SHOULD CHRISTIANS BE ENVIRONMENTALISTS?

ALSO BY DAN STORY

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Should Christians Be Environmentalists?

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To my daughter, Jody.
Some of my fondest memories are family hikes
and backpacks through woods and deserts
during your wonderful childhood years.

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INTRODUCTION

Oh, how I wish I had wings like a dove;
then I would fly away and rest!
I would fly far away
to the quiet of the wilderness.
King David, Psalm 55:6–7 (NLT)

I rushed into young adulthood during the turbulent years of the 1960s. I remember it well. On November 22, 1963, my first year in college, I was cutting classes with two buddies to escape to the mountains when we heard on the car radio that President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. A few years later, in 1968, his brother Robert F. Kennedy and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. were also assassinated. The Vietnam War became enormously unpopular in the late 1960s, and student protests erupted on university campuses. Race riots rocked American society. The sixties spawned the "flower children" in Haight-Ashbury, San Francisco, the countercultural music at Woodstock in New York State (1969), and a burgeoning drug culture that threatened to hemorrhage the moral values of America's youth. Thousands of disillusioned young people became hippie dropouts.

Historians report that no society in the history of the human race has changed as dramatically or as quickly as American culture has during the last decades of the twentieth century. It all evolved out of the sociological upheavals of the 1960s. Within a mere forty years, American society shifted from a largely Christian world-and-life view to a secular worldview.

April 22, 1970—barely into a new decade—marked another event that arose out of the 1960s: the first "Earth Day." Twenty million Americans assembled across two thousand colleges and universities, thousands of primary and secondary schools, and hundreds of local communities to create a grassroots groundswell for an environmental movement unprecedented in its scope and enthusiasm. A new awareness of the interrelatedness of all life—plants, animals, and humans—and the deterioration of our air, water, land, and natural resources galvanized America's youth. And I discovered my calling.

Unlike my brother, who spent part of the 1960s in a commune on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State, I didn't become a hippie. I didn't protest the Vietnam War. I didn't get into drugs. My wife didn't wear flowers in her hair (although she put flower decals on the body of our 1966 Datsun station wagon). But I did plunge into the environmental movement of the 1970s with all the passion and zeal of youth. My wife and I joined the Sierra Club and the National Wildlife Federation. We backpacked, photographed wildlife, and supported environmental causes. We volunteered at a wildlife rescue center. I published more than thirty wildlife and nature related articles in magazines and other periodicals. My music of choice was John Denver. I was energized and inspired by "Rocky Mountain High," "Take Me Home, Country Roads," "Sunshine on My Shoulders," and "Blow Up Your TV." I spent countless hours listening to Denver's music in my study and on the tape player in my car. We lived in Southern California but craved to live in wild country. I seriously considered quitting my job and moving my family to the outskirts of Zion National Park. My wife was all for it. In short, as a non-Christian, nature was my life.

This changed dramatically in 1981 after I became a Christian. My love for nature was quickly overshadowed by my love for the Creator. It was not that my love and enthusiasm for nature diminished—it was just no longer the center of my life. In fact, my thesis for a master's degree in Christian apologetics was a 330-page tome entitled *Environmental Stewardship: A Biblical Approach to Environmental Ethics.* After graduating in 1988, however, my focus in writing changed. Instead of nature

themes, I took up the case for Jesus Christ and began to write books and teach classes on how to defend the Christian faith.

During the ensuing years, I periodically yearned to resume my writing about nature, wildlife, and the environment. I envisioned that a book on a subject like "Encountering God in the Wilderness" or "Is God an Environmentalist?" would be a great apologetic point of contact with secular nature lovers and environmentalists. But the time never seemed right to begin such a project. Nor could I imagine such a book having broad appeal in the Christian community, which historically has shown little interest in environmental matters and has often opposed environmental activism.[1]

In recent years, however, there has been a growing concern over environmental issues within Christendom, including among evangelicals. In part, this is because diverse political and scientific views on climate change (global warming) have spawned much confusion and misinformation, intensifying environmental debates and adding to the hostility that already existed between conservatives and left-leaning environmentalists.

