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BELLY-BUTTON CHRISTIANITY

PETER ILLYN

“We are belly-button Christians! Our umbilical cords are still connected to the earth, our mother.” So claimed Yat, a tribal friend from Papua New Guinea (PNG). “But when our tribal people leave the rainforest and go into the city, we say that they have lost their belly-buttons; they no longer have a living connection to the earth.”

We were standing by the shore of the lagoon under the coconut and palm trees, talking as I was trying to chew some betel nut for the first time—a local, foul-tasting stimulant. We were looking out at what was once a pristine lagoon but now contaminated by the industrial waste of a Philippine-owned tuna processing plant—R.D. Tuna.¹

Yat was fuming mad. Every day the factory sent out fishing fleets that destroyed in a decade a traditional fishery that had supported his ancestors for tens of thousands of years. His local people could no longer paddle out in their dugouts, spend a pleasant afternoon fishing, and then come back to feed their families. The fish were almost all gone. The ships could power out further and further into the ocean to chase the tuna, but the locals had no such options.

Not only were the industrial tuna factory owners overfishing and polluting the water; the tuna processing plant was built illegally on tribal land after some Catholic missionaries sold it to the government who then sold it to the multi-national corporation.²

“This land was never for sale!” Yat said angrily. “The earth is our mother. You never sell your mother.” Yat, a committed, life-long, seminary-trained Catholic, continued, “One hundred years ago, my ancestors gave the church *permission* to use the land. That was all.”

A few days later, Yat and I were in the PNG’s capital city of Port Moresby. We awoke to the smell of smoke and heard chanting and then the sound of gunfire. As we looked out the window, we saw crowds streaming over the hillsides—waving guns and shooting into the air.

1. For more on R.D. Tuna, see Erklarung von Bern, R.D. Corporation: Nominated for the Public Eye Award in the Category Environment (Dec. 28, 2004), <http://www.evb.ch/p3319.html>; Press Release, Friends of Kananam, Solidarity With the Kananam People: Ban R.D. Tuna (May 5, 2003), <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WO0305/S00023.htm>.

2. On the history of the Catholic Church in PNG, see Fr. Rochus Tatamai, M.S.C., The Catholic Church in Papua New Guinea (Sept. 29, 2000), [http://www.catholicpng.org.pg/faith/history%20\(edited\).html](http://www.catholicpng.org.pg/faith/history%20(edited).html).

Then they began setting nearby grass fields on fire and looting the nearby stores.

Later that morning we learned that the Papua New Guinea government, at the insistence of the World Bank, had attempted to mandate a land tenure system where all tribal land was to be registered. This policy would force the tribes to title their ancestral lands, which had always been held in common trust. By registering land, it can be treated as personal property. This would then allow it to be bought and sold to multi-national corporations for development.³

The day before, when a group of college students marched in protest to the land registration scheme, the police shot and killed four students.⁴ What we had seen was a riot in reaction to the killing. Things were quickly getting out of control, so I went to the airport ready to leave the country. While there, I spied another American across the room. In PNG, the natives say all white men are either missionaries, miners, or misfits—so I sauntered across the room to see which one he was.

As we chatted, I learned that he was a missionary with the Nazarene Church working up in the Waghi Valley in the Highlands. The missionary was working with some of the children of those first contacted when this part of PNG was “discovered” in the 1930s. Some Australian gold prospectors flew into the mountains and were surprised to find a large valley between them filled with 200,000 primitive farmers and hunters.⁵ Only ten years later, the Waghi Valley became the site of massive WWII battles between the Japanese and Australian forces. Many wounded soldiers came home with tales of being tended to by the forest dwellers they called the “Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels.”⁶

In addition, to this day, a popular local PNG dish is instant noodles from Japan mixed with canned corned beef from Australia, a surprisingly tasty combination gleaned from the abandoned military rations of the two enemies.

3. For more on customary PNG notions regarding land, see Kathrine Dixon, Note, *Working With Mixed Commons/Anticommons Property: Mobilizing Customary Land in Papua New Guinea the Melanesian Way*, 31 HARV. ENVTL. L. REV. 219, 220–23 (2007).

4. See *PNG Probes Causes of Riot Deaths*, CNN.COM, July 2, 2001, <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/auspac/07/02/png.riots.inquiry/>; *PNG Student Protests End in Shootings, Riots*, CNN.COM, June 26, 2001, <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/auspac/06/25/png.students/index.html>.

5. See PAULA BROWN, *HIGHLAND PEOPLES OF NEW GUINEA* 96 (1978); TERENCE E. HAYS, *ETHNOGRAPHIC PRESENTS PIONEERING ANTHROPOLOGISTS IN THE PAPUA NEW GUINEA HIGHLANDS* 10–11 (1992); GEORG F. VICEDOM ET AL., *THE MBOWAMB* 7 (1983).

