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Improving the Environment in a Conservative Political Climate

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Conservatives (Republicans) have a dismal record when it comes to environmental issues, at least according to environmentalists, liberals who are probably Democrats. There are exceptions to this rule, certainly, yet this is a pretty safe generality today. The phrase "conservative political climate" is here defined as the tone set by the individual holding the office of President, currently a Republican. Therefore, most environmentalists have assumed a defensive posture, hoping not to lose too much ground, especially ground that if lost, may be irretrievably gone. My goal here is to offer some theoretical and practical suggestions for improving the environment under these circumstances, assuming that some of the *EGJ* readers are frustrated by recent shifts in attitude toward environmentalists in light of national security issues and wildfires in the West.

First, I should warn you that I am very conservative. However, I too am quite frustrated by my conservative peers who place environmental issues far too low on their list of priorities. The key to changing this situation lies in the common ground shared by conservatives and liberals. Common ground? What is that? you ask. Religion. Yes, religion. Skeptical? Consider this. Interest in spiritual matters is quite high in both political camps, and as Lynn White said in his article, "Since the roots of our [environmental] trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not." (White, 1967). He also noted that science had yet to come up with any viable solutions to the environmental crisis and that our attitudes toward nature were at the crux of the problem. Much has been said about White's thesis that Christianity must bear a large measure of guilt for our environmental problems. I disagree with his conclusion, yet White is right when he directs our attention to our basic attitudes toward nature. I am happy to report that environmental attitudes and activities are changing among conservatives, even if only bit-by-bit. I can cite three examples as evidence of this trend toward an increase in environmental awareness and concern among conservatives.

Examples of Growing Environmental Awareness Among Conservatives

In his book *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*, Matthew Scully calls upon conservatives, especially church goers, to live up to their values of righteousness, justice, and mercy. These values should no longer be reserved for humans alone but extended to all

creation. His efforts have gotten the attention of influential conservatives like Chuck Colson and Trent Franks. Scully is a speechwriter for President Bush and is lobbying Congress to pass legislation to provide more humane treatment of animals. Colson, in his national radio program *BreakPoint*, which is aired on such conservative Christian stations as FamilyLife Radio, conceded that Christians should be more actively involved in relieving the suffering of animals. Franks, conservative Congressman from Arizona's District Two, told me that he and Scully had spoken about legislation to protect animals. I talked with him at length about Scully's book and how it convinced me to stop eating any meat unless it was clear that the animals in question had been treated humanely.

Politically conservative, environmental geologist Maurice Hamel recently completed an online book, *Nature, God's Groaning Creation: Biblical Perspective for the Environmentally Concerned* (<http://www.fmihq.org/healingtheland/nature.htm>). He calls upon his peers to focus on the cause of our environmental problems rather than just the outward symptoms. This text offers a truly insightful examination of the environmental issues facing us and shines as a beacon in the conservative community, increasing awareness and equipping professionals and laypersons alike with the tools to address our environmental challenges. Many conservatives, and liberals alike for that matter, do not think environmentally or biblically about their own personal lifestyles. Hamel effectively opens his readers' minds along both fronts. The problem with our culture is that many operate apart from either worldview and both perspectives are essential to make long-term improvements in the environment.

A relatively conservative church, Grace Community Church in Tempe, Arizona, is currently offering a Bible study course on environmental issues. This is the same course that was offered at Mesa Community College in Mesa, Arizona, this spring as well as over the Internet this past winter. I have been in conservative churches for many years and have never seen such a course offered. It basically follows the outline of an article, which appeared in the *Electronic Green Journal* (<http://egj.lib.uidaho.edu/egj12/johnson1/index.html>). This course draws upon the work of other conservatives such as Calvin DeWitt from the Au Sable Institute and the University of Wisconsin, Madison. While progress toward greater environmental sensitivity among conservatives is beginning, the challenges ahead are great. Whether you consider yourself a liberal or a conservative, there are several things you can do to foster environmental activism among conservatives.

Action Steps

Encourage church leaders in particular and conservatives in general to address these issues biblically. Environmental discussions should not be limited to one or two portions of Scripture either. The whole text needs to be brought to bear on the discussion. Conservatives will appreciate other writings too, but without a sound biblical basis, it will be hard to get their attention. This does not mean you need to become a Bible scholar. All of the scriptural references to environmental issues are in the article mentioned above or on Johnson's free online course in Biblical Environmentalism <http://hislight-az.com/env/>. Whether or not the person believes in the Bible, he or she will generally respect its authority.

If you are a conservative and you hear a sermon, lesson, or comment that does not reflect biblical truth on the environment, challenge that statement. In a recent sermon on stewardship, my pastor was silent on the environment, referring only to personal finances. I asked why. A recent *BreakPoint* message by Chuck Colson suggested that clean water and endangered species were abstract concepts that we didn't have time for. I received a response to my email message questioning the logic of his remarks. And FamilyLife Radio aired a promotional message on their services to families recently, suggesting that environmental issues were not their concern. In my letter to Randy Carlson, president of Family Life Communications, I told him that, according to the Bible, God cared about those environmental issues. He wrote back acknowledging that more care should have been used in creating their promo and that Christians should work more actively for a healthier environment. Communicate professionally, biblically, and in a timely manner for the best results.

Focus on the fact that environmental issues are moral issues. Poor stewardship of the environment like poor stewardship of one's personal relationships or finances is a spiritual issue with moral implications. Additionally, related moral issues such as materialism, wastefulness, gluttony, and self-centeredness have environmental implications. By addressing these issues, the environment will improve along with the social conditions of people around the world. For example, less consumption at home means a healthier environment and greater contentment.

Consider the potential of music to heal the environment. While many factors contribute to the complex interaction between music and human behavior, evidence suggests that music can play a role in improving environmental conditions. Therefore, if you are a conservative, identify appropriate music for home, office, or church with an environmental element to reinforce the message that we all need to do a better job of caring for the environment.

The long list of environmentally friendly music originally appeared in the *Electronic Green Journal* in December 2002 (<http://egj.lib.uidaho.edu/egj17/johnson1.html>).

Historical facts paint a grim picture for the environment in the hands of conservatives. However, recent evidence suggests that things are beginning to change. The environmental alarms and foresight among environmentalists/liberals are finally paying off. There is reason for hope that, even in a conservative political climate, the environment can improve as we work together from a common basis for action-our faith systems. Conservatives and liberals will not necessarily agree on every point and we will not emphasize the same aspects of every problem. Yet, we do share this global environment and are beginning to see the importance of resolving environmental issues through the same lens, that of religion as proposed by Lynn White thirty-seven years ago.

References

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