

## Christian Ethics: Lesson 6

### The Environment

#### I. Introduction:

The modern environmentalism movement is over forty years old. During that time various causes have been advocated including the cleansing and prevention of toxic waste, the banishment of dangerous pesticides, the restriction of various forms of pollution, the protection of endangered species, habitat conservation, energy conservation, recycling, closing the hole in the ozone layer, slowing down global warming, etc.

- A. When Christians think about environmentalists what images or stereotypes come to mind?
  
- B. Do you believe that the environment is an issue that Christians should be concerned about? Why or why not?

As Christian citizens we can often fall into two broad camps<sup>1</sup> with regards to the environment. The first group sees the earth as a disposable planet. Thereby trash it all you want since it will be remade when Jesus comes back. The other extreme drinks the Kool-Aid of the modern environmental movement – fully embracing their agenda as their own.

When dealing with the issue of the environment, it is important that we take great care to frame the discussion in biblical terms. Therefore, in this study we will attempt to develop a Christian framework for our stewardship of God’s creation and then assess two of the major environmental issues of this day against this biblically formed grid.

#### II. Key Texts:

##### A. *The Image of God:*

*Genesis 1:26-27: Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”*  
<sup>27</sup> *God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on various Christian views regarding the environment see appendix 1.

According to this passage, man resembles God in some sense. One Old Testament Scholar comments:

*Traditional interpretations of the doctrine of the imago Dei (image of God) propose that man is in God's image in the sense that he shares much of what God is. That is, man, like God, has personality, intelligence, feeling, and will. To be in God's image is indeed to be godlike though obviously in a highly nuanced and restricted sense. . . The differences between the transcendent God and mere mortals are so vast, however, as to require a better explanation of the imago Dei, one that focuses not so much on ontological equivalence as on functional comparisons.<sup>2</sup>*

This next passage helps to explain how we function in the image of God.

**B. The Creation Mandate:**

***Genesis 1:28-30 God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."<sup>29</sup> Then God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you;<sup>30</sup> and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food"; and it was so.***

Being made in the image of God means that man rules the earth as Yahweh's viceroy – a representative of the King. While deployed to another nation, an ambassador must make every effort to carry out the interests of his homeland. In addition, just like an ambassador must be aware of how his conduct reflects upon his leader, so we must realize that our conduct reflects our Creator.

- With what type of skills and abilities did God endow man in order that he might be able to rule the earth on the Lord's behalf?
- For what purpose does creation exist?
- Given that we represent God to creation, how should we treat and value creation?
- How can our governance of creation help us to draw closer to God? How can it help us relate to our Lord?

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<sup>2</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, pp. 169-170.

C. Man's Pre-fall relationship with Nature:

**1. *Genesis 1:31 God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good.***

- What is God's estimation of creation?

**2. *Genesis 2:9 Out of the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.***

- How easily did agriculture come to Adam?

**3. *Genesis 2:15 Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.***

- What is Adam's job description?
- What is the purpose of cultivating and keeping? What is its impact on the land and the animal kingdom?

**4. *Genesis 2:19-20 Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. <sup>20</sup> The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him.***

- With what ease was Adam able to work with the animals?
- How does the picture of Adam's harmony with nature help us to formulate an understanding of how to relate to creation?
- What would be the danger of exclusively looking at this picture of harmony?

**D. Man's Post Fall Relationship with Nature:**

1. ***Genesis 3:17-18*** Then to Adam He said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat from it’; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life. <sup>18</sup> “Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you will eat the plants of the field;

- How did man's relationship with the earth change?
- Does this passage imply that the earth has lost all traces of “goodness”? Why or why not?

2. ***Genesis 9:1-3*** And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. <sup>2</sup> “The fear of you and the terror of you will be on every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky; with everything that creeps on the ground, and all the fish of the sea, into your hand they are given. <sup>3</sup> “Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give all to you, as I gave the green plant.

- What does this verse suggest about our current status as the functional image of God as well as our obligation to the creation mandate?
- What does this passage suggest about how the fall impacted our current relationship with the animal kingdom?

3. ***Genesis 11:7-9*** “Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech.” <sup>8</sup> So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. <sup>9</sup> Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth.

- Why did God scatter all of the people? What did he want them to do and why (*Gen. 1:28*)?
- How important is it to God, that the people leave the earth untouched? Why?