6. OSMAR WHITE, *PARLIAMENT OF A THOUSAND TRIBES: PAPUA NEW GUINEA* 129 (1972); see generally JOHN D. BODGER, *FUZZY WUZZY ANGELS OF PAPUA: THE NATIVE BACKGROUND TO THE PAPUAN CAMPAIGN AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE FUTURE OF THE TERRITORY* (1946).

When the missionary at the airport asked what I did, I replied that I was a “Christian environmentalist.” Clearly taken aback by that answer, he visibly twitched and then pointed at me and, with a lecturing tone, said, “You better never call the earth your mother!”

This was a stark contrast of worldviews, especially after spending time listening to Yat’s stories about how his umbilical cord was still connected to the earth. Finding the missionary’s attitude paternalistic and arrogant, I retorted, “I think the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans that the creation is ‘groaning as if in childbirth.’⁷ Giving birth is clearly a metaphor for motherhood, so even Paul refers to the earth as mother.” Our conversation ended as we realized we had little in common except for our skin color.

* * *

For most Americans, calling the earth “your mother” is a slippery slope leading to paganism and earth-worship. This paranoia is quite common especially among evangelicals who never had a relational theology of the earth nor had ecological heroes of the church like St. Francis of Assisi.

The missionary’s response should not have been a surprise. I have been doing Christian-based environmental advocacy work for almost twenty years; speaking in churches, tabling at Christian rock festivals, and gathering signatures for petitions. I have been in many culture-and-language debates as I worked to protect endangered species, ancient forests, and critical habitats like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Contrasting that, I also spent ten years outfitting a llama trekking business where I would watch people have epiphanies—spiritually and interpersonally as they spent time in the wilderness, many for the first time.

As such, I no longer cluster these worldviews as most social and political commentators do, who frame the divide in *conservative* versus *liberal* terms. Instead, in talking to people about the need to care for the earth, I see the rift as more accurately defined as *compartmentalized* and *disconnected* versus *integrative* and *interconnected*.

My observation is that *integrative* people tend to see complex interrelationships interacting in a dynamic, constantly-in-motion world. *Compartmentalized* people, however, tend not to see the interrelationships between actions and consequences. They do not see the world as complex, ambiguous, or filled with paradox but instead see a much simpler world often framed as dualistic choices between extremes. They use phrases like a battle between good versus evil; darkness versus light; us versus them; right versus wrong. In the environmental debates, these compartmentalized people espouse false dichotomies like “jobs versus the

7. See Romans 8:22.

environment” or “man versus nature” or, as Woody Allen says, “I am two with nature.”⁸

If one accepts this clustering of worldviews—the compartmentalized versus integrative—as a simplistic but somewhat reasonable explanation of our modern culture wars, then a second set of questions emerges.

- Are these various perspectives nature or nurture? Is a person born that way or does the worldview gradually occur?
- If it occurs over time, can it be influenced or changed?
- What role does education and personal experience play?
- What roles do the soul and the spiritual journey play?
- Do culture, religion, types of economies (subsistence versus cash, local versus global) influence these perspectives?

I have struggled for decades with these tactical questions. Is there an experience of the heart that leads to a connection with nature? Can a person’s worldview go from compartmentalized to integrative? Will it change their behaviors? Can a person have a conversion? As an evangelical Christian might ask, “Can they be born again, again, again into a relationship with God, with humanity, and with the natural world?”

I believe they can. That is why my life’s work is that of Christian environmental evangelist. The formal name for this is Kuyperian theology—named after the Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper, who preached a gospel of reconciliation described as a “right” relationship with God, a right relationship with humanity, and a right relationship with creation.⁹

Like all evangelists, I encourage a born-again moment—in this case, to rediscover a God-given love of the land. The message is simple; God is a good God, God made a good earth, and God calls us to be good stewards. I even invented a new term—*Terra Agape*—which I define as a *God-given love of the land*. *Terra* is Latin for earth,¹⁰ and *agape* is Greek for divine love.¹¹ Loving what God loves is the heart of faithful and wise service. Loving what God loves is wisdom—destroying what God loves is folly. The Psalms say that God loves creation and that all creation is praising God.¹²

Restoring Eden, the nonprofit Christian environmental ministry I founded, has developed an integrative mission statement: *to love, serve, and protect God’s creation*. For our ministry’s definition, *love* means

8. THE ILLUSTRATED WOODY ALLEN READER 203 (Linda Sunshine ed., 1993).

9. See CORNELIS VAN DER KOOI & JAN DE BRUIJN, KUYPER RECONSIDERED: ASPECTS OF HIS LIFE AND WORK 85–144 (1999).

10. CHARLTON T. LEWIS, AN ELEMENTARY LATIN DICTIONARY 855 (1890).

11. For more on interpretations of *agape*, see CRAIG A. BOYD, VISIONS OF AGAPE (2008).

12. *Psalms* 45:10.

nature appreciation, *serve* means creation care and environmental education, and *protect* means public policy and marketplace advocacy.¹³

It is this concept of right relationship with God, humanity, and nature that is frequently defined as *shalom*. This balanced harmony is what younger Christians today refer to as being missional; faith lived out in actions.