This, however, is not a book detailing environmental issues; nor is it a doomsayer's appraisal of potential environmental catastrophes. Enough is already being written on those topics. Rather, the primary purpose of this book is threefold. First, to encourage godly environmental stewardship by systematically developing a Bible-based theology of nature, including an environmental doctrine and guidelines for environmental ethics. What does an environmental doctrine reveal? Among other things, it reveals that the Bible instructs the human race to be God's caretakers over creation. It provides moral principles that can guide mankind's activities in nature so that people use the earth's resources without selfishly exploiting the land and its wild inhabitants.

The second primary purpose of *Should Christians Be Environmentalists?* is to present an apologetic to anti-Christian environmentalists who claim that Christianity is the "root cause" of environmental exploitation and degradation, and that other religious traditions are better suited morally and theologically to push for environmental stewardship.

In answer to these and other challenges, we'll discover that every

culture, regardless of religious beliefs, has exploited and despoiled its natural environment. We'll establish that God directed the entire human race to be His caretakers—His stewards—over nature. He didn't give mankind carte blanche to use nature with no concern for the land and other life forms. I'll demonstrate that Christianity, more than any other worldview—secular or religious—is equipped to implement and institutionalize worldwide environmental ethics. The book includes strategies for how the church can engage corporately in proactive environmental stewardship activities and how individual Christians can put into practice sensible measures that will contribute solutions to local environmental problems. We'll also explore the potential evangelistic opportunities embedded in Christian environmentalism.

Let me comment further on this last topic; it's the third purpose of this book.

Evangelistic and apologetic techniques that were effective thirty years ago, such as rational arguments and historical evidences for the Christian faith, are not as effective in the twenty-first century. In particular, people under the age of thirty have been conditioned by postmodern relativism to reject moral absolutes and to be skeptical of all religious truth claims. Accordingly, Christian evangelists and apologists are urgently seeking relevant "points of contact"—areas of common concern to both Christians and non-Christians—that can be starting points for conversations, often leading to opportunities for sharing the gospel message.

Stephen Rand of the Evangelical Alliance Relief Fund reports, "Every survey showed that the environment was top of the list of [young people's] concerns for the future, for the planet."[2] In light of this, I'm convinced that Christian environmentalism can be a tremendously effective point of contact with this generation, especially among college students and other young people.

I conclude the book with a special word to non-Christian readers. I share my journey from zealous non-Christian environmental advocate to even more zealous Christian environmentalist, and the impact this journey has had on my life. My story can become the reader's story.

My prayer is that, as you work your way through this book, you'll not only develop a better understanding of the biblical perspective of environmental stewardship, but that you'll also come to better love and enjoy God's magnificent creation in the process.

PART ONE

ENVIRONMENTALISM: A MOVEMENT IN NEED OF A RELIGION

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT?

Environmentalist: A person who is concerned with or advocates the protection of the environment.
The New Oxford American Dictionary

Hanging on my study walls are paintings and photographs of national parks and other wild places: Yellowstone, Zion, and Glacier National Parks; the Sierra Nevada mountains in eastern California; Monument Valley in southern Utah; the Rocky Mountains. All of them are places I have visited—and often explored—and long to see again. In my whimsical moods, I imagine these pictures as windows to the wilderness. I envision myself climbing through their frames and walking the wild lands beyond.

As pleasurable as these daydreams are, they're always clouded with a grave concern. Will these great tracts of American wilderness continue to exist, so that future nature wanderers can experience their solace and solitude? Not if many developers have their way. Yosemite Valley, the outskirts of Zion National Park, the south rim of the Grand Canyon—all are threatened by hotel and commercial development.

A similar desire to explore wild nature is awakened when I visit art museums. My favorite painters are the Romantics (ca. 1750–1850), who envisioned nature as boundless, untamed, and sublime. Their paintings typically create exaggerated, almost mythical portrayals of wild nature: colossal, jagged mountains with cloud-draped, snow-capped peaks. Raging, boiling, angry rivers with stalwart explorers pondering safe

crossing. Dark, misty, forbidden, impenetrable forests where dwell fierce grizzlies, crowned elk, and glorious soaring eagles. Like the paintings and photographs on my study walls, these portrayals of wild nature invoke a powerful urge to plunge into the primeval wilderness they capture.