***E. Our Post Fall relationship with the Earth:***

***Isaiah 11:6-9 And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the young goat, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them. <sup>7</sup> Also the cow and the bear will graze, Their young will lie down together, And the lion will eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup> The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. <sup>9</sup> They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea.***

- What will our relationship be like with the animal world when Christ returns?
- What does this verse teach us about God's ultimate design regarding how creation is to live with each other?
- In this day and age, why are we unable to live in total harmony with nature? What must change?

**Note:** In the Garden of Eden, mankind lived in tranquility with the natural order. God intended for them to use their delegated authority to subdue the entire planet and bring it under God's complete control. Yet, the plan was thwarted by Adam and Eve's sin, and as a result humans not only live in conflict with each other but the animal world and the Land. Despite this adversity, God still calls upon humans to fulfill their creation mandate even if it means force. This struggle will end one day when Jesus comes back and lifts the curse.

***F. The Golden Rule***

***Matthew 7:12 "Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.***

***Matthew 22:39 "The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'***

- How should these verses govern our stewardship of the environment?

- Can you think of any environmental abuses which may harm other people?

### G. General Observations:

1. Mankind is made in the image of God. We have been given the responsibility (stewardship) to rule the world and exercise dominion over the animal kingdom. But this dominion is not for our own gratification but God's glorification. His loving, kind, providential dominion over us serves as a paradigm for how we should rule over nature. How we rule creation will help us to draw closer to God.
2. Our position as image bearers makes us different and distinct from the animal kingdom. As we serve God, the animal kingdom serves us.
3. Mankind is good for creation in that we cultivate and keep it. We make it more fruitful.
4. Creation is good, but it is corrupt. Thus, there are certain elements which we are under no obligation to cultivate and keep (i.e. we should not panic if the Ebola virus is on the verge of extinction). In the same way, we must recognize that humans are corrupt and our sinful desires often impact our treatment of God's creation.
5. We should exercise realism when we appeal to the *Genesis 2* creation account. Adam's sin marred that picture of tranquility and harmony. None the less, the creation mandate is still active. And God has equipped humans with the ingenuity and force to accomplish this end. Contrary to the ideals of many environmentalist, it will not be until the return of Jesus Christ that humans will be able to live in natural harmony with nature. Thus, we must use exertion and effort to bring a resistant creation under our dominion.
6. Creation still maintains a sense of goodness, and it is right and acceptable for Christians to praise God for the works we can still see in creation (cf. Psalm 19).
7. God desires for the whole earth to be brought under His control. And His means of doing this is bringing the whole earth under the control of those made in His image.
8. This will happen when Jesus comes back and rules the world.

9. As with all things, these observations should be tempered with Christian love. In our dominion over the earth we must be mindful of the needs of others and aware of how our actions impact our neighbors.

With these nine observations, we will apply them to two of the great environmental issues of the day:

1. Population Control:
2. Global Warming:

### **III. Population Control:**

#### **A. The Problem:**

In short, the two principal concerns of those who fear continued population growth are (1) that in their effort to meet their needs and wants people are using up the earth's resources; and (2) that in the process they are polluting the earth to such an extent that its ability to continue to sustain life, or at least the abundant variety of life that it presently sustains, is catastrophically, perhaps irreversibly, threatened. The vision of humankind that underlies these two concerns is of two parts also: humankind is principally a consumer and a polluter. And these two traits can be summed up in a single trait: humankind is fundamentally destructive.<sup>3</sup>

In the words of Laurie Ann Mazur, "At the heart of the environmentalists' perspective on population growth is the concept of 'carrying capacity.' The planet's carrying capacity is, in essence, its ability to sustain life." And the "ability to sustain life," in turn, consists of two components: the ability to provide the resources people need to consume in order to live, and the ability to absorb the pollution people generate in their productive activities without the earth's biological systems being overwhelmed.<sup>4</sup>

- How do overpopulationists view humans?

#### **B. Two Views of Humans:**

1. Environmentalists see humans as consumers. We do not replenish so much as exploit the environment and creation to feed our desires. Some extreme forms of environmentalism believe that the planet would be better off without us.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> E. Calvin Beisner, *Imago Dei and the Population Debate* *TrinJ* 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 177

<sup>4</sup> Beisner, p. 177.