There is still a culture war happening within modern society and within the churches between those who are compartmentalized versus those who are integrative in perspective. Some recent attacks from the evangelical religious right illustrate what I mean.

ATTACKS FROM THE FAR RIGHT

One of the most recent and important ecological converts within the evangelical circles was Rich Cizik, the former Washington, D.C. political representative of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE).¹⁴ In 2002, Reverend Cizik went to England as part of a group of evangelical leaders to meet with some of the world's top climate scientists. The evidence the scientists offered was compelling, and Cizik had an ecological conversion. He returned to Washington, D.C. committed to raising the profile of creation care broadly and climate change specifically within the church.¹⁵

However, as Cizik began to speak about creation care and gain positive media exposure, there was a strong pushback from leaders of the far religious right such as James Dobson, Tony Perkins, and others. They wrote a letter demanding that the NAE fire Rich for advocating about climate change.

Acknowledging that “[i]t does appear that the earth is warming,” the letter writers complained that “Cizik and others are using the global warming controversy to shift the emphasis away from the great moral issues of our time, notably the sanctity of human life, the integrity of marriage and the teaching of sexual abstinence and morality to our children.”¹⁶ They also took affront at what they saw as a personal attack from Cizik:

[H]e granted an interview with Fast Company, dated June, 2006, in which he said[,] “We [proponents of global warming] are the

13. See Restoring Eden: Our Mission, <http://www.restoringeden.org/about> (last visited Mar. 3, 2009).

14. Cizik resigned under pressure in December 2008. Sarah Pulliam, *Richard Cizik Resigns From the National Association of Evangelicals*, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, Dec. 11, 2008, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/decemberweb-only/150-42.0.html>.

15. The Great Warming: Interview With Rev. Richard Cizik, <http://www.thegreatwarming.com/revrichardcizik.html>.

16. Letter from Dr. Don Wildmon, Chairman, Am. Family Ass'n, et al. to Dr. L. Roy Taylor, Chairman of the Bd., Nat'l Ass'n of Evangelicals 1 (Mar. 1, 2007), available at <http://www.citizenlink.org/pdfs/NAELetterFinal.pdf>.

future, and the old guard,” he continued, “is reaching up to grasp its authority back, like a horror movie where a hand comes out of the grave.” To paraphrase, Cizik apparently believes “the old guard” which defends traditional values is like a rotting corpse that will not die.¹⁷

The authors were also concerned that Cizik might damage their own reputations by “contributing to growing confusion about the very term, ‘evangelical’” as it slides “toward the same linguistic demise that ‘fundamentalist’ met decades ago because it has been misunderstood, misappropriated and maligned.”¹⁸

In this compartmentalized, hierarchical framework, then, if a person is looking at God, they should not be looking at the earth. If they are focused on the earth, then they have clearly taken their eyes off God. There are clear choices—loving God or loving the earth, but you must pick as they are mutually exclusive.

Chuck Colson, an evangelical apologist, revealed this frame in his writings, arguing that “our highest priority should be looking out, not for the planet, but for people, and especially the poor.” He continued:

Why do radical environmentalists seem so indifferent to the poor? It is a matter of worldview. If you deify nature instead of God, if you believe humans are just another species of animal with no greater moral status than a kangaroo rat—well, you don’t have to worry much about the poor or marginalized. But if you believe God created humans in His image, and gave each one of us a unique and privileged place within His creation, then your concern for the poor far outweighs concerns for nature—especially speculative concerns like global warming.¹⁹

Mr. Colson is not alone in this view. Richard Land of the Southern Baptists wrote that the Bible makes clear that “human beings come first in God’s created order. Primacy must be given to human beings If that means that other parts of nature take a back seat, well, then they take a back seat.”²⁰ Similarly, James Dobson’s *Focus on the Family* concluded, “Any issue that seems to put plants and animals above humans is one that we cannot support.”²¹

17. *Id.* at 2.

18. *Id.* (quoting Cathy Lynn Grossman, *Evangelical: Can the “E-Word” Be Saved?*, USA TODAY, Jan. 23, 2007, available at http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2007-01-22-evangelicals-usat_x.htm?csp=34).

19. Chuck Colson, *Not an Either/Or Choice*, BREAKPOINT COMMENT., Sept. 9, 2008, <http://www.breakpoint.org/listingarticle.asp?ID=9209>.

20. *Morning Edition: Evangelical Leaders Urge Action on Climate Change* (NPR radio broadcast Feb. 8, 2006), available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5194527>.

21. Eric Gorski, *Haggard Profile: Man of Cloth and Clout*, DENVER POST, Oct. 30, 2005, available at http://www.denverpost.com/search/ci_3165558.

