



# It's Not Easy Being GREEN Christian

by Marv  
Wegner

If you still have the stereotypical notion that environmentalists and Christians maintain mutually exclusive residences at opposite ends of the political landscape—always have, always will—you may want to think again. It seems that the landscape may be shifting right under our feet.

Far from the lookout towers of major media outlets, beneath the dense forest canopy of daily news coverage, a grass-roots movement has quietly been adding growth rings. It's no wonder that you may have heard little about it.

This story does not lend itself well to the political pigeonholing, rapid-fire, five-second sound bite, nuance-free, pre-digested, mass media template.

Naturally, this movement seems bewilderingly complex to a media that often prefers to portray politically active Christians as abortion clinic-protesting, anti-gay, gun-toting, talk-radio addicted toadies of industry-favoring right-wing politics, marching in lock-step with all things Bush.

Instead, many Christians may be "turning green"—or environmentally astute. Evidence is growing—from polling data and public statements by church leaders—that even conservative Christians increasingly view caring for the earth as a sacred responsibility mandated by the Creator—defying the stereotype that environmental

concerns belong solely to the political left.

Issuing a blow to conventional thinking a little more than a year ago, the board of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) unanimously approved a document emphasizing every Christian's duty to care for the planet. This unprecedented document is entitled "For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility." It states in part:

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"Because clean air, pure water, and adequate resources are crucial to public health and civic order, government has an obligation to protect its citizens from the effects of environmental degradation."

Representing 51 church denominations and an estimated 30 million Christians, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) is the largest association of evangelicals in the U.S.

Despite overwhelming approval for this landmark NAE environmental statement, some evangelical leaders were less than enthusiastic about the next statement by the NAE on global warming this past May. James Dobson of Focus on the Family announced, "Our friends at the National Association of Evangelicals, with whom we agree on...so many other issues, have now staked out a position in the very controversial area of global warming. This is despite the fact that significant disagreement exists within the scientific community regarding the validity of

—"For the Health of the Nation"  
National Association of Evangelicals

this theory.... Any issue that seems to put plants and animals above humans is one that we cannot support.”

In a National Public Radio interview in 2005, NAE's vice president for government affairs, Richard Cizik, enumerated many instances of Christians crossing over political boundaries to work on common issues of human rights.

“In the last nine to ten years the evangelicals have gotten very involved...we are a little more diverse group than people give us credit for being.” Explaining how disparate social and environmental issues unite with the common faith Cizik noted, “You can't really talk about global warming and climate change without understanding it impacts people, people who suffer overseas. We are more than ‘two-trick ponies’ who are simply interested in protecting the definition of marriage as traditional or restricting abortion, (which we are)...we as evangelicals understand we have to do both, we have to understand it's not just one or the other.”

But it's not easy being green. Conservative Christians who cross over to the green side draw fire from both left and right. Fellow conservatives often view these born-again naturalists with suspicion, fearing they may be going too far to help “the other side.” The prospect of whole-heartedly joining in a political group-hug with the “tree-huggers” gives many conservatives pause.

Politically left leaning environmentalists, who are used to standing alone against well-funded corporate interests, normally welcome any help they can get. However, in this shifting political landscape they are understandably concerned about losing the farm—potentially having to share their heretofore exclusive role as protectors of the earth. Sharing one major issue with Christian conservatives, who don't seem to be bending leftward

otherwise, has made some wary.

This blossoming relationship between left and right is being approached cautiously by both sides. The wedge between evangelicals and environmentalists remains deep on most issues. Can environmentalists work with Christians while being at odds over abortion, gay marriage and big government? Many Christians remain distrustful of environmentalists and vice-versa.

### Left Behind—Care for the Earth?

It should be remembered that being a Christian and an environmentalist has not always been mutually exclusive. Two of the earliest founders of the environmental movement had their then radical ideas about conservation influenced by their Christian faith.

Theodore Roosevelt, popular Republican president, is known as the father of conservation. He worked closely with friend John Muir to preserve the nation's wildlife and forests. He was also a conservative Christian and a Sunday school teacher.

