The environmental movement has a political agenda that has enjoyed some success and in the process generated a significant backlash movement. Evangelical Christians are on both sides of this controversy, causing no small confusion in the ranks of believers. Several case studies of anti-environmentalism show the dimensions of this controversy: 1. Criticism of the Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation; 2. The charge that global eco-war is being planned as a way for government to gain more control over people; 3. The emergence of the Wise Use movement; 4. The writings of E. Calvin Beisner and Larry Burkett, an economist and a financial advisor, challenging environmentalism from a Christian perspective; and others. Some people argue that the battles over environmentalism are basically political, and that the Christian attack on the environmental movement is primarily a political attack from the right in the name of Christianity. In this paper, I explore the scientific dimensions of the controversy—that the anti-environmentalists use poor scientific work and discount the mainstream scientific consensus on the environment. Next, a look at the religious dimensions shows that both sides in this controversy use Scripture to support their views. I then explore the fundamental world view differences between environmentalists and the backlash movement. I conclude that a Christian world view does not conform to either camp, but calls people of faith to care for the environment because it is God's good creation and we are to be His stewards.

Environmentalism represents a broad spectrum of people and organizations with a strong interest in protecting the natural world and encouraging greater human concern for that world. It is fair to say that environmentalism intends to cause changes in how people relate to the natural world -- that is, changes in people's behavior and in public policy. Because it also involves people's beliefs and values, there is often a religious dimension to the environmental movement. Other components to the movement include science, education, and economics. But environmentalism has primarily a political agenda, and during the past 25 years, environmentalists have been successful in implementing action in support of that agenda.

Recent years have seen a growing reaction to environmentalism -- an environmental backlash. This reaction has arisen as a response to some beliefs and actions of environmentalists, especially those that have had a perceived or real economic impact on individuals or organizations. This movement also has a political agenda; they want to restrict the regulatory powers of government. One strategy of this movement is to call into question most of the scientific claims of the environmentalists about resources, pollution, and population. Another is to label the movement as politically socialistic and religiously pagan or earth-worshiping.

Evangelical Christians can be found on both sides of environmental issues: some are highly supportive of environmental concern, calling for Christians to take more seriously their calling to be stewards of God's Creation. Others, however, are critical of environmentalists, citing the political directions and anti-Christian religious elements found in the movement.

What are we to make of this controversy? Environmentalist vs. anti-environmentalist has all the appearances of a clash of basic world views; to confuse matters, some of the Christians on both sides are claiming to have scientific findings and biblical truth supporting their position. Is this another case of the Christian world chancing after secular movements and putting a Christian spin on them? Is there a unique Christian world view to be clarified and distinguished from both movements? Do the two sides have different political orientations? What are we to make of both sides' claims that they have strong scientific support for their views and agendas? We begin an answer to these questions by presenting several case studies of anti-environmentalism.

Case Studies

Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation

The newly created Evangelical Environmental Network, associated with Evangelicals for Social Action, has drawn up a 1600-word declaration on Christian concern for the environment1 (see p. 110) and is soliciting endorsements from many evangelical leaders around the country. It is a strongly worded, uncompromising document that calls on Christians to acknowledge the extent of degradation of the Creation, to repent of attitudes and actions that have continued that degradation, and to commit anew to being a good steward of God's
Having obtained a copy of the circulating Declaration, World responded in November 1993, with a news analysis/editorial entitled “Are God's Resources Finite?” that was critical of the Declaration. The World broadside has resulted in an editorial battle, reflected in a recent Prism (published by Evangelicals for Social Action). The thrust of World's analysis, written largely by Christian economist and author E. Calvin Beisner, is that the Declaration is seriously flawed. In declaring that the environment (the Creation) is being degraded at all, claims of environmental degradation are said to be highly exaggerated and largely false. Beisner accuses the authors of mimicking the “claims of crisis current in the popular press and the secular environmental movement without checking the credibility of those claims.” The editorial lists the drafters of the Declaration and challenges their “expertise in environmental science and theory.” Citing a few positive principles in the Declaration, Beisner then charges that the document is weak theologically and reflects a faulty view of resources and human relationships with the natural world. Beisner is optimistic about human creativity and accomplishments, and points to a world that is getting better, not worse, under human dominion.