Jerry Falwell preached in a Sunday sermon just before he died, “If I decide here as the pastor and our deacons decide that we’re going to get caught up in the global warming thing, we’re not going to be able to reach the masses of souls for Christ, because our attention will be elsewhere. That’s pretty wise for Satan to concoct.” Falwell went on to explain, “I agree every Christian ought to be an environmentalist of reasonable sort. We should certainly pick up trash. . . . But we shouldn’t be hugging trees and worshipping the creation more than we worship the Creator, and that is what global warming is all about.”²²

And Colson had argued in an earlier column that there is a real difference between mankind and the rest of creation, which serves as the gracious provision of God for the human race. The apostle Paul tells us that God “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” We need to instill in our children the biblical perspective of responsible stewardship. Only then can they resist a pantheistic ideology that denies humanity its proper place in God’s creation.²³

Ouch! Please tell me this can’t be our best thinking?

SO HOW DID LIFE’S COMPLEXITY GET REDUCED TO MAN V. NATURE?

This compartmentalized, disconnected worldview is especially baffling when espoused by educated and supposedly scholarly leaders. It is contrary to common sense, defies all knowledge about ecology, and implies that humanity is somehow separate from the natural world. While admittedly the Bible says only humans were made in the image of God,²⁴ it does say humans are also made of the substance of the earth.²⁵ It is *adamah* and *adam*—best translated as red-earth and earthling.²⁶

Many of our cultural struggles are rooted in this gap between the compartmentalized and the complex. This compartmentalized dichotomy may have its roots simply in the way some people are hard-wired. Those that are compartmentalized—who shun ambiguity and see the world in dualistic terms—tend to be more forthright in their opinions. Perhaps they are unable to handle uncertainty, paradox, and complexity. Choices are either right or wrong. Choose one.

22. Pro-Science, <http://kriswager.blogspot.com/2007/03/jerry-falwell-on-global-warming.html> (Mar. 6, 2007, 9:44 AM).

23. Chuck Colson, *Trees are People Too*, BREAKPOINT COMMENT., June 6, 1996, <http://www.breakpoint.org/listingarticle.asp?ID=4050> (quoting 1 *Timothy* 6:17).

24. *Genesis* 1:26–27.

25. *Id.* 2:7; *cf. id.* 3:19.

26. *Cf.* FRANCIS BROWN ET AL., *THE BROWN-DRIVER-BRIGGS HEBREW AND ENGLISH LEXICON* 9 (1905).

However, this cultural duality is more than an intellectual wiring. It also has roots in theological history. By the mid-1700s, as Europe entered into the Enlightenment, we saw newly applied scientific philosophies; Adam Smith built on Locke to define classic economic theory,²⁷ and Immanuel Kant, like Descartes before him, promoted rationalism²⁸—but the giant on whose shoulders all the Enlightenment thinkers stood was Isaac Newton.²⁹

With Newton's mathematical theories, scientists could now use the new math of calculus to accurately predict the movement of the planets. The thinkers of that era finally understood the mechanism of how the planets circled the sun, and how the moons circled the planets. The natural world was seen as orderly and logical—less mysterious and more mechanical.

The 1700s were also the beginning of the industrial age with the first of the textile mills in England and New England. Prior to that time, almost all technology was constrained by natural limits: how far a man could walk, how fast a horse could run, how much an ox could pull, how strong the current could move a barge, or how fast the wind could push a sailboat. With the birth of the machine age, society was no longer as constrained by natural limits. They had complex water wheels turning crankshafts that powered room-sized looms. It became a world of levers, of cables and gears.

Not all machines were large, however. During this era the first mechanical watches and clocks were invented, and they ushered in a significant shift in the theological language of God. Moral philosopher William Paley wrote a treatise on God the *watchmaker*, promoting both mechanistic and utilitarian aspects of the natural order.³⁰ Theological idioms went from God the *Father*, God the *Shepherd*, and God the *King* to God the *Watchmaker*. Fathers, kings, and shepherds all had dominion over living communities. Children, citizens, herds of animals, and vegetables are all living communities and if you neglect them, they die. When you nurture them, they thrive.

But as God began to be called the great watchmaker, the created order went from being seen as a garden, a flock, or a family—composed of complex interrelationships of living communities—to a “well-oiled

27. See generally ADAM SMITH, AN INQUIRY INTO THE NATURE AND CAUSES OF THE WEALTH OF NATIONS (1776); JOHN LOCKE, TWO TREATISES OF GOVERNMENT (1689).

28. See generally IMMANUEL KANT, CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON (1781); RENE DESCARTES, DISCOURSE ON THE METHOD (1637).

29. See Letter from Isaac Newton to Robert Hooke (Feb. 5, 1675 (O.S.)), published in 1 CORRESPONDENCE OF ISAAC NEWTON 416 (H.W. Turnbull et al. eds., Cambridge Univ. Press 1959).