Roosevelt's writings include much about the preservation of nature, as well as the virtues of Christianity. According to biographer James Lever, Theodore Roosevelt's published works were found to contain over 4,200 biblical images, inferences and quotations. And his unpublished letters contained thousands more.

John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club and widely considered father of the national parks, grew up a Scottish Calvinist.

In the 2002 book by Dennis C. Williams, *God's Wilds: John Muir's Vision of Nature*, Williams asserts that Muir's ambition to save nature from development emerged out of



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### Founding fathers of the environmental movement Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir in Yosemite in 1906

his commitment to the assumptions of late 19th century evangelical Christian theology.

Exactly why and when many Christians became silent on the environment is up for debate. It is commonly assumed in the environmental community that most conservative Christians, (including George W. Bush) care little about the here-and-now condition of the planet due to a belief in the imminent return of Jesus Christ.

This view was pointedly stated by journalist Bill Moyers in his 2004 Global Environment Citizen Award acceptance speech at Harvard: “Why care about the earth when the droughts, floods, famine and pestilence brought by ecological collapse are signs of the apocalypse foretold in the Bible? Why care about global climate change when you and yours will be rescued in the Rapture?”

Moyers sighted the popular *Left Behind* series of apocalyptic novels, “These true believers subscribe to a fantastical theology concocted in the 19th century by a couple of immigrant preachers who took disparate passages from the Bible and wove them into a narrative that



Among some Christians there is a deep-seated perception that many environmentalists may be merely “watermelons”—green on the outside, red on the inside—feigning concern for the planet while advancing the left.



Jim Ball claims this obstacle can be easily surmounted. “With most of these folks, it takes me about two minutes to punch a huge hole in [the Rapture] argument,” says Ball. “I also say, ‘Well, you take care of your body, don’t you?’ It doesn’t take that much to win people over. If it’s just some eschatological or future-oriented thinking [prejudicing them], that’s handled pretty quickly.”

There is a deep-seated perception among some Christians that the environmental movement is rooted in new age paganism, pantheism or perhaps worse yet, that many environmentalists may be merely “watermelons”—green on the outside, red on the inside—feigning concern for the planet while advancing the leftist agenda to destroy capitalism.

“Evangelicals feel besieged by the culture at large,” Jim Ball of the Evangelical Environmental Network said. “They don’t know many environmentalists, but they have the idea they are pretty weird, with strange ...views.” And as liberal environmentalists are quick to point out, the feeling has been mutual.

Richard Cizik, of the NAE, is confident that this distrust will be overcome. “There is a younger generation coming up,” he says. “There is a transitional leadership, and the stereotype is simply not true.”

With increasing media attention focused on environmental degradation, climate change, the need for renewable energy and the end of cheap oil—easy or not—being “green” is something we all must consider. □

*When Marv Wegner is not overseeing Plain Truth production and the PTM website ([www.ptm.org](http://www.ptm.org)), he and his family enjoy adventures in the “great outdoors.”*

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*—Larry Schweiger, president of the National Wildlife Federation*

has captivated the imagination of millions of Americans”.

Popular trends in dispensational reading material notwithstanding, many activists have observed that the Christian emphasis on God as Creator should make them devoted, natural-born environmental protectors. Larry Schweiger, president and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation, wryly ponders why more Christians aren’t involved in environmental causes—“I would suggest that the people like Rush Limbaugh have had more influence over certain Christians, frankly, than their Scriptures.”

Reverend Jim Ball, executive director of the Evangelical Environmental Network and organizer of the “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign, has been working to raise environmental consciousness in the evangelical community since the early 1990s. “In dismissing environmental activism, many Christians are just going along with what their allies are telling them,” asserts Ball. “They haven’t really taken a serious look at issues like climate change.”

Touching on the common perception that many Christians aren’t concerned with the environment because of a theology emphasizing an imminent Rapture,

# For God so

*Call them God’s Greens. Armed with Scripture and a righteous respect for nature, a host of religious groups have taken up the environmental fight and are waging holy war on behalf of an embattled creation. But, critics ask, is this a truly divine cause—or the devil’s work?*

Yea my brothers and sisters, let us wander into the den of unbelievers and lay the righteous word down like wall-to-wall shag. Let us take the Good Book as our weapon and smash the skeptics and smite the Wise Users and quiet their chainsaws and backhoes and pavers for ever and ever, Amen.

