care for God's creation.²⁷ Today the organization provides resources and organizes events to raise awareness about issues surrounding not only mountain-top removal, but hydraulic fracturing for natural gas, pollution, and climate impacts resulting from the combustion of coal. Christians for the Mountains has received national attention, from being featured in *Newsweek* and a PBS documentary hosted by Bill Moyers entitled "Is God Green?" to collaborating with Restoring Eden and the EEN, but the organization's core commitment remains rooted in the Appalachian region where its founders live and worship.

Scholars suggest that the words used to talk about the environment matter to evangelicals, a point that I also argue in this paper. Words such as "creation" and "stewardship" mark a consciously Christian environmental discourse. According to Prelli and Winters, "Green evangelicalism is ontologically distinct from other environmental discourses in that it situates environmental issues within a biblically derived nomenclature of Christians seeking restoration of God's creation."²⁸ Ecological problems are framed as the result of human sin that has separated creation from God the creator. Key metaphors in this discourse include nature as a garden and environmental problem solving as stewardship, healing, and reconciliation. This discourse has a distinctly moral character, and appeals to scientific authority are always matched with appeals to biblical authority. Throughout this paper, I incorporate and expand upon this idea of an evangelical environmental discourse.

²⁷ Christians for the Mountains, "Our History," <http://www.christiansforthemountains.org/site/Topics/About/history.html>.

²⁸ Lawrence J. Prelli and Terri S. Winters, "Rhetorical Features of Green Evangelicalism," *Environmental Communication* 3, No. 2 (2009): 232-3.

Ethnographic approaches to the subject have also supported the idea that language matters. A study by Peifer, Ecklund, and Fullerton with Southern Baptists and African American Baptists argues that evangelicals express apathy toward environmental issues when discussions of the issues seem to violate the hierarchy of God, humans, and then nature.²⁹ Overall, the authors argue that the cultural tools available to evangelicals support environmental apathy more than concern. However, the concepts of stewardship and responsibility to God can generate motivation for behavioral change.

Katharine Wilkinson includes ethnographic research in *Between God and Green: How Evangelicals are Cultivating a Middle Ground on Climate Change*, for which she facilitated discussion groups in nine evangelical churches across the southeastern United States.³⁰ Wilkinson also interviewed evangelical public figures such as Cizik and Tri Robinson, finding a gap between their views and the views of those in the discussion groups. However, Wilkinson focuses exclusively on climate change, structuring the groups around discussion of the Evangelical Climate Initiative. Studies that focus exclusively on climate change can obscure the fact that other environmental issues and actions may be less problematic for evangelicals. Nonetheless, Wilkinson's study finds potential for evangelical involvement on the issue of climate change; she advocates an approach that she terms "climate care."³¹

A recent study by the progressive evangelical magazine *Sojourners* demonstrates an in-community appreciation for the power of words when discussing climate change.³² The study offered different arguments "in favor of taking action to reverse climate change," asking

²⁹ Jared L. Peifer, Elaine Howard Ecklund, and Cara Fullerton, "How Evangelicals Frame Their Environmental Concern and Apathy," (Rice University, July 2012), <http://sociology.rice.edu/uploadedFiles/Peifer%20Untitled%20attachment%2000072.pdf?n=8297>.

³⁰ Katharine Wilkinson, xiii.

³¹ Ibid., xiv.

³² Liz Schmitt, "Talking to Evangelicals about Climate Change," *Sojourners*, March 2014, <http://sojo.net/magazine/2014/01-0/talking-evangelicals-about-climate-change>.

participants to choose the arguments they found most convincing. A majority of evangelicals found most convincing the statement “We have a moral duty to take care of creation and preserve it for future generations.” Interestingly, the study found that evangelicals were more likely to be receptive to scientific arguments about climate change after a moral argument was made. Summarizing the results, *Soujourners’* Creation Care Campaign Associate Liz Schmitt writes, “evangelicals tend to care most about their relationship with God and about repenting of sins and living out their values. So begin with those values and follow them up with a clear, confident case for the science.”³³ The individuals such as Schmitt who conducted this study occupy a unique position as evangelicals trying to convince other evangelicals to care about climate change, in some sense acting as missionaries within their own religious group. Their research supports the conclusions of outside researchers by arguing that environmental issues like climate change can be framed in a way that makes them compelling for evangelicals.

Recent research on evangelical views of the environment may seem inconsistent, but it shows certain dependencies in evangelical thinking and action toward the environment. Evangelicals are not unconditionally moved to take action on environmental issues. Climate change in particular remains a divisive issue, especially as it becomes increasingly politicized. But both quantitative and qualitative research suggests that when thought of in terms of caring for God’s creation, these issues may garner more evangelical support.

³³ Schmitt, “Talking to Evangelicals about Climate Change.”

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Ethnography

This thesis combines textual support from examples of evangelical writing on the environment with ethnographic data from interviews with evangelicals in the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area. By bringing these sources into conversation with each other, I provide a broad base of evangelical perspectives to support my argument. The purpose of presenting the ethnographic data is not to argue that these interviews speak for all American evangelicals, nor to speak for all evangelicals in the study area. Instead, I use the interviews to highlight certain key themes in evangelical views of the environment as well as to show evidence of diversity, another feature often overlooked in popular presentations of evangelicals.

The research area is one densely populated with universities and highly educated professionals. Local governments, particularly Chapel Hill and Carrboro, value sustainability, as do vocal populations in these towns. Businesses in the area proudly advertise food from local farms and composting programs. The research area may be somewhat exceptional in its public environmental consciousness. However, this overall bias does not mean that all in the study area think or act the same way, especially those who have more conservative tendencies. I found that my ethnographic data resonated with evangelical textual sources from across the country, supporting the idea that these views can be found throughout American evangelicalism.

Individuals interviewed came from across the evangelical spectrum, from both denominational and non-denominational churches. These included two informants from a Vineyard Association church, three from a Presbyterian Church of America church, four from a Church of the Nazarene, one from a non-denominational church related to the Southern Baptist Convention, and one from a church affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. I sent

information about the project and inviting interviews to ministers across the area. In some cases the minister recommended certain individuals whom he or she thought would be interested, and in some cases informants responded on their own. While the voluntary response process of selection may have resulted in a bias toward those with a particular interest in the environment, most informants explicitly stated that they do not consider themselves “environmentalists”, or necessarily prioritize the environment over other issues. For example, the women’s bible study at the Church of the Nazarene was suggested by the group’s leader as a group that would generally be willing to talk, not just because of an interest in the subject matter. I met most of the participants individually for coffee, while I spoke with the women from New Hope one week during their normally scheduled Bible study time. Interview questions were open ended, along the lines of “Is the environment important to you? How so? Does the subject come up in discussion at your church?” I decided to take only handwritten notes, as most informants at the beginning of the project expressed discomfort with being recorded. As a result, there are few direct quotations, and in some cases only specific phrases are directly quoted rather than entire sentences.

From Greenleaf Vineyard Church in Chapel Hill, I spoke with co-pastor Maria and Justin,³⁴ a graduate student in biochemistry at UNC who led a summer small group about “Caring for Creation.” From Christ Community Church in Chapel Hill, part of the Presbyterian Church of America, I spoke with John, a business professional; Amanda, a preschool teacher; and Amanda’s husband Matt, an elder of the church. From New Hope Church of the Nazarene in Hillsborough, I spoke with Gwen, Diane, and Carol. From the Summit Church, a large Baptist-oriented church with campuses in Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill, I spoke with Lauren, who researches climate and air quality. From HillSong Church, part of the Cooperative Baptist

³⁴ For purposes of confidentiality, all names have been changed.

Fellowship, I spoke with assistant pastor Erin. In total, my informants were mostly female and largely university educated young professionals. I also conducted a personal interview with Rev. Richard Cizik, who came to speak to my campus ministry on behalf of the Good Steward Campaign.

Throughout the research process, I kept in mind the key interpretive ethnographic principle of reflexivity, understanding that in this study I was not a mere observer but an active participant and interpreter, and that my own perspective is therefore important to acknowledge. I do not consider myself an evangelical, but I am a Christian and familiar with discussing the environment in a theological context, including at my United Methodist campus ministry at UNC. For example, the opportunity for my interview with Rich Cizik arose because my campus ministry invited him to speak, working in partnership with the Good Steward Campaign. In some ways my background facilitated conversation with my informants, as I was able to speak the language of “creation” and “stewardship.” My informants often asked me about my religious background out of curiosity but did not ask me to elaborate upon my beliefs, and my religious identity never became the focus of the conversation.