30. WILLIAM PALEY, NATURAL THEOLOGY 1–8 (1802).

machine.” Descartes wrote that animals are machines.³¹ This created a dramatic shift in our view of nature and offered an alternative to a relational theology of creation that has since become dominant. The earth went from community to commodity, from a relationship to resource, from something to be nurtured to a raw material to be exploited.

As we combined a utilitarian land ethic with the mechanistic view of creation, instead of seeing creation as a community—as a garden singing praise to the gardener—we saw it as a machine. Stewardship went from nurturing and protecting life to maintaining machines and tools. When a machine cannot be repaired, it is replaced. Machines do not have inherent rights or intrinsic value. They are not nurtured or loved.

* * *

With the mechanistic view of nature, a secondary theology emerged called the Subordinate Rule of Order (or of Nature), which began to see everything as created to serve that which was above it. Just as small gears turned big gears, the same was true for natural systems. God created different species to serve the needs of higher species. Worms serve birds, birds serve cats, cats serve humans.

This philosophy was espoused by theologian Soame Jenyns, who wrote in 1757:

Thus the universe resembles a large and well-regulated family, in which all the officers and servants, and even the domestic animals, are subservient to each other, in a proper subordination: each enjoys the privileges and perquisites peculiar to his place, and at the same time contributes by that just subordination to the magnificence and happiness of the whole.³²

* * *

The whole affair then of Religion and Morality, the subject of so many thousand volumes, is in short no more than this: The Supreme Being, infinitely good, as well as powerful, desirous to diffuse happiness by all possible means, has created innumerable ranks and orders of Beings, all subservient to each other by proper subordination.³³

Within the theology of subordination was the assumption that nothing was higher in God’s created order than white Christian male landowners. Slaves, indigenous people, landless peasants, forests, rivers,

31. See RENE DESCARTES, DISCOURSE ON THE METHOD 96–100 (John Veitch trans., Sutherland & Knox 1850) (1637).

32. SOAME JENYNNS, A FREE INQUIRY INTO THE NATURE AND ORIGIN OF EVIL 70–71 (4th ed., R. & J. Dodsley 1761) (1757).

33. *Id.* at 121.

and all species were mere gears in God's complex machine, a machine created to benefit the factory owner—again, the white Christian males.

Compounding this worldview was the certainty that the United States was a gift from God to the displaced and persecuted—but faithful—Christians of Europe. This theology of the “promised land” coupled with the theology of subordination was then used to justify genocide against native peoples, codified expansionism and Manifest Destiny in theological terms,³⁴ saw women as the property of their husbands,³⁵ and defended slavery of Africans as designed by God to work in the humid fields of the Deep South.³⁶

The mid-1700s was also the birth of the evangelical community that emerged in England and in the United States with Jonathan Edwards,³⁷ George Whitefield,³⁸ and the Wesley brothers.³⁹ While these early leaders wrote about the intrinsic value of nature,⁴⁰ that eco-virtue was not a priority for most early American evangelicals who were more concerned about getting access to the land denied to them in Europe.⁴¹

Furthermore, in the 1800s, the new theology of dispensationalism appeared with an emphasis on an end-times eschatology that taught that following the rapture of the saints, the earth would be destroyed.⁴² We replaced an eschatology of relationship, renewal, and redemption with an eschatology of despair and destruction.

The ubiquity of this storyline became apparent last year when I was invited to a friend's new mega-mansion—a 4,800 square-foot home with thirteen sinks and nine toilets for a family of four. As we were eating

34. See, e.g., REV. JOSIAH STRONG, *OUR COUNTRY: ITS POSSIBLE FUTURE AND ITS PRESENT CRISIS* (1885).

35. See generally SEAN GILL, *WOMEN AND THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND: FROM THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT* 11–38 (1994).

36. See generally RELIGION AND THE ANTEBELLUM DEBATE OVER SLAVERY (John R. McKivigan & Mitchell Snay eds., 1998).

37. See GEORGE M. MARSDEN, *JONATHAN EDWARDS: A LIFE* (2004). Edwards' son, also named Jonathan, was a preacher and theologian of some, though lesser, acclaim in his own right.

38. See *THE WORKS OF THE REVEREND GEORGE WHITEFIELD* (Edward & Charles Dilly 1772).

39. See JOHN WHITEHEAD, *THE LIFE OF THE REV. JOHN WESLEY, WITH THE LIFE OF THE REV. CHARLES WESLEY* (Dow & Jackson 1845).

40. See, e.g., Belden C. Lane, *Jonathan Edwards on Beauty, Desire, and the Sensory World*, 65 *THEOLOGICAL STUD.* 44 (2004).

41. For one example of the low behavior and material preoccupation of some preachers in this era, see *THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF JOHN BROWN, LIBERATOR OF KANSAS AND MARTYR OF VIRGINIA* 11 (F.B. Sanborn ed., Roberts Bros. 1891) (1885) (discussing a Mr. Thomson, who was adamant in keeping his slaves under his control while in Connecticut, despite that state's abolition of the practice).