Criticism of environmentalism is consistent with World's general stance on environmental issues. For example, environmentalists are pictured as deliberately putting people out of work by their involvement in the controversies over timber harvesting and endangered species like the spotted owl, and by their promotion of governmental regulations to reduce pollution. World compares the EPA and the OSHA with the Gestapo, claiming that regulations go “far beyond minimal standards for good health. The social engineers of our government are absolutely committed to bigger government and national socialism.”

Other Christian journals -- Moody Monthly, Christianity Today, World Vision, for example -- have tended to take the message coming from the environmentalist side quite seriously, and have strongly promoted Christian environmental stewardship as the proper Christian response to environmental ills. World, however, is not alone in challenging the environmentalist message in evangelical circles.

**Earth in the Balance**

In 1992, then-Senator Al Gore published a book on the environment, Earth in the Balance, that became a bestseller. The book is somewhat autobiographical, documenting Gore's experiences and beliefs that have led him to produce a book that is an environmentalist's dream. Here is a leading politician, now Vice-President, who speaks the language of environmentalism, understands the scientific literature, and is calling for the environment to be the central organizing principle of the 21st Century.

Gore claims that our civilization has lost its crucial connections with the natural world, and seems equally disconnected with the future; it is now embarked on a collision course with the environment, which is our life support system. After documenting the crises of air pollution, global warming, ozone layer depletion, water pollution, deforestation, soil erosion, and the like, Gore states: “Unless we find a way to dramatically change our civilization and our way of thinking about the relationship between humankind and the earth, our children will inherit a wasteland.” Gore refers to his basic Christian beliefs and sketches out an eco-theology, which he expands to include all of the world's religions in pointing to the need for a spiritual change to weather the crisis. The book also provides details of a "Global Marshall Plan," some of which are quite radical, to turn our political and economic systems towards solving, not making worse, our environmental problems.

Late in 1992, the Spiritual Counterfeits Project Journal (SCP) published an entire issue called "The Way of Ecology." The issue contains, among other articles, a review of Gore's book entitled "America's Ecological Millennium -- Al Gore in the Balance" by Doug Groothuis. Groothuis addresses Gore's roles as environmentalist and Christian, and does so in a balanced way. But the main article of the issue is "The View from Iron Mountain -- Planning Global Eco-War" by Brooks Alexander. Alexander refers to a disturbing book published anonymously in the late 1960's, Report from Iron Mountain on the Possibility and Desirability of Peace. This book purports to be written by a participant in high-level discussions who must remain anonymous to protect his reputation. It describes a series of meetings addressing the question of what would happen to the United States if a condition of "permanent peace" should arrive -- and a program of how to deal with the consequences.

The book describes how the participants (also anonymous) laid out a thesis for the necessity of war to maintain internal stability in nations, concluding that the elimination of war might lead to such social and political unrest in societies that peace can be seen as a threat to those societies. The "report" concluded that war would have to be replaced, if peace were to "break out," with something that would play the same role in maintaining stability, a response to some large threat that would mobilize a society in much the same way a war does. If the threat does not exist, the group maintained, it must be invented. The "group" proposed several candidates, but concluded that the most likely substitute for war would be environmentalism.

Enter Al Gore. Gore tells us "we must make the rescue of the environment the central organizing principle for civilization." Alexander goes for the jugular: here is the manifestation of our new war-substitute -- global eco-war. He admits that Gore may not have even read Iron Mountain (but suspects that he has), but clearly his program fills the bill admirably for that new organizing principle that will keep nations internally stable. Alexander's fear is that what is now happening in society -- the persistent message that we are in danger of seriously damaging our planet and its atmosphere -- is a threat manufactured to serve the needs of those who want government to conduct social management of its people and perhaps forge an international agency with control over other nations. In effect, the ecological crisis is part of a political conspiracy. Other articles in the issue reinforce this theme.
Mainstream anti-environmentalism is seen most clearly in what is called the Wise Use Movement, and in the work of Rush Limbaugh. On Feb. 4, 1992, ABC News Nightline featured a debate between Al Gore and Rush Limbaugh called "The Environmental Movement's Latest Enemy." The newscast setup for the debate presented the views of a group called the Wise Use Movement. Their spokesperson, Ron Arnold of the Center for Defense of Free Enterprise, states: "We intend to destroy the environmental movement once and for all by offering a better alternative, the 'wise-use' movement." This movement consists of a loosely organized group of private landholders and organizations whose common interest is maintaining freedom of access to public lands -- the motorcycle industry, oil companies, mining groups, the timber industry, and the National Rifle Association. The movement has nothing good to say about environmentalists: they are "anti-people and pro-owls," they "exaggerate their claims in order to gain control" (e.g., ozone depletion, toxic pollution, endangered species needs, etc.), they are "tree-worshiping pagans," and their activities are "stifling the economy and putting people out of work." For financial support, Arnold has also tapped into the American Freedom Coalition, an arm of Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church.

