A Thesis
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Evangelizing Environmentalism: A Vision for a
Broader “Creation Care” Movement

by
Joshua Martin

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Philosophy Adviser: ______________________
Dr. Benjamin Pryor
Religious Studies Adviser: ______________________
Dr. Jeanine Diller
Honors Program Director: ______________________
Dr. Thomas Barden

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Abstract

Environmentalism, an ideology once vilified by whole swathes of the American evangelical community as pagan pantheism, has in recent years gained an increasingly larger foothold in the community. Prominent evangelical organizations and churches have drafted declarations expressing their concern for the deteriorating state of creation, denominational leaders are fervently promoting sustainability, and congregations are starting to reconsider their divinely ordained dominion over the earth.

This thesis will explore this emerging phenomenon by examining these declarations as well as the scholarship of those evangelical leaders advocating creation care. I will provide a historical overview of such material since the 1970s, attempt to explain the factors that contributed to the movement, and explicate the philosophical nuances of both liberal and conservative evangelical treatments of the environment.

Subsequently, I will offer an endorsement of a panentheistic, pneumatological, and pro-environmental evangelical framework that recognizes the pervasive presence of the divine in all life forms. This solution will build upon the liberal evangelical treatment of the environment isolated from the problematic notion of human ontology possessed by conservative evangelicals, while utilizing their shared theological language to establish a connection. I believe this modified creation care framework will stand supremely capable of catalyzing a shift within the conservative evangelical community toward an appropriate sustainability ethic, hopefully helping in some small way to stave off ecological Armageddon.
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Introduction

Significance of the Topic

For the last seventeen hundred years, Christianity has exerted an arguably unmatched influence on the progression of world events. It is, after all, the crucible in which Western academia, the Crusades, the age of Enlightenment, industrialism, and European colonialism were all forged. Some scholars would like to add to this list a modern phenomenon – though one of much greater significance – that has similarly developed within a largely Christianized, Western meta-context. Global climate change – more sensationally and perhaps widely known as “global warming” – is an ever growing threat to this world, capable of causing massive species extinctions, rising sea levels, droughts, famine, *et cetera*. It is also a phenomenon increasingly attributable to high rates of resource exploitation in the developed nations of the Western hemisphere. With Christianity so relevant here, people concerned with the fate of the natural world will look to this religion for two reasons: first, to examine the Christian conception of creation and its relationship to humanity that conditioned these historical processes and Western cultural habits; second, to develop a solution capable of catalyzing a major *ethos* shift within this culture toward strident sustainability efforts.

Such a project, however, if properly undertaken, lies outside of the scope of a simple undergraduate thesis project. A responsible, historically-minded approach would, at the very least, take account of two thousand years worth of Christian thought. Such an approach might inspect what theologians from Origen to Karl Barth and beyond had to
say about the issue and track how the concepts changed over time. Instead, my focus in this thesis will be examining the recent debate over proper creation management and the underlying metaphysical beliefs within the American evangelical community assumed in this debate. The choice of this particular denomination is not an arbitrary one designed solely to make the project manageable, though. It is also not simply meant to capitalize on the mere sociological curiosity surrounding the issue that characterizes much of the scholarship I encountered during my research.

Viewing environmentalism through the lens of the biblically-associated “dominion” v. “stewardship” debate within the American evangelical community is rather instructive as to how the issue stands in greater Christian thought. As will become evident later, the sharp divide that exists between the traditional group and the more pro-environmental group within the denomination uniquely captures the conflicting tendencies regarding creation management that exist in broader Christianity. The former’s emphasis on a utilitarian value of creation for humankind realized through domination represents the Christian theme of spiritual transcendence central to the religion’s eschatology. Conversely, the latter group’s insistence upon an intrinsic, steward-like valuing of creation recalls God’s happiness with all creation and the significance of the incarnate Jesus Christ embracing humanity with his material body.

This inclusive capacity of the evangelical debate over “creation care” is perhaps due to the evangelical practice of basing beliefs in scripture. The Bible is, after all, the foundation for much of Christian theology, though some branches of the religion subscribe to different formulations of biblical canon and interpretation. This serves to produce a rather comprehensive evangelical debate. Additionally, the element of
scriptural fundamentalism within the sect (not to be equated with biblical literalism, as will be discussed later) ensures that the metaphysical statuses of humans and creation staked in the debate are done so unambiguously and unabashedly. The difficulty of developing a nuanced theological position from a consultation of numerous, possibly inconsistent sources simply isn’t present with this exercise. The relatively few positions on a theological subject that can be deduced from the one, prominent source are then vigorously adopted. I will refer to this later as the evangelical “epistemological dynamic.” Furthermore, evangelicals’ preoccupation with the rapture tends to make their appeals to either change or uphold a certain social value or practice rather pressing.

All of this results in a contemporary evangelical “dominion v. stewardship” debate which embraces the two diverging attitudes in Christianity as represented in the Bible (a unifying element across the religion) regarding creation management with a conceptual clarity and urgency of purpose. This ultimately makes the denominational dialogue a superior vantage point into the whole of Christianity on the issue.

I do not, however, think this philosophical investigation of evangelicalism will perfectly capture a larger debate on the issue within Christianity. The two millennia-old religion, one rife with different factions, has undoubtedly featured more theological nuance than what could have been captured within the three hundred year existence of American evangelicalism. This necessarily narrower investigation simply offers more in understanding this broader debate than any other specific denominational dialogue on the topic.

And, while my goal here of growing the creation care movement among evangelicals won’t affect all Christians, its significance is hardly minor. If those
evangelicals espousing a harsh domination over creation are persuaded – probably within some kind of evangelical ideological context – to adopt more of a pro-environmental sensibility, much needed environmental healing might take hold. One must not forget the eminent political ramifications which would exist in the wake of such a coup, as evangelicals make up approximately one-third of the American population (McCammack 646). Given their propensity for voting ideologically on specific issues regarded as important, pro-environmental presidential and congressional candidates may expect a sizable voting boost from evangelicals. This significance is only magnified when the implications for international sustainability efforts are considered, assuming America continues to enjoy substantial influence in the global community.

Scope, Goal, and Intended Audience of the Thesis

In this thesis, I will primarily be endeavoring to explicate the metaphysical assumptions of both liberal and conservative evangelical communities regarding humans, creation, and their divinely ordained relationship with one another. Aside from this, I will follow historically the development of creation care theology from the early 1970s to present-day and track the conceptual development of the movement. I plan on pursuing the latter by scrutinizing scholarly work published by pro-environmental evangelicals and declarations on the environment by prominent evangelical organizations. Additionally, I will speculate about the possible causes of the growing movement as well as analyze the metaphysical, epistemological, economic, and political elements of conservative evangelical creation management. Ultimately, I will critique the conservative camp’s position on the nature of creation and humanity’s relationship to it as well as offer a pneumatological, panentheistic theological framework as a solution. It will be similar to
that offered by some pro-environmental evangelicals, but capable of achieving needed ecological results.

Though a practical proscription for the conservative evangelical community is attached to this thesis, I believe the project’s value is not wholly dependent upon the realization of any ethical shift. A scholarly analysis of American evangelical thought regarding creation care is worthwhile in its own right, both as it addresses the sociological curiosity surrounding the issue and insofar as it offers a valuable insight into Christianity’s orientation to environmentalism.

Given this theoretical and practical makeup of the thesis, my intended audience is manifold. I expect scholars (including environmental philosophers, philosophers of religion, environmental scientists, sociologists, et cetera) to take interest in this project as well as – what I will dub – “agents of the awakening.” By this, I mean those dedicated to spreading the awareness not only that a profound affliction is facing this planet, but also that we humans are the cause of it and ought to be its solution. These issues should obviously not be of interest and concern to simply those in academia. The health of the biosphere is a province restricted to no one, open to humans from all cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, professions, et cetera. I hope, therefore, this thesis and any other corresponding works within academia or without remain accessible and salient to all such agents. Evangelical creation carists reading this thesis might possess better chances of affecting the project’s goal of an ethos shift mentioned above for their conservative kin. But ultimately it is the opportunity and responsibility of every mindful human resident of this planet to enter into a careful yet urgent dialogue with those opposed to the reclamation of the planet’s well-being.
A Note on Language and a Disclaimer

Before I proceed with this work, though, I would like to offer a few prefacing notes. First, I’d like to address some language deficiencies and liberties that will and already have characterized my writing. Due to a dearth of succinct identifiers capable of referring to both those evangelicals who espouse creation carism and those who don’t, I am pursuing a number of contingencies. I am coining the term “creation-carists” to refer to the latter group, and will also be referring to them as “pro-environmentalist” or “liberal” evangelicals. This second term is something of a misnomer, erroneously implying that other evangelicals are “anti-environmentalist,” which isn’t true. These evangelicals simply value creation in a different, more anthropocentric and utilitarian fashion. In fact, as will be suggested later in this paper, creation-carists themselves might not be sufficiently “environmentalist.” The term “pro-environmentalist” shall henceforth be read as “pro-environmentalist relative to those more anthropocentric evangelicals.” I will not be using its contrast, “anti-environmentalist,” as it is unduly pejorative. Instead, I will be referring to the advocates of the more traditional evangelical treatment of nature as “conservative” evangelicals. The use of the conservative/liberal dialectic is not to necessarily associate with the evangelicals referred to here with any of the political, social, or economic values usually tied to the terms in America.

Secondly, I’d like to note that I am a student of philosophy. I am therefore not approaching this thesis as a theist, tacitly applying various different metaphysical and
epistemological claims. Mentions of “God’s creation” or the divinity of the person known to history as “Jesus of Nazareth” are not to be taken implicitly as claims that God the creator and Father exists. I will be simply speaking from the perspective of evangelicals at such times. Similarly, when I analyze a particular evangelical or generically Christian belief in light of a biblical passage, I am treating the Bible as authoritative only insofar as an evangelical would. On this note, I will not be engaging in any extensive investigation of biblical dictums regarding humanity’s treatment of the environment. Those passages from Genesis key to the development of the Christian notions of creation and humanity’s connection to it will be the only ones analyzed. Though it has characterized other scholarship on the topic, this thesis will not be an exercise in Bible study.