42. For a general overview of the movement, see DARRELL L. BOCK ET AL., *DISPENSATIONALISM, ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH* 13–34 (1992). Cf. CHARLES C. RYRIE, *DISPENSATIONALISM* (rev. exp. ed. 2007) (1965).

dinner, I was talking about my work within indigenous communities. The friend's wife looked up, a fork full of food, and asked innocently, "I just don't understand why Jesus didn't bless the Indians at the same time He gave us their land?" My wife gave me a sharp warning kick under the table and I bit my tongue.

My theory, in summary, is that from the beginning of our history, most Americans and evangelicals have adopted a mechanistic, utilitarian, disposable view of nature coupled with material wealth as proof of God's divine blessing. This worldview became an unquestioned storyline of the North American gospel. The creation as a disposable machine, made by God and given to us—His newly chosen people—to bless us with all the comforts and wealth we can handle before He returns, raptures us up to heaven, and then destroys the earth. . . .

Thankfully, the greater church has never forgotten the relational theology of creation. The torch (or at least embers) have been carried and protected by the liturgical churches—Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Episcopalianism.

HOW I BECAME AN ENVIRONMENTAL EVANGELIST

I was not always an environmentalist—a label I proudly use. I spent ten years as an evangelical minister working in a congregation in the Pacific Northwest. Just before I was to return to seminary, I begged my wife and informed my church that I was taking summer sabbatical to fulfill a lifelong dream of spending months alone in the wilderness.

I'd had this dream ever since I was ten years old and read *My Side of the Mountain*, the fictional account of how Sam Gibley survives in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York.⁴³ He trained a peregrine falcon to hunt with and lived in a hollow tree trunk with a deerskin doorway. I would spend hours daydreaming, browsing my father's Herter's Catalogue trying to figure out how I would spend the \$200 in allowance I had saved, buy the necessary supplies, and head into the wild to survive.⁴⁴ Single-shot .22 rifle, pup tent, sleeping bag, flint and steel, etc.

I must have grown up to be quite persuasive, because after years of begging, my wife gave me her blessings to go into the wilderness. I bought two llamas—Frank and Jessie—and spent a year training them to pack. I then ventured into the Cascade Mountains for a thousand-mile trek along the Pacific Crest Trail through Oregon and Washington.⁴⁵ We

43. JEAN CRAIGHEAD GEORGE, *MY SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN* (1959).

44. For a fond reminiscence of Herter, see Paul Collins, *The Oddball Know-It-All*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 5, 2008, at 71.

45. From end to end, the entire trail is 2,650 miles long. Pacific Crest Trail Ass'n, Frequently Asked Questions, http://www.fs.fed.us/pct/frequently_asked_questions.html#1 (last visited Mar. 3, 2009).

started out hiking six miles a day, working up to our eventual pace of twelve miles a day.

It was a glorious and relatively leisurely summer. Late-morning coffee, hiking by 9 a.m., stopping by 3 p.m., then reading in the afternoon sunlight while sitting in a lawn chair, sleeping on two air mattresses, playing on an electronic chess set powered by a solar battery charger. At camp: a tent, a solar shower, a Bible, a lantern to read by, six *Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever* fantasy novels to read,⁴⁶ a journal to write in, a fountain pen to write with. I had so much gear, it took almost an hour to pack all my luxuries every morning—and the llamas carried it all.

One night, about three months into the four-month journey, the llamas and I crossed the top of a treeless ridgeline and followed the curving trail down into Big Crow Basin.⁴⁷ Aptly named, because as we came into the meadow, a murder of hundreds, if not thousands, of crows scattered up. Cawing and swirling, they were a spooky omen of the upcoming events of the night.

I set up camp on the edge of a meadow under some tree branches by the forest edge. By this time in the trek, I was living the natural rhythms of the wild—getting up with the sun, going to sleep with the moon, celebrating the silence, and feeling a deep, deep spiritual contentment.

That night, I got ready for bed and staked the two llamas out in the meadow, using a screw-in dog stake and two long, flat 25-foot lead lines. The night sky was clear and there was a full moon, so the night became cool. A low bank of fog formed, maybe two feet deep, rising off the meadow.

Somewhere around 2 a.m., I awoke hearing the crushing of leaves and breaking of twigs as something walked around the tent. Assuming the llamas had somehow gotten free of the stakeout line, I lay in my warm sleeping bag trying to decide if I needed to get up in the frigid alpine night to re-catch them or if I could wait until morning.