<sup>5</sup> As an aside, it is interesting to note, in contrast to the emerging biocentric ethic among many environmentalists, which insists that every species of life is of equal value, that Scripture recognizes a clear hierarchy of earthly life:

2. In contrast, the Bible teaches that humans are created in the image of God. This different vision begets a different prediction: that people, because God made them in his image to be creative and productive, because he gave them *creative minds* like his, can bring order out of chaos, and higher order out of lower order, actually *making* more resources than we consume.<sup>6</sup>

### C. Humans as the Solution:

#### 1. Overpopulation has been an enduring concern:

The church father Tertullian (circa AD 200) wrote with alarm:

*Everything has been visited, everything known, everything exploited. Now pleasant estates obliterate the famous wilderness areas of the past. Plowed fields have replaced forests, domesticated animals have dispersed wild life. Beaches are plowed, mountains smoothed and swamps drained. There are as many cities as, in former years, there were dwellings. Islands do not frighten, nor cliffs deter. Everywhere there are buildings, everywhere people, everywhere communities, everywhere life... Proof [of this crowding] is the density of human beings. We weigh upon the world; its resources hardly suffice to support us. As our needs grow larger, so do our protests, that already nature does not sustain us. In truth, plague, famine, wars and earthquakes must be regarded as a blessing to civilization, since they prune away the luxuriant growth of the human race.*<sup>7</sup>

#### 2. Humans are the Solution:

One scholar writes:

*The biblical view of human beings and the universe predicts that, as we apply our minds to raw materials, scarcity of resources will decline—in other words, the supply of resources will increase relative to the demand*

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humans first, then animate life, and finally inanimate life. The gulf between animate and inanimate life is so great that in this passage God speaks as if plant life were not life at all. The gulf between human and animal life is equally great, so that just as people kill and eat vegetables, so also they may kill and eat animals (Gen 9:3); but “Whoever sheds the blood of man by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man” (Gen 9:6) (Biesner p. 187)).

<sup>6</sup> Beisner, *Prospects for Growth*, 114–7.

<sup>7</sup> Emphasis added. From *Opera II: Opera monastica*, cited in D. Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) 24, and—from Herlihy—in S. P. Bratton, *Six Billion & More: Human Population Regulation and Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 76. This citation is from Bratton.



*for them, causing falling labor-capital costs of resource production and falling inflation-adjusted resource prices. And that is precisely what we find when we look at history.*<sup>8</sup>

**3. Statistics Show that humans are making the earth more productive and livable:**

- a. No one worries, after all, about chickens going extinct, although Americans alone now slaughter over six billion of them annually, or about wheat going extinct, although Americans alone now harvest over seventy-three million tons annually. At the risk of being accused of crass anthropocentrism, let me point out that the key to ensuring the survival and flourishing of other creatures is to give people an incentive to cultivate them, i.e., to exercise one of the elements of the cultural mandate. For when people cultivate things, their multiplication increases so much that extinction ceases to be a live option.<sup>9</sup>
- b. By looking at the best measure of scarcity available: prices. The long-term (and I mean centuries-long) trend of inflation-adjusted prices of extractive resources (those we take out of the earth: minerals by mining, crops—including wood—and livestock by harvesting, fish and some other animals by hunting or fishing) is, almost without exception, downward, and it has gotten more steeply downward precisely during the past hundred years or so when human population has grown faster than at any time in history.<sup>10</sup>
- c. Worldwide trends in human life expectancy are, almost without exception, positive, and they have been throughout the roughly two hundred years since industrialization and modernization began. Around the mid-seventeenth century, life expectancy at birth everywhere in the world was about the same—somewhere in the late twenties. Today it is 66 years old worldwide, 62 in low-income economies (66 in China and India, 55 in other low-income economies), 68 in middle-income economies, and 77 in high-income economies. The upward trend in life expectancy shows no sign of slowing; indeed, this sign of environmental improvement is the primary cause of the population growth that so many

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<sup>8</sup> Beisner, *Prospects for Growth*, 114–7.

<sup>9</sup> Beisner, p. 192.

<sup>10</sup> Beisner, pp. 192-193

environmentalists fear threatens human well-being by damaging the environment.<sup>11</sup>

- What does the above data reveal about man's impact on the environment as well as the earth's "carrying capacity"?

**D. Problems with Population Control:**

1. Which population do we seek to control? What gives us the right to tell people in India to stop having children?
2. Children are a blessing from the Lord. The problem with population control proponents is that they devalue human life failing to see people as a resource. Thus, birth control policies often advocate abortion.
3. Emphasis on overpopulation detracts us from the real problem – poverty. Isn't it interesting that when people think of overpopulation they imagine a scene from a crowded market in Calcutta and not Rockefeller Center in downtown Manhattan.
4. Population is good for the economy as it gives us more resources and consumers.
5. Causes for alarm negate the fact that the worldwide population growth rate has dropped from 2.2% in the 1960's to 1.3% in 2000.<sup>12</sup>

**E. Thought Questions:**

1. What would happen to this world if the population precipitously declined?
2. How does a biblical view of humans inform us in our discussion of population control?