Rush Limbaugh applauds the efforts of the Wise Use Movement to contain environmentalism and explains in his presentation how the environmentalists have promoted a fragile earth and a crisis mentality. Limbaugh calls them the new home of socialism and a doomsday industry who want to shut down business. He asserts that their activities are an assault on the American way of life.

Speaking on the newscast for the environmental community are Bruce Hamilton from the Sierra Club and, of course, Al Gore. Hamilton admits that the Wise Use Movement has to be taken seriously by the environmental movement, and counters their claims about the damage being done by environmentalism. Gore responds to Limbaugh's charge that ozone layer problems are highly exaggerated by referring to specific scientific findings in support of a damaged layer. Gore also reaffirms his conviction that the earth is indeed fragile, and that human beings can do serious damage to the global environment. The televised debate ends with the opponents hopelessly disagreeing on everything except the importance of paying attention to the business community and affirming capitalism and democracy.

Healthy Growth or A Fading American Dream?

Without any doubt the two most prominent critics of environmentalism from within the Evangelical fold are E. Calvin Beisner and Larry Burkett. Beisner's book Prospects for Growth is directed toward refuting the notion that human population growth and resource use are problems. His editorial in World is likely a preview of a book on the radical environmental world view. In the editorial, Beisner counters each of the "degradations of creation" listed in the Evangelical Declaration, and concludes that there is no serious environmental problem in the world today.

In his book, Beisner leans heavily on biblical passages that (1) present children as a blessing from God as proof of the mandate to multiply and fill the earth (he points out that the earth is not yet filled); and (2) support the derived ideas that humans are "subordinate owners" of the earth (Psalm 115:16), not just stewards; and that God-given human creativity, reflected in our present civilization, more than cancels the negative impacts that the Fall has had on the Creation -- i.e., things are getting better, not worse.

For his "scientific" sources, Beisner taps into the work of the prominent anti-environmentalists Julian Simon, Herman Kahn, Fred Singer, and Dixie Lee Ray, and chooses to ignore the evidence against his views that can easily be found (see, for example, publications of the World Resources Institute, Worldwatch Institute and World Bank, all of which broadly represent current research and consensus in the scientific community). Beisner, it seems, takes the views of the more conspicuous anti-environmentalists and puts a Christian spin on them, concluding that more growth in human population and resource use is not only environmentally sound, but is also justifiable from a Christian perspective.

Larry Burkett is a well-known financial advisor and president of Christian Financial Concepts, a ministry designed to promote "God's principles for financial management." Unlike Beisner, Burkett is pessimistic about the future, and has laid out the reasons for his pessimism in What Ever Happened to the American Dream. Burkett's American Dream is the expectation that each generation could, with hard work, live better than the previous generation. Two fundamental processes are causing that dream to fade: the enormous federal debt built up over the past two decades, and the growing burden of governmental regulations. This book addresses the latter problem; an earlier book deals more directly with the debt problem.

Burkett targets the problem of environmental regulations in detail. In brief, Burkett holds that environmental extremists have gained control over the political process, having done so by frightening the public into believing that environmental problems are far more serious than they are. The problems of global warming, acid rain, ozone depletion, asbestos, and pesticide use are too overwhelming. Environmental extremists are the mainline scientists who use scare tactics to get unquestioned public support for their scientific empire. The net effect of the regulations is to lay on the economy an enormous burden of unnecessary costs that saps the strength of the economy and are dooming Americans to a future in decline (while we watch jobs evaporate or disappear overseas).