But again I wonder. In thirty or forty years, will wilderness art inspire people to explore, experience, and protect America's wildernesses, as was the goal of the Romantics? Not if the present trend toward a disconnection with nature continues unabated.

The destiny of America's wildernesses—as well as the health and sustainability of our air, water, and soil—has been embroiled in controversy and legal battles for nearly a half century. Past battles have resulted in some notable victories and some heartbreaking failures. I believe a powerful voice has been missing in this battle, one that could have a dramatic influence on the fate of America's remaining wild lands and on the health and sustainability of our natural environments and resources. What's been missing is God's perspective on nature and His decree that the human family be His stewards over creation. To put it more specifically, what's been missing is the Christian church.

In the following chapters, we'll learn that God permitted the human race to use nature for our own purposes, but with the understanding that nature belongs to Him and people are His caretakers. People *do not* have carte blanche to use nature for their own consumption without any regard for the environment and wild creatures. Sadly, even though this truth is clearly taught in Scriptures, Christians have generally been reluctant to get involved in confronting environmental issues. Consequently, it was secular activists, educators, and organizations that alerted the country to environmental degradation and became the vanguard of the environmental movement that emerged in the mid-1960s.

In terms of stemming the tide of environmental and ecological degradation, was this movement—propelled largely by secular environmentalists—a success or failure? And if a failure, why? Would the environmental movement have been more successful if embraced by the Christian community? Answering these questions is where our journey begins.

What Brought About the Environmental Movement?

Since the pilgrims, America's impact on nature has been, for the most part, a chronicle of neglect, misuse, exploitation, and deterioration.[1] Two classic examples illustrate this. Hope Ryden, in the thorough study of coyote eradication recorded in her book, *God's Dog*, presents Department of the Interior figures on the number of predators killed in federal government control programs for a *single* year in the 1960s, when such activity was government sanctioned. Body counts included:

> 89,653 coyotes [the target animal]; 20,780 lynx and bobcats (the lynx is endangered in the Western states); 2,779 wolves (the red wolf is endangered); 19,052 skunks; 24,273 foxes (the kit fox is endangered); 10,078 raccoons; 1,115 opossums; 6,941 badgers; 842 bears . . . [the grizzly is threatened in the lower 48 states, except Yellowstone National Park]; 294 mountain lions; and untold numbers of eagles and other rare and endangered birds. This tragic toll does not take into account the large number of poisoned animals that were never found.[2]

Although the federal government no longer sponsors such wasteful slaughter of animals, attacks on predators persist today, with the same sad results. Coyote-hunting "tournaments" were held in Nevada, Oregon, and Idaho early in 2010 to "help protect livestock." In Nevada, hunters paid a thirty-dollar entrance fee, with the entire pot going to the team that "bagged" the most coyotes over two days. The expected kill was "up to 60 coyotes."[3]

The willful and often unnecessary slaughter of predators in order to protect domestic stock and "game" animals (animals killed in recreational hunting) has had catastrophic effects on entire ecosystems. This points to a second example of America's chronic despoiling of nature.

The Kaibab game preserve on the north rim of the Grand Canyon was established in 1906. Some 20,000 sheep and cattle were introduced to

share the forage with an estimated 4,000 deer. To protect the livestock and game animals, predator control efforts eradicated more than 6,000 large predators (wolves, mountain lions, coyotes, bobcats, and golden eagles). In two decades, the deer population increased to 100,000, destroying virtually all the available forage in the preserve. Tens of thousands of deer (90 percent of them) eventually starved to death—an estimated 60,000 in 1924 alone—and the range was ruined for decades.[4]