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<sup>11</sup>Trinity Evangelical Divinity School: *Trinity Journal Volume 18*. Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1997; 2002, S. 18:194

<sup>12</sup> The Acton Institute, *Environmental Stewardship in the Judeo-Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, the Acton Institute 2007)P. 86.

#### IV. Global Warming:

Global Warming is the new cornerstone of the environmental movement. Thanks to Al Gore and legions of activists, public opinion now expresses deep concern over the prospect of the polar ice caps melting, rising sea levels, droughts, and more extreme weather. But before we embrace the movement, we need to analyze four questions and then apply a biblical perspective.

##### A. Is there global warming?

In a survey of 530 climatologist from 27 different countries released in 2003 we find the following beliefs:

*82% of scientists agree with the statement “We can say for certain that global warming is a process already underway.” Most climate scientists believe that the Earth has warmed a slight (.8 C°) in the last century.<sup>13</sup>*

##### B. Are human’s responsible?

The question most people keenly ask climate scientists is probably “**do you agree or disagree that climate change is mostly the result of anthropogenic (manmade) causes?**” Slightly more than half (55.8 percent) of climate scientists surveyed agreed, 14.2 percent were unsure, and 30 percent disagreed. Interestingly, more scientists “strongly disagree” than “strongly agree” that climate change is mostly the result of anthropogenic causes. The survey clearly shows that the debate over *why* the climate is changing is still underway, with nearly half of climate scientists disagreeing with what is often claimed to be the “consensus” view. Note that the question asked was not whether or not human activities have *any* effect on climate, but whether climate change is “mostly the result” of human activity.<sup>14</sup>

##### C. Is global warming a good or a bad thing?

The same survey mentioned above

##### **Would climate change have beneficial effects?**

The earth has experienced warmer temperatures today than during recorded history, and records indicate human civilization thrived during those times. Moderate global warming could produce such benefits as lower morbidity and mortality rates, more plentiful and

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph L. Bast and James M. Taylor, *Scientific Consensus on Global Warming: Results of an International Survey of Climate Scientists*: 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Chicago: The Heartland Institute 2007)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4.

less expensive food supplies, and lower heating bills. When asked, “To what degree do you think that climate change might have some positive effects for some societies?” most scientists (69.9 percent) expressed some degree of support while only 17.0 percent gave it little or no support. Nearly nine times as many scientists had a “great degree” of confidence in benefits resulting from global warming as those who had “none at all.”

### **Would climate change have detrimental effects?**

In a relatively rare show of near-consensus, 85.8 percent of scientists expressed agreement to some degree with the statement, “Climate change will have detrimental effects for some societies.” Only 5.5 percent were uncertain and 8.6 percent disagreed. Most experts, including skeptics, recognize that global warming could be accompanied by rising sea levels and heavier rains, though in both cases the amount of increase and when and where they might occur are hotly debated. Any time the climate changes there are winners and losers, and the way this question is phrased solicits an acknowledgment of that fact.<sup>15</sup>

### **D. Is there anything we can do about it?**

The most common solution to global warming is adhering to the Kyoto Protocol. According to one economic forecasting firm, if the United States adhered to its target standards it would cut annual economic output by 300 billion, or 3.5 % of the 1998 Gross Domestic Product.<sup>16</sup> This will undoubtedly take a tremendous toll on our way of life and life itself. Specialists in risk assessment estimate that in the United States every \$5 to \$10 million drop in economic output results in one additional statistical death per year. Thus, a \$300 billion loss would result in 19,300 to 30,000 a year.<sup>17</sup>

So we have to ask ourselves, “Would it even be worth it?” Even by global warming advocate standards, the results will be minimal. If the world follows the Kyoto protocol and reduces emissions 7% below 1990, by the year 2047 only .19C° out of a potential .5C° will be cut.

When considering how aggressively we should fight global warming, we must have a balanced view of environmentalism. First of all, carbon dioxide does not poison the earth. It is indispensable for millions upon billions of life forms. Secondly, humans have an ability to adapt to climate change. The mere fact that we can build thriving cities in desert wastelands (i.e. Phoenix and Las Vegas) is testimony to this. Thirdly, the people who Global Warming advocates most want to save will be the most affected by this. In an open letter, signees from the Cornwall alliance state:

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 9-10.