To support his "scientific" pronouncements, Burkett cites many articles from New American, an ultra-right wing journal, and many popular writings of anti-environmentalists used by Beisner as authoritative sources. Burkett consistently ignores the writings of mainstream scientists in favor of the journalists and others with a clearly political axe to grind. The book contains many statements that
Political Dimensions

Burkett is perhaps at his very worst when he takes on global warming (Ch. 8: The Global Warming Myth) and ozone depletion (Ch. 9: The Hole in the Ozone Myth). He repeats many criticisms of these climatic phenomena, essentially all of which have been thoroughly refuted in the refereed scientific literature. For example, writing about the chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), Burkett states: "CFCs are significantly heavier than the Earth's air, and no one to date has explained how they would 'float' into the upper atmosphere" -- this is in spite of the fact that CFCs have been so carefully measured in all parts of the atmosphere that essentially all that have ever been produced have been accounted for. A spectacular example of Burkett's inexpertise is seen in his reference to some 910,000 metric tons of CO2 coming from the Mt. St. Helen's eruption as "dwarfing the output of CO2 of all industrial sources" -- completely oblivious of the fact that the annual release of CO2 from the burning of fossil fuels is more than 18 billion metric tons.

Gaia, New Age, Eco-Feminism, and Deep Ecology

Out on the fringes of the environmental movement are several ideologies with strong religious thrusts. Gaia--earth goddess of the ancient Greeks--has been resurrected to give substance to a semi-scientific hypothesis that the earth can be regarded as a living entity with capabilities of self-regulation. In other words, life itself controls the environment to suit its own needs. The New Age Movement and radical feminist groups have embraced the concept of an earth Mother in their religious thinking. Earth becomes sacred (as in many pagan religions), and therefore environmental degradation becomes a blasphemous act. The most radical form of environmental "religion" is Deep Ecology--an ideology that assumes all of life to be on an equal footing and strongly opposes mainstream environmentalism, Christianity, Gaia, and New Age visions of how humans should relate to nature. Deep Ecology rejects any form of human control of the natural world. The first issue of SCP Journal for 1991 was devoted to an analysis of these "environmental religions"; Themelíos has also presented some excellent reviews of these "Green religions."

Some Christians are quite concerned with what they see as a tendency to embrace elements of this new "Ecotheology," in a desire to unite with all who are willing to work towards more responsible stewardship of the Creation. Some see a willingness to make Earthkeeping the main thrust of the Church's message, downplaying the evangelistic thrust of the gospel and blending Christianity with paganism. The Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation makes a clear effort to avoid these two errors.

Christian Guilt for the Ecological Crisis

For many years and in many contexts, Christianity has been castigated for being the source of Western civilization's willingness to make full use of the earth and natural species to further human progress. This accusation began with Lynn White's article in Science, 1967, entitled "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." White traced both modern science and technology to Christian doctrines of human dominion and the notion of progress, and claimed that exploitation of the environment was a consequence of Christianity. This claim has been addressed by many, including myself. I pointed out that irresponsible exploitation of the environment could be found in many cultures not influenced by Christianity, and that the real source of the problem is to be found in the human heart-- that human pride, greed, and carelessness are the source of our ecological crisis.

Writing in SCP Journal, Coffman and Alexander, referring to White's charge, saw the possibility that a new generation of "earth protectors" will actively prosecute a campaign against biblical Christianity because of its perceived "earthcrimes." SCP Journal pictures a violent world view clash between "the anthropocentric" Christian ethic that has dominated Western culture, and a new, biocentric, mystico-pantheistic Green religion that will seek to water down Christian belief and fuel a political and social revolution where earth is revered.

Sex Education and Family Planning

Although pretty far afield from these ideological issues, it should be noted that evangelical Christians are usually in the forefront of protests against sex education in public school systems, and are highly critical of the international family planning movement. There are several concerns here. The most important one is a strong pro-life stance that sees abortion as one option promoted in many family planning programs. A second concern is that sex education will encourage sexual activity in teen-agers because of its explicit explanations of the birds and the bees and especially, contraceptive techniques.

On the other side of these issues are people concerned about teen-age pregnancies and the spread of AIDS, who argue that sex education holds the only possibility of changing the behavior of teen-agers in a pluralistic society like ours. The increasing incidence of teen-agers with AIDS, acquired heterosexually, has pushed this controversy to the front burner.

Their aversion to abortion has led many Christians to oppose any notion that population growth is a serious problem. In doing so, they are in direct conflict with one of the most pervasive of environmental concerns: that human population growth continues to cause widespread environmental degradation and places unsustainable demands on resources. Family planning programs represent the most logical and cost-effective way to help nations reduce their fertility.
Concerns about the environment -- which we as Christians can properly view as part of God's Creation -- have been around even before the first Earth Day in 1970. However, since the early 70s, environmentalism has gathered steam and has become a true movement in our society and in many other parts of the world. There are all shades of environmentalists, and they are often a part of a large and influential collection of what are called NGOs (non-governmental organizations). These organizations effectively mobilize grass-roots activism by putting together a constituency of like-minded people, keeping them informed, and acting to promote their agendas in local and global arenas. The environmental NGOs are now a well-recognized interest group, with lobbying activities in Washington and local or regional offices to carry out their campaigns for membership and political action.