Let us gather the clear-cutters and dam builders in their place of worship and take the truth of



God’s green message straight at them. Let us follow Brother Peter, the world’s foremost Bible-thumping, chapter-and-versifying, Jesus-praising tree-hugger into battle to save God’s glorious domain. Also, let us not step in the llama poop. For it is squishy and sticky and doth offend us.

“Nnnngh!” cries the llama.

“C’mon Oochoo,” says Peter Illyn. “We’ll go get some water.” The shaggy beast steps out of its trailer and onto the sawdust paths of the Skamania County, Washington, fairgrounds. Oochoo’s ears flick in the direction of a nearby stage where a thrashcore band is fret-noodling for Jesus as part of an annual Christapalooza that draws 5,000 pierced and tattooed evangelical Christians to the banks of the Columbia River for five days of headbanging fellowship. Illyn, a 42-year-old former Foursquare Gospel preacher from the southwestern Washington town of La Center, is here trolling for environmental converts. Oochoo is bait.

“Hey, llama!...Can I ride him?”

Once Oochoo draws a crowd,

# Loved the World

BY  
BRUCE  
BARCOTT

Illyn goes to work. “We’re out here talking to people about the environment and how God’s word calls for stewardship of his domain,” he tells the llama-entranced kids. “I work with a group called Target Earth—we’re all about serving the earth and serving the poor. Heard of Earth First? We’re like Earth Third: We were made to love God, love people and love creation. Environmental stewardship is part of our calling as Christians, but the church has remained silent for so many years that we’ve defaulted to New Age pagans and industrialists.”

The kids nod vaguely. For many of them, this is the first time anyone’s told them that environmentalism mixes with the Lord. Their naiveté is almost touching. “This isn’t like Bill Clinton taking land and giving it to the UN, is it?” asks a pastor’s daughter from a small town in Oregon. They’re not sure what to make of Illyn.

A tree pastor he’s not—with his husky frame, unruly shock of dark brown hair, full beard and fire-eater’s growl, he could pass for an Aerosmith roadie.

Illyn and Oochoo work the crowd, spreading shaggy-coated charisma and the green gospel, with phrases like “creation care” and “serving the earth.” Planting a seed in the mind of a pastor’s daughter is well and good, but Illyn’s real targets today are the true peer influencers—musicians.

“A few words from the stage can really set us up,” he confides. He’s got an MBA in marketing, so he knows the dynamics of his selling situation. A guy passing out pamphlets—he’s a freak. Give him a llama—he’s a curiosity. Give him a shout-out from a hot new band, he’s the “downest dude” at the Christapalooza.

Illyn comps a sticker—your soul needs the wild—to a dreadlocked holy hip-hopper named Dirt, then greets a bare-chested young man wearing wraparound Oakleys and a cross around his neck. “Didn’t I see you hiking along the river?” Illyn asks.

“That was me. Nearly made myself sick eating blackberries. Is my tongue still purple?” He sticks it out for inspection: Purple as Prince. The berry junkie turns out to be John Paul Peters, 24-year-old guitarist for the Winnipeg punk-pop band The Undecided. “I’m definitely concerned about the wild,” he tells Illyn. “We’re driving home tomorrow, and I talked the guys into letting me have a couple hours in Yellowstone.”

Illyn launches his rap, “What my group is trying to do, we’re Christian environmentalists trying to protect the earth. We’re working to save the last bits of wild nature as part of our earthly stewardship. You play guitar, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So you’re tapping into your faith through your art,” says the preacher. “Look around you—at those hills, at that river. That’s God’s art.”

“Right, right,” says Peters.

“I have people tell me, ‘It’s all about the human soul; Jesus died just for us,’” Illyn continues, anticipating a rebuttal. “Well, I say, make your heart bigger, dude.”

Peters smiles and nods his head. Illyn has found a believer. The two exchange addresses and make tentative plans to go llama hiking at next year’s festival. “God bless, Peter,” says the guitarist as they part.