I also approached the study with critical ethnography in mind. By critical ethnography, I follow Jim Thomas, who defines the method as “a way of applying a subversive worldview to the conventional logic of cultural inquiry.”³⁵ The environment as a subject of study carries with it an implicit critique: few scholars studying the environment approach it with the idea that nothing needs to change. With that in mind, I hope to that my research not only adds to scholarship on evangelical Christianity but that it also highlights positive developments in environmental stewardship and encourages other groups to regard evangelicals as an important partner in finding solutions for environmental problems. Clifford Geertz, founding father of interpretive

³⁵ Jim Thomas, *Doing Critical Ethnography*, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993) vii.

anthropology, suggests that “the whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is [...] to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them.”³⁶ By pointing to some evangelical beliefs and frameworks of understanding that may support environmentally conscious actions, I hope to provide non-evangelicals with access to the evangelical conceptual world as it relates to nature, in order to encourage evangelicals’ inclusion in conversations about environmental issues.

Gaining access to this conceptual world involves speaking the right language. Throughout my analysis, I assume that language matters when evangelicals talk about the natural world. Here I follow Susan Harding, who argues that religious conversion happens through learning to speak a particular language.³⁷ For fundamentalist Christians, the subject of her book, this language draws heavily on biblical concepts and references. Her argument is particularly relevant to this discussion because the language used by evangelicals when speaking about the environment is also filled with Scripture references and translations from “environmentalism” to “creation care” or “stewardship.” An informant reminded me of this early on in the research process by subtly correcting my reference to environmentalism into “creation care, as we like to call it.” Words matter here, and word choice is influenced by that most authoritative set of words: the Bible. Understanding the language used by evangelicals contributes to understanding the assumptions that underlie their perspectives of the natural world and facilitates needed communication.

³⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 24.

³⁷ Harding, 57-9.

Significance

This study has both scholarly and non-academic significance. It engages with a growing body of literature on religion, nature, and the environment by offering perspectives from a group for whom the earth is not often thought to be a primary concern. This growing field is led by scholars like Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, who organized the multi-year Harvard Project on Religion and Ecology and later co-founded Yale University's Forum on Religion and Ecology. Mary Evelyn Tucker writes, "Environmentalists are observing that while science and policy approaches are clearly necessary, they are not sufficient in helping to transform human consciousness and behavior for a sustainable future. These thinkers are suggesting instead that values and ethics, religion and spirituality may be important factors in this transformation."³⁸ However, scholars do not study the view of nature in evangelicalism with as much optimism as the perspectives of Asian and indigenous religious traditions, which are assumed to be more "green" or even "dark green," a term coined by Bron Taylor to describe religious traditions or spirituality "that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care."³⁹ Yet all of this scholarship argues that religion helps shape people's orientations toward the natural world and that an interdisciplinary study of religion and ecology can lead to productive discussions about potential future solutions.

This thesis also contributes to scholarship on evangelicals by calling for an appreciation of their diversity and complexity. Even in the small sample interviewed for this thesis, I shared conversations with a diverse group of individuals who have unique thoughts and opinions about the issues discussed. While connected by a powerful faith in Christ and a sincere desire to share

³⁸ Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Preface to Ecology and the Environment: Perspectives from the Humanities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 3.

³⁹ Bron Taylor, "From the Ground Up: Dark Green Religion and the Environmental Future," in *Ecology and the Environment: Perspectives from the Humanities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 89.

Christianity's message, these individuals view the role of the church and the natural world quite differently. After the rise of the Moral Majority and Christian Right in the 1980s, evangelicals are also often assumed to unanimously subscribe to the platform of the Republican Party. From both my conversations with informants and other research that will be discussed below, the environment appears to be an issue that challenges hardened political boundaries. When politics did come up in our conversations, most informants expressed frustration toward the politicization of environmental issues, seeing it as part of an overall unfortunate politicization of the church.

This thesis also deals with issues of lived religion, by looking not only at texts but at evangelicals' individual practices. Both the academic study of religion itself as well as the sometimes tense relationship between Christianity and "environmentalism" have been influenced by a Protestant understanding of religion as belief rather than practice, an idea that participates in a long historical debate within Christianity about the relationship between the spiritual and the material. Recent trends in religious studies scholarship away from such a dualism and toward an appreciation of "lived" religion and materiality influenced my thinking throughout this thesis.⁴⁰ Caring for the earth involves not just words, but tangible, material actions, mentions of which repeatedly arose in the conversations I had with my informants. The Bible certainly influences evangelicals' views of the environment, but these views cannot be fully understood by exclusively studying Genesis and other related texts. Recognizing the importance of lived practices helps to prevent the possibility of unfairly dismissing evangelicals as anti-environmental based simply on certain biblical passages. More broadly, this approach is a reminder that all religions are lived out in the material world.

⁴⁰ For example, David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America; Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

As for non-academic significance, this thesis has value for people thinking about the environment. Authors in the environmental studies field have highlighted the importance of a spiritual element in environmental solutions. Environmental issues can be divisive, and interested parties often make assumptions about which groups hold which opinions and values. However, the results of this research suggest that dialogue is possible. I suggest that others who are thinking about environmental issues should take note of these evangelical perspectives and not overlook evangelicals as a potentially valuable partner in moving forward on these issues.

CHAPTER FOUR: ORGANIZATIONAL AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

While the developments addressed in this paper have been a relatively recent phenomenon, signs of evangelical concern for the environment began as early as the 1970s when the environmental movement took off in the United States in the 1970s. In 1970, Francis Schaeffer, the intellectual often credited with bringing evangelical voices back into American politics, wrote *Pollution and the Death of Man: A Christian View of Ecology*, in which he argues that Bible-believing Christians are called to a distinct approach to ecological issues. He writes that the church should act as a “pilot plant concerning the healing of man and himself, of man and man, and man and nature. Indeed, unless something like this happens, I do not believe the world will listen to what we have to say.”⁴¹ He also writes that the answer about the proper relationship between humans and nature is not a new development but part of the heritage of Reformation Christianity, which believes that “God has spoken and told us something about both heavenly things and nature.”⁴² Despite Schaeffer’s prominence as a prolific author and founder of the L’Abri community in Switzerland, this particular work appears to have been mostly overlooked at the time of its publishing. The National Association of Evangelicals released statements on “Ecology” in 1970 and “Environment and Ecology” in 1971, which affirmed Christians’ responsibility to care for creation and expressed the NAE’s willingness to participate in “any responsible effort to solve critical environmental problems.”⁴³ While these sources did not immediately result in an identifiable evangelical environmental movement, they do show an

⁴¹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970), 82.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴³ National Association of Evangelicals, “Environment and Ecology 1971,” <http://www.nae.net/government-relations/policy-resolutions/138-environment-and-ecology-1971->.

early perception of a need for evangelical Christians to establish their own unique position within emerging conversations about the environment.

Recent evidence of evangelical environmental concern has been the growth of organizations such as the previously mentioned Christians for the Mountains, Restoring Eden, Blessed Earth, Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, and the Good Steward Campaign. Restoring Eden encourages political environmental advocacy, partnering with groups such as the Indigenous Christian Environmental Network and sponsoring awareness-raising events.⁴⁴ Blessed Earth, founded by Matthew Sleeth and his wife Nancy, who is also an evangelical environmental author, sponsors a Seminary Stewardship Alliance and provides devotional materials on the theme of creation.⁴⁵ Young Evangelicals for Climate Action seeks to organize and mobilize young evangelicals to lobby political leaders for legislation to fight climate change.⁴⁶ The Good Steward Campaign specifically calls for churches, universities, and other groups to disinvest from fossil fuels.⁴⁷ The Campaign also facilitates speaking tours by well known evangelical environmental advocates, including Rev. Richard Cizik, who came to speak to my campus ministry. Each of these organizations operates in a unique way, using different strategies to encourage Christians to take action on environmental issues.

The most prominent of these organizations is the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN). The EEN was founded in 1993 as the evangelical representative in the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE), and the EEN-sponsored 1994 “Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation” is widely regarded as a milestone in the evangelical environmental movement. The organization also garnered national media attention for a 2002 “What Would

⁴⁴ Restoring Eden, “Get Involved,” <http://restoringeden.org/getinvolved>.

⁴⁵ Blessed Earth, “Mission and Beliefs,” <http://www.blessedearth.org/about/mission-and-beliefs/>.

⁴⁶ Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, “What We Do,” <http://www.yecaction.org/about/what-we-do/>.

⁴⁷ Good Steward Campaign, “Join Us,” <http://goodstewardcampaign.org/get-involved/>.

Jesus Drive?” campaign.⁴⁸ The EEN acts as a political lobby, taking definitive stances on climate change, organizing prayer breakfasts across the country and sending representatives to meet with EPA chair Gina McCarthy. As the EEN is a very vocal and visible group, its ability to speak for American evangelicals can be overstated. Just as publicity on evangelical opponents of environmental protection tends to focus on the Cornwall Alliance, the EEN is somewhat overrepresented in publicity on evangelical environmentalism. For example, the organization’s promotion of mercury’s impacts upon the unborn as a “pro-life” issue is not a position likely to be shared by most evangelicals.