Also, as a philosophy student, I want to state that any scientific claims made in this thesis – most notably that global climate change is a real and eminent threat to the health of the planet as well as all of its resident life forms – are not those of an experienced climatologist or biologist.

Global Climate Change Facts

That having been said, finally, I would like to frame the following exposition by briefly detailing what exactly is at stake according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. This volunteer group of scientists from countries associated with the United Nations and the World Meteorological Organization established in the early 1990s is charged with reviewing “the most recent scientific, technical and socio-economic information produced worldwide relevant to the understanding of climate change” (“Organization”). According to the “Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report Summary for Lawmakers,” atmospheric levels of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide,
methane and nitrous oxide are almost certainly on the rise due to anthropogenic causes – including fossil fuel burning and land-use change. Annual global greenhouse gas emissions have increased seventy percent in the years between 1970 and 2004. In addition to annual temperature increases (as of 2007, eleven of the last twelve years were the hottest on record), human influences on the environment are likely to have caused rising sea levels during the latter half of the twentieth century, increased cyclone intensity, and changes in wind patterns affecting tropical storms. Other affects include less snow cover area, less sea ice, enlarged thaw depth in most permafrost regions, colder as well as warmer days and nights, larger areas affected by droughts, more precipitation in other regions, and additional heat waves (“Climate Change 2007”).

The impending consequences of these human-generated alterations of the natural world are biblical, on par with ten plagues that ravaged ancient Egypt. The chances of wildfire incidents in drier climates will increase, water scarcity issues will arise, and lower crop yields will be experienced in such areas. Droughts in these areas may also become commonplace, spurring population migration, failed agriculture, wildfires, as well as food- and water-borne diseases. Locales experiencing higher amounts of precipitation, on the other hand, will also experience loss of crops, soil waterlogging, contamination of surface and groundwater supplies, increased flooding, as well as the spread of skin, respiratory and infectious diseases. Violent storm activity – notably cyclones – will increase and destroy property, land, and lives. Finally, rising sea levels will too result and cause coastal flooding as well as amplified concentrations of salinity in irrigation water, estuaries, and freshwater systems (“Climate Change 2007”).
Furthermore, implicated in many if not all of these outcomes is a massive amount of species loss and ecosystem collapse.

The affects global climate change, therefore, are hardly restricted to the extinction of a few marginal species relegated to fragile ecosystems at the edge of the earth. It is the overriding reality of our time capable of disrupting the balance of ecosystems across the planet, casting humanity along with many other beings into oblivion. Considering this, global climate change should not just be cause for concern among academics, politicians, and the scientific community. An effective response from humanity must emanate from every available forum, especially those capable of significantly modifying lifestyles and value systems. Thus, it is no surprise that I concern myself with a religious community in this thesis and its capacity to promote sustainability. Indeed, what could be more fundamental and appropriate of a preoccupation for religion than the state of existence itself?

Distinguishing Beliefs and History of the American Evangelical Community

I have thus far referred to the evangelical community here without much context, and will now present a description of their distinguishing beliefs and a brief history of the Christian sect.

Generally speaking, evangelicals believe that the Bible is a particularly authoritative and reliable source of information and that eternal salvation is an intimately personal phenomenon where believers are “born again” in Christ. They also place emphasis on leading a moral life marked by devout Bible study, missions, and evangelizing, the last two of which are concerned with saving the souls of non-believers through conversion. This is motivated by evangelical eschatology, which leads its
believers to be ever-expectant of Jesus’ imminent return. They prepare for the event with steady spiritual and moral progress, ideally culminating in the triumph of the gospel throughout the world. Such conversion is not supposed to be coercive, however, and ought to be achieved through genuine scriptural propagation and reflection leading to a genuine encounter with, and salvation by grace through, Jesus Christ. Evangelicals tend to value individualism and personal freedom, as evidenced in their understanding of salvation as a personal one (Eliade 190-191). Historically, the term “evangelical” has denoted a “gospel-believer,” and has etymological roots in ancient Greek phrase evangelion (ευαγγελιον), meaning “good news” or “good message” (190).

One characteristic that is often erroneously attributed to all evangelicals is the belief in biblical inerrancy, or inherent truth of all those propositions contained in the text. This belief is characteristic of Christian fundamentalists, a subset of the American evangelical community. While all Christian denominations seat some amount of truth and authority within its pages, some view parts of the Bible as containing allegorical truth, for example, or having no relevant truth value at all. Christian fundamentalists reject these selective or interpretative approaches to biblical assessment, viewing every moral edict as well as scientific and historical detail expressed in the Bible as indisputable truth. Stemming from this treatment of biblical authority among fundamentalists is often an organized militancy opposed to modernist theology and secular trends. It is this trait that most notably separates this radical subset from the more mainstream evangelical group (190-191). So, while Christian fundamentalists are often considered to be evangelicals, it is important to note that not all evangelicals are fundamentalists. All subsequent references to evangelicals in this thesis should then be read as signifying the whole of the
evangelical community, with Christian fundamentalist more closely identified by my references to conservative evangelicals.

Although the evangelical movement is often associated with related communities in the British Isles and America, the latter of which this thesis is specifically addressing, the group has its origins in European Protestantism. Protestantism merged with eighteenth century continental European pietism plus their associated renewal movements and awakenings to produce evangelicalism. Protestantism’s tenets regarding the sole authority of the Bible and personal embrace of Jesus as savior were major early influences on the group. By the mid-nineteenth century, evangelicalism was the most typical form of Protestantism in Great Britain. It proved to be even more widespread in America, where it competed with fewer well-established competitors than in Europe (191).

American evangelicalism coalesced in the mid-eighteenth century in the wake of the myriad revivals that characterized the Great Awakening. Subsequently, various strands of Protestantism melded to form this country’s evangelical community and established networks of “volunteer societies” to sponsor their cause (191). These organizations evangelized to needy groups, established Sunday schools along with colleges, distributed Bibles, and largely promoted missionary work around the world as well as progressive social reform at home. Not only did evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic lobby to prohibit slavery, they fought for Sabbatarian and temperance legislation, prison reform, and the founding of private charities. As industrialism began to crowd cities in mid-nineteenth century America, these organizations became overwhelmed and were forced to abandon their exercises in volunteerism. The
evangelical community then shifted its salvific endeavors – performed in light of the impending return of Jesus – away from social engineering to focus on personal holiness. The goal of recasting the whole of society in an evangelical image was never completely deserted, though (191).

An ever more radical challenge than the socioeconomic changes brought on by industrialism was the intellectual shift ushered by Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution in the late nineteenth century. In its wake, Westerners began to view truth and reality as malleable and contingent upon the cultural evolution of humanity rather than fixed and absolute. As a result, sources of divine revelation such as the Bible were cheapened in the imagination of the general public and a schism within the evangelical community began to form. Several evangelical leaders took heed of Darwin’s theory and developed a more modernist brand of evangelical theology. According to it, God interacted with creation through natural processes like evolution, as opposed to through miracles. More traditional circles within the community rejected such trends and became polarized, leading to the rise of Christian fundamentalism. World War I fueled the derision of evolution among the traditionalists, who thought Germany’s lapse into violent barbarism resulted from an undermining of their morals caused by an embrace of a “survival of the fittest” philosophy. This mobilization of fundamentalists was further intensified during the 1920s as Bolshevism and atheism were perceived as on the rise. The era also saw many Victorian ideals fall away and growing Roman Catholicism within the country following decades of European immigration to the United States (192-193).

This period of discord, though, was succeeded by attempts at reconciliation. After the death of Christian fundamentalist leader William Jennings Bryan in 1925, the group’s
influence waned. A coalition of fundamentalists and evangelicals was pursued by the early 1940s with the founding of National Association of Evangelicals and the publication Christianity Today. Both were designed to serve as a platform for the movement. The work of leaders like Charles E. Fuller and Billy Graham further solidified the effort. Fundamentalists went their separate way in the 1950s and continued to further splinter after that. In subsequent decades, they founded a number of what are today termed “megachurches,” including the late Reverend Jerry Falwell’s Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia (193-196).

This coalescing trend among non-fundamentalists contributed to the growth of the national evangelical community to around forty or fifty million by the 1970s. The group began to garner increasing media attention and gained notable political power, contributing to Jimmy Carter’s successful bid for president in 1976. It then engaged in political mobilization, giving rise to the “Moral Majority” in the late 1970s. The group shifted conservatively somewhat and began to vigorously oppose Roe v. Wade as well as legislation favoring homosexuals and women’s empowerment. They supported smaller government, a larger military, and pro-business initiatives, contributing to the political successes of subsequent Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush (195-196).
Framework of a Christian Perspective on Creation

As has already been discussed in the introduction, the evangelical debate about whether humanity should exercise dominion or stewardship over creation uniquely captures the conflicting impulses within a broader Christian framework toward environmentalism. In this section, I will briefly explore these disparate themes and thus lay the groundwork for a more thorough examination of the evangelical debate that will follow.

The modern environmentalism debate in the Western world is mirrored in (if not largely resultant from) the ambiguity of the two thousand-five hundred year old account of Genesis. Is humanity just one product of divine craftsmanship among many, imposing upon us a responsibility to care for the flora and fauna as we do for each other? Or are we to rule over plant and wildlife in a manner that recognizes the needs of humans as chief – though perhaps not a disdainful or capricious one? The answer is not perfectly clear in either of the Genesis creation stories, which are believed to be different Hebrew accounts of creation that were later edited and synthesized to make Genesis 1:1-2:25.

The priestly or first creation story detailed in Genesis 1:1-2:3 cites the fashioning of man and women as the last event of creation, the complete process being assessed by God as satisfactory (Gen. 1:31). The “dominion” language in this excerpt is often taken as the foundation for the charge that humanity is set off and away from the natural world in the eyes of God.
“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over the all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth’” (Gen. 26).