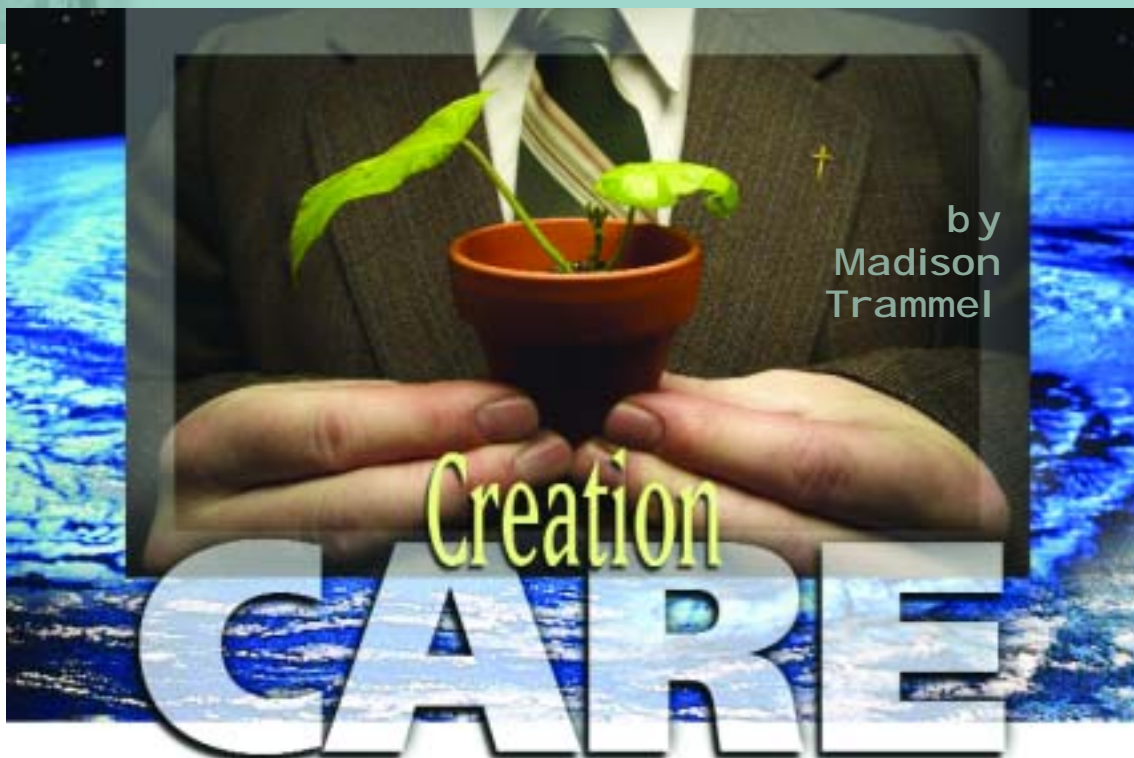
At the river Illyn slips off his sneakers and cools his feet. The sun refracts off the water into a bushel of stars that tumble across the mile-wide Columbia, forcing Illyn to squint. “You know, God created the world and he called it good,” he muses. “Now we’ve got six different kinds of salmon going extinct right here in this river. You can’t tell me that’s good. You can’t tell me God’s pleased.” □

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by  
Madison  
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## Saving the earth 🌿 without worshiping it

*As environmentalism becomes mainstream, more and more Christians are joining the cause. Their ecological manifesto comes from the pages of Scripture, and they're seeking to save the earth without worshiping it.*

**T**he hippie journalist and co-founder of Greenpeace, Bob Hunter, died last May in his native Canada. A godfather of the environmental movement, Hunter had been driven all his life with a determination not just to write headlines, but to make them. Indeed, he was known to take on impossible odds and place himself in harm's way in defense of the earth and its resources.

Hunter first caught the world's attention in 1971, when he and a group of 11 activists sailed a boat called "The Greenpeace" into a United States nuclear testing site. Following the wake of their voyage, the U.S.-Canadian border closed for the first time since the War of 1812, public protest grew to the point where the U.S. government could not ignore it, and, eventually, the testing program was shuttered.

In the years that followed, Hunter presided over the growing organization named after his ship, wrote numerous articles and editorials about environmental issues, and became what his obituary called "one of the heroes of the environmental movement."