Other examples of the “creation care” movement include the Evangelical Climate Initiative, a campaign launched in 2006 with a statement that has been signed by about 300 evangelical pastors including Rick Warren, author of the hugely popular *The Purpose Driven Life*. The statement makes four main claims: “Human Induced Climate Change is Real,” “The Consequences of Climate Change Will Be Significant, and Will Hit the Poor the Hardest,” “Christian Moral Convictions Demand Our Response to the Climate Change Problem,” and “The need to act now is urgent. Governments, businesses, churches, and individuals all have a role to play in addressing climate change—starting now.”⁴⁹ Though the Southern Baptist Convention’s official stance rejects arguments about human causes of climate change, a movement led by Jonathan Merritt established the Southern Baptist Environment and Climate Initiative, whose 2008 declaration has so far received 750 signatures, including that of the SBC’s president Frank

⁴⁸ “Would Jesus Drive an SUV?” *ABC News*, November 21, 2002, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=125583>.

⁴⁹ The Evangelical Climate Initiative, “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action,” 2006, <http://christiansandclimate.org/statement/>.

Page.⁵⁰ These initiatives are particularly significant because many see climate change as a major obstacle to evangelical environmental action.

At the time of the Evangelical Climate Initiative's release in 2006, the National Association of Evangelicals distanced itself from taking definitive stands on climate change. Former vice president Richard Cizik, an influential evangelical lobbyist who has become a major face of the creation care movement, stepped down from the NAE in 2008 in part for his views on climate change. The NAE's 2004 publication "For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility" included a section on caring for creation, but did not address climate change.⁵¹ In more recent years the NAE has somewhat changed its tune on climate change, publishing the 2011 document "Loving the Least of These: Addressing a Changing Environment", which states that scientific evidence for climate change exists.⁵² However, the document does not argue that human activity is a primary cause, suggesting that the scientific literature credits a mixture of human and natural causes. The National Association of Evangelicals is a voluntary association whose membership includes almost every major American evangelical denomination, but its positions on issues like the environment cannot necessarily be taken as representative of the positions of all of its members. However, a statement from a major public voice like the NAE shows the increasing attention paid to environmental issues within the evangelical community.

A few of the most visible figures expressing evangelical environmental concern are the previously mentioned Cizik, former vice president of the National Association of Evangelicals

⁵⁰ Southern Baptist Environment and Climate Initiative, "A Southern Baptist Declaration on the Environment and Climate Change," <http://www.baptistcreationcare.org/node/1>.

⁵¹ National Association of Evangelicals, "For the Health of the Nation: A Call to Civic Responsibility," 2004, http://www.nae.net/images/content/For_The_Health_Of_The_Nation.pdf.

⁵² National Association of Evangelicals, "Loving the Least of These: Addressing a Changing Environment," 2011, http://www.nae.net/images/content/Loving_the_Least_of_These.pdf.

and co-founder of the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good; Rev. Jim Ball, Executive Vice President for Policy and Climate Change at the Evangelical Environmental Network and Senior Advisor to the Young Evangelicals for Climate Action; Mitch Hescoc, current president of the EEN; Tri Robinson, author and pastor of Vineyard Boise; and Calvin DeWitt, longtime director of the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies and environmental theologian. Other authors whose work I incorporated into this paper are Matthew Sleeth, a former emergency room doctor turned full time creation care advocate; Jonathan Merritt, founder of the Southern Baptist Climate Initiative, and Katharine Hayhoe; director of the Climate Science Center at Texas Tech University and contributing author on climate change reports by the US Global Change Research Program and the National Academy of Sciences. These individuals represent the evangelical environmental movement both within the evangelical community and on a national stage.

National evangelical publications' discussion of environmental issues reflects the political diversity of evangelicalism. The progressive magazine *Sojourners* publishes most often on these issues, citing environmental stewardship as one of its three key commitments, along with racial and social justice, and life and peace.⁵³ The more conservative *World* sits at the other end of the spectrum, often including articles skeptical of climate change and criticizing federal environmental policies. *Christianity Today* falls somewhere in the middle, closer to the progressive stance of *Sojourners*. In a content analysis of these three magazines from 1984 and 2010, Danielson argues that evangelical elites' discussions of environmental issues have moved

⁵³ *Sojourners*, "Topics," <http://sojo.net/topics>.

from abstract and theological ideas to increasingly political debates over government policies, resulting in a clear split between conservative and progressive evangelicals.⁵⁴

Overall, organizational and political environmental involvement by evangelicals has taken many forms. The creation care movement has in some sense evolved alongside the broader environmental movement, moving from early statements generally affirming God's concern for the earth to current debates focused especially on climate change. Some organizations such as the EEN lobby for legislative change, while others such as Blessed Earth focus on individual-level awareness. The Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation must also be counted among organizations with an interest in environmental stewardship, albeit advocating an approach quite different from others. All parties share a conviction of the importance of caring for God's creation, but hold different ideas about the best strategies for achieving this end goal, especially about the role of the government. Significantly, these groups also hold in common an emphasis upon the biblical basis for environmental concern, an emphasis also made by the individual evangelicals whose perspectives I discuss in the next chapter.

⁵⁴ S. Danielson, "Fracturing Over Creation Care? Shifting Environmental Beliefs among Evangelicals, 1984-2010," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, Issue 1 (March 2013): 198-215.

CHAPTER FIVE: INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVES

I have identified several recurring themes in evangelical discussions of the environment: creation, stewardship, experience of God in nature, redemption, creation care as a mission opportunity, and individual accountability for everyday actions. This list of themes is not exhaustive, nor was each one discussed or expressed in the same way by all the people with whom I spoke. However, organizing the material this way shows key ideas being used by evangelicals in multiple places and how they relate to identified aspects of evangelical theology. Identifying these themes serves to further understanding of the features of evangelical environmental discourse, providing material for broader conversations about environmental issues.

In addition to information derived from interviews, I also include examples of literature written by evangelical authors. The works incorporated include *Green Like God* by Jonathan Merritt, *A Climate for Change* by Katharine Hayhoe and Andrew Farley, *Love God Love the Earth* and *The Gospel Is Green* by Matthew Sleeth, *Saving God's Green Earth* by Tri Robinson, and *Global Warming and the Risen Lord* by Jim Ball. These works complement the geographically-focused ethnographic data by providing perspectives from across the country, albeit by evangelical elites. I selected these works because they are popular and written by authors well known in the "creation care" movement.

Evangelical environmental literature appeals both to scientific authority and biblical authority. Another striking feature found particularly in the books is their personal, witness-like character. Authors often speak of having had an experience of conversion to environmental thinking. The dramatic changes of heart they describe demonstrate that they likely expect their readers to be skeptical that a good evangelical would naturally be an environmentalist. Jonathan

Merritt describes the transformation that took place for him in a class at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary: “I often describe myself as a recovering anti-environmentalist. As I sat in that theology class, God changed me. He began shifting my perspective and replacing it with His own. He stretched out His hand and grabbed hold of my heart. My mind returned to those destructive moments, and I felt God convict me of the sins of pride and selfishness.”⁵⁵

Matthew Sleeth describes himself as having been an environmentalist before becoming a Christian, but he also describes a conversion to a specifically evangelical, creation care type of environmentalism: “Before, I assumed that science or business of government would provide the answers. Once I read the Gospels, I realized my heart needed to change before I could make significant changes-changes that would require sacrifice.”⁵⁶ Both Merritt and Sleeth describe having a heart change. Richard Cizik describes having had a conversion to believing in climate change, calling it “a strange warming of the brain”⁵⁷, drawing upon John Wesley’s famous account of having his “heart strangely warmed” at a prayer meeting at Aldersgate.⁵⁸

In addition to scientific and biblical authority, evangelical literature about the environment draws upon the authority of personal experience. Authors offer their testimonies just as they might at a worship service, in order to personalize the conviction that their audiences should care about the environment. Appealing to individual changes of heart may also lead to a particular kind of environmental engagement that favors individual actions over large scale policy level changes, an idea that will be further developed later. The personal, confessional style of these narratives makes them well suited to incorporation with ethnographic interviews.

⁵⁵ Jonathan Merritt, *Green Like God: Unlocking the Divine Plan for Our Planet* (New York: FaithWords, 2010), 2.

⁵⁶ J. Matthew Sleeth, *The Gospel According to the Earth: Why the Good Book Is a Green Book* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), xii

⁵⁷ Richard Cizik, personal interview, September 26, 2013.