The second creation story, Genesis 2:4-2:25, narrates the generation of Adam and Eve by God. In this version, Adam is created from the dust at a time before plants and animals, seemingly because he is needed to cultivate the former (Gen. 2:5) and his loneliness precipitates the presence of the latter (Gen. 2:18-19). God locates Adam in Eden “in order to till it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15) and allows him to name all of his animal companions (Gen. 2:19).

Neither account then can be characterized as strictly endorsing an intrinsic or extrinsic valuation of creation, stewardship or domination. The first story obviously characterizes humanity’s relationship with plants and animals as “dominion” (at least in this New Oxford translation). But it also features a divine command to all marine life and birds to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:20-22) as well as divine approval of the various types of creation aside from humans. The second has Adam in a steward-like, gardening role, where he is created from the earth and enjoys an amicable relationship with animals. Adam’s fellow beings are, however, created in varying forms of subjugation to him, either needing his care or valued as they provide him companionship.

This Biblical dynamic regarding creation care then plays out in many other sectors of Christianity. Jay McDaniel notes this disparity in Christian attitudes when he says, “While it is an exaggeration to claim that Christianity is largely responsible for negative attitudes toward nature, it is also an exaggeration to claim that it is largely innocent. The truth lies in between” (McDaniel 71). For him, Christian soteriology either involves humans overcoming nature en route to spiritual transcendence or entering into...
an appreciative union with nature, recognizing its more-than-utility value. He notes that support for the latter motif would prominently feature the first creation story. There, humans are simply “creatures among creatures” and God’s satisfaction with creation is not restricted to this species (74). Jesus’ selfless adoption of flesh in order to redeem material creation similarly communicates the divine love for it.

Despite these insights, critiques of the Christian attitude toward creation as anti-environmentalist abound. In a landmark 1967 essay, Lynn White traces the rapacious manipulation of the natural world to Christian dualism irrevocably separating matter from divine spirit. He notes that every spring, waterfall, forest, and hill possessed a guardian spirit in the minds of the ancients which demanded placation before exploitation of the resource could happen. Christian thought subsequently demystified nature for its adherents, destroying “pagan” animism and making the cavalier abuse of habitats possible (White 197). While it is unfair to attribute the notion of mind-body dualism in Western metaphysics totally to Christianity, given the contributing effects of Platonic and Cartesian philosophy historically, it is undeniable that influential Christianity contributed to its rootedness in the tradition.

The effects of this metaphysical insight, according to White, were only exacerbated by the particularly Western Christian notion of natural theology. It posited that God could be further understood through a meticulous investigation of God’s creation (198). This then would have served as a prime motivation for Western empirical scientists, ushering in the age of Enlightenment. White’s line of thought suggests this growing scientific exercise soon embraced and further fueled the development of
technology in the West, the catalyst for industrialism and thus modern Western consumptive lifestyles.

Whitney Bauman pursues a different tack, arguing that the Christian theory of “creatio ex nihilo” (or “creation out of nothing”) spurred violent and voracious European colonialism (Bauman 354). Offered as a response to the ancient Greek concepts of cyclical time and the permanence of matter, she claims creatio ex nihilo implanted in the Christian imagination the power of “erasure of presence” (353-355). This tool of domination helps to account for the European disposition to regard land considered for colonizing as unoccupied, despite the presence of native peoples. It is important to note, though, that creation ex nihilo was not a notion unique to Christianity, existing similarly in Islamic philosophy – as evident in the kalam argument. But, of course, Christianity’s embrace of the notion is what had arguably helped to shape the later actions of these largely Christian Europeans.

Tragically, in addition to being killed and suffering cultural genocide, the indigenous peoples of these settlements were robbed of their land. This is true both in the immediate political sense, but also the enduring, ecological sense. Even decades after many European forces ceded power over the territory, the land they left behind is often dedicated to growing single-export crops. The soil of the land is then depleted of particular nutrients used by that crop, and thus becomes quite unhealthy. The failure of this land then would not only lead to starvation among the native people, but also lead to the collapse of their likely agriculturally-based economy. Further adverse ecological effects such as erosion would then also result. Bauman claims the colonialists were simply mimicking the power of God when labeling such locations “terra nullius” (or
“empty land”), constantly “re-creating” the world in a Christian, European political paradigm (354). It isn’t hard to see how such a mindset could lead to the obviously incorrect yet deeply engrained conviction that the bounty of exploitable creation is limitless, excusing the greed and will to power that also fueled the colonization fervor.

The infamous practice of tree felling by Christian saints bent on converting the animists tribes of Europe is detailed by Nicole Roskos. She recounts briefly a few examples of this practice throughout history, including the destruction of a temple to Apollo and an abutting sacred grove atop Mount Cassino by St. Benedict. She also mentions the report of St. Boniface cutting down the sacred Oak of Thunor, a Saxon thunder deity (Roskos 485).

I have here outlined how the clashing Christian impulses regarding treatment of creation are reflected in Christology and the contrasting biblical accounts of creation. I then briefly examined how these impulses have played out historically. This thesis will now turn to the recent evangelical debate on creation care.

History of the Evangelical Debate

Though it still gains attention today, the creation care movement emerged in the early 1970s. This is only a decade after the publication of Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring,” which engendered the modern American environmental movement. In 1970, one of the first pieces of environmentally-minded evangelical scholarship appeared (Simmons 51). Francis Schaeffer’s “Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology” lamented the then-visible signs of natural decay in the country threatening the ecological health of the planet. These included the DDT-related deaths of sea-feeding birds, the impending extinction of the whale due to over-fishing, as well as the declining
level of water in the Swiss Lac Leman driven by the growing population around it (Schaeffer 9-21). Recognizing the novelty of his effort, the evangelical Schaeffer says, “The distressing thing about this is that orthodox Christians often really have had no better sense about these things than unbelievers. The death of ‘joy’ in nature is leading to the death of nature itself” (11). He contends that Christians can properly champion ecology by developing an affection for other creatures, and letting their well-being affect human activities (more on this later).

The same decade saw two more significant evangelical endeavors related to promoting sustainability. In 1971, the National Association of Evangelicals published a short yet somberly-worded resolution about the health of the planet (Simmons 51). It read, in part,

“Man’s multiplication and progress have combined to create environmental problems of huge proportions on the earth. … We pledge our cooperation to any responsible effort to solve critical environmental problems, and our willingness to support all proven solutions developed by competent authorities. We call upon our constituency to do the same, even at the cost of personal discomfort or inconvenience” (“Resolution”).

The pronouncement was especially significant considering its source, which today claims approximately 30 million members at 50,000 congregations (Harden). Eight years later, the Au Sable Institute was founded in Michigan. This Christian center is dedicated to environmental education, and its director was Calvin DeWitt (Simmons 51).

After the 1970s, coinciding with the two-term presidency of Ronald Reagan and the strengthening of the Moral Majority, the evangelical community fell silent on the issue until August of 1992. At this time, the Au Sable Forum on Evangelical Christianity and the Environment was held, offering a uniquely evangelical promotion of sustainability. The event was triggered by a World Council of Churches conference on
“Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation” held in 1990 in Seoul, South Korea. The conference offered an endorsement of sustainability that some of the evangelical leaders present found dissatisfactory. A 1992 meeting of evangelical leaders then offered an endorsement of environmental efforts in response that recognized the special role of humanity in the process (52).

In the same year, the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) was founded. The organization financially sponsors efforts in private residences as well as churches to establish creation care programs. It also funds research, facilitates conferences, and publishes the respected *Creation Care* magazine. In 1993, the group joined the National Religious Partnership for the Environment with the U.S. Catholic Conference, the Coalition on Jewish Life, as well as the Environment and the National Council of Churches. A year later, the EEN issued “An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation” (52-53). This document opens with, “As followers of Jesus Christ, committed to the full authority of the *Scriptures*, and aware of the ways we have degraded creation, we believe that biblical faith is essential to the solution of our ecological problems” (The Evangelical Environmental Network 223). It continues to list various types of ecological hazards spurred by reckless human action and invites both theologians and other believers to bring to fruition the needed changes (223-226).

In Spring of 2000, the landmark decree known as the “Cornwall Declaration” was issued by prominent conservative leaders of the evangelical community advocating a much more diluted form of environmentalism. It in part reads,

“As concerns about the environment have grown in recent decades, the moral necessity of ecological stewardship has become increasingly clear. At the same time, however, certain misconceptions about nature and science, coupled with
erroneous theological and anthropological positions, impede the advancement of a sound environmental ethic” (“Cornwall Declaration”).

This “sound environmental ethic” is one that would encourage a reduction in harmful pollution, stricter nuclear waste management policies, and seemingly any other policy that would improve the living standards of impoverished people across the world (“Cornwall Declaration”). Anxieties over “destructive manmade global warming, overpopulation and rampant species loss,” on the other hand, are referred to as “unfounded or undue” (“Cornwall Declaration”). The Interfaith Stewardship Alliance (previously the Interfaith Council for Environmental Stewardship) formed around the document in 2005, but became the Cornwall Alliance two years later (Simmons 53-54).

The emerging creation care campaign continued without pause, however. In November of 2000, several evangelical scientists at the international climate negotiations held at The Hague spoke about the realities of climate change. Several evangelical leaders were also present at the Oxford Conference on Climate Change along with dozens of climatologists and politicians from across the world. The event was sponsored by the Au Sable Institute and the John Ray Initiative of Great Britain, which was directed by John Houghton, an evangelical who was co-chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. In 2002, the “What Would Jesus Drive” environmental advocacy campaign was launched by the Evangelical Environmental Network to encourage evangelicals to drive fuel-efficient vehicles (54-55).