In spite of ecological calamities like the Kaibab debacle—and the slaughter of countless thousands of America's wildlife for vested interest groups—the "environmental crisis," as it came to be called, did not come into *popular* focus until the 1960s. Many conservationists and environmentalists credit the publication of biologist Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 as the kick-off for the modern environmental movement. Carson persuasively argued that mounting evidence indicated that man-made pollutants, in particular synthetic pesticides, were threatening the survival of large birds such as eagles, peregrine falcons, ospreys, brown pelicans, and other wildlife. Pesticide sprays were contaminating the land, and irrigation drainage from pesticide-treated crops were poisoning lakes and rivers. Carson's book was a shock to Americans who heretofore were ignorant of humanity's destructive impact on nature, and it raised concern about the negative effects of other human activities on the environment. After *Silent Spring,* hundreds of books, articles, and newspaper exposés were written to further document the rapid degradation of the natural world at the hands of Homo sapiens—as well as to promote a greater awareness and appreciation of nature.

The result was that during the 1960s and 1970s important environmental laws were enacted, including the Clean Air Act in 1963, the Wilderness Act in 1964, the Clean Water Act in 1972, the Endangered Species Act in 1973, and some two dozen other separate pieces of environmental legislature. In 1970, President Richard M. Nixon used his administrative powers to create the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The purposes of the EPA and environmental laws were to control industrial and automotive emissions, protect threatened and endangered wildlife, set aside

wilderness areas, clean up hazardous waste, and encourage the recycling and conservation of non-renewable resources. Growing public awareness of the deteriorating state of America's natural environment gained popular momentum with "Earth Day," April 22, 1970. In sum, the environmental movement of the late 1960s and the 1970s opened America's eyes to the fact that it could no longer sustain a take-what-you-want-and-use-it-as-you-please approach to nature. It became clear that humanity was "dirtying its nest."

The environmental movement was not just about conserving natural resources, establishing wilderness areas, and curtailing pollution. It also put forward a new image of Homo sapiens' place in the "intricate web of life" by raising public awareness of our inescapable interdependence with all other life forms. The science of ecology became popular, helping people to realize that what threatens our fellow creatures on earth ultimately threatens us. After all, ecologists pointed out, Homo sapiens breathe oxygen produced from plant life—the same as insects, fish, birds, reptiles, and mammals. We get our nutrition via the food chain—the same as ants, squirrels, and coyotes. We build our dwellings from materials supplied by the earth—the same as mud-daubers, birds, and beavers. We drink water purified by an incredibly complex hydraulic system run by the sun—the same as cattle, elephants, and otters. When people disrupt and damage the ecological balance of nature through pollution, habitat destruction, or the slaughter of wildlife, it diminishes the health and quality of life not only for non-humans but also for people.

Why Did the Environmental Movement Fizzle?

There was great optimism and hope in the 1970s (sometimes referred to as the "environmental decade") that the human race would make an ecological worldview shift away from destructive exploitation and toward a relationship with the land that curtailed pollution, extinction, and the destruction of wild habitats solely for profit. Unfortunately, with the exception of some improvements in air and water quality, this didn't

materialize. In spite of public zeal for environmental reform, a vocal army of professional and lay environmentalists, and tough new environmental laws, the environmental movement failed to stem the tide of environmental degradation, especially when measured on a worldwide scale. I believe there were three interconnected reasons for this.

Loss of Popular Focus

It was no coincidence that the environmental movement of the late 1960s and the 1970s paralleled the countercultural movement of the same era. Many of America's youth were fed up with the stress, smog, and congestion of city life. Those of us who entered adulthood during the 1960s felt isolated from the land. We viewed nature's plight as the fallout of rampant materialism and rapid suburbanization. The environmental movement fit like a glove with the 1960s popular rebellion against conventional values.

Historically, in American culture, when a forward-looking movement of any kind exists at a popular level, things get done. Think of John F. Kennedy's commitment in 1961 to land a man on the moon within a decade; it only took eight years. Consider Martin Luther King Jr.'s hugely popular civil rights marches in the 1960s. Think of the Vietnam War protests that erupted in universities across the country in the late 1960s. Nothing is more newsworthy than a united, popular display of dissatisfaction. The squeaky wheel gets the grease.