⁵⁸ John Wesley, Journal entry from May 24, 1738, *The Journal of John Wesley, Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.ii.xvi.html>.

Creation

God created the world and all that is in it: this idea lays the groundwork for evangelical views of the natural world. Discussions of the environment begin with the creation stories in Genesis. Recognizing the earth as a purposeful creation of God is a crucial point in the argument that the earth should be cared for. These discussions usually note that after each act of creation, God declares it to be good. Jonathan Merritt writes, “I used to think that the Sierra Club was the first entity to recognize that the environment is valuable. But from the beginning, God tells us He approves of it.”⁵⁹ The earth is intrinsically valuable because God declared it to be so. As discussed by Prelli and Winters, the word “creation” plays a key role in evangelical environmental discourse. “Creation” is a central part of evangelicals’ conscious language choices when talking about the Earth, preferred over “environment”, “earth”, and even “nature”.

Outsiders also begin and usually end with Genesis in their explanation of evangelicals’ relationship to the environment, but evangelicals do not stop there. Outside of Genesis, a Bible verse commonly used to discuss God as creator and ultimate owner of the earth is Psalm 24:1, which reads “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.”⁶⁰ For example, the verse appears prominently at the head of the Evangelical Environmental Network’s “An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation”⁶¹, and it is cited in the National Association of Evangelicals’ “Loving the Least of These: Addressing a Changing Environment.”⁶² Christians for the Mountains cites the verse as its founding scripture.⁶³ In the previously mentioned study

⁵⁹ Merritt, 32.

⁶⁰ Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations taken from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989.

⁶¹ The Evangelical Environmental Network, “An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation,” 1994, <http://www.creationcare.org/blank.php?id=39>.

⁶² National Association of Evangelicals, “Loving the Least of These.”

⁶³ Christians for the Mountains, “Our History.”

by *Sojourners*, surveyed evangelicals found the verse to be a convincing argument for environmental protection policies.⁶⁴

My informant John also cited the Psalms verse, describing it as “providing the backdrop” for his thinking: “The earth belongs to someone else who I claim to follow, so I have to take care of it.”⁶⁵ Another informant said that believing that the earth was created by God allows Christians to find meaning in appreciating and protecting nature, perhaps even more so than non-believers.⁶⁶ Reinforcing the idea of God’s ownership connects to the concept of stewardship, which evangelicals commonly use to describe humans’ proper role in creation. According to this point of view humans do not own the earth, but have been entrusted with its care by the ultimate owner, and for this reason should be treated with respect.

The word creation carries with it certain assumptions, especially as being in opposition to science and evolution. However, in this context, the word has less divisive associations. According to Loren Wilkinson, despite the debates surrounding both evolution and the environment, “a much richer understanding of creation is beginning to take shape. That emerging doctrine of creation increasingly tells the old story of biblical revelation in the light of the new story of the universe which is being told by science.”⁶⁷ Several of his points describing this developing theology of creation deal with new thinking about the relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world: “One of the most visible ways that creation has become an evangelical concern is through a recognition that the oft-used term ‘the environment’ is an inadequate name for the creation, which is recognized repeatedly as good in Genesis 1.”⁶⁸ Here

⁶⁴ Schmitt, “Talking to Evangelicals about Climate Change.”

⁶⁵ John, personal interview, October 10, 2013.

⁶⁶ Lauren, personal interview, November 8, 2013.

⁶⁷ Loren Wilkinson, “Creation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 117.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

Wilkinson points to the importance of language, and shows that the meaning of the word creation can be dynamic and multifaceted.

The word creation immediately identifies a Christian speaker and allows evangelicals to claim a distinct place in broader environmental discussions. By using their own vocabulary, they can avoid internal criticisms that they are becoming secular environmentalists. Establishing that the earth belongs to God distinguishes a Christian environmental argument from a secular environmentalist argument. This could be significant for evangelical entry into broader conversations, because the association of environmental issues with secular, liberal worldviews is a widely perceived obstacle to evangelical involvement.

To John, the word “creation” adds meaning to the word “environment.” The term also adds a hierarchy to environment, because “human beings, as reflections of God, are above in value to other beings. Creation may be an uncomfortable idea for some because it does introduce a hierarchy and includes the idea of a God that created.” But for Christians, “the idea that the ultimate end of creation is the glory of God and the good of humankind almost gives caring for the environment more meaning.”⁶⁹ According to John, non-Christians may be uncomfortable with the term, but for Christians, it gives the idea of protecting the environment significant theological meaning.

Though the word creation often serves as a synonym for environment, it is not a direct translation. Environment refers almost exclusively to the non-human world and can also be defined as a person or object’s surroundings. Creation, on the other word, includes humans. As noted by John, humans are usually understood as distinctive from other creatures, but our created status links us with the rest of the earth. This fuller sense of creation seems to complement the

⁶⁹ John, personal interview.

greater attention paid by scholars in the environmental studies field to human-environment links and interdependencies.

My informants consistently used the word creation when discussing their views of the environment and the natural world. Despite the word's association with the evolution debate that seems to pit evangelicals against science, evangelicals increasingly use it to discuss Christians' role in caring for the environment. This discourse of creation draws not only upon Genesis, but upon other passages in the Bible that reference God as the creator of all life, an idea used to motivate respect and care for the natural world. Creation is not simply a synonym for environment, but a word with theological implications and a key part of evangelical discussions about the earth.

Stewardship

“Stewardship” is another key term in evangelical environmental discourse. Traditionally, the word has primarily been used in a financial context, understood to mean tithing and giving offerings to support the work of the church. Given this legacy, the use of the term in an environmental context seems to suggest a view of the earth as a resource to be managed. The term stewardship has recently been a popular topic for theological discussion, and many volumes have been written in an attempt to develop the term. I will not try to cover all these developments in the limited space I have here, but will instead focus on relevant evangelical perspectives. Though a recent volume entitled *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* calls into question whether the term can actually be used in a meaningful way, with some contributors calling it a “default position,” for the individuals I spoke with it was

meaningful.⁷⁰ Each person had a different, nuanced understanding of the term, but it still serves as a helpful anchoring concept to describe an evangelical philosophy of environmental responsibility.

Broadly speaking, the term stewardship posits that humans are caretakers of the earth for God, its ultimate owner. The concept is traced back to Genesis 2:15 and God's instructions to Adam in the Garden of Eden. Translations of the verb to "___" the garden include "till and keep it" (NRSV), "dress and keep it" (KJV), and "work and take care of it" (NIV). Offering a correct translation of the Hebrew verbs *abad* and *shamar* appears as a fairly common trope in evangelical literature on the subject. For example, Calvin DeWitt suggests translating the first verb as serve, playing with language by explaining that in being called to serve with God, humans are called to "con-serve." He uses the translation of *shamar* as "keep," developing its definition as a dynamic keeping that sustains its object in all its vitality, and this idea of "earthkeeping" is a central theme in his writing.⁷¹ The perceived necessity of translating these verbs correctly is another example of how language matters in the way evangelicals talk about the environment.

Another linguistic matter in untangling the theology of stewardship arises in dealing with the word "dominion." In Genesis 1:26-28, the most problematic passage for an environmental reading of the creation stories, God instructs his created people to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." Outsiders such as Lynn White have often pointed to "dominion" as evidence that Christianity promotes reckless human use of the

⁷⁰R.J. Berry, Preface to *Environmental Stewardships: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. R.J. Berry (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006), 1-13.

⁷¹ Calvin B. DeWitt, "Science, Scripture, and Con-serving Creation," in *Holy Ground: A Gathering of Voices on Caring for Creation*, ed. Lyndsay Moseley (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2008), 74-87.

environment. At the very least, critics argue that the idea of dominion establishes a highly anthropocentric worldview that may be irreconcilable with environmentalist ideals.

Several of my conversations began with my informant clarifying what he or she understood as the proper meaning of dominion. Maria suggested that dominion is often mistranslated, and “our responsibility is better understood as caretakers. As reasoning individuals, we should be the ones who intentionally take care of it [the earth].”⁷² Gwen also noted that dominion is interpreted differently by different people, but at the very least it does not mean that we can “use up the earth and throw it away.”⁷³ My informants were self-consciously aware of the problematic potential of the word “dominion” and sought to resolve the issue before I even mentioned it.

Even ecological understandings of the word “dominion” do not contradict its human-centered implications. The Caring for Creation summer small group led by Justin at Greenleaf Vineyard spent several weeks on Genesis, discussing creation and humans’ place in it. The approach to dominion that resonated most with him was “benevolently ruling the creation as a king rules his subjects.”⁷⁴ Dominion may mean that humans have rule over the earth, but that does not necessarily mean that this should be an exploitative rule. As those with power, humans also have the responsibility to care for the entire creation. Justin’s perspective sounds similar to that of Jonathan Merritt, who contrasts dominion with domination.

