
Between Heaven and Earth—Evangelical Engagement in Conservation

I was saddened by David Orr's essay, "Armageddon versus Extinction" (Orr 2005), because it obscures rather than illuminates our ability to perceive and understand our neighbors and allies in conservation for who they really are and fails to treat them as we would like to be treated ourselves. U.S. evangelicals, argues Orr, convinced of an imminent Armageddon that will establish the Kingdom of Heaven, have no motivation to conserve anything on Earth. Now enjoined to ruling political and economic powers, they will the removal of all statutory environmental protection in the interests of economic growth and material welfare.

Orr does not explain the operational specifics of exactly how this "alliance" functionally directs environmental policy. The reader is left to assume that such assertions reflect "common knowledge" that no informed person could dispute. That settled, Orr proceeds to elaborate the ideological "differences" between conservation biologists and evangelicals in his text and in a table without the inconvenience of a single substantive theological or political reference. This is a remarkable achievement in economy of effort but a gross distortion of evangelical ideas. The text and table erect a straw man who provides a serviceable intellectual tackling dummy but are of no value in understanding the specific points of convergence or divergence between the conservation community and evangelical Christians, particularly the growing numbers of evan-

gelicals engaged in the conservation science and practice.

Orr's tar-and-feather technique lacks precision in defining who and what the evangelical community is, and his broad brush unfairly blackens the many evangelicals active in conservation and the theology that motivates their efforts. Misidentification, however, is but the first of a series of errors that not only unfairly characterize evangelicals and their role in conservation but misdirect the conservation community's strategy toward existing problems in conservation policy.

Today there are more than 40 Christian organizations in the United States, many of them expressly evangelical, that state their missions in terms of environmental conservation, including A Rocha, the Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation, the Evangelical Environmental Network, Florista, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, and the Christian Society of the Green Cross. Such activism is supported by a systemic educational engagement in conservation now characteristic of most evangelical colleges. One is Greenville College (Illinois), which founded the Zahniser Institute of Environmental Studies in 1998. Named for one of its own alumni, Howard Zahniser (for many years editor of *The Living Wilderness* and one of the principal advocates and architects of the U.S. Wilderness Act of 1964), the institute's stated mission is "... to promote the preservation of unique and wild places; to facilitate the in-

tegration of an ethic of environmental stewardship into the conservative moral constructs of our society; and to use muscle, sinew, will, and spirit to restore Nature." Through the institute, Greenville faculty and students run an environmental consulting firm as a co-curricular program. Starting with local consulting efforts in wetland restoration in Illinois, Zahniser has expanded its work to Missouri and Kansas and now includes prairie, forest, and mined land in its restoration efforts. The program at Greenville is exemplary but not unique. Today 36 of 105 evangelical schools in the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities offer majors or program concentrations in environmental or conservation studies, and more continue to be added.

The development of these and other environmental initiatives within the evangelical community has been supported by a growing body of theological and ethical literature on environmental stewardship produced by evangelical scholars, dating from the early 1970s and 1980s (Sittler 1972; Schaeffer 1973; Wilkinson 1980). More recent books have reached larger evangelical audiences. *Christianity Today*, the most widely read evangelical magazine in North America, chose one of these, *For the Beauty of the Earth* by Christian ethicist Steven Bouma-Prediger, for its Award of Merit in theology and ethics. Here Bouma-Prediger brings his theological expertise to bear on the prophecies that Orr finds so problematic. In his exegesis of Revelation,

Bouma-Prediger asks, "What then does God's good future look like? These last chapters of Revelation beckon us with an earthly vision of a life made good and whole and right, because of God's grace. Heaven and earth are renewed and are one. God dwells with us, at home in creation" (Bouma-Prediger 2001:115-116).

Orr notes that "evangelicals' belief in the end times...has the paradoxical effect of seeming to justify behavior that brings on the end times, but of a sort without scriptural basis. In biblical terms, the destruction of the Creation because of hardheartedness and a profound indifference to life is a sin against God and a crime against humanity" (Orr 2005:291-292). Evangelicals who hold this view base it mainly on a single text, II Peter 3:10, which has been rendered traditionally, "the Earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up" (Revised Standard Version). Bouma-Prediger, a fluent reader in Greek, notes that "this verse represents perhaps the most egregious mistranslation in the entire New Testament. The Greek verb in question here is *heureskein*, 'to find,' from which we get the English expression 'eureka.' In other words, the text states that after a refiner's fire of purification (verse 7), the new Earth will be *found*, not burned up. The Earth will be discovered, not destroyed" (Bouma-Prediger 2001:77).