The environmental movement was essentially a grassroots movement. It had the same kind of broad support among the rank-and-file that these other popular movements enjoyed, especially with the emerging baby boomer generation. This zeal for nature had an interesting side effect that paralleled and, in fact, was part of the environmental movement. It spawned a back-to-the-land migration during the early 1970s. Dissatisfied with city life, more than a million people in America migrated to rural settings. By the mid-1970s, for the first time in 150 years, rural areas grew faster, proportionately, than cities.[5]

As a sociocultural phenomenon, however, the back-to-the-land movement was short lived. As one researcher put it, the "city-to-small-town

movement proved to be a demographic blip. . . . The city-to-rural migration of the 1970s did not last."[6] The fading zeal to live a natural, simple, semi-isolated life on the land coincided with a loss of vigor for the environmental movement. As the 1980s moved toward the 1990s, the environmental movement increasingly lost steam. As columnist and environmental advocate Richard Louv observed, "The American conservationist may be an endangered species, both in numbers and public influence."[7]

By the 1990s, the environmental movement had all but vanished from the public eye. John Denver (1943–1997) and other folk artists no longer serenaded wild nature and encouraged people to love and protect wildlife. Films like the *Wilderness Family* movies, which romanticized living off the land in the wilderness, became a thing of the past. There was no longer an exodus of young people to rural communities and communal farms. Today's technocrats and urbanites find such notions quaint and archaic.

Although environmental activism is still popular in American universities, the environmental movement itself has evolved from a grassroots movement to the vocation of professionals and politicians. Citizen-supported environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation, Defenders of Wildlife, and the Wilderness Society provide organized lobbies for environmentalists. In addition, with dozens of environmental laws now in place, environmentalists can rely more on governmental action to take care of environmental problems. Litigation, ballot initiatives, environmental impact statements, and the EPA have depersonalized the environmental movement. Ironically, the goals that the environmental movement worked so passionately to achieve—establishing laws against pollution and setting aside land for wilderness and wildlife preservation—were a major contributor to its demise because of the loss of grassroots involvement.

A Nature-Starved Generation

A second reason the passion and fervor of the environmental movement waned at a popular level is that a new generation has arisen that is

less interested in experiencing nature firsthand.[8] After fifty years of steady increase, attendance at various U.S. National Parks has declined between 18 and 25 percent since 1987, according to an article from *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.[9] The present generation is more sedentary and attuned to indoor activities, technological toys, cyberspace, and MTV (the report uses the term "videophilia"). The Academy of Sciences report concluded that "all major lines of evidence point to a general and fundamental shift away from people's participation in nature-based recreation."[10]

Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* thoroughly documents how children today have all but lost physical contact with nature. He noted that "in the space of a century, the American experience of nature has gone from direct utilitarianism to romantic attachment to electronic detachment. . . . Americans born between 1946 and 1964 . . . may constitute the last generation of Americans to share an intimate, familial attachment to the land and water."[11] Louv further observed, "We are no longer talking about retreating to rural communes, but, rather, about building technologically and ethically sophisticated human-scale population centers that, by their design, reconnect both children and adults to nature."[12] In other words, people still want contact with nature, but they don't want to live in isolation. They want a tamed nature, a nature easily accessible and adapted to human comforts.

This change came with a cost. Louv coined the phrase "nature-deficit disorder" to describe the physical and emotional health problems that isolation from nature has created: "As one scientist puts it," Louv explained, "we can now assume that just as children need good nutrition and adequate sleep, they may very well need contact with nature. . . . A widening circle of researchers believes that the loss of natural habitats, or the disconnection from nature even when it is available, has enormous implications for human health and child development."[13] Conversely, studies have shown that illnesses such as childhood obesity, stress, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) can sometimes be alleviated through physical interaction with nature.[14]

Of course all people can benefit from contact with outdoor activities. New research from England's University of Essex reports on "the positive effects of nature on human mental health." In particular, "green exercise" —such as walking or cycling in natural settings—and other contact with nature "improves psychological health by reducing stress levels, enhancing mood and self-esteem and offering a restorative environment which enables people to relax, unwind and recharge their batteries."[15]