In addition to defining dominion, many of my informants began our conversation by explaining their understandings of stewardship. For Amanda, stewardship means that everything ultimately belongs to God, and that our possessions are only temporary. Christians are called not only to be stewards of material things, but to be stewards of time.⁷⁵ Matt defines stewardship as

⁷² Maria, personal interview, September 9, 2013.

⁷³ Gwen, personal interview, November 1, 2013.

⁷⁴ Justin, personal interview, October 23, 2013.

⁷⁵ Amanda, personal interview, October 21, 2013.

“using what we have in the most appropriate and respectful ways.”⁷⁶ Carol began our conversation by stating emphatically, “I believe that Christians very much have responsibility for the earth.” She said that in the Bible, though noting that she did not know chapter and verse, God instructs people to be stewards. “Christians have fallen down on this. When we see something, we tend to go home and be quiet about it. Maybe we should speak out about the environment.”⁷⁷ According to Lauren, as the primary place where the environment is mentioned in Scripture, the creation story sets out a stewardship model. The responsibility that was given to Adam should be taken seriously as our relationship to care for creation.

John had the most systematically developed understanding of stewardship. He was conscious that people use the term broadly, but said explicitly, “I try to challenge myself to know the meanings of the words I use.”⁷⁸ For him, stewardship means to “use it but use it well,” a wise use according to God’s purpose. We are to use it for good, but maintain its health. The ultimate purpose of human use of creation is to be productive and create positive benefit for humans, which would play out in health and happiness. He underscored the significance of “use” in his definition, identifying himself as more of a conservationist than a preservationist. Coming from someone with a business background, John’s definition has a distinctly financial and pragmatic tone to it. However, he also noted that in some cases the best use of a natural resource may be to just look at it, rather than touching it. John emphasized the need to critically think through each decision.

Erin spoke critically of the term stewardship, which she says “is not a biblical word,” and a word that to her suggests conservation or preservation, “which doesn’t get at the full gist of

⁷⁶ Matt, personal interview, October 21, 2013.

⁷⁷ Carol, personal interview, November 1, 2013.

⁷⁸ John, personal interview.

loving and knowing the environment.”⁷⁹ Stewardship is more about not consuming more than you can. This type of understanding “limits our relationship with God and harms the environment.” She instead used the word “priest” to describe human’s relationship to creation. “We are not called just to be stewards, but to participate in God’s work”, and “priests” captures this relationship better. She recognized the importance of the term stewardship as a concept that could provide common ground for Christians and non-Christians, but cautioned that the stewardship approach does not always go far enough.

The concept of stewardship draws upon ideas of God’s ultimate sovereignty and humans’ temporary presence on earth. For the most part, stewardship means wisely managing earth’s resources, but the term can often have more general implications, along the lines of “creation care.” While a fairly broad term that can encompass many different approaches, it is still a useful one for understanding how evangelicals think about the environment because they use it the most often.

Experiencing God in Nature

Another key theme in evangelical perspectives on the environment is nature’s ability to reveal God and facilitate personal experience with him. This theme closely relates to the idea of creation, because as an intentional creation, nature is thought to reflect its Creator. For many of my informants and evangelical authors, experiences of God in nature serve as a foundation for their desires to protect the environment, by confirming the teachings they find in the Bible.

Like many of the theological approaches addressed in this thesis, this idea that God can be known through nature has a long history in Christian thought. Calvin DeWitt expresses the idea of seeing the Creator through his creation in his explanation of the “two books theology” that has

⁷⁹ Erin, personal interview, January 14, 2014.

been instrumental in the development of his thought. He makes specific reference to the Belgic Confession of faith by the Reformed Church, which cites this verse in describing one of the ways that God is known: “First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: God’s eternal power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20.”⁸⁰ DeWitt describes this expression of faith as having a significant impact upon his decision to pursue science as God’s work. He also argues that reading the text of creation is part of the heritage of Christianity, albeit one that has been less emphasized in recent decades.

For Tri Robinson, nature plays an essential role in his classic evangelical conversion narrative, which he recounts in his book *Saving God’s Green Earth*. Though he had been raised in a Christian home, Robinson desired proof of God’s existence for himself. This proof came to him while sitting on the side of a mountain: “as I looked across the breath-taking landscape before me, I came to the amazing reality that it was all true; God must exist. I recognized God in His creation.”⁸¹ His acceptance of Jesus as his savior was also located in nature, following a close encounter with a deer who looked him in the eyes: “It was in that moment that Jesus was really revealed to me. It was as if He was saying, ‘I’m here and I’m real-and I’m answering your prayer.’”⁸²

“Born again” narratives such as this one are common among evangelical Christians, as they reinforce the importance of individual relationship with Christ. Robinson’s story follows the classic example. He not only experiences God in nature, but has an evangelical experience of

⁸⁰ DeWitt, 76.

⁸¹ Tri Robinson with Jason Chatraw, *Saving God’s Green Earth: Rediscovering the Church’s Responsibility to Environmental Stewardship* (Norcross: Ampelon Publishing, 2006), 34.

⁸² Ibid., 40-41.

God in nature. The role of nature in such a foundational moment in his Christian faith gives it a powerful potential to play a role in his future as a Christian.

Many evangelicals connect with nature by experiencing God outdoors. Carol echoed DeWitt's description of knowing God in creation, describing looking at clouds and the sun streaming through them and thinking, "How can someone see this and not think there is a God?"⁸³ Gwen says, "I do most of my praying and talking to God outside. I even do it better outside than I do in here [the church]."⁸⁴ In a summer "Caring for Creation" small group that Justin led at Greenleaf Vineyard, the group often worshipped God together outside. According to Justin, the group was guided by the question "Knowing that God is reflected in all creation, how do we worship him in that?"⁸⁵

For some of my informants, spending time outside as a child shaped an appreciation for the ability to know God through creation. Growing up in Western North Carolina, from a very young age John appreciated the environment around him, especially the Blue Ridge Parkway. Appreciating "the awe and the wonder of the creation" was an important part of his upbringing.⁸⁶ Diane from New Hope cited a similar experience, growing up in Colorado enjoying the beauty of the mountains. This background has shaped her primary association of caring for the environment as protecting pristine wilderness areas and national parks. She expressed dismay at the impact of recent increases in commercial building and devastating floods and fires on the mountains that she grew up enjoying. She concluded by saying, "We need to protect the beauty

⁸³ Carol, personal interview.

⁸⁴ Gwen, personal interview.

⁸⁵ Justin, personal interview.

⁸⁶ John, personal interview.

God has created and not just trample it with our feet.”⁸⁷ Childhood experiences fostering an early love of nature seem to support a later appreciation for creation as part of an adult faith in Christ.

According to Tri Robinson, Calvin DeWitt, and others, nature is important not just as the creation of God, but as a reflection of him. They also suggest that personal experience of God in nature can be a motivating force for environmental concern. Experiencing God in nature draws not only upon biblical ideas of knowing the creator in his creation but upon the evangelical privileging of individual experience.

Creation’s Redemption

Some evangelicals use the Christian theological idea of redemption as a way to describe God’s ultimate goal for the earth. A biblical passage commonly pointed to for support is Romans chapter 8, in which Paul writes “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God [...] creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.” Another verse cited to support this idea is Colossians 1:20, which says that Christ “reconcile[s] to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” Evangelical discussions of these passages emphasize the inclusion of the entire creation in God’s plan of salvation.

Several evangelical thinkers have expressed this idea that total redemption in Christ will include the entire creation. In his 1970 book *Pollution and the Death of Man*, influential evangelical intellectual Francis Schaeffer develops this idea particularly eloquently, arguing “on the basis of the fact that there is going to be total redemption in the future, not only of man but of all creation, the Christian who believes the Bible should be the man who-with God’s help and in

⁸⁷ Diane, personal interview, November 1, 2013.

the power of the Holy Spirit-is treating nature now in the direction of the way nature will be then. It will not now be perfect, but it must be substantial, or we have missed our calling.”⁸⁸

Schaeffer calls Christians not to passively await redemption in the Second Coming, but to begin the redemptive process here and now. Schaeffer calls upon a potentially unique resource that Christianity could offer the environmental movement: the ability to provide “hope here and now of substantial healing.”⁸⁹

The theme of creation’s redemption through Christ reflects the crucicentric aspect of evangelicalism highlighted in Bebbington’s definition. Rev. Jim Ball of the Evangelical Environmental Network develops this theme in *Global Warming and the Risen Lord*. Specifically referring to Colossians 1:20, he writes, “Verse 20 and the Holy Spirit prompt those of us gathered at the cross, at the feet of our crucified Savior, to look around, to look behind us, to look at all that has gathered there, farther than the eye can see. The whole creation is gathered at the foot of the cross.”⁹⁰ Perhaps more than other evangelical authors writing on the subject, Ball draws a direct line between faith in the resurrected Jesus and taking action on climate change.