Evangelical leadership also congregated in June 2004 at the Sandy Cove Conference and Covenant to discuss creation care – an event cosponsored by the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) as well as the magazine Creation Care. Four months later, “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility” was
overwhelmingly adopted by the NAE. The document outlined the grounds for Christian civic engagement and articulated the methods for such engagement, mentioning global climate change as one issue among many in need of redress. In March of that next year, approximately one hundred evangelical leaders met to consider drafting a single statement regarding global warming. They included the President of the NAE, Ted Haggard, and its Vice President for Governmental Affairs, Richard Cizik. This plan never came to fruition. Another prominent statement entitled “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action” was produced in February 2006, garnering the support of many notable evangelical leaders. These included the pastor of Saddleback Church Rick Warren and the commander of the Salvation Army Jack Hayford (55-56).
Conservative Evangelical Perspective

On a literal, espoused level, the conservative wing of the American evangelical faith is supportive of “caring dominion” and stewardship over God’s creation (“Cornwall Declaration”). As will be discussed here, though, traditionalist evangelical values and theological principles are more anthropocentric than attentive to the needs of creation. These principles seem to be incapable of recognizing – let alone dealing with – humanity’s current ecological crisis. I am starting with an explication of this group’s understanding of humanity, creation, and their relationship with one another. This will offer context to the preferable theological position articulated by creation carists.

At the heart of conservative evangelicals’ environmental orientation is their firm commitment to humanity’s having been “created in the image of God, given a privileged place among creatures, and commanded to exercise stewardship over the earth” (“Cornwall Declaration”). Though this tenet is replicated across much of Christianity, conservative evangelicals elevate it to a uniquely authoritative level. With the imago dei (“image of God”) characteristic of humans in mind, statements like the Cornwall Declaration seem to treat positive human roles in an oddly default manner. This formative document in particular begins with the assertion that “the past millennium brought unprecedented improvements in human health, nutrition, and life expectancy” (“Cornwall Declaration”). The wonderments of human science and technology are notably stressed here. It continues with, “At the same time, many are concerned that
liberty, science, and technology are more a threat to the environment than a blessing to humanity and nature,” as if they were blissfully unaware of the destructive side of science (“Cornwall Declaration”). This is definitely not the case, though, considering the late nineteenth and twentieth century evangelical preoccupation with the threat of evolutionary theory to the human condition.

While conservative evangelicals recognize the harm that science can do to human beings, they seem to ignore the wide-ranging, destructive consequences it can have for creation. I say “wide-ranging” because conservative evangelicals do recognize unfortunate yet relatively minor environmental phenomena such as pollution and poor land use policies as harmful and originating with humans. But “destructive manmade global warming, overpopulation, and rampant species loss” are “speculative” and are only “of concern mainly to environmentalists in wealthy nations” for these evangelicals (“Cornwall Declaration”).

In fact, far from admitting our destructive impact, conservative evangelicals actually emphasize the strongly positive influence that humans have with creation. Another part of the Cornwall Declaration states, “Many people mistakenly view humans as principally consumers and polluters rather than producers and stewards. Consequently, they ignore our potential, as bearers of God’s image, to add to the earth’s abundance” (“Cornwall Declaration”). So, while they denounce pollution production and forms of resource exploitation harmful to humans, they defend the species as undeniably virtuous.

“Humanity alone of all the created order is capable of developing other resources and can thus enrich creation, so it can properly be said that the human person is the most valuable resource on earth,” it continues (“Cornwall Declaration”).
Considering this, it is hardly surprising that the authors of the treatise go on to promote global economic growth, particularly in the most impoverished areas of the world where disease and malnutrition run rampant. Such a push would eventually allow, they argue, more spending on environmental clean-up efforts and would best be pursued through the spread of capitalist, free market economies. In other words, the solution to environmental degradation – where it actually exists – and human suffering alike is to more efficiently and intensely exploit natural resources. This would produce the capital necessary to solve both problems.

Conservative Evangelical Analysis

A number of significant factors bear on this community’s unique appraisal of creation and formulation of its relationship to humanity, all of which need to be altered if conservative evangelicals are to adopt a hearty environmental ethic. Among these are their deep-seated metaphysical convictions regarding the nature of humanity and creation, the epistemological dynamic characterizing fundamentalist belief systems, and political as well as economic philosophies. Each of these will be explored here, with special attention paid to how each interacts with or arises out of evangelical theology.

The first of these domains has already been broached on an apparent, espoused level, but further investigation is warranted. We know conservative evangelicals think of humans as divinely sanctioned cultivators of the physical world, but the full extent of this insight is needed to grasp entirely their environmental outlook and its effect on the planet. I contend that this stewardship is not treated by its advocates as just one opportunity among many to show reverence for God. Nor is it even just a significant opportunity to care for the poor or oppressed. I think this brand of stewardship for conservative
evangelicals is nothing less than humanity’s essential mission to imitate an omnipotent God capable of *creatio ex nihilo*.

The commitment of these evangelicals to the troubled belief that creation is of near infinite bounty and thus exploitable without probable negative ecological consequences could be motivated by this metaphysical belief. In order for the comparison between God and his worshipers to hold, humans would need to be able to exercise an influence on creation similar to that of a divine being. Conservative evangelicals such as Robert Whelan believe that God’s mode of interaction with the world is all-encompassing, constant, and necessary – sustaining “it in existence at every moment” (Whelan 48). A parallel capacity for cultivation by humans would then involve our ability to exert extreme influence on creation, defying innate (material finitude) and consequential (e.g. global climate change) limitations. I therefore take their cavalier endorsement of runaway economic growth predicated on prolonged resource exploitation and their unflagging objection to any formidable ecological consequence of human actions as evidence for this metaphysical belief. That is, this radicalized form of the already established evangelical *imago dei* tenet seems to be the most logical explanation for the odd conservative beliefs regarding the durability of creation.

Worshippers of God would not be able to fashion matter out of nonexistence similar to God, *per se*, but would still be able to exert significant – if not inexhaustible – influence over matter. So, even if humanity’s treatment of creation looks like it is often destructive, this immutable, divinely installed resiliency of matter would ultimately secure it in the face of a humanity made to be cultivating/exploitative.
In fact, conservative evangelical thinkers such as Calvin Beisner find creation so resistant to human influence, they think that increasing levels of anthropogenic carbon dioxide in fact cultivate creation rather than squash it. In an article defending the effects of greenhouse gases, they say, “Rising CO2 – presumably what drives global warming – enhances agricultural yield. For every doubling of atmospheric CO2 concentration, there is an average 35 percent increase in plant growth efficiency” (Beisner et al. 7). This underscores the belief that, for conservative evangelicals, humankind and our technological progress is requisite for any flourishing of creation. Without us, ecological systems would fall into disarray, akin to an untilled agricultural plot. The authors of the Cornwall Declaration, after all, accuse anyone thinking “nature knows best” of inappropriate “romanticism” (“Cornwall Declaration”). The notion of natural balance is foreign to such an ideology, and conservative evangelicals are casting humans in a demiurgic role as providers of it. Brian McCammack echoes this reading of Beisner’s work. When discussing Beisner’s response to the argument that the negative effects of carbon dioxide on the environment far outstrip the positive, McCammack says,

“Citing Psalm 19:1–6, Beisner’s answer to this argument is that God is too wise and his creation too adaptable to be much negatively affected by mankind’s activities. Such a construction, along with Beisner’s argument that CO2 emissions are actually beneficial for the environment, could easily be taken as a blank check for environmental exploitation” (McCammack 648).

At the heart of the conservative evangelical brand of environmentalism, then, is this commitment to the role of humans designed by God regarding creation management. As omnipotent God bestowed life upon imperfect humanity out of a loving domination, so are we to do with base matter. Instead of leaving it to its own inadequate devices, humans are to invest care in and subsequently imbue it with worth. Conservative
evangelicals’ claims that matter is inherently worthy as represented in the Cornwall Declaration are then quite difficult to take seriously. They aren’t, after all, recognizing and admiring preexisting value in trees and streams, but rather gracing them with valued human agency in its transformation from base stuff to valuable resources. Creation isn’t legitimately valued in this paradigm.

Second, the epistemological dynamic of evangelical faith deserves exposition. As I noted above, evangelicalism features a particular scriptural fundamentalism which conditions denominational discourse on many issues. This is particularly true of those issues at the heart of evangelical faith, such as the propriety of creation management, which involve deep-seated metaphysical beliefs.

Though clear disagreements have transpired amidst the dominion v. stewardship debate between conservative evangelicals and creation carists, they don’t constitute the most interesting epistemological dynamic involved here. Rather, the frequently cited lack of scientific consensus on global climate change by the former group as well as their characterization of environmentalism as a religion is.

While some critiques of conservative evangelicals may bandy charges of gross incompetence or anti-scientism, I feel neither charge is warranted. The high standard for beliefs preferred by evangelicals and their critiques of opposing theories hardly entail a wholesale rejection of objective, empirical-based reasoning. Nor does it mean that they simply can’t comprehend climatology or any other type of science. I instead think that, due to the aforementioned tendency toward scriptural fundamentalism, evangelicals possess a uniquely rigorous standard for the consensus they seek on issues such as global climate change. Thus, they may just appear as unreasonable. I also think their
characterization of the “green” movement as a religion is legitimately an instance of structural critique.

Though the term may often be applied to scholarly deliberations, the type of consensus that I imagine to be of such great importance to the evangelical community is congregational. Any religious community largely invested in a source of authority foundational to their worldview will feature an expectation of wide-ranging, shared support for those truths recognized by the community. Regardless of how or in what context that support is expressed and developed, the force of it to bind a community and strengthen their ideological resolve is undeniable. Without this structure in place, one can imagine how disoriented any such believer might feel. This isn’t to suggest that evangelicals solicit the opinions of their peers on all matters in order to make a decision about what to believe. It seems hard to imagine, for example, that they would choose to buy a particular car only after securing their peers’ unanimous endorsement. But an evangelical’s resignation to the existence of global warming, involving the acceptance of particular key metaphysical assumptions, is hardly a trivial matter. Indeed, it gets at the heart of evangelical theology and associated cosmology.