Laying there groggy, half-asleep, I tried to muster the urge to arise when I heard a scream right outside of the tent—a high-pitched, soulful cry. I was now fully awake, fumbling around in the moon shadow looking for my .357 magnum, 8-inch-barreled, stainless-steel Smith & Wesson revolver. As I scrambled to load it with bullets, alternating wad-cutter and hollow-points (one to go deep and one to go wide), I was asking myself, “Was that a bear? Or the cry of a cougar? Maybe it was the sound a llama makes when a cougar has just landed on its back?” At

46. STEPHEN R. DONALDSON, 1 & 2 CHRONICLES OF THOMAS COVENANT, THE UNBELIEVER (1977–83).

47. JEFFREY P. SCHAFFER & ANDY SELTERS, 2 PACIFIC CREST TRAIL: OREGON AND WASHINGTON 248 (6th ed. 2000).

2 a.m., all alone in the middle of the night, I am a bit embarrassed to admit that Bigfoot was on the matrix of possibilities.

Crawling out of the sleeping bag, I put on my hiking boots and quietly stepped out of the tent clutching the pistol. Standing in the shadows, with the fog reflecting the moonlight, I saw a herd of ten to twelve elk grazing. In the middle of the herd was a magnificent bull. His antlers were so large they reached halfway down his spine. Surrounded by his harem of cows, this beast of the forest lifted his head towards heaven. With the steam blowing out his nostrils, he let out another cry. Mystery solved. What I had heard earlier was the rut of the bull elk; a primal cry of wild, of glory, of lordship.

Standing there covered with goosebumps from the wonder of it all (also partially because I was almost completely naked), I was reminded of the scripture in Genesis 1:

And God said, "Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind": and it was so. And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good.⁴⁸

The word "good" in Hebrew is *tov* (or *towb*).⁴⁹ It is a relational term—means "good" like an artist who looks at their creation and knows when it is complete, when they can stop for it is finished. As I watched the elk, I was overcome by a sense of goodness. It was at that moment when I recognized how deeply I loved nature, the stars, the elk, and the wilderness. It was an epiphany of the eyes of my soul.

For the next two days, I walked in the wild lands until reaching the edge of the federally protected wilderness. Stepping out from the trees, I came into a muddy clear-cut that had recently been a logging operation. With slash piles and Douglas fir stumps eight to ten feet across, it was the largest clear-cut I have ever seen, even to this day. I was shocked at the amount of devastation—and had this sense of unnecessary destruction, of people who have power over nature but have no sense of limits.

Brokenhearted by the site of carnage in what had clearly been an ancient forest, I found a sunny spot and sat on an immense stump for my daily Bible reading. As I read Proverbs 31:8 for the fourth time that trip, the words meant something different. "Speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves." Praying beseechingly, I asked, "Lord, who speaks for your spotted owls, your elk, and your ancient forests?"

Sitting on that stump, I made a covenant with God to speak out for the wilderness and for all the species that called it home. Thus began the calling to preach environmental stewardship and a theology that reflects a

48. *Genesis* 1:24–25.

49. BROWN ET AL., *supra* note 26, at 373–75.

relational, loving, and sacrificial care of God's creation; a passion that continues to this day.

The political and social battle over the enforcement of the Endangered Species Act was in high gear with the listing of the spotted owl shutting down much of the logging on the federal forest.⁵⁰ For the final month on the llama trek, I spent every evening exploring the Bible to glean what a Christian relationship to creation might look like. Late at night, I would even hear conservation biologists hiking, eerily hooting for owls in the forest as they inventoried nests, marking the places where the owls hooted back. The biologists would then go back for further research in the daylight.

My time in the wilderness spent researching the Bible was fruitful. Reading the scripture with a deliberate desire to discover God's truths about caring for creation gave new meaning to verses that I had read many times before but without an environmental perspective.

In particular, four stewardship parables starting in Matthew 24 made new sense.

1. the parable of the faithful and wise servant⁵¹
2. the parable of prepared and unprepared bridesmaids⁵²
3. the parable of the servants entrusted with the talents⁵³
4. the parable of the reward for those who served "the least of these"⁵⁴

There was a common thread of authority and accountability in these parables. The Master gave authority to certain servants along with the decision-making ability to manage the household in his absence. In all four parables the Master later returns and demands an accounting from the servant—Were you faithful; were you wise? Did you serve the least of these? Are you worthy of a reward for your faithfulness? Or should you be punished for your unfaithfulness?

In the first parable of the faithful and wise servant, Jesus asks rhetorically, "Who then is the faithful and wise servant whom the master has put in charge of his household to make sure that they have food at the

50. For more on the controversy at the time the spotted owl was listed, see, e.g., *Concern About Spotted Owl Leads to Ban on Timber Sale*, N.Y. TIMES, May 25, 1991, at 1-11; Timothy Egan, *Politics Reign at Spotted Owl Hearing*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 9, 1992, at A14; Timothy Egan, *Softening Stand on Spotted Owl, Administration Delays Protection*, N.Y. TIMES, June 27, 1990, at A1; Timothy Egan, *Split on How to Save Spotted Owl Is Reported in Bush's Study Group*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 8, 1990, at 1-18; *Northwest Loggers Challenge Rules on Spotted Owl*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 1, 1991, at 1-29.