Implicit in talk of redemption and healing are the concepts of sin and the Fall. The rest of creation needs redemption along with humans because it has also fallen as a result of human sin. After mentioning Romans 8, Lauren suggested that “Brokenness is not just with humans, but is manifest in the rest of creation. Maybe the fall of humans for rebelling against God having consequences for all of creation shows just how in charge we are.”⁹¹ Just as several other tenets of evangelical environmentalism, such a view is rather anthropocentric. However, arguing that

⁸⁸ Schaeffer, 68-69.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 81.

⁹⁰ Jim Ball, *Global Warming and the Risen Lord: Christian Discipleship and Climate Change* (Washington, D.C.: The Evangelical Environmental Network, 2010), 223.

⁹¹ Lauren, personal interview.

creation is broken because of human sin also suggests an acknowledgement that human actions have been destructive of the earth. Amanda said, “Big factories taking up huge pieces of land and poorly using it is sin, an example of people wanting money and power.”⁹² In *Green Like God*, Jonathan Merritt argues that the misuse of human dominion over creation is sin: “the first sin involved the misuse of dominion. At the heart of dominion is selfless service, but at the heart of sin we find selfishness. Dominion is worshipful obedience while sin is irreverent disobedience.”⁹³ Not all of my informants used the strong language of sin to characterize environmental destruction, but such language is implied in discussions of redemption and creation’s release from bondage.

John offered similar thoughts on the idea of redemption, saying that Genesis sets up creation as it was supposed to be, but as it is fallen, there is death and destruction. “The story of the Gospel is Jesus bringing redemption to the world. Redemption starts with humans, but it can be part of our redemptive acts in the world and in creation.” He also brought up eschatological ideas of redemption or restoration, referencing biblical passages that discuss a new heavens and a new earth, saying “I have to assume that means earth in its entirety. To me it means that the earth will be restored rather than destroyed.” He avoided making a definitive statement about how the world will end, but concluded, “It makes a more compelling story to talk about restoration.”⁹⁴

Amanda also discussed redemption, saying “the Bible is clear that forgiveness of sins and redemption is of utmost concern to God.”⁹⁵ This redemption of human sin relates to the redemption of creation here and now, because God “renews believers to renew what is

⁹² Amanda, personal interview.

⁹³ Merritt, 52.

⁹⁴ John, personal interview.

⁹⁵ Amanda, personal interview.

decaying.” For Amanda, the redemption offered by God in Jesus calls Christians to share the blessings of redemption with all of creation.

A tension accompanies this idea of redemption, deriving from a question of whose actions can redeem: humans, or only God? Lauren directly addressed this tension, mentioning N.T. Wright as having the idea that “we will see God renewed in all things and we can participate until he comes.” She quickly added, “I don’t think we’re in charge of bringing Christ back, but we can participate.”⁹⁶ She was hesitant to embrace a fully progressive millennialist view, but felt strongly that Christians are called to take part in God’s renewal of the creation. Erin offered a similar opinion, saying “We can’t save anything. We can’t save the earth. That’s God’s work. But we are supposed to participate in God’s work.”⁹⁷

Evangelicals disagree over whether the redemption of creation means that the physical earth will be restored, particularly in the context of biblical verses such as 2 Peter 3:10, which reads “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.” Some use this verse to argue the futility of creation care. The popular young evangelical pastor Mark Driscoll drew a lot of attention in a statement alluding to this passage made at a conference in Dallas: “I know who made the environment. He’s coming back and he’s going to burn it all up. So yes, I drive an SUV.”⁹⁸ Richard Cizik refers to people who follow in this line of thought as the “burn it all downers,” of whom several vocal examples can be found.⁹⁹

Each of my informants who discussed redemption placed the idea in the context of these verses. As evangelicals who take the Bible seriously and to a certain extent literally, they do not

⁹⁶ Lauren, personal interview.

⁹⁷ Erin, personal interview.

⁹⁸ Noah Toly, “Do Evangelicals Really Like Our Planet?” *The Martin Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Religion*, October 17, 2013, <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/do-evangelicals-really-our-planet-noah-toly>.

⁹⁹ Richard Cizik, personal interview.

ignore the existence of these verses. As previously noted, John suggested instead that references to “new heavens and new Earth” in other verses mean that the earth will be restored. He noted, “I used to be of the opinion that all will be wiped away and started anew. I don’t know what perspective I take about the end, but whether it will be wiped away or there will be a restoration of this earth, it doesn’t matter. We should still care because God calls us to.”¹⁰⁰ Rich Cizik too offered a different take, interpreting the fire mentioned in 2 Peter 3:10 as a fire that will refine rather than destroy the earth.¹⁰¹

Even believing that one day the earth will be destroyed in a burst of flames does not necessarily mean believing that the same earth should not be protected. Climate scientist and author Katharine Hayhoe disagrees with redemptive takes on 2 Peter, stating firmly, “Our current Earth will pass away to be replaced with a new Earth. There will be no improving, no restoring, no fixing of the old earth. Just destruction of it followed by a new creation.”¹⁰² This statement perhaps does not seem noteworthy coming from an evangelical author. However, the statement appears in the middle of a book arguing that climate change is happening and Christians have a role to play in taking action to fight its destructive changes. This apparent contradiction shows the diversity within evangelical thinking about the environment, even among those who call for active engagement.

Redemption lies at the heart of Christian theology, and its potential ecological implications have not been fully developed in evangelical literature. Is redemption of the earth an end which can be brought about by human acts of caring for creation? Or can it only be brought about by

¹⁰⁰ John, personal interview.

¹⁰¹ Richard Cizik, personal interview.

¹⁰² Katharine Hayhoe and Andrew Farley, *A Climate for Change: Global Warming Facts for Faith-Based Decisions* (New York: FaithWords, 2009), 135.

God in his ultimate plan? Regardless, healing and redemption remain key features of evangelical environmental discourse.

Mission Opportunity

Some evangelicals have identified taking action to protect the environment as an important mission opportunity, both in the sense of serving those in need and spreading the gospel, two goals which often go hand in hand. Many conservatives have criticized environmentalists for placing more weight on saving whales and polar bears than upon saving people. In this view, Christians should instead prioritize helping the poor and spreading the gospel, motivated by a sincere belief that bringing people to Jesus is the best way to help them. To bridge the gap between prioritizing helping the environment and helping people, many evangelicals have begun to argue that creation care and neighbor care can co-exist, by broadening the definition of “mission” to include not only peoples’ spiritual needs but physical needs that require a healthy environment.

The mission-oriented approach to creation care primarily draws upon the idea that environmental changes have the most detrimental impacts upon the poor. This argument that the global poor suffer most from environmental degradation fits well with the concepts of healing, reconciliation, and mission found in evangelical environmental discourse. The National Association of Evangelicals’ 2011 publication “Loving the Least of These: Addressing a Changing Environment” makes this argument, noting scientific evidence that climate change impacts such as shifting weather patterns and agricultural seasons and an increased number of natural disasters have the greatest impact upon the rural poor who depend directly upon the land.

¹⁰³ The document presents lifestyle changes that reduce energy usage as an appropriate response to Jesus' statement "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

John also noted the potential of connecting the environment with the poor, saying that "if a causal relationship and connection can be made between environmental health and human life, the issue would be more appealing to evangelicals, especially if the environment can be framed as caring for the poor."¹⁰⁴ At the end of our conversation, he mentioned that he had worked in the Congo before graduate school, a place where "the rubber meets the road" with environmental issues. He described encountering situations where human needs and the environment seemed to be in conflict, such as using genetically modified crops to fight hunger. This direct experience led John to think seriously about the relationship between people and their natural environment, a relationship that could be particularly compelling for evangelical Christians as they continue to develop positions on environmental issues.

Historically speaking, Christian global missions have had an ambiguous and often negative ecological legacy. In his famous essay, Lynn White charges, "For nearly two millennia Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves, which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature."¹⁰⁵ In the modern era, the spread of Christianity has often been accompanied by the adoption of Western capitalist relations with nature and a loss of indigenous ecological knowledge and practice. A 1992 volume edited by Calvin DeWitt entitled *Missionary Earthkeeping* deals with this topic and offers alternative visions for the future, based on specific cases in the Amazon, Ghana, and Zaire. The contributors to this volume call for Christian

¹⁰³ The Evangelical Environmental Network, "Loving the Least of These," 29-36.