Evangelical engagement in conservation has not been merely academic but has often assumed decidedly political dimensions. In June 2004, Jim Ball, director of the Evangelical Environmental Network, organized a meeting of evangelical leaders in Sandy Cove, Maryland. The outcome was The Sandy Cove Covenant, a statement calling for evangelicals to take stewardship of the environment more seriously. In the words of the covenant, Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, David Neff, editor of *Christianity Today*, Ron Sider, president of Evangelicals for Social Action, and 27 other evangelical lead-

ers affirmed that "we covenant together to make creation-care a permanent dimension of our Christian discipleship and to deepen our theological and biblical understanding of the issues involved...to motivate the evangelical community to fully engage environmental issues in a biblically faithful and humble manner, collaborating with those who share these concerns, that we might take our appropriate place in the healing of God's creation, and thus the advance of God's reign" (Creation Care 2004:10).

In his keynote address to those gathered at Sandy Cove, Larry Schweiger, president and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation, spoke of the connections between his own decision to follow Christ and his lifelong activism in environmental and conservation policy. Schweiger recounted his childhood struggles with dyslexia, the untimely death of an infant brother, and the experience of a ruined vacation on a polluted Lake Erie shore, where he saw dozens of dead pike embedded in a rotting mat of vegetation. Drawing these experiences together, Schweiger recalled, "I remember making a decision for Christ, I knew I had something out of whack, and I made a decision for Christ through that experience of my younger brother dying. But I was on that beach and I remember making a promise to God. I remember the promise: 'God, I don't know how I'm going to do this, but if you open doors, I will spend my life working on this stuff.' And you know something, God had demonstrated that in my life in ways I couldn't even imagine, that that boy on the beach, with dyslexia, would be standing here, President of the National Wildlife Federation" (Schweiger 2004:13).

Schweiger's contributions to conservation have come through political activism, not scientific research. The leaders assembled at Sandy Cove seek to advance conservation in the same way. Speaking of The Sandy Cove Covenant, Jim Ball wrote,

"Communicating the contents of this statement through a variety of political and media channels, we hope the administration will make common cause with the Christian faithful who recognize that conservatives and conservationists are natural allies" (Ball 2004).

What These Examples Mean

What do these examples tell us? A superficial answer is that some evangelicals do good things for conservation, but the rest do bad things, so Orr is right after all. There is more to it than that. These examples are significant not merely because they stand against Orr's charge that evangelical influence in conservation policy is entirely negative, but because they are examples of evangelicals speaking to the world and to one another through venues of leadership, scholarship, and institutional communication that are the legitimate, normative channels that any community would use to identify itself and express its ideals on key issues.

These examples reveal Orr's second error, an error of misinformation. Using Orr's logic, a slogan on a bumper sticker with no direct reference to conservation counts more in defining the evangelical position than official statements about conservation from evangelical leaders legitimately empowered to represent their community's viewpoint. An entire religious community is impugned with unreferenced allusions to words written on a Web site, with no acknowledgment of the community's words written in its environmental scholarship in peer-reviewed books and journals or of the environmental curriculum taught in its colleges. Evangelicals are judged complicit of eviscerating environmental statutes, treaties, and policies on the basis of their votes for political candidates, who take divergent stands on a variety of issues, and are deemed unworthy of being defended for their actions as individuals and members of organizations

that have been instrumental in creating or supporting laws, treaties, and policies that specifically protect the environment. Such selective analysis is, at best, inconsistent and, at worst, blatantly prejudicial. In either case, I invite the reader to join me in rethinking Orr's conclusions.

When a magazine such as *Christianity Today* gives an award of merit to a book on environmental stewardship, it is making a statement that the topic is important and worthy of sustained attention. When evangelical parents send their children to evangelical colleges and discover that their daughters and sons are taught conservation biology, placed in environmental internships, and employed by college-based environmental consulting firms, the same parents come to see such conservation practice and activism as meaningful expressions of evangelical faith. And when evangelical Christians gain an understanding of the biblical basis of conservation through their churches and then hear explanations of the application of that stewardship to life and livelihood, they treat such information as authoritative and legitimate.

The Sandy Cove Covenant and many other such documents produced by the evangelical community are designed to influence environmental policy toward conservation ideals. It was appropriate (if also obvious) for Orr to note that the current U.S. administration has consistently produced policies unfriendly to the environment, such as the Clear Skies Policy and the Healthy Forests Initiative, whose decidedly Orwellian names mask their unfriendly environmental intent. But neither these nor any other environmental policy initiative has been justified by the administration on the basis of theology. Publicly, the administration has advanced such policies in the name of continuing economic growth, providing more goods for U.S. consumers, and decreasing dependence on foreign resource supplies. The fact that such policies may be supported by some

evangelicals does not prove that the policies are theologically inspired, only that many evangelicals are as theologically ignorant and as unreflectively consumptive as everyone else.