This faith-related epistemological dynamic is evident when Robert Whelan equates “scientific certainty” with “conclusive scientific evidence” during his critique of global climate change as a theory (Whelan 11). He seems to note that the presence of segments in the scientific community denying the existence of the phenomenon occasions doubt sufficient to suspend judgment on the matter. This sentiment is echoed in a letter from Calvin Beisner, Charles Colson, James Dobson, and other evangelical leaders in the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance (currently the Cornwall Alliance) to heads of the National
Association for Evangelicals. It was regarding a section of a document drafted by the NAE promoting evangelical civic engagement, called, “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility.” Beisner et al. were unhappy with the last area of civic engagement addressed by the document – environmental stewardship. Part of it read, “We affirm that God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part” (“A Letter”).

The scope of policy offered in this relatively short section buried under others targeting abortion and poverty isn’t overwhelming. The NAE authors simply urged evangelicals and other Christians to recycle, conserve, and experience “the joy of contact with nature” (“For the Health of the Nation” 12). They encouraged governments to do slightly more, asking them to “encourage fuel efficiency, reduce pollution, encourage sustainable use of natural resources, and provide for the proper care of wildlife and their natural habitats” (12). No mandates were suggested, no ethos shift was lobbied for, and the treatise’s tone wasn’t urgent.

Despite the relatively soft touch of the NAE authors, staunch and presumptive criticism from Beisner et al. ensued. They wrote in the response letter,

“Global warming is not a consensus issue, and our love for the Creator and respect for His creation does not require us to take a position. We are evangelicals and we care about God’s creation. However, we believe there should be room for Bible-believing evangelicals to disagree about the cause, severity and solutions to the global warming issue” (“A Letter”).

Even though “global warming” was never mentioned in the NAE document and all but one of the advocated policy positions (improved fuel standards) find some support within the Cornwall Declaration, these conservative leaders were moved to register their lack of assent (“For the Health of the Nation” 12). The response letter doesn’t include any
explicit challenge to the existence of global warming, however. Considering the ardent and forthright way with which these believers often articulate and defend important theological positions, it is unlikely that the intent of the letter was to invalidate the position under the disingenuous veil of persistent discord. That is, if the conservative evangelicals thought of the position as scripturally unsupported or even heretical, they would have said so directly. The nature of the retort instead points to the epistemological dynamic described above, where explicit and perhaps unanimous assent to an article of faith – no matter how subtle – must be established before promulgating it. With this theological convention in mind, Beisner and the others were probably simply trying to set the record straight on what they believe (that there is indeed disagreement on the topic), not furtively stifle the opposition.

The oft-used conservative evangelical strategy of suggesting that scientific theories like global climate change demand a religious-like commitment to be believed reveals another interesting aspect of the group’s epistemological moorings. The tactic is certainly not derogatory, as evangelicals would simply be insulting their own religious orientation as fantastical and ill-informed – what the depiction is usually taken to mean – if it was. Instead, the allegation is often accompanied by some form of theoretical or methodological critique of climate-change science similar to arguments scientists skeptical of its existence use. In fact, Beisner’s abovementioned argument that increases in carbon dioxide levels would – if anything – grow plant life and not kill it is replicated in the infamous Oregon Petition (Robinson, Robinson, and Soon 79). This document has garnered thousands of signatures of academics with scientific backgrounds (Kearns 110-111).
But if science is indeed embraced by conservative evangelicals, why are evangelical scientific accounts so misguided and incompatible with the more established authorities? As is the case with their demand for solidarity, the explanation lies within evangelical theology. As I have stated above, this theology involves certain metaphysical presuppositions that mainstream science doesn’t posit. When evangelicals hear climate change scientists claim that human actions are drastically harming the earth, they recognize that these scientists are operating without a “proper” (read “evangelical”) understanding of the human condition. That is, they don’t recognize the key truth that humans are divinely fashioned cultivators populating a realm specifically designed by God to accommodate their stewardship (i.e. not break down because of it). Thus, these secular scientists’ efforts constitute erroneous and incomplete science – promoting an environmental ethic that is rationally indefensible. Without any support from reason, conservative evangelicals attribute propagation of climate change-science to the religious belief its proponents have in it.

To quickly summarize, complaints that evangelicals are anti-scientific or opposed to rational discourse are bogus. Their seemingly constant appeal to a lack of consensus on issues like global climate change can be explained by their uniquely high standard of proof inspired by their theological convention of scriptural fundamentalism. The conservative evangelical refrain that environmentalism is a religion doesn’t imply a devaluation of science. It actually results from the structuralist critique that other types of science are insufficient as they aren’t equipped with significant, metaphysical “facts.”

And what of conservative evangelical economics as well as politics and their influence on creation management within the group?
In “Cooking the Truth: Faith, Science, the Market, and Global Warming,” Laurel Kearns argues that, though the evangelical creation care debate is often depicted as a fight between religion and science, economics is oftentimes the most important factor (107). She says, “Although groups would like to convince people on pure ethical or scientific terms, it is often much easier to convince people to take the right and moral action when it makes good economic sense” (107). Regardless of their environmental position, all evangelicals tend to emphasize capitalism, free market economics, and business growth. While such a desire is undoubtedly self-incentivized in certain cases, the broader, theological-based motivation for this is to combat poverty, malnutrition, and other social ills.

The two interdenominational groups can differ in their economic philosophies, though, in order to promote different environmental effects. Creation carists would support any type of economic growth not predicated on the wanton destruction of ecosystems. Contending that economists, business ethicists, and evangelical theologians all need to better understand and champion sustainable development, John Jefferson Davis presents a framework for this type of balance. The largest problem with the current U. S. economic model is that it is prone to misinterpreting the true value of certain items (Davis 266). He says,

“Traditional categories of cost accounting such as Gross Domestic Product and depreciation have not reflected the true environmental and social costs of environmental activity. ... Keynesian economics counts the cost of depreciation of a factory, buts tends to ignore the depreciation of natural resources such as soil fertility and clean water, treating the environment as a ‘free’ good” (267).

This myopic approach to industrial production obviously entails ecological “costs,” but traditional financial costs definitely accompany these. The massive draining
of the Florida Everglades by the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers is an example of this. Though the economic value posed by the increasingly developed and urbanized land in the area was obvious, the even greater value of the wetlands went unnoticed. Now facing water scarcity in the coastal Florida cities, the state is pursuing a massive wetlands restoration project projected to cost $11 billion (Wright 281). As Davis notes, a mindful approach of economic growth would bear in mind these traditionally overlooked assets and maintain their integrity if not improve upon it (Davis 275). Such a model would be perfect for pro-environment and pro-business creation carists.

Conservative evangelicals, on the other hand, would more often than not dismiss such hybridized approaches as financially wasteful. Sticking with Davis’ example, these evangelicals may support cleaning up toxic pollution, but would either reject the notion of soil fatigue completely or would simply advocate a constant cycle of soil use and factory transfer. This conservative evangelical form of efficient economic strategy is predicated on the understanding that humans are charged with God-like cultivation and thus are equipped by God with accommodatingly durable creation. What Joanna Macy refers to as the “Industrial Growth Society” results from this type of thinking (Macy and Brown 15). She says the logic of this type of system is, “exponential, demanding not only ‘growth,’ but rising rates of growth” (16). This constant growth then not only exhausts increasing amounts of resources, but produces increasing amounts of waste.

The integral role played by metaphysics here is mirrored in conservative evangelical politics. The group is sometimes portrayed as obsessed with abortion, gay rights, and political freedom to the exclusion of matters such as creation management, but I don’t think this is a valid characterization (McCammack 645). While it is true that
conservative evangelicals often focus on the preceding issues in their political engagement, it isn’t because they don’t care about creation. Indeed, they know that they don’t have to care, as creation is quite resilient to our exploitation per this metaphysical belief. Therefore, creation is often treated in their politics as a platform for the aggrandizement of humans. If, for example, a traditionalist evangelical supports nation-building efforts to stem the spread of AIDS or to raise people out of poverty, it will be achieved through rampant resource exploitation needed to generate wealth. But beyond devaluing creation forthrightly in their proactive politics, this group also does it indirectly through defensive politics. When these evangelicals encounter environmental advocates in the public square, they will marginalize their agenda as oddly romantic and conspiratorial (Whelan 38). These “greens” are accused of using the exigency entailed by the death of the planet to implement an evil one-world government capable of employing the rest of their sordid policies (25).

This political engagement is only enhanced by the belief of dispensationalism among some members of the group. They believe that the return of Jesus is so close that stewardship over the planet would be a waste of time (Neff 35). Consequently, dispensationalist evangelicals often endorse urgently exploiting nature – or at least defending the ability to do so – for the improvement of human living standards or saving souls before the rapture (Studebaker 948). (I will be offering a rebuttal to this dispensational tendency in the “Pneumatological Panentheistic Solution” section of this thesis.)

My analysis of conservative evangelicals’ orientation to environmentalism has established two significant determinations. First, their economic and political
philosophies as well as their understanding of sound science are wholly predicated upon their commitment to the metaphysical account of humanity as divinely ordained “cultivators.” Second, evangelical epistemology involves a cautious and rigid treatment of issues central to their belief systems, such as creation management. These determinations are significant, as they contribute to a thorough understanding of conservative evangelicals’ treatment of the environment in those three paradigms that matter most – science, economics, and politics.

If a sustainability shift for these Christians is possible, a strategy of implementation is coming into sight here. Conservative evangelicals must, through a relatable theological framework sensitive to their scriptural fundamentalism-based epistemology, be persuaded to abandon the key metaphysical understanding of humans as demiurgic cultivators. They must adopt in its place a belief embracing those scientific, economic, and political principles consonant with a vigorous and legitimate environmental ethic. By analyzing the creation careist approach to stewardship now, I will begin to show just how this type of persuasion can commence.