Some prominent NGOs are the Sierra Club, the National (and local) Audubon Societies, The Wilderness Society, The League of Conservation Voters, Greenpeace, Zero Population Growth, The Union of Concerned Scientists, etc. These groups have become politically wise -- they know how Washington works. It is a game of power and influence, with the stakes often going to those who can garner the most media coverage or generate the most letters and telegrams to key Congressional politicians or regulatory agencies. Their critics suggest that even the best-intentioned environmental interest groups will be tempted to exaggerate on an issue to generate membership support.

Politically, environmental interest groups have tended to lean to the left of center -- not, I believe, because of any intrinsic socialist philosophy, but because they have found more support from politicians who seem to be concerned with social issues and are less willing to favor the big business interests, who also have their influence on the political scene. Environmentalists are highly skeptical of classic American capitalism, with its minimalist, hands-off approach to regulation. Accordingly, the Democratic Party has more frequently been seen as the party for environmentalists. The presidential parade of the last two decades has helped draw the political lines for the environmental movement; Jimmy Carter and now the Clinton-Gore team are viewed as having strong environmental ties, while the Reagan years are regarded as the low point, environmentally, with Bush attempting to make some corrections in the Republican record. The 1994 Republican tide that swept the Congress will undoubtedly create some challenging times for environmental concerns.

It is conventional wisdom that Washington bureaucrats -- especially those in the regulatory agencies -- tend to favor the regulatory approach to solving environmental problems, whereas the parties being regulated -- business and industry in particular -- view every regulation as a drag on the economy and worse -- an infringement on the freedom of the market system that has been a hallmark of the American way. Environmentalists point to the need for and, then, the successes of regulation in such legislation as the Clean Air Act, the Endangered Species Act, the several acts dealing with Toxic Waste (Superfund, Toxic Substances Control Act, etc.), and the ongoing work of such Federal agencies as the EPA, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the FDA, and the OSHA.

Those on the political right, whose views are quite effectively expressed by Rush Limbaugh, contend that excessive regulation has led to economic disaster in case after case, and is part of a general political malaise. Some Christians echo these sentiments, for example, Larry Burkett says, "Most of our regulations are not designed for solving problems, but rather to expand the government's authority."20

As the case studies above have shown, anti-environmentalists often speak in terms of conspiracies and intrigue, where the motives ascribed to environmentalists are designed to paint them as communists or socialists with a lust for power, control, and manipulation. I think this strategy is counterproductive, as it clearly strains the credibility of all but those who are committed to conspiracy theories. Interestingly, these charges can also be found in The New American, a journal sponsored by the John Birch Society. This journal is a major source of the "science" used by Larry Burkett in What Ever Happened to the American Dream!

My point here is to make it clear that the classical political alignments are very important in understanding the views different people and groups have about the environment. Environmental concerns have ceased being apple pie and motherhood issues (in the words of Ted Koppel), and are now part of the larger political dichotomy that pits conservatives against liberals, businesses against regulators, economists against ecologists, with all shades from far right to far left to be found. The farther to the political right one is, the more anti-environmental; the farther left, the more environmentalist.

These political orientations should, however, be separated from the next two considerations -- science and religious belief -- and unfortunately, they often are not when it comes to the question of Christian anti-environmentalism. Obviously, where one stands politically or religiously does not need to have anything to do with whether a person has strong environmental convictions. However, evangelical Christians are very often drawn to the more conservative political viewpoints because (1) they are already religiously conservative; and (2) they perceive that the other camp contains proponents of such views as pro-choice, equal rights, radical feminism, New Age, and secular humanism. Who wants to keep company with these convictions? So, very often, environmental concerns are thrown in with a lot of undesirable baggage, and discarded with the rest of the baggage.

**Scientific Dimensions**

Concerns for toxic wastes, pesticide impacts, global warming, ozone depletion, and routine air and water pollution were first raised by scientists with reputable credentials. The professional scientists addressing their specialties have tended to become the advocates for political and social change. Because scientists have a great deal of credibility in our society, their advocacy for environmental issues carries weight with the media, the public, and the policy-makers.