Other researchers have expressed similar concerns over American children's loss of connectedness with nature. Conservationist and scholar Gary Paul Nabhan reports that a major reason children today lack knowledge about the natural world is that they spend more time watching television than playing outdoors, collecting rocks and insects, and exploring natural surroundings. "The vast majority of the children we interviewed," explained Nabhan, "are now gaining most of their knowledge about other organisms vicariously; 77 percent of the Mexican children, 61 percent of the Anglo children, 60 percent of the Yaqui children, and 35 percent of the O'odham children [the latter two are Native Americans] told us they had seen more animals on television and in the movies than they had personally seen in the wild." This lack of contact with nature, Nabhan continues, "will become the norm as more than 38 percent of the children born after the year 2000 are destined to live in cities with more than a million other inhabitants."[16]

Sadly, in terms of the demise of the environmental movement, the loss of connectedness with nature and the outdoors has translated into an inadvertent apathy toward the natural world. Nabhan was right when he concluded, "Because only a small percentage of humankind has any direct, daily engagement with other species of animals and plants in their habitats, we have arrived at a new era in which ecological illiteracy is the norm."[17]

For people under the age of thirty-five or forty, congestion, urbanization, and isolation from nature is like water to a fish. It's the world they grew up in; it's what they swim around in every day. Without "knowing" nature, that is, without experiencing nature on a personal level (hiking,

camping, bird watching, and so on)—and passing on this joy to succeeding generations—people are easily blinded to the threats against nature that still exist, and in many cases are increasing.

The National Academy of Sciences report confirmed this. Referencing other studies, it explained,

> Human cultural learning and experience . . . [exerts] a fundamental shaping influence on the content, direction, and strength of people's nature-related values. Similarly, it has been found that environmentally responsible behavior results from direct contact with the environment and that people must be exposed to natural areas as children if they are to care about them as adults. Extended periods spent in natural areas, as well as creating a role model, seem to create the most environmentally responsible behavior and increase involvement in biodiversity conservation. Moreover, as today's adult role models spend less time in nature, this generation of children is also likely to follow suit.[18]

When I think back on my own childhood growing up in the 1950s and early 1960s, this loss of connectedness with nature is hard to imagine. I remember well the adventures and excitement of exploring the farmlands and chaparral foothills surrounding my California neighborhoods and of hikes and camping trips in forest and desert. Kids today have no idea what they're missing.

Lack of Ethical Foundation

There is one other reason why the environmental movement fizzled at a popular level, and I believe it's the major reason. It failed to generate an ethical foundation necessary to institutionalize environmental ethics in American culture. For the emerging values of the environmental movement to have become entrenched in America's corporate conscience and passed on to succeeding generations, they needed to be inculcated into

society's cultural heritage. With one notable exception, this just didn't happen. The one instance in which it did happen, however, proves that it *is* possible to change an entire society's attitude toward an environmental issue and elicit willing cooperation for solutions.

In 1961, Keep America Beautiful in cooperation with the Ad Council (a public service advertising organization that focuses on social issues) created a campaign to raise public awareness of litter and other forms of pollution. Their goal was to change negative attitudes and behaviors that resulted in these activities. In the case of litter, it was a tremendous success. By the end of the campaign, "local teams had helped to reduce litter by as much as 88 percent in 300 communities, 38 states, and several countries."[19] To this day, most Americans automatically use public trash receptacles and are infuriated when they see someone throw trash out their car window. The success of the Keep America Beautiful campaign demonstrates that it is possible to create ethical norms that foster workable solutions for serious environmental problems through public cooperation.

In spite of the success of the anti-litter campaign, the fact remains that an objective foundation for environmental ethics has yet to be established in American society. There are no broad-based ethical standards by which preemptive environmental strategies can be formulated or even by which existing environmental problems can be identified with any amount of general agreement. Thus we have the ongoing debate and hostility over virtually every environmental issue that surfaces: between left and right leaning politicians, between developers and preservationists, between the EPA and environmental organizations, and so on.