Liberal Evangelical Perspective

What I have termed in this thesis the “liberal” evangelical approach to environmentalism is still in its infancy relative to the more traditional tack pursued by “conservative” members of the denomination. As has been detailed already, the 1970s featured the publication of Francis Schaeffer’s “Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology” as well as the first statement generated by the National Association of Evangelicals regarding the environment. The momentum of the movement peters out, though, until the 1990s when its revitalization accompanies the founding of
the Evangelical Environmental Network (Simmons 51-52). A number of richer, more nuanced declarations and works of scholarship from liberal evangelicals proceeds from this point, culminating in the recognition of a growing rift in the community today over the topic. I will now trace the ideological/conceptual development of the movement as represented in these treatises from its humble beginnings forty years ago to the present-day.

Schaeffer presents humanity as both above and among creation, where we are gifted by God with “dominion” over creation, but not are not “sovereign over” it (Schaeffer 69). He later explains that since the inception of original sin caused by the Fall of Adam and Eve, “man has exercised this dominion wrongly. He is a rebel who has set himself at the center of the universe” (71). As evidenced in the numerous ecological emergencies listed in the text, Schaeffer is saying that humans have and continue to adopt a misguided and abusive relationship with nature. He doesn’t explore in any great depth how this abuse plays out through economic or land-use processes, and focuses as much on the individual’s spiritual relationship with creation as he does society’s. He says, “The Christian stands in front of the tree, and has an emotional reaction toward it, because the tree has a real value in itself, being a creature made by God. I have this in common with the tree: we were made by God” (77). Schaeffer is suggesting that humankind – on an individual level as much as any other – is wrongfully exercising a heavy-handed influence over creation that both inappropriately exalts us and disparages it. To offer context to his position, he proffers a number of positive, though puzzling, moral proscriptions. Among these is an appeal not to strip bark off of a tree just for the sake of it, in lieu of any practical value associated with the action. He also asks that his readers
treat ants more respectfully when outdoors, their proper domain, as opposed to inside a house, where God did not “make the ant to be” (74).

This initial expression of liberal evangelical environmentalism argues for an attitude quite different from the conservative one. It promotes a hands-off approach to creation for humans rather than a necessarily offensive, officious one. This insight becomes clearer when Schaeffer advocates land development policies that take into account the well-being of the ecosystems and dedicate financial resources to preserving them amidst mining or construction. Creation seems to be best cared for in this unfolding liberal evangelical paradigm when humanity’s often harmful interaction with it is mitigated.

The first statement by the NAE on environmentalism – the 1971 “Resolution on the Environment and Ecology” – as well recognizes the perverse control humans have exerted over creation (Simmons 51). Identifying this natural decay as the “waste and pollution of natural resources,” this declaration laments humanity’s failure to both faithfully steward over God’s creation and ensure our continued existence (“Resolution”). The NAE authors, similarly to Schaeffer, blame this degradation on the “multiplication and progress” of humans which have formed “environmental problems of huge proportions on the earth” (“Resolution”). The document further claims that “drastic restrictions upon present standards of living in the developed countries” are necessary components of the solution (“Resolution”).

The next major advocacy piece for creation care doesn’t emerge until 1994 with the release of the Evangelical Environmental Network’s “An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation” (Simmons 53). Twenty years separates the release of this statement
from its NAE predecessor, and the increasingly substantive piece reflects this. Humans are yet again identified as “embedded in the same systems of physical, chemical, and biological interconnections which sustain other creatures” (The Evangelical Environmental Network 225). The document maintains, though, that humans are made in the image of God, assigned the task of stewardship. The EEN statement acutely grasps the adverse effects humanity has had on creation. Whereas the NAE statement framed planetary ecological dilapidation in the form of shoddy resource management, the EEN identifies the following as problems: “1) land degradation; 2) deforestation; 3) species extinction; 4) water degradation; 5) global toxification; 6) the alteration of atmosphere; 7) human and cultural degradation” (224). This thoroughly ecological perspective on the crisis as opposed to the NAE’s more anthropocentric focus on resource management then allows for a more forceful indictment of environmental abuse anchored in God’s valuing creation.

Another, even more revolutionary element is contained in this declaration, though. In addition to the richer relationship of humanity to creation developed here, the text reveals an undoubtedly sager notion of creation itself. It says that “Many of these degradations are signs that we are pressing against the finite limits God has set for creation. With continued population growth, these degradations will become more severe” (224). The insight that began to emerge in the NAE pronouncement – that increased human population growth is problematic – comes to its logical conclusion here with the suggestion that creation cannot bear humanity’s constant exploitation. The EEN still promotes “the development of just, free economies” for the empowerment of the poor, but only “without diminishing creation’s bounty” (226). An encouragement of
“lifestyle choices” that demonstrate “humility, forbearance, self restraint and frugality” over “wastefulness and overconsumption” based on the teachings of Jesus is also expressed here (226).

Ten more years would pass until the publication of “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility” (Simmons 55). It was a seminal statement from the NAE regarding the engagement of evangelicals in a broader sociopolitical context, urging its audience to realize its potential as an influential force in the American electorate (“For the Health of the Nation” 1). Abortion, legitimate political representation, religious freedoms and compassion for the poor were all discussed in the document, culminating in a relatively short address of environmental issues. It reads in part, “We affirm that God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part” (11). The following characterization of the environmental damage being inflicted by humans is once again couched in both divine and anthropocentric terms – bad both because it hurts human communities and is an insult to God. More importantly, the document reiterates the fragility of creation and humanity’s capacity for harming it. Part of it reads, “Because natural systems are extremely complex, human actions can have unexpected side effects. We must therefore approach our stewardship of creation with humility and caution” (12). As has already been discussed, this statement is also the first articulation of the creation care perspective that offers particular policy suggestions for remedying humanity’s relationship with the earth.

Finally, we have the most comprehensive and urgent call from the liberal evangelical community to date related to creation care. In 2006, the Evangelical Climate
Initiative (ECI) issues the “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action,” a document signed by a number of high-profile evangelical leaders, many of whom were considered to be outside the reach of such a movement (Simmons 56). The document notes, though, that for these leaders, “study, reflection, and prayer” over “the last several years” had persuaded them that “climate change is a real problem and that it ought to matter to us as Christians” (“Call to Action”). Previously, many of its signers avowedly didn’t consider global climate change to be a “pressing issue or major priority” (“Call to Action”).

Four significant claims are set forth in the document, each of which indicates a further polarization of the creation care group away from a more traditional evangelical environmental model. The first resounding assertion is that anthropogenic global climate change is an actual phenomenon, one reinforced by the testimony of both scientists and government officials. The second claim takes a 2001 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report as its foundation. Cited in the ECI document as possible repercussions of this global phenomenon are droughts, agriculture failure, rising sea levels, floods, and tropical disease, all of which the document says disproportionately affect poor people. Part of this section reads, “The earth’s natural systems are resilient but not infinitely so, and human civilizations are remarkably dependent on ecological stability and well-being” (“Call to Action”). Third, a biblical basis offering a stewardship reading of Genesis as well as a valuation of creation that both exalts God and benefits human existence is offered. Fourth, and perhaps most shockingly, the signers call on governments, churches, individuals, and businesses to assume an active role in stemming the production of anthropogenic greenhouse gases. That’s right, an evangelical declaration actually demands that “national legislation requiring sufficient economy-wide reductions in
carbon dioxide emissions through cost-effective, market-based mechanisms such as a cap-and-trade program” (“Call to Action”).

The evolution of the creation carist philosophy to one utterly distinct from that of the conservative evangelical community is achieved in “Call to Action.” I will now track the development of this philosophy relative to its traditional foil.

Liberal Evangelical Analysis

While Schaeffer’s message was quite advanced for its time, it bears noticeable signs of naïveté to a contemporary audience. We are, after all, sadly equipped with an awareness more acute than his of the destructive influence of humanity on creation, due to our relative proximity to the proverbial biotic breaking-point. He is, of course, the first to suggest in prominent fashion that there are adverse ecological consequences of human behavior transpiring globally, evangelicals have a stake in the fight, and creation has inherent value as God’s product. In fact, he is the first to claim that Christians are best poised to address environmental concerns. He argues that an ethic based on pure pragmatism developed by Richard Means is unworkable, due to the secularist’s inability to appeal to morality to establish a normative value according to Schaeffer (Schaeffer 27). Means simply argues that individuals’ exploitation of the planet ought to take into account the effects their actions have on the rest of the species (Means 125). The creation carists of the future also get their first sense with Schaeffer that humans cannot and should not be demiurgic cultivators – that in fact such an existence would be sinful and not divinely approved.

Schaeffer therefore lays the essential groundwork for the interdenominational movement that I am writing about today, but tragically stops short of a critical insight.
Questions about resource exploitation methodology come up in his work, but he never asks whether humanity should continue to develop – either altogether or in certain ways. His example of the Swiss mountain town receiving electricity leads to a concern about how the land developers are situating electric cables in relation to the mountain biome (Schaeffer 84). Schaeffer, however, never asks whether the remote town ought to get electricity at all, in light of the potential ecological costs. The appropriateness of development at this early stage of the creation care movement is seemingly a foregone conclusion, and Schaeffer’s work is therefore insufficient. Any truly capable sustainability ethic must be prepared to dramatically curtail high consumption rates responsible for global climate change.

This crucial piece of the puzzle is contained in the first NAE statement, though, where the exponentially growing human population is identified as problematic and a more responsible living standard is identified as a solution (“Resolution”). Indeed, progress itself is not simply brought into question regarding its ability to lift humanity and creation out of degradation; it is recognized as spurring on the spoilage. Dominion over creation, which was extolled by conservative evangelicals as human ingenuity capable of salvaging creation, is yet again maligned as the greedy and shortsighted obliteration of nature.