¹⁰⁴ John, personal interview.

¹⁰⁵ White, 5.

missionaries to change the story through “an extension of the traditional missionary role of the physician and healer to include all of God’s creation.”¹⁰⁶

The evangelical humanitarian organization World Vision has begun to incorporate the environment into its international development work, motivated primarily by practicalities encountered on the ground. Development workers have found through first-hand experience that human health and prosperity cannot be separated from ecosystem health. Individuals involved in World Vision’s ministry in the developing world have found that ecological restoration projects allow those receiving aid to not only be recipients, but active participants in the improvement of their circumstances: “Reinforcing humanity’s role in the stewardship of creation and ensuring that people have the skills, knowledge and power to preserve or restore their part of God’s creation (water, trees, soils, marine environment) allows more people to experience the biblical vision of the fullness of life.”¹⁰⁷ World Vision’s model of creation care connects directly with the previously discussed theme of redemption.

Participating in environment-focused work may also present evangelicals with an opportunity to engage with people outside the church community and even spread the gospel. Jonathan Merritt writes, “Creation care speaks to people in developing nations where people have a greater connection to nature in everyday life. Creation care is a bridge for the gospel in these places. But it also bolsters the gospel in the Western world where people know of, if not respect, Jesus.”¹⁰⁸ Merritt argues that creation care can be an effective form of evangelism both in the developing world among “the least of these” most affected by environmental changes as

¹⁰⁶ Dennis E. Testerman, “Missionary Earthkeeping: Glimpses of the Past, Visions of the Future,” in *Missionary Earthkeeping*, ed. Calvin B. DeWitt and Ghilleen T. Prance (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1992), 38.

¹⁰⁷ Jared Hyneman and Christopher Shore, “Why Are We Stewards of Creation? World Vision’s Biblical Understanding of How We Relate to Creation,” May 2013, <http://www.wvi.org/food-and-livelihood-security/publication/why-are-we-stewards-creation-wvs-biblical-understanding-how>, p. 25.

¹⁰⁸ Merritt, 91.

well as in the United States with non-Christians who value the environment and might not expect the church to share those values.

Maria noted the effectiveness of the environment as part of the Vineyard Association's core value of "culturally relevant mission": "We are finding that the environment is really important to our generation. For our parents' generation, the environment may have been a more polarized political issue, but for us it is just part of our lives."¹⁰⁹ According to Maria, Vineyard missions focus on doing things that are "tangible and real." I noted a strong missionary theme throughout a service that I attended at Greenleaf, in which the sermon called everyone present to be a missionary, stressing that sharing the Gospel in Chapel Hill is missionary work just as is flying to Africa. For some evangelicals, showing by example that the church also cares about the environment seems to be an effective strategy for reaching out to young people.

Lauren, who works in air quality, views environmental problem solving in the developing world as an important personal mission opportunity. She chose her profession out of a desire "to leverage my life both for the spread of the gospel and use the skillset I have been given." She described her dream as going to "countries where missionaries aren't allowed to go and try to help people physically by improving air quality and hopefully by cultivating relationships to bring them to Jesus."¹¹⁰

Amanda and Matt also connected the environment with missions. Amanda said that she cannot separate land from people, because "where you see land being misused, you usually see people being mistreated too." She was currently reading *Ministries of Mercy* by Tim Keller, which she brought up to explain the connection. While she talked, she drew a diagram of the four levels of alienation that the book describes as being caused by the fall: theological,

¹⁰⁹ Maria, personal interview.

¹¹⁰ Lauren, personal interview.

psychological, social, and physical. Each type of alienation has specific needs that must be met in order to overcome it. Amanda explained that if on a mission to a developing country, she would not just read a gospel passage to people who were hungry and thirsty, but would be called to meet their physical needs as well. Referring back to the diagram, Matt said “our relationship with God is at the core, and if we are called back to God, the call works outward, renewing and recreating.”¹¹¹ He asked if this process could work outside in too, starting with the physical, but left the question unanswered. Amanda said, “I hope our lives can be an example for those who see them, and they would say, ‘She says she’s a Christian and she cares about nature, so maybe God cares too.’”¹¹² For Amanda and Matt, physical and spiritual needs cannot be separated, and caring for creation should be a central component of the church’s overall mission in the world.

Connecting environmental problems to the poor creates an opportunity for missions, but it also has the potential to support a highly anthropocentric view of nature. While discussing roadblocks to Christian environmental action, Justin noted that the issue for some people seems to be focusing on the earth rather than on helping people. Justin suggested that thinking about environmentalism as a hippie tying himself to a tree may not be a very appealing image, “but if you instead think of a village where the people are forced by their circumstances to cut down trees and sacrifice the village’s future in order to survive now, your idea of environmentalism would be different.”¹¹³

On the other side, some evangelicals use the same emphasis upon helping the poor to frame arguments opposing government policies of environmental protection. For example, they oppose limiting carbon emissions by power plants or favoring alternative energy sources on the grounds that resulting higher energy costs will be borne disproportionately by the poor. As previously

¹¹¹ Matt, personal interview.

¹¹² Amanda, personal interview.

¹¹³ Justin, personal interview.

mentioned, Beisner and the Cornwall Alliance make this argument. Writers for the conservative magazine *World* often make this argument as well, resulting in headlines like “The left’s conundrum: The environment or the poor”,¹¹⁴ “President’s energy plan could hurt poor.”¹¹⁵ The issue of poverty strongly resonates with evangelicals and is a powerful reference in debates, and therefore both sides make connections between poverty and environmental issues.

Evangelicals’ missionary orientation has led many to understand working to protect the environment as an opportunity to spread the Gospel. Working to plant trees, remove invasive species, and restore habitats is not time that should be better spent sharing the good news, but work that displays the Gospel’s promise for all of creation. As Prance writes in *Missionary Earthkeeping*, a “rich form of Christianity that understands creation as well as the creator is what is needed in the mission field to avoid ecological disaster and to create a more stable and sustainable life system for those whom we seek to help.”¹¹⁶ Caring for the earth is thus seen both as an integral part of traditional missionary work as well as a mission in its own right.

Individual Accountability

Evangelicals take seriously how they practice their faith in daily life. Those who consider caring for creation an integral part of their Christian faith also value daily practices that reflect this faith. Several of my informants explained that the decisions they make about their environmental impacts are motivated by the conviction that God cares about all of their decisions. This theme is important because it shows that evangelicals do not simply think and talk about the environment, but engage in tangible pro-environmental behaviors.

¹¹⁴ D.C. Innes, “The Left’s Conundrum: The Environment or the Poor,” *World*, July 15, 2013, http://www.worldmag.com/2013/07/the_left_s_conundrum_the_environment_or_the_poor.

¹¹⁵ Andrew Branch, “President’s Energy Plan Could Hurt Poor,” *World*, June 26, 2013, http://www.worldmag.com/2013/06/president_s_energy_plan_could_hurt_poor.

¹¹⁶ Ghilleen T. Prance, “The Ecological Awareness of the Amazon Indians,” in *Missionary Earthkeeping*, 58.

Evangelical authors often describe lifestyle changes as the result of personal introspection and reflection, much as they might describe the process of becoming a Christian. Matthew Sleeth, an author who considered himself well informed about the environment before he became a Christian, writes that his conversion motivated him to take personal responsibility “My lifestyle was not reflecting my espoused concern. I was a hypocrite. After my assessment, I knew my family had to make some drastic changes. As a Christian, I felt a mandate to align my lifestyle with what I was saying.”¹¹⁷ Sleeth’s newly found faith called him to line up his everyday actions with the values he claimed to uphold, values that included stewardship of the earth. Several of my informants expressed similar ideas.

John reflected upon the idea of truth as it relates to the environment. Christians should be committed to a “fundamental alliance to truth as we see it from the Bible,” meaning that actions should be directly motivated by beliefs.¹¹⁸ According to John, one of those fundamental truths found in the Bible is stewardship. He has met some Christians who are conservative on most other issues but unexpectedly take the environment seriously, and he admires them because to him it shows that they are genuinely thinking and applying their beliefs to specific issues. In his mind, stewardship is a truth that could make a significant impact if more Christians recognized and practiced it.

Amanda continually emphasized that all decisions, no matter how small, matter to God. In her opinion, the purpose of our lives is to glorify God, a purpose which should show up in every aspect of life. Life is not just about being saved and going to heaven, but glorifying God in tangible ways. The pastors at Christ Community Church focus on following Christ with one’s whole life, and she has seen the environmental impact of this message as church members begin

¹¹⁷ J. Matthew Sleeth, *Serve God, Save the Planet: A Christian Call to Action* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 24.