I believe the only successful basis for a foundation of environmental ethics is biblical Christianity, and I'll develop this fully in later chapters.

How Do We Get Past Christian Reluctance?

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in environmentalism within Christendom. Sadly, however, many evangelicals

have been reluctant to embrace it. The primary reason, claims Christian environmental scientist Richard T. Wright, is that "Christian anti-environmentalism is a direct consequence of political commitments. . . . People who are conservative in their religious views are very often conservative in their politics. They are often reluctant to side with groups that are perceived as being more liberal, usually pro-Democratic Party, as the environmental organizations often are."[20] Christian environmental writer Michael S. Northcott adds that "many conservative Christians in the United States regard environmentalism as both a betrayal of the American dream of liberty and prosperity, and a pagan subversion of true, biblical Christianity."[21]

I agree that the reluctance of many evangelicals to wholeheartedly embrace environmentalism is often political and ideological in nature. However, I would add that there is another reason for the lack of Christian involvement in ecological and environmental issues. Environmental stewardship does not jump out of the pages of Scripture, as do other social concerns. The New Testament in particular focuses primarily on spiritual and moral issues: the person and work of Jesus Christ, struggles with sin and temptation, how to be reconciled to God, church and family relationships, and moral issues. As a result, many Christians have historically failed to recognize the host of verses and passages woven throughout the Bible, especially in the Old Testament (which is part of Christian Scriptures) that have a strong ecological and environmental emphasis.

New Testament professor at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, I. Howard Marshall makes an important observation relevant to this. He points out that other social problems were not recognized or widely acknowledged by past generations of Christians (and society at large) but they later burdened the conscience of the church, such as slavery, the horrid conditions under which children often worked, and prohibiting women from voting. In a similar way, explains professor Marshall, "The problems of the environment [were], by and large, not part of ancient thinking. After all, the environment hardly constituted a problem, in view of the comparative smallness of the world's population at that time

and of its limited capacity to plunder or destroy nature. In no way could there have been a consciousness of the problem that we now have, which is so largely the result of the behavior of sinful people."[22]

We shouldn't be surprised that environmental ethics and stewardship were not on the church's agenda until recently. Environmental exploitation and the deterioration of natural environments were not recognized as a problem until the mid-twentieth century—just as slavery and child labor practices were not recognized as unbiblical until the nineteenth century. What is regrettable is that as the seriousness of the environmental crisis became widely acknowledged, more Christians did not get involved in the environmental movement. God instructed the human race to be His stewards over nature, and the Bible reveals moral principles on which to develop environmental ethics and guidelines for environmental stewardship. The church should have been the vanguard of the environmental movement.

Be that as it may, the church failed to develop an environmental ethos because it never developed a theology of nature leading to a precise environmental doctrine. We'll look at the primary reason for this in the following chapter. The point for now is that, as a *secular* phenomenon, the modern environmental movement was unsuccessful in terms of establishing environmental ethics in popular culture. Nor, by the way, were such ethics established through the passage of environmental laws. Without an ethical base, the environmental movement was unable to sustain the momentum it had in the 1970s and early 1980s, especially for a new generation of mostly indoor people.

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Would an environmental movement within the Christian community have had more success than the secular environmental movement of the 1970s and 1980s? If God-centered, I believe it would. In later chapters, I'll build a case for Bible-based environmental ethics and stewardship and suggest practical guidelines for implementing both in the Christian

community. I'll also give suggestions on how the church—and individual Christians—can become godly advocates and participants in ecological activities. But first, several preliminary issues must be examined.

To begin with, Christians must confront an image problem. As a world-and-life view, Christianity has been targeted by many environmentalists as the "root cause" of today's environmental and ecological problems. The fallout from this has been that spiritually-minded non-Christian environmentalists are turning to other religions as a source of moral and spiritual guidance in environmental activism (the subject of chapter 3). Refuting the erroneous assumption that environmental degradation is directly related to the growth and spread of Christianity is the topic of the next chapter.