The EEN declaration brings to the movement the first sophisticated grasp on the ecological problem before us, but the most significant contribution of this text is its understanding of creation and thus its relationship to humanity. The affirmation of the finitude and therefore frailty of creation furthers the creation carist rejection of key conservative evangelical metaphysical presuppositions. Schaeffer suggested that
humanity was inappropriately hurting nature and exalting itself through its treatment of nature, and the first NAE statement explicitly identified this amorphous “treatment” as concerted human resource exploitation and development. The EEN understanding of creation as limited helps to reinforce the consistent creation carist rejection of humans as demiurgic cultivators. But, instead of simply objecting to this account of human-creation interaction, the document provides its own unique version of the relationship. As a replacement for an ethic based on domination over creation, the EEN endorses stewardship embracing “humility, forbearance, self restraint and frugality” (The Evangelical Environmental Network 226). This constitutes a total subversion of the latter, offering a metaphysical framework capable of supporting a true sustainability shift.

The second NAE endorsement of creation care in “For the Health of the Nation” is rather short, but it reaffirms most of the previously discussed elements of creation care philosophy. Unique to it, though, is the clear prominence granted to environmentalism. More anthropocentric issues have traditionally dominated evangelical thought, and this is reflected in the guide to civic engagement. But, the significance of creation care being elevated to the level of these topics should not be understated. One must also remember the NAE’s mainstream status, and therefore the pressure it must feel to reflect an agenda supported by at least the majority of American evangelicals. Specific governmental policy and private lifestyle initiatives are also first presented in this document, transplanting creation care from a theoretical discourse to a practically-engaged ethic.

The ECI then completes the 180° turn for this community, with a message nearly indistinguishable from any expression of modern, secular environmentalism. Its endorsement of mainstream scientific authority on global climate change and staunch
advocacy for cap-and-trade legislation designed to reduce CO\textsubscript{2} output (by the
government, no less) is completely different from the creation management philosophy
espoused by conservative evangelicals (“Call to Action”). The attitudes toward
economics, science, and politics contained in this declaration are indeed quite capable of
promoting a true environmental ethic.

So what can account for this magnificent catharsis of liberal evangelicalism, such
that they are exemplars of stewardship and no longer perpetrators of ecological abuse? I
answer that the creation carists’ abandonment of the demiurgic cultivator model for
humanity as well as its replacement with an ethic of humility and reverence for God’s
intrinsically valuable creation is responsible. With this particular conservative evangelical
metaphysical belief goes the troubled endorsement of continual resource expansion, a
science unable to reach the most elementary conclusions, and a set of politics unwilling
to promote the reclamation of nature. Instead, the ethic of humble reverence toward God
and thus God’s creation promotes the exact tendencies needed in a capable
environmentalism. These namely include respect for the complexity of nature and an
openness to a diminution of human consumption habits.

But what of the binding force of the congregational identity discussed in the
section detailing conservative evangelical ideology? Is it not too present among liberal
evangelicals? Is it somehow overcome for those evangelicals that transition from one
group to the other?

As I have struggled to illustrate here, evangelicals are not immune to
countervailing evidence that challenges a particular belief or ideology – whether it be
scientific or theological, empirical or rational. The distinguishing characteristic of
evangelical epistemology is simply that it oftentimes requires a burden of proof more formidable than that employed by other types of communities to be satisfied in order for an ideological shift among evangelicals to take affect, one sufficient to overcome that congregational block. I can’t, however, definitively identify where the threshold between sufficient and lacking evidence can be drawn in light of this communal dynamic. Once the shift has been realized among a coalescing group of then liberal evangelicals, the dynamic once again comes into play among that fledging group. A unique congregational identity is then formed around their mutual principles, meaning that the dynamic is never simply and utterly overcome or abolished.

Account of the Creation Care Movement

In order to both truly understand the creation care movement as well as replicate it across the whole of the evangelical community, one would need to explore the factors that have given and continue to give rise to the shift. I will endeavor to do just that here.

As I have thus far suggested, evangelicals are not immune to or disinterested in non-theological influences on the development and maintenance of their worldview. It is my contention that theology primarily concerns members of this Christian sect. These non-theological influences might be scientific, empirical, sociological, political, and economic. If a particular believer’s job is in the timber industry, and his financial security depends on weak restrictions on logging, his opposition to stringent environmentalism may be prominently couched in economic terms (Moyers). Another evangelical’s strict opposition to abortion may lead that person to support whichever political candidate or party that prevents abortion, regardless of the party’s or candidate’s position on environmental conservation.
Such influences work both ways, however, and can actually open up the window for an adoption of creation care. The infamous bulwark of the Christian Right, Pat Robertson, offers a great example of the profound effects empirical observations can have on people, regardless of their previous mindset. Despite having denied the existence of global warming for years prior, he announced in 2006 his belief that the phenomenon is real. He explained his decision by simply noting that particular summer was unseasonably hot. Though he buffered the empirical claim with scientific ones regarding the reality of melting ice caps and rising atmospheric CO$_2$ levels, it is clear that the heat was the catalyst for change here (Moyers).

Another, less whimsical, instance of empirical evidence coming to bear on a countervailing theological culture is related to the Christians for the Mountains organization in West Virginia. Due to their proximity to mining operations in the mountainous state, many Appalachian evangelicals are not only surrounded by an increasingly flat and unseemly landscape. They are also forced to contend with water supplies contaminated with toxic “slurry,” the liquid byproduct of coal processing either stored in huge pits atop leveled mountains or in abandoned underground mine shafts. From either location, the sludge can leech into the groundwater and subsequently cause serious health issues for the local population which drinks it. Judy Bonds, a leading protestor against mountaintop removal, was moved by the very sight of the suffering of her community. She said in an episode of “Moyers on America” titled “Is God Green?,“ “It was the injustice that I saw that was being heaped upon the people, the blasting, and the children suffering from the coal dust and the elderly suffering from the coal dust and the flooding, and I began to pray for help, for guidance” (Moyers).
In addition to empirical evidence, sociological pressures may as well be exerting influence on the growing creation care movement. Michael Schut communicated to me in a July 28 interview that aging dynamics as well as a dialogue with lay community members may be fueling the shift for some congregations. He is a former staff member of Earth Ministry and current associate program officer for economic and environmental affairs in the Episcopal Church’s Advocacy Center. He also has some personal history with the evangelical tradition. The growing numbers of young, relatively impressionable members of the evangelical community may be introducing more ideological flexibility into the group, he says. This might occur as they increasingly view and respond to environmental issues expressed in the media and forms of entertainment. Similarly, the influence of laymen and laywomen within the community noted by Schut demonstrates the viability of non-theological agents of change. If there is an openness at the congregational level to the influence of laypeople, he says, they can,

“form a ‘green’ team or begin to do something visible in their church, whether it is [an] explicit curriculum of … [teaching] Sunday school or it’s the implicit curriculum of doing an energy audit and retrofitting or changing light bulbs and … using no pesticides on their lawn and maybe planting a garden. All of these [are] ways of teaching and modeling a certain worldview” (Schut).

Despite the variety of non-theological influences impinging upon these evangelicals, religious doctrine often holds the most sway over them. Echoing this, Schut said a spiritual transformation, or a “change of the heart,” is probably a component of most ideological shifts among evangelicals. As advocates of evangelization and religious rebirths in Christ, it is only appropriate that the creation care movement spreads by way of personal conversion. This spiritual shift is oftentimes precipitated in this community through the influence of a mentor or congregational leader who then works to build the
emerging communal identity among the liberal evangelicals. Schut added, “It is maybe particularly true in evangelical circles that there needs to be some significant and well-known voices of leaders that are out-front on [creation care issues].” NAE evangelical leader Richard Cizik himself was “converted” in this sense by Sir John Houghton, an evangelical associated with the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Moyers). He credits the efficacy of Houghton’s appeal in no small part to their shared identity as evangelical Christians (Moyers).

On the congregational level, evangelicals may be awakening to the variant understanding of humanity as caring, humble stewards over God’s earth when their pastor decides to raise the issue liturgically. Such an event is recounted in the Moyers’ documentary mentioned above. After keeping silent on creation care for a while, Troy Robinson, the pastor of the Vineyard Boise Church, decided that he wanted to preach on it. And, after six months of intense preparation in deeply conservative Idaho, Robinson gave his homily. It garnered positive response from the congregation, and many of its members began to participate in recycling and other environmental programs. One of Robinson’s parishioners indicated that he was “somehow blinded to that connection … between creation and the creator,” adding, “I just couldn’t put the two together before [Robinson’s preaching]” (Moyers). Another said, “I think for many years I was like the hidden conservative conservationist, and … quite frankly, it hasn’t been until our pastor said ‘You have the right to do it’ that I was empowered to speak out as an evangelical” (Moyers). Yet another noted how Robinson’s “speaking from the heart” energized him on the topic (Moyers).
Whether it manifests as orthodox dogma suppressing its acceptance or as an eye-opening homily encouraging acquiescence to the harsh reality, it is obvious that the theological influences on evangelicals regarding global climate change are considerable. In recognition of this, the spread of an environmental ethic to any segment of the evangelical community must be pursued though a relatable, theological framework. Liberal evangelicalism can function as that framework, utilizing the same epistemological dynamic and biblical/theological language as their conservative peers to instill in them the appropriately modified metaphysical beliefs regarding the natures of humanity and creation. A conversation between the two interdenominational groups is thus the best if not the only chance conservative evangelicals have of successfully being “converted” on the issue of environmental conservation.
Pneumatological Panentheistic Solution

Though the widespread adoption of creation care among the American evangelical community would certainly be cause for celebration, its realization might only be part of the struggle outlined here. Creation care as articulated by liberal evangelicals definitely comes close to a vigorous sustainability ethic, but it simply might not be enough to avert ecological disaster. My language here of uncertainty, as opposed to outright critique, is due to ambiguity present in the philosophy of creation carists. Pragmatically speaking, few of the documents generated from within the liberal evangelical community analyzed here address critical questions about human population limits explicitly, for example, or spell out what behavior modifications are needed among believers. Principally speaking, creation care metaphysics isn’t as amenable to encouraging a humble stewardship of creation as they could be. These documents lay a groundwork that is obviously suggestive of a true sustainability ethic, though not quite synonymous with it.