All environmental issues are grounded in scientific work, from ecology to demography to atmospheric chemistry. For example, the EPA makes a strong effort to base their regulatory rules on scientific research, employing a strategy called risk assessment to evaluate the
It is fair to say that these views, which are derived from Scripture but are not explicitly supported by the Bible, are controversial. At the ownership and therefore liberty to make use of God's good provision of the earth's bounty.

Beisner favors a minimization of state ownership of resources, and a maximization of private and multiply.

A good example is the issue of a diminishing ozone layer in the stratosphere. Articles and books have been published on both sides of the issue. On the one hand, there is the claim that the increased release of CFCs from refrigerants and solvents over the past 30 years has led to the Antarctic ozone hole and a general thinning of the ozone layer everywhere. Yet, anti-environmental activists bitterly oppose this view. However, the prevailing scientific consensus clearly supports the CFC theory; ultraviolet radiation is definitely on the increase because of the thinner ozone layer. Where does the opposition come from, then? Here it can be traced to a few skeptics who have not done any work in the field but have misinterpreted the scientific parameters. The anti-environmentalists have picked up and propagated the errors, compounding them, and continuing to make use of them in spite of repeated rejoinders from scientists in the field showing where they are wrong. The media often make matters worse by devoting equal time to both sides of the issue, implying that there is equal support for the opposing views and that the truth is likely to be somewhere in the middle.

The uninformed public -- indeed, most of us -- is therefore dependent on whatever media source they encounter and can easily be misled into believing exaggerations and untruths. How can this be avoided? In evaluating statements about the environment, the best guard against swallowing untruths is to look carefully into both sides of an issue and get in touch with the basic scientific work underlying the issue.

In this regard, it is important to distinguish among the refereed literature, which contains the original scientific work of the scientists working in the environmental field; the gray literature, which consists of reports by agencies and other organizations; and the popular literature, which is the books and journals written for profit or propaganda. The reliability of the science declines significantly in going through this progression! Some of what poses as science is very clearly propaganda, but it is not easy to know this unless you have dug more deeply into the literature on a given issue, and clearly distinguish between science and interpretations of science. Textbooks in science represent a special case, where the work of scientists is presented in a format that attempts to synthesize the current state of knowledge. The information from which textbook science is drawn is always cited in the appendix or reference pages. Check these to see what kind of literature was used for the text.

Unfortunately, the bottom line for many will be, whom do you want to trust? Do you trust Rush Limbaugh to give you a scientifically accurate picture of global warming and acid rain? How about Ted Koppel? Do you trust your Christian magazine because you believe that it stands for the truth? In the final analysis, there is no substitute for scientific literacy and the ability to read and understand the original reports of the scientists. However, since this literature is inaccessible to many in our society, the question of trust remains. My recommendation would be for you to search for media with no obvious ties to a political agenda; some examples would be this journal (Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith), many major media journals (Time, Newsweek, etc.), and many scientific journals (Scientific American, Nature Conservancy, Discover, etc.)

Religious Dimensions

It is evident from the case studies that religious belief plays an important role in environmental controversies. As we saw, Christianity has been a convenient scapegoat when questions come up about how our Western societies have gotten themselves into environmental trouble. Furthermore, New Age, Gaia, and Eastern religions have no trouble sanctifying and worshiping the Earth and other elements in the created order, and so can be seen on the side of the environmentalists. Yet there is a strong segment of evangelical Christian thought that claims to provide the key to the environmental problems, and their analysis is thoroughly supported by Scripture. The Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation provides a good summary of this thinking. Until recently, the biggest problem environmentally active Christians have had with their fellow believers was apathy -- and perhaps that continues to be the most serious problem. Apathy toward environmental concerns is also characteristic of the society in general, and so it is no surprise to find it alive and well in Christian thought and practice.