But here is Orr's third error, an error of implication, that is most damaging because it creates a fundamental misdirection in our efforts. The current problem U.S. conservationists are trying to solve is the problem of bad environmental policy. Reforming such policy is a task the SCB is uniquely empowered to engage, and one with which it has a reasonable chance of success. In contrast, the problem of bad environmental theology in a religious community is one that the conservation community is ill equipped to understand or resolve. Orr's call for confrontation on this point will not advance the solution. Although Orr's tactic is incorrect, the theological problem he identifies is not, but its solution lies elsewhere.

Orr seems to view the evangelical integration of faith and vocation in conservation only as a manifestation of the "heroic intellectual acrobatics" of the "few" evangelicals he has known who endeavor to relate Christian commitment and conservation concern, implying that such efforts are akin to building a replica of the Sears Tower with toothpicks. This attitude reveals Orr's fourth error, an error of intellectual assessment regarding the state of mind of evangelicals involved in conservation. The integration displayed by Larry Schweiger and thousands of evangelicals engaged in conservation represents studied reflection and analysis, not an intellectual high-wire act. It is not irrational that many are drawn to the preservation of biodiversity as an expression of God's continuing covenant with his creation (Genesis 9:8-17) rather than as a particular state of affairs that conservation biologists happen to prefer. The "end" such persons find in scripture is not the shallow picture of "Armageddon" Orr has painted; rather, it is a lasting reconciliation between

God, humanity, and the nonhuman creation.

Removing the Log in Our Eye—Needful Reflection by the Conservation Community

The problem with a spirit of condemnation toward others is that it blinds us to our own shortcomings. As Jesus put it, "Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3). In the recent past, a visit to the SCB website (www.conbio.org) naturally drew the eye to the organizational mission statement, "...committed to developing the scientific and technical means for the protection, maintenance, and restoration of the Earth's biological diversity."

This was a brilliantly worded statement, capturing the intrinsic tension of conservation biology. The authors had taken pains to put "scientific and technical means" in a prominent place. Biologist Dennis Murphy (1990:203) said, "Conservation biology only exists because biological information is needed to guide policy decision making." This view of conservation biology is captured in its description as "regulatory science," whose purpose is "to develop scientific standards that can be applied to regulatory criteria and then to develop management strategies to meet those standards" (Tarlock 1994: 1130).

A view of conservation biology as "regulatory science" would be applauded by those who want to keep our focus on its "scientific and technical means," but that is not all there is to it. We do not practice conservation simply because we possess the technical expertise to do it. If that were the case, conservation would be nothing more than technological imperative, with no more ethical authority than supersonic transport. Our argument for conservation would be

reduced to “we should do it because we can.”

The mission statement did not support this view. Rather, it declared that scientific and technical means are to be developed in the service of an ethical ideal, “for the protection, maintenance, and restoration of the Earth’s biological diversity.” If that is conservation biology’s mission, something more than regulatory science is afoot here. The Society for Conservation Biology could have said that scientific and technical means should be used to study, understand, and discover Earth’s biological diversity. But that is precisely not what the statement said because that is not what its framers intended. Instead, the mission statement described a purpose unique to conservation, a value produced by a particular course of action.

The ethical and spiritual nature of conservation are qualities intrinsic to it, not irrational public sentiments forced on it. The SCB’s mission statement seemed to demand that people come to SCB with their commitments already “in hand” as a condition of membership. That we think nothing of expecting such commitment to moral ideals betrays a wealth of unreflective assumptions common in the conservation community. These assumptions are part of “conservation in context,” a context that is not something conservation biolo-

gists must bear with sorrow and reluctance, desperately longing for the day when the rest of humanity will desire nothing but “scientific and technical means” from their community. On the contrary, conservation thrives on such context, without which it would cease to be conservation in any real sense. It is religious communities, including evangelicals, that can best clarify conservation goals in terms of transcendent values, and that is part of the “context” in which conservation must express itself to the larger public.

Evangelicals engaged in conservation are best equipped to speak to those who are not so engaged, and they are doing so. This is the best and most effective remedy for bad environmental theology. Their efforts are imperfect but nevertheless of substantial and tangible effect. The conservation community should aid these efforts. Three actions can advance this intention. First, invite leaders of evangelical environmental organizations to join in opposition to policies of the current U.S. administration that threaten conservation goals. Second, work with such leaders and organizations to speak to the evangelical community through channels the evangelical community views as legitimate. Third, as individuals, speak with colleagues who are evangelical Christians. Listen to their integration of faith and conservation

vocation. One can learn a great deal. No intellectual acrobatic experience is required.

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