I will not enumerate here a list of changes to policy initiatives or personal lifestyle choices which ought to be explicitly advocated by the creation care movement. Such a list would be far too long to develop, and would miss the point of changing evangelical values, which so motivate evangelical actions. Instead, I will outline the proposed conceptual modification to this brand of evangelical theology, infusing it with a
pneumatological panentheism. Then, I will briefly discuss the significant ramifications this would have for human interaction with creation.

Before I begin with this effort, however, I would like to discuss the types of shortcomings which usually hold creation care appeals back from their true potential. As a template for this, I will be using Calvin DeWitt’s “A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective.” It features many of the crucial insights typical of creation care philosophy needed to cultivate enduring environmental ideals, all of which are insufficiently developed and articulated.

DeWitt, of course, recognizes the situation facing the planet and its cause, saying, “the biosphere is being seriously degraded by human activity” (DeWitt 87). He also explicitly recognizes the various manifestations assumed by this degradation. These include, “alteration of the earth’s energy exchange with the sun,” “land degradation,” “water quality degradation,” “deforestation,” “species extinction,” “waste generation and global toxification,” as well as “human and cultural degradation” (87). The inseparability of the ethical life – or any kind of life, really – from creation care is also noted by DeWitt. He subsequently endorses an approach to environmentalism that recognizes the ethical value associated with creation, as opposed to just offering a scientific “description” of the state of the ecological world (88).

DeWitt grounds this ethical basis in both worshiping God and caring for creation, saying that any environmental degradation is regrettable when God is “sustainer of the whole of Creation” (90). He identifies the biblical principles of “earth keeping, Sabbath, and fruitfulness” as relevant to creation management (91). The first calls for a “loving, caring” relationship between humans and creation, where we maintain the proper
connections between members of the same species, those other species they interact with, as well as the fundamental elements of soil, water, and air (91). This underscores the fragility of creation, dependent on natural “cycles upon cycles” (82). Preserving the Sabbath for creation echoes the need to protect creatures “from relentless exploitation” (92). Finally, upholding the fruitfulness of creation is so significant to DeWitt, he states, “Our fruitfulness … should not be at the expense of the fruitfulness of other creatures” (92).

What we have here with DeWitt is a strong denouncement of conservative evangelical creation management, reinforced by an understanding of creation’s fragility, complexity, and closeness to God as well as our responsibility to approach it lovingly. Despite all of this, DeWitt may not succeed in demonstrating to his conservative peers the true radicality of the suggested sustainability shift. A conservative reading of his work is still too plausible. Such a reading might admit that creation is limited and some human behavioral change is needed, but limit it to the type of conventional mitigation broached by Francis Schaeffer. Instead of ceasing development in the proverbial Swiss mountain town, humanity would need only to pursue such projects with some measure of responsibility, only sacrificing some of the animal or plant life. An ad hoc number of wildlife refuges or national parks may be identified for safe-keeping, and the planet may enjoy an intermittent Earth Day or ozone-action day as a respite from human development. There is simply no clear mandate for meaningful, paradigm-shifting consumption curtailment expressed in DeWitt’s work or any other creation carist document.
Therefore, as an addendum to or a revision upon liberal evangelical environmental philosophy, I would like to suggest introducing a pneumatological, panentheistic trajectory for the ethic. This trajectory will emphasize the pervasive presence of the divine in all creatures and matter, offering special incentive for humanity to treat it with love and humility. It is crucial to note that this new approach does not come at the expense of a change in the target of worship or reverence. In other words, God will not be ignored in this new paradigm or otherwise suffer a reduction in prestige. Indeed, a new form or method of worship mindful of the divinely ordained importance of creation will account for the shift. The significance of this distinction is momentous, as no properly evangelical Christian would ever assent to worshiping or admiring creation or any other thing wholly apart from a celebration of God. The question, of course, is how we conceptually and practically relate God’s love to and presence in the world, and thus how we develop our theology based on that dynamic.

Mark Wallace argues just this in “Sacred-Land Theology: Green Spirit, Deconstruction, and the Question of Idolatry in Contemporary Earthen Christianity.” Utilizing language and imagery from the Bible, Wallace develops an understanding of the Holy Spirit as the “landed sacred” to defend a Christian environmentalism (Wallace 300). He says, “all of nature in its fullness and variety is the realization of the Spirit’s work in the world. The Spirit is an earthen reality – God’s power in land, water, and sky that makes all things live and grow toward their natural ends” (296). He later adds, “A place where God dwells, a place that is ‘sacred,’ is a place where ecosystem diversity is protected so that the miracle of self-regulating species-development is allowed to thrive” (300).
It is important to note here that Wallace is not advocating pantheism, where the divine is nothing but creation itself. An arguably similar environmental philosophy – as articulated by Stephanie Kaza – characterizes the Buddhist tradition. It’s predicated on the Buddhist principle of dependent co-origination, a law that claims, “all phenomena, that is, all of nature, arise from complex [and interrelated] sets of causes and conditions, each set unique to the specific situations” (Kaza 336). Buddhist environmental philosophy then stresses that improvements to one ecosystem lead to improvements across the world, serving the Buddhist value of reducing suffering for all beings (337-338). Wallace, on the other hand, is proposing a pneumatological panentheism similar to mine where God is bound up in the whole of creation through the pervasive presence of the Holy Spirit, but also transcends it, sustaining its life force.

The theme of God’s sustaining presence familiar to conservative evangelical theology is evident here, but there is no built-in expectation in Wallace’s work that God is constantly safeguarding creation from exhaustion. Instead, he proposes an ethic that calls us to “protect and nurture” creation, where our acts “invest all things with inherent, supreme value as a loving extension of God’s bounty and compassion” (Wallace 314). Every time we allow nature to degrade, we are hurting God (313).

There can be no doubt in Wallace’s work and philosophies similar to it that God is the object of human veneration, just as in conservative evangelicalism. Both groups are living out a divinely perceived plan for humanity. Beisner, Whelan, and the others emulate the divine attribute of omnipotence, whereas creation carists emulate God’s loving compassion and selflessness, paying witness to creation’s vulnerability. A
successful courting of the former by the latter then will need to sell this form of worship as preferable.

Steven Studebaker suggests this selling-point might involve the integration of evangelical eschatology with environmentalism. He says, “Creation care is a pneumatological participation in the eschaton because the scope of redemption extends to all of creation, and the Holy Spirit is the intrinsic divine presence that leads all of creation to its redemptive consummation” (Studebaker 954). This opportunity to assist in the work of the Holy Spirit, which he says is traditionally understood as only offering spiritual redemption for humanity, and offer physical redemption to creation might be of interest to the traditionally eschatologically-minded evangelical community. Evangelicals would thus be charged with evangelizing – in a sense – to God’s creation. This would involve maintaining or restoring its integrity in the face of harmful human exploitation and promoting its primordial right relationship with God.

A problem seems to exist with this, though. Conservative evangelicals are traditionally perceived as cavalier in their treatment of the environment precisely because of their eschatological views. Who is going to care for something at the expense of human living standards and economic growth if Jesus is going to return in due time to whisk all believers away from the Earth and fix creation then? David Neff responds by arguing that there is value in this type of caring, despite is being brought into question by a teleological understanding of time and existence. He compares the physical world to an engagement ring, the receipt of both indicating a sacred promise and not an immediate fulfillment of a grander reality. According to Neff, humanity’s presence in the world offers us a unique opportunity to care for God and each other, embracing our limitations
and allowing them to remind us constantly of what is important (Neff 36-37). Neglected creation care would then be nothing more than a missed opportunity at worship and fulfilling humanity’s telos.

What we have here in a solution, then, is an unflagging, noncontradictory Christian approach to pneumatological panentheism capable of better focusing any sustainability ethic adopted by conservative evangelicals. By reminding them explicitly in their theology that God is always immanently present in creation, these Christians will undoubtedly restrain their abuse of nature. They wouldn’t have to appeal to the well-meaning yet unwieldy and perhaps unreliable cost-benefit analysis process suggested by Calvin DeWitt to determine whether an action will have unduly negative ecological effects. Instead, believers could simply ask themselves if any certain action would be appropriate in the eyes of God, who sustains all creation in a fundamentally immediate and present fashion panentheistically. Constantly aware of God in creation, they would then begin to engage in less frivolous natural resource abuse, using only those resources needed to live a healthy and safe life. A more orthodox theism that understands the divine as separate from but sustaining creation might also work, but I feel it wouldn’t function as well. As a more radical paradigm shift, the panentheistic pneumatological solution simply stands a greater chance of nudging evangelicals consciously and subconsciously toward sustainability, affecting a habitual catharsis.
Conclusion

As an arguably unparalleled force within the American electorate caught between both the best and worst tendencies toward the environment within the world’s largest religion, evangelicals in America have a significant choice to make. The dominion v. stewardship debate playing out in that community may be a fight for the very soul of Christianity, and may also decide the world’s response to global climate change.

This thesis is designed simply to equip its audience – whether they are scholars or “agents of the awakening” – with a historical, sociological, and philosophical understanding of this debate and issues surrounding it. I can only hope that it aids the spread of creation care among conservative Evangelicals, as the real work will unquestionably need to come from the liberal Evangelical community itself. Utilizing their shared theological framework as a foundation, only creation carists can elicit the religious conversion element of the shift among their conservative peers perhaps necessary to upset the widespread understanding of humanity as demiurgic cultivators. It would then be exchanged for a decidedly humbler and more loving role for humanity as stewards over a world which God pneumatologically, panentheistically pervades. Only then can the treatment of the institutions intimately bound up with the health of the planet – science, economics, and politics – shift within the community, leading to definitively different Christian and American treatment of the environment.
References