Now, however, there is the emerging Christian anti-environmentalism I have documented in this paper. The presumed biblical support for this position is currently found primarily in Beisner's work; Burkett does not offer biblical support for his views. For example, Beisner cites biblical passages that encourage procreation opposing those Christians who might claim that continued population growth is a problem, and concludes that "no state ought to discourage fertility," and that Christians are those "who count it a blessing to be fruitful and multiply." Beisner also offers presumed biblical support for his views on resources, deriving many theological and moral standards to be applied to the management of resources. From those principles, Beisner reasons that: (1) "man, not the environment, is primary." If the environment is to be protected, such protection is "for the sake of man, not for its own sake. Anything else is idolatry of nature," (2) "no entity, private or public, has proper authority to restrict others' use of property." Thus, "Planning and control of resource use should be left to the owners of the resources." Beisner favors a minimization of state ownership of resources, and a maximization of private ownership and therefore liberty to make use of God's good provision of the earth's bounty.

It is fair to say that these views, which are derived from Scripture but are not explicitly supported by the Bible, are controversial. At the
very least, it is possible to present opposing views supported by principles derived from Scripture. For example, the dominion mandate (as it has been called), from Genesis 1:26-28, can be taken to mean that God gives us a right, as Beisner puts it, to the “free use and development of resources . . . that the earth, with everything in it . . . was intended by God to serve man’s needs. Man was not made for the earth; the earth was made for man.”37 It can be argued equally that dominion does not mean slavery of the rest of creation to humankind, that our task is to care for creation as Adam was to care for the garden (Genesis 2:15), and that the earth and the creatures in it were made to glorify God (Psalm 24), not to serve man. As we saw above, Beisner admits that the environment should be protected, but only because it is important to man. On the other hand, it can also be argued that since the creation (which is the environment!) has as its first purpose to glorify God, and God values his creation (he called it good in Genesis 1), it is not idolatry of nature to protect creation as God’s stewards.

One is led to the conclusion that both sides in this controversy may find support for their environmental views from Scripture, and that the primary orientation and motivation for searching for this support may be a prior commitment to a world view.

World View Analysis

At this point then I would like to move to a discussion of world views. Each of them represents a set of beliefs, supported by sources of information believed to be accurate, and laying out an agenda for action. This perspective helps us to sort out the controversies and perhaps put them into a Christian perspective.

Environmentalist World View

On Science: The picture we are getting from scientists studying the interactions of human civilization and the environment is accurate. The trends are not encouraging.

Population: Human population growth is reaching unprecedented numbers and makes all of the other problems worse. It is increasing exactly where it can be least well supported -- in the Third World.

Global pollution: Global warming is likely to occur because of the increase in greenhouse gases; the ozone layer is becoming thinner because of CFCs that have made their way up to the stratosphere.

Extinctions: Human societies are continuing to push back natural species by replacing their habitats with cattle, roads and agriculture. Species are probably becoming extinct at a rapid rate, but we do not know because they have not all been found and classified.

Other Concerns: Deforestation is proceeding at an undesirable rate, fisheries are becoming depleted because of serious overfishing, air pollution in urban areas is creating more and more human health problems, soil erosion is causing a large loss in productivity of heavily managed agricultural land, toxic chemicals and nuclear power represent poorly managed technologies that are a serious threat to humans, water pollution is degrading much of our freshwater systems, the gap between the rich and poor countries is getting greater, etc.

Public Policy: Our political system, from the local level to the national level and even internationally, must respond to these trends before they lead us into serious social and economic decline. This means putting controls on the rates of use of biological resources like the grasslands, forests, and fisheries. It means addressing the industries and technologies that are responsible for pollutants that toxify the air, land, and water. It means helping the more populous nations to reduce their fertility with family planning methods. It even means committing ourselves to international agreements so that we can bring about worldwide relief from global warming, ozone depletion, and biodiversity loss. The market can be used to accomplish some of these things, but unregulated free enterprise has always led to greed and exploitation, not just of the natural environment but also of people.

Backlash World View

On Science: Most of the mainstream scientists are mistaken about the state of the environment. They are overlooking many good things that are happening, and exaggerating the problems, often to gain support for their research.

Population: Overpopulation is a myth. The world is full of unused land and can easily support many more people. Human creativity and productivity can solve our resource and environmental problems if they do get worse. Global pollution: The ideas of global warming and ozone depletion are not supported by the data. Neither of these situations is likely to happen, because the earth is robust and humans are not able to affect its systems.

Extinction: There is no good evidence that many species are becoming extinct. The ones that do are undoubtedly poorly adapted and not essential to natural systems.

Other Concerns: Each environmentalist concern is exaggerated and based on an inaccurate assessment of human interactions with the environment. Environmental organizations need members, and they use scare tactics to get them.