Yet evangelical Christians were never among his admirers. At least, not until recently.

Perhaps because of Hunter's New-Age spirituality—he often recounted a Cree Indian story about "Warriors of the Rainbow," spirits who would rescue nature when she became sick—Christians at large and evangelicals in particular tended to keep their distance.

While the work of Greenpeace and other environmental groups began swaying public sentiment toward conservation, many Christians remained unconvinced. If you could find a Christian to speak publicly about the environment at all, he or she was more likely to quote Genesis 1:28, "Fill the earth and subdue it," than to show any real concern about global warming, deforestation or pollution.

As James G. Watt, President Ronald Reagan's interior secretary,

said, "We don't have to protect the environment—the Second Coming is at hand."

While it is true that many Christians have historically been supportive of environmental issues, evangelical Christians were generally suspicious of what they saw as an environmental agenda.

Since the early 1990s, however, evangelical attitudes have undergone a slow, steady shift. Last October, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) released a "call to civic responsibility" that included a "responsibility to care for God's earth." In addition, more than 500 evangelical leaders, from Richard Mouw of Fuller Theological Seminary to Robert Seiple, former president of World Vision, also signed the first ever "Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation."

### The Seven Degradations of the Earth

A little more than a decade ago, Ray Bohlin, the president of Probe Ministries International, an apologetics think-tank in Richardson, Texas, released a forward-looking statement on Christian environ-

mentalism. Contrasting the Christian's motivation sharply against that of an evolutionary naturalist, Bohlin argued that creation care was, for followers of Christ, an unavoidable issue of stewardship.

"...Man's rule and dominion over the earth is that of a steward or a caretaker, not a reckless exploiter," he wrote. "Ownership is in the hands of the Lord."

Bohlin referred to the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, in which a master goes away on a long trip, holding his servants responsible for how they manage his resources while he's gone.

"When Christ returns," Bohlin wrote, "His earth may well be handed back to him rusted, corroded, polluted and ugly. To what degree will you or I be held responsible?"

The NAE's recent statement uses similar language: "God gave the care of his earth and its species to our first parents. That responsibility has passed into our hands."

However, the specter of Bob Hunter and his New-Age environmentalism never strays too far from evangelicals' minds. The NAE carefully distinguishes between worship of the Creator and worship of creation. We honor creation because we worship God, it warns, never the other way around.

Borrowing from a book written by Calvin DeWitt, president of Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, Bohlin lists seven outstanding environmental crises, what DeWitt calls "seven degradations of the earth."

Each one can be seen as an affront to God's creation and a threat to humanity's health and safety.



First, urban development continues to overrun wilderness and agricultural land, often without careful forethought about the long-term consequences. Covered

by sidewalks, streets and high-rises, this land may never be fully reclaimed. As Joni Mitchell put it in her 1970s hit, *Big Yellow Taxi*, "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot."



Second, extinction continues to claim animal and plant species at a rate of three species per day. Most Americans, no doubt, can live without the spotted owl. But when three species a day disappear, it leaves unfulfilled the role that each one played in the ecosystem. To borrow the analogy of a previous generation, God has created the universe like a finely tuned watch. As parts break down and disappear, the watch cannot function properly.



Third, pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers take a toll on farming land.



Fourth, even more seriously, foolproof treatment of hazardous chemicals and wastes continues to confound scientists. The disposal of nuclear waste into geological repositories, for instance, leads to undetermined long-term consequences.



Fifth, human pollution continues to poison water sources and land, sometimes in unexpected

## Evangelical Church Calls for Environmental Stewardship

"Environmental stewardship" and "evangelical church" don't often appear in the same sentence, unless it's a story about conflict. But don't tell that to Tri Robinson, pastor of the 2,500 member Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Boise, Idaho, where an environmental program is thriving. The pastor is on a mission to get his church to "tend the garden" in their homes, community and state, and his message has been welcomed. "The story of mankind in the Bible begins in a garden and ends in a restored garden," Robinson told *Ministries Today* magazine.