51. *Matthew* 24:45-51.

52. *Id.* 25:1-13.

53. *Id.* 25:14-30.

54. *Id.* 25:31-46.

proper time?”⁵⁵ Those who are *faithful* and *wise* serve the entire household of God and are contrasted with the *foolish* and *evil* servant who instead gets drunk and beats the other servants.⁵⁶ The Master expects the servant to labor in maintaining the needs of the household, to see that they have food so that their biological needs are met.

This parable has great wisdom for today. Drunk on consumerism, narcissism, and cheap energy, we have created a global economy that is dependent upon ever greater exploitation of the earth. Driving species to extinction, destroying the integrity of habitats, unraveling the web of life are of no concern as long as the economy is growing.

As the appointed caretakers and as gardeners, we have the right to take fruit from creation, but we don't have the right to destroy the inherent fruitfulness of it. The faithful, wise, and prudent servants recognize that they are serving the entire household of God, not just themselves. They have adopted the code of ethics that was other-minded, inclusive, and sacrificial.

The next parable is of the prepared and unprepared bridesmaids. In this parable, the bridesmaids went to the right place at the right time to wait with the right equipment.⁵⁷ They went out to the dark trail to greet and bring light to guide the bridegroom back to the wedding feast. Their faithfulness and obedience is not in question. Rather their foresight—their ability to think long-term and plan for unexpected consequences—is the stewardship ethic in this parable. The wise ones asked themselves, “What if the master tarryes?” They brought extra oil and lamp wicks.⁵⁸ They took the ethical code of longsightedness and the cautionary principle seriously.

Indeed, the master did tarry.⁵⁹ When the servants who did not bring enough oil realized they were going to run out, they demanded that the wiser servants sacrifice and give them some of their oil. The wise servants recognized that if they did that, then no one would have enough oil to greet the master with light; they would have betrayed their higher calling to be there for the master, so they refused to share.⁶⁰ The stewardship lesson I gleaned is to be willing to say “no” to the foolish and to the unsustainable choices and pressures put upon you by the unwise of society. Stewardship requires us to think ahead, to plan for unexpected consequences, and to refuse to follow the foolish.

55. *Id.* 24:45. The phrase “food at the proper time” is a reference to *Psalms* 104:27, where it says that God the Father gives the sea creatures their “food at the proper time.”

56. *Matthew* 24:46–51.

57. *Id.* 25:1.

58. *Id.* 25:4.

59. *Id.* 25:5.

60. *Id.* 25:8–9.

The third parable is of the three servants who are given money (talents) to invest for their master. The master gave each servant different amounts of money to actively manage until his return.⁶¹ The first two servants earned a profit.⁶² The third servant, however, fearful that he might invest unwisely and lose the trust, buried the money.⁶³ He did not squander it or waste it. He just did nothing with it. On first read, this parable seems to be telling us to maximize financial profits, but a better lesson is the expectation that servants are to actively increase the fruitfulness of the master's holdings.

This is the tension between fruitfulness and risk. There are no guarantees of success, so the ethic of stewardship demands vigilance and action. Environmental stewardship is a complex conversation that affects every single point of our life. It can be overwhelming and difficult because decisions must be made with limited information and multifaceted, interrelated variables. The servant was condemned not because he failed, but because he did nothing. He did not make the sacrifice, he did not take the risk.

The last parable tells of the separation of the sheep and goats. The master judged them using the measure of "Did you give me food? Did you give me water? Did you clothe me?"⁶⁴ What both sets of servants did not realize was that they served the master by serving the least of these. This parable teaches that stewardship is not self-serving but is motivated by a purity of heart.

The covenant God made with Noah is indispensable in understanding the desire of God. This was a covenant between God and Noah and his descendants after him and with every living creature on earth for all generations to come. This was a covenant between Him and all life on earth.⁶⁵

We have to treat the earth as if our lives depend upon it. We do not have to guess about how God sees creation. It is "good."⁶⁶ Restoring Eden reflects this in our mission statement: to make "hearts bigger, hands dirtier, and voices stronger by [learning] to love, serve, and protect God's creation."⁶⁷ Re-establishing the historic theology of a relational view of nature is the core work of Restoring Eden. Scripture says creation is not a machine—but a living community with numerous voices: a voice of praise,⁶⁸ a voice of instruction,⁶⁹ and groans of suffering.⁷⁰ Modern soci-

61. *Id.* 25:15.

62. *Id.* 25:16–17.

63. *Id.* 25:18, 24–25.

64. *Cf. id.* 25:35–36.

65. *See Genesis* 9:9–17.

66. *See id.* 1:31.

67. Restoring Eden, *supra* note 13.

68. *E.g., Psalms* 145:10.

69. *E.g., Job* 12:7.

ery and the consumer church just became tone deaf and color blind to the song and beauty of the creation. Maybe the time has come for hearing aids and reading glasses. And to rediscover our belly-buttons.