Public Policy: Because of environmental and resource concerns, our society has built a system of regulations that impose enormous costs on the private sector and effectively stifle economic progress. Public lands should be opened to multiple use; mineral resources in
wilderness areas and national parks should be developed; restrictions on privately held lands because of wetlands or endangered species should be abolished. We should back away from any international agreements on the environment, because of the danger of losing our sovereign rights. If the environmentalists have their way, we will likely drift into an authoritarian, socialistic government, perhaps even into a world government that will take away our sovereignty. In the end, private enterprise, capitalism, and the free market represent the best approach to solving environmental and resource problems.

The Roots of Christian Anti-Environmentalism

It would be hard to find two sets of fundamental beliefs about the world that are more in conflict. It is as if the two camps were living in two different worlds. At every turn, they will disagree about what we should do.

The primary concern in this paper is to understand environmental backlash within evangelical Christianity. As I have looked into this subject, I have become convinced that Christian anti-environmentalism can be traced directly to political commitments. The arguments about how questionable the science supporting environmentalism is, and the influences of New Age and pagan religions on environmentalists are not the basic issue—but red herrings. The religious argument is true only of the radical fringe of the environmental movement. The science argument is patently indefensible when it is scrutinized carefully. Even many political arguments -- the conspiracies, the socialistic and authoritarian control -- are tactics calculated to generate fear and antagonism, and are a direct offspring of the cold war. It is a fact that the political right has lost its traditional enemy -- world communism -- and appears to be in the process of replacing it with world environmentalism. The Christian political right is following right along the party line with the John Birchers, Wise Use Movement and Rush Limbaugh. This does not reflect well on the Gospel!

There is a solid core of environmentalists -- and Christians -- who reject the radical fringe of the environmental movement and stand solidly with the mainstream of the science community as they document what is happening to the earth -- not for political reasons, but out of a deep love of nature and often out of sincere humanitarian concern. They deplore the tactics of the anti-environmentalists as they try to caricature the whole environmental movement by some tactics and beliefs of fringe groups, and deliberately downplay and deny unmistakable evidence that all is not right with the earth.

Christian World View

It is the duty of all Christians to develop a uniquely biblical world view -- that is, to bring biblical truth to bear on all of life, and not to accept everything that comes to us from a culture that is thoroughly secular and often destructive to Christian thought and practice. There is a spiritual battle going on, and it is going to be felt in all of the affairs of humans. The world view conflict between environmentalists and anti-environmentalists reflects the spiritual condition of fallen humankind very well. These two sides have different visions of the good life and how to achieve it. Neither side understands the biblical doctrine of human depravity and the inability to escape its consequences. Neither side understands the environment as God's creation, nor humans as appointed both to dominion and stewardship acting as God's viceregents and imaging him.

We do not need to embrace either of these camps and become the religious camp-followers that they might want to provide some moral legitimacy to their agendas. On the positive side, the biblical world view may hold the key to this controversy. We do not owe our allegiance to any political party or philosophy, but to a higher authority. What the earth needs are stewards, people who see themselves as caring for something that does not belong to them--God's good creation--which should be protected and justly shared with present and future generations. Christian stewardship should be a natural outworking of our common faith; if more Christians were to take their stewardly calling seriously, we could hold up our faith and practice as "essential to the solution of our ecological problems," as the Evangelical Declaration puts it.

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Notes

1The December/January 1994 issue of Prism contains the text of the Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation, and an article by Calvin B. DeWitt, "Take Good Care -- It's God's Earth."


Ibid., 163.


Larry Burkett, What Ever Happened to the American Dream, p. 131. This information is thoroughly refuted by the literature; see, for example, George W. Cox, Conservation Biology (Dubuque IA: Wm.C. Brown, 1993) where pp. 138-142 clearly document the scientific work establishing DDT’s harm to wildlife.

Larry Burkett, Whatever Happened to the American Dream, p. 110.

This is well-established information. See, e.g., Table 23.1 in The World Resources Institute, World Resources 1994-95, where CO2 emissions from industrial processes are documented for every country in the world.


33 There is a rich literature in support of these views; see, for example, in Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith 46:2, 1994, articles by DeWitt and Bube, and a review of Healing the Earth: A Theological Perspective on Environmental Problems and Their Solutions, by Richard A. Young (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994).

34 Beisner, Prospects For Growth, pp. 176-177.


36 Ibid., pp. 166-168.

37 Ibid., p. 165.