"The first commission to God's people is to be caretakers of the gift of creation," he added. "We pridefully and selfishly assume that creation exists for our own consumption. It is the responsibility of every true Christian to take stewardship seriously, and that includes environmental stewardship." Robinson, age 57, said VCFB began airing a TV commercial locally to spotlight his four-week message on environmental stewardship and that the topic drew some 200 new people to the church.

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ways. As Bohlin notes, human garbage has been found on the beaches of uninhabited Pacific islands, far from any shipping lane.



Sixth, the earth's atmosphere appears to be changing, perhaps due to the thinning ozone layer. Although the Bush administration has made environmental concerns a low priority—as seen in its push for oil drilling in Alaska, among other decisions—it recently changed its tune about global warming, admitting that the

burning of fossil fuels seems to be heating up the planet. Warmer winters may not bother residents of Chicago and New York. However, widespread climate change can affect the earth's entire weather pattern, bringing about cataclysmic storms, unending droughts and other unintended consequences.



Seventh, indigenous cultures that have thrived in remote parts of the earth, such as the Amazon rainforests, are being pushed out by loggers and ranchers who make far greater demands on the environment. In addition to the human toll, this expansion of civilization eats away at some of the world's last wilderness areas.

As Bohlin concludes, "Never before have human beings wielded so much power over God's creation. Do we know what we are doing?"

### What Would Jesus Drive?

In 1994, social-justice advocate Ron Sider, the founder of Evangelicals for Social Action, aided in the genesis of the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN). Perhaps best known for its "What Would Jesus Drive?" campaign, which addressed the national debate about fuel economy from a distinctly Christian perspective, the EEN takes every opportunity to tie creation care to family values.

Its Healthy Families, Healthy Environment initiative, for instance, provides families with tips on how to protect themselves from environmental health concerns. Similarly, the EEN has produced church study materials on environmentalism, started a program to protect the unborn from mercury poisoning, sponsored a recycling program at Creation Festival, the largest Christian rock festival in the U.S., organized numerous Christian environmentalism conferences and launched a magazine entitled *Creation Care*.

## Find Out More

The following groups and resources, while not a comprehensive list, provide a good starting point for learning more about evangelicals' emerging interest in the environment:

### Books

- Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man: A Christian View of Ecology* (Tyndale, 1970)
- Calvin E. Beisner, *Prospects for Growth: A Biblical View of Population, Resources, and the Future* (Crossway, 1990)
- Calvin B. DeWitt, ed., *The Environment and the Christian: What Can We Learn from the New Testament?* (Baker, 1991)
- Tony Campolo, *How to Rescue the Earth Without Worshipping Nature* (Thomas Nelson, 1992)
- Fred Van Dyke, et al, *Redeeming Creation: The Biblical Basis for Environmental Stewardship* (InterVarsity Press, 1996)
- Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Baker Academic, 2001)

### Statements

- "For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility," National Association of Evangelicals ([www.nae.net](http://www.nae.net))
- "Evangelical Declaration for the Care of Creation," Evangelical Environmental Network ([www.creationcare.org](http://www.creationcare.org))

### Articles

- "Heat Stroke," *Christianity Today* (September 16, 2004)
- "The Greening of Evangelicals," *Washington Post* (February 6, 2005)
- "Christian Right's alliances bend political spectrum," *USA Today* (June 16, 2005)

### Organizations

- Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies ([www.ausable.org](http://www.ausable.org))
- Evangelical Environmental Network ([www.creationcare.org](http://www.creationcare.org))
- Floresta ([www.floresta.org](http://www.floresta.org))
- Restoring Eden ([www.restoring-eden.org](http://www.restoring-eden.org))
- Target Earth International ([www.targetearth.org](http://www.targetearth.org))
- Zahniser Institute for Environmental Studies ([www.greenville.edu.zies](http://www.greenville.edu.zies))

When combined with growing evangelical interest in addressing issues of poverty and social justice, environmentalism is threatening to undermine the Christian right's full allegiance to the Republican Party. The lead lobbyist for the NAE, Richard Cizik, recently went public with his willingness to disagree with President Bush on this issue.

Both in their personal lives and in the public square, American Christians are slowly but surely

adopting a creation-care mindset. Who can argue that an increased emphasis on reaching out to the poor and defending the environment is anything but Christ-like? We can thank God that the body of Christ is becoming more green. □

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