

Evangelical Environmentalism: Concern or Apathy?

Research Summary by Hayley Hemstreet

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If an Evangelical church has a recycling bin in the foyer, do the members of this congregation consider themselves to be environmental advocates? Do Evangelical Christians think their theology allows them to throw trash out the window because the End Times are near? Or do Evangelical Christians have a theological imperative to exercise great care and concern for the environment because it's God's property over which humans are stewards? These and other questions fuel debate around the issue of Evangelicals and the environment. RPLP Director Elaine Howard Ecklund and several others found out what Evangelical Christians in two different congregations really have to say about it.

An upcoming issue of *Review of Religious Research* includes the article "How Evangelicals from Two Churches in the American Southwest Frame Their Relationship with the Environment," written by Jared L. Peifer, Elaine Howard Ecklund, and Cara Fullerton. The authors utilize interview data collected from May 2011 to June 2012. While both Evangelical, the make-up of the two congregations are different: one middle-class, mostly white Americans, the other African Americans from a lower socioeconomic (SES) background.

By asking "what narratives do Evangelicals from two different congregations use to frame their relationship with the natural environment?", the authors sought to discover how Evangelical Christians explain their environmental apathy or concern in religious or biblical terms.

The authors find that a respondent's reading of the Bible frames his or her conception of stewardship. Several respondents repeated the notion that stewardship over the environment manifests itself in two behaviors, recycling and not littering, exclusively citing these two practices. Despite these indications of environmental care, as opposed to apathy, there was a common warning against extreme concern for the environment. This warning emerged from some respondents' *hierarchical concept of stewardship*.

In analyzing Evangelical views on the environment, a rigid hierarchy clearly emerged; God above humans and humans above the natural environment. Respondents were particularly sensitive to two perceived breaches to this hierarchy. One type of breach is the perceived elevation of the environment to an equal plane with God, and a second is the elevation of the environment above or on par with humans. Moderation is key, because, as one respondent stated, "God will take care of it." Adherence to this viewpoint, according to some Evangelical perspectives, avoids the extremism commonly associated with environmental advocates. Similarly, many of the respondents expressed belief in the sovereignty of God, which was reflected in their answers to questions regarding climate change: God has complete control over all, including the future of the environment, and any harmful actions committed by humans will not change the course of God's plan for the earth.

Because the authors used data from two congregations of the same denomination, they also addressed political affiliation, race, and socioeconomic status in their analysis. Common assumptions exist in society that politically conservative people will have more environmental apathy than the rest of the population. Interestingly, the authors found tension within the African American Baptist congregation, whose members were mostly politically liberal and affiliated with the Democratic party. They were torn between their loyalty to other Democrats, who show strong environmental concern, and their apathy toward ideas of climate change and global warming. With regard to socioeconomic status, the leaders of the low-SES African American church confirmed the “hierarchy of needs argument.” This concept, in which a survival mentality precludes environmental concern, has been explored through previous research: one must meet the basic needs of survival before being able to worry about the state of the environment. In other words, if people do not know where to find their next meal, they are less likely to concern themselves with the source of the food, the sustainability of the process, or the waste that is generated. Interestingly, however, the authors found that, contrary to the clergy’s predictions, the church members’ ideas about the environment were not necessarily due to a concern for basic needs or a lack of time to care. Environmental apathy could be attributed to low levels of scientific knowledge. This explanation for environmental apathy introduces an aspect of SES that is distinct from, but very much related to, income.

Based on their findings, the authors provided several avenues for systemic-level changes to prevent environmental degradation. The hierarchical relationship that is relevant to Evangelical beliefs, in which humans exist above the environment, “implies that linking environmentalism with the plight of helpless humans may be an effective way to garner more Evangelical support.” Speaking about climate change and other environmental concerns in less inflammatory and apolitical ways could encourage Evangelicals to be more receptive to the issue.

Depending on which definition is used, Evangelicals may comprise up to 50% of the U.S. population. Thus this group should not be ignored. Environmental advocates can increase environmental concern among Americans by reaching out to the Evangelical Christian population and tailoring their messages so that this religious group will accept the reality of environmental degradation, develop environmental concern, and take positive action.