<sup>16</sup> Acton Institute p. 92.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 92.

Reducing energy consumption will require significantly increasing the costs of energy—whether through taxation or by restricting supplies. Because energy is a vital component in producing all goods and services people need, raising its costs means raising other prices, too. For wealthy people, this might require some adjustments in consumption patterns—inconvenient and disappointing, perhaps, but not devastating. But for the world’s two billion or more poor people, who can barely afford sufficient food, clothing, and shelter to sustain life, and who are without electricity and the refrigeration, cooking, light, heat, and air conditioning it can provide, it can mean the difference between life and death.<sup>18</sup>

As you may or may not know, most of the third world receives their energy from burning wood or dung. In order for them to emerge from poverty and live healthier and longer lives, they need an opportunity to develop electricity. Such draconian measures promoted by the wealthy western nations will be a sentence to those on the bottom of the economic pyramid.

#### **E. Thought Questions:**

1. In light of this information, how should we proceed with the issue of global warming?
2. How can humans be part of the solution?
3. Are restricting greenhouse gases the only way of dealing with global warming? What else can we do?
4. How can fighting poverty help the poorer countries adapt to the negative impact of global warming?

#### **V. Conclusion:**

A Christian environmentalist must exercise caution when approaching the issue of global warming as well as other issues. Much of the environmental agenda today is set by men and women who have a different view of humanity and our relationship with the planet. This is not to say that we cannot find common ground. For instance, clean drinking water, energy conservation, smog reductions, prevention and removal of hazardous waste all have a place in the Christian worldview. We don’t take care of the earth because we worship the earth, but because we love God and our fellow man. God made a planet that was meant to be used. He calls us to populate and cultivate it so that it will reach a greater potential of sustaining life and giving glory to Him.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.cornwallalliance.org/docs/an-open-letter-to-the-signers-of-climate-change-an-evangelical-call-to-action-and-others-concerned-about-global-warming.pdf>

## Appendix One A Survey of Christian Views on the Environment:

Traditionally, a Christian view of the environment can be divided into six camps.

- A. **Subjectionism:** This school of thought interprets the creation story as a call to bring the non-human environment into subjection for the purpose of facilitating human expansion. Traditionally, this has been held by the more conservative branch of Christianity which is highly suspicious of the “new age agenda” of environmentalism. At its core, subjectionism seeks to preserve the economic interests of mankind.<sup>19</sup>
- B. **Social Justice:** Common in mainline Protestant Churches a growing number of Evangelicals are adopting this approach. Whereas, subjectionists focus on the economic well being of humanity, social justice advocates measure the universal satisfaction of basic human needs such as food, water, and shelter. The benefits of this planet must be equally shared by all. And where there is poverty and oppression both humans and the environment suffer. This causes them to align with the activist environmental movement. Like the subjectivists, they see the earth as a means for satisfying those needs.<sup>20</sup>
- C. **Creation Care:** Defined by the concept of stewardship, they believe that humans have been appointed guardians over creation. With this focus on the preservation and protection of creation, they spend minimal energy on the needs of humans.<sup>21</sup>
- D. **Environmental Justice:** Forged in the liberation theology movement, this environmental movement seeks to ameliorate potentially life threatening conditions or improving the overall quality of life for people of color. Citing studies which show that those within the lower social economic strata or exposed to more pollution, they target righting such a wrong.<sup>22</sup>
- E. **Eco-Feminism:** Drawing upon the observation that societies which devalue women also degrade the environment, they believe that male domination and exploitation of woman carries over into the environment. What is needed is a transcendent equality in which men, women, and the environment treat each other with mutual respect.<sup>23</sup>
- F. **Eco-Justice:** This is a call for environmental protection and social justice. Advocates claim that we are one with creation and we must love one another. We must conserve our natural resources and justly distribute them to all humanity. We need to turn from our consumerism which hoards wealth from the poor and exploits the creation.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Raymond E. Grizzle, Paul E. Rothrock, Christopher Barret, “Evangelicals And Environmentalism: Past Present, and Future, TrinJ 19:1 (Spring 1998) p. 7.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid. p. 9

<sup>22</sup>Ibid. p. 12.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid. p. 12-13.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid. p. 13.