¹¹⁸ John, personal interview.

to ask “Who made this?” and “How far did this travel?” She became interested in environmental issues, especially food, because her roommate who is not a Christian would discuss them with her and she thought, “God cares about those things too.”¹¹⁹ She sees food as an especially important issue to consider because we have to eat every day. But after beginning to think about their food, more questions and decision making began to follow for Amanda and Matt. They believe that their everyday actions like not using the dryer and not getting plastic bags at the store honor God, because God cares about the earth and all the decisions that protect it.

For the evangelicals with whom I spoke, caring for the environment requires not only thought, but action. Our conversations did not deal only in the realm of theological ideas, but often transitioned into discussions of practicalities. Maria discussed how her idealism has been challenged by the realities of small children and cloth diapers. At the Bible study at New Hope, the women enthusiastically traded tips for keeping animals out of compost bins, discussed the types of plastics that can be recycled in Orange County, and asked each other whether they brake for squirrels, turtles, and snakes in the road. When one woman asked if the conversation was veering off topic, other members assured her that everything they discussed related to honoring God’s creation.

Jim Ball offers similar thoughts in *Global Warming and the Risen Lord*: “Purchasing LED lights or combining trips in the car to save energy is a spiritual act of love towards our savior. To choose to purchase clean, green electricity is a Kingdom act [...] No righteous act is too small to the one who bore our sins on the cross.”¹²⁰ Like Amanda, the women from New Hope, and others, Ball argues that individual household level efforts to save energy or reduce trash production not only make a positive environmental impact, but serve as acts of devotion to God.

¹¹⁹ Amanda, personal interview.

¹²⁰ Ball, 227.

The checklists of simple, practical tips found as appendices in many monographs like Ball's echo this perspective.

These actions are motivated by a conviction that they matter to God. This conviction highlights the evangelical focus upon having a personal relationship with God and reflects what Emerson and Smith term "accountable freewill individualism," part of white evangelicals' cultural toolkit in which "individuals exist independent of structures and institutions, have freewill, and are individually accountable for their own actions [...] they are individually accountable to family, other people, and, most important, to God for their freely made choices."¹²¹ Emerson and Smith argue that accountable freewill individualism often leads evangelicals to look past structure in favor of individual level solutions.

The emphasis upon individual actions and decisions rather than structural change may seem to be an obstacle to evangelical environmentalism. Especially in regard to political issues, evangelicals often focus on finding solutions at the level of personal morality. For the most part, the same appears to be true in regard to environmental issues, as also noted by Peifer, Ecklund, and Fullerton. Lauren expressed her opinion that the role of the church should be to "model what caring for creation looks like in terms of individual responsibility" and "actively encourage people to steward their own impact on the environment."¹²² Though also saying that most large scale environmental decisions take place in the realm of policy and politics, relating to her own work, she feels that the church should not advocate in this realm. The leadership of the Evangelical Environmental Network and *Sojourners* may actively lobby Congress and call for regulations on carbon emissions, but most evangelicals may be more comfortable with household level changes. While this can be attributed to evangelical individualism, such a preference would

¹²¹ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 76-77.

¹²² Lauren, personal interview.

hardly make evangelicals unique in a sample of average Americans. Instead, the framework of individual accountability may have the potential to be highly motivating, by relating environmental protection to an individual's personal relationship with God.

Pro-Life Issue

A few evangelicals who are vocal on the subject of the environment go so far as to argue that environmental issues are pro-life issues. The issues cited in such arguments have direct and identifiable impact upon human health, including toxic pollutants. The Evangelical Environmental Network specifically focuses on mercury and the unborn as a pro-life issue. Part of the organization's "End Mercury Poisoning Pledge" reads, "As a pro-life, creation-care organization, protecting and enhancing life is at the heart of what we do. A key dimension of this is protecting human health, and that's why we want to stop the mercury poisoning of the unborn [...] We believe this is an urgent and escalating moral crisis which calls for immediate action!"¹²³ EEN-sponsored commercials urging viewers to contact their senators for legislation reducing mercury pollution from coal-fired power plants ran in several states in 2011. In a recent open letter to Rush Limbaugh in response to his statement that "If you believe in God, then intellectually you cannot believe in man-made global warming", EEN's president Mitch Hescox argues that pro-life is not just about abortion, but caring for people from birth until natural death.¹²⁴ He cites air pollution as a cause of birth defects and childhood illnesses. Tri Robinson also argues that creation care is a matter of life, saying in an interview with the Christian

¹²³ The Evangelical Environmental Network, "The End Mercury Poisoning Pledge," May 18, 2011, <http://www.creationcare.org/view.php?id=314>.

¹²⁴ The Rev. Mitchell C. Hescox, "An Open Letter to Rush Limbaugh," August 14, 2013, <http://www.creationcare.org/view.php?id=864>

Broadcasting Network, “If we actually care about the sanctity of life, then we should care about the environment because, when an environment becomes unsustainable, it kills people.”¹²⁵

Most evangelicals would not be likely to associate the environment with the pro-life cause. For one, the Cornwall Alliance issued a response to the EEN’s mercury campaign emphatically arguing that environmental issues are not pro-life issues: “First and foremost, truly pro-life issues are issues of actual life and death, while environmental issues tend to be matters of health. Second, truly pro-life issues address actual intent to kill innocent people, whether the unborn, the gravely ill, or the aged, while environmental issues do not.”¹²⁶ Though this perspective is certainly a minority one, it is worth mentioning as another example of how some evangelicals claim environmental issues to be moral issues to which fellow Christians should pay attention.

¹²⁵ Paul Strand, “Green Church: Making Creation Care a Holy Cause,” April 9, 2012, CBN News <http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/healthscience/2012/April/Green-Church-Making-Creation-Care-a-Holy-Cause/>

¹²⁶ Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation, “Protecting the Unborn and the Pro-Life Movement from a Misleading Environmentalist Tactic: A Joint Statement by Pro-Life Leaders,” February 7, 2012, <http://www.cornwallalliance.org/articles/read/protecting-the-unborn-and-the-pro-life-movement/>

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that American evangelicals are increasingly addressing environmental issues in theological and moral ways. Organizations like the Evangelical Environmental Network and Restoring Eden, books like *Saving God's Green Earth* and *The Gospel is Green*, and statements by the National Association of Evangelicals serve as evidence of this development. Some recent developments in evangelical literature argue that prioritizing the earth does not constitute an attack on the fundamentals of evangelical faith, but instead emphasizes theology and values that have existed all along. Though ecological awareness does not necessarily characterize the majority of evangelicalism, this trend is significant because evangelicals represent a significant and publicly active share of the American population. The examples of “creation care” that I have presented also serve to challenge stereotypes of evangelicals as anti-science and uniformly Republican.

I have also argued specifically that the language used to discuss humans’ relationship with the natural world matters significantly to evangelicals. Evangelical environmental discourse used words such as “creation” and “stewardship” with rich theological meanings, preferring such terms to “environment” and “environmentalism.” I have highlighted certain common frameworks that evangelicals used to communicate their thoughts, including the redemption of creation, mission opportunities, and individual accountability. Speaking in familiar Christian language allows them to claim their own space in multi-party discussions, as well as to appeal to their co-religionists.

This idea that word choice matters in communication of environmental issues and solutions extends beyond the American evangelical community. Dryzek suggests that we all participate in

environmental discourses that help us to make sense of the complex nature and causes of global environmental problems.¹²⁷ Evangelical Christians participate in just one of these discourses. These discourses offer helpful conceptual frameworks, but their differing embedded assumptions can also make communication between different groups difficult, especially on a political level. However, I argue that further understanding of the terms used by other parties in environmental discussions can aid better communication.

Almost all of my informants expressed displeasure with the politicization of the environment. Several expressed strongly that both ends of the political spectrum can support caring for creation. Politicization may be a driver behind their preference for the word “creation” over “environment.” Despite these concerns, environmental issues are indisputably political issues. Solutions to large scale issues come from the realm of policy. Theological environmental discourse may eschew mention of politics, but politics remain a central aspect of putting those ideas into action. The particularly politicized issue of climate change currently divides evangelicals, as it does the American public. As the science continues to develop, so will evangelical discourse about climate change, making this topic a relevant one for further study.

The evangelicals with whom I had conversations were excited to discuss what Christianity has to say about the environment, not just because they had opinions to share but because they took an active interest in broader discussions. They looked forward to pushing past the stereotypes and political gridlock that limit productive discussions about sustainable solutions to ecological issues. My informants share with scholars in the developing field of religion and ecology a belief in the necessity of new conversations about humans and our relationship to the natural world, conversations that ignore preconceived notions and instead welcome the idea that

¹²⁷ John S. Dryzek, *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9-11.

people of faith have important perspectives to share. I hope that this thesis makes a constructive contribution to these conversations.

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