

## COMMENTARY

# Consider the Turtles of the Field<sup>1</sup>

Many evangelicals find themselves in an emerging theological habitat, where care of creation is central to mission.

Brian McLaren

Right now, I'm thigh-deep in muck. Clad in hip waders, I'm sloggling through a spring-fed bog in northern Maryland. I'm surrounded by tussock sedge, alder, jewelweed, skunk cabbage, and swamp rose. And I'm having a great time.

I've done this for a couple of days almost every spring for the last dozen years. I'm out here as a volunteer to do wildlife surveys. In particular, we're looking for the rarest turtle in North America, *Glyptemys mublenbergii*, the little four-inch Bog Turtle. In the 1970s, they were found in more than 400 sites in our little state. In the 1990s, we could only find them in about half those sites. The other sites had been ditched, drained, bulldozed, polluted, invaded by non-native plants, bisected by roads for turtle-smashing cars, depleted by collectors, or otherwise made uninhabitable for these little creatures.

When I meet professional wildlife biologists and other volunteers, they're surprised that an evangelical (or post-evangelical, or "younger evangelical," or whatever) pastor would be out here doing this sort of thing. They're not used to seeing mud-smearing pastors who aren't afraid to grope around in bog muck for turtles or who keep track of chorus frogs and Baltimore checkerspot and Indian paintbrush. I know what they're thinking: Christians, especially ones associated with the term "evangelical," are part of the problem, not part of the solution. They listen to James Dobson and Pat Robertson and James Kennedy, not Wendell Berry and Herman Daly; they focus on the family and the military, not the environment.

The surface causes of environmental carelessness among conservative Protestants are legion, including subcontracting the evangelical mind out to right-wing politicians and greedy business inter-

ests...putting the gospel of Jesus through the strainer of consumerist-capitalism and retaining only the thin broth that this modern-day Caesar lets pass through...a tendency to be against whatever "liberals" are for. Even more important, though, are the deeper theological roots of environmental disinterest — and the emerging theological values that many of us are embracing instead.

People who are sensitive to creation know that creation is in constant flux. Continents drift, climates change, magnetic poles flip-flop, and bogs like this one gradually give way to wet meadows and then various kinds of forests. There's a natural succession out here under the sun, and I think there's a kind of natural succession going on theologically for many Christians as well. Let me mention three of these elements.

First, increased concern for the poor and oppressed leads to increased concern for all of creation. The same forces that hurt widows and orphans, minorities and women, children and the elderly also hurt the songbirds and trout, the ferns and old growth forests: greed, impatience, selfishness, arrogance, hurry, anger, competition, irreverence — plus a spirituality that cares for souls but neglects bodies, that prepares for eternity in heaven but abandons history on earth.

When greed and consumerism are exposed, when arrogance and irreverence are unplugged, when hurry and selfishness are named and repented of, the world and all it contains (widows, orphans, trees, soil) are revalued (or re-deemed) and made sacred again. No, in this emerging view, these little Bog Turtles we're looking for today are a priceless treasure, an original creation of the greatest Artist in (and beyond) history — even though they are deemed precisely worthless to someone who would want to build an interstate highway through this bog.

Second, the eschatology of abandonment is being replaced by an engaging gospel of the kingdom. The phenomenon of evangelical-dispensational eschatology (doctrine of last things or end times) makes perfect sense in the modern world. Understandably, Christians in the power centers of modernity (England in the 1800s, the United States in the 1900s) saw nothing ahead in the story of modernity — nothing but destruction. Their only hope? A skyhook Second Coming,



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Bog Turtle (*Glyptemys mublenbergii*): These tiny turtles (shell lengths usually < 9 cm) have a disjunct distribution throughout the eastern United States. They are federally listed as "threatened" under the 1973 Endangered Species Act and as "endangered" by agencies in states with extant populations.

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wrapping up the whole of creation like an empty candy wrapper and throwing it in the trash can, and the sooner the better, so God could bring us all to heaven, beyond time, beyond matter, beyond this creation entirely. In this model, virtually no continuity exists between this creation and the new heavenly creation; this creation is discarded like a non-recyclable milk carton. Why get sentimental about a cheap container destined for the cosmic dumpster of nothingness?

This pop-evangelical eschatology made one understandable but serious mistake: It assumed that modernity was all there was or ever would be. Just as the early Christians could not imagine the gospel outlasting the Roman Empire (unless they got the point of the Apocalypse of John), 19th and 20th century evangelicals couldn't imagine the gospel outlasting modernity, the empire of reason, consumerism, and individualism. For pop-evangelical eschatology to proliferate and maintain hegemony, it had to reinterpret the Hebrew prophets. Their prophetic visions of reconciliation and shalom within history (metaphorically conveyed via lions and lambs, children and serpents, swords and plowshares, spears and pruning hooks) had to be pushed beyond history, either into a spiritualized heaven or a millennial middle ground — between history and eternity, so to speak.

The eschatology of abandonment also had to marginalize Jesus (which they did, to a degree, by letting Jesus remain as savior but promoting Paul to master-teacher). But now, as more and more of us rediscover Jesus as master-teacher, we are struck by the centrality of “the kingdom of God” in Jesus' message (and Paul's too). And it is clear to us that this kingdom is not just about heaven after we die: It's about God's will (or wish) being “done on earth” now, in history.

In this kingdom, Jesus said, sparrows matter. Lilies of the field matter. Yes, people matter even more, but it's not a matter of either/or; it's a matter of degree in a world where everything that is good matters — where everything God made matters. God sent Jesus into the world with a saving love, and Jesus sends us with a similar saving love — love for the orphans and widows, the prostitutes and lepers, the poor and forgotten to be sure, but also for the little creatures who suffer from the same selfish greed and arrogance that oppress vulnerable humans.

Third, the hallowed concept of private ownership is being confronted by the biblical concept of stewardship. If liberal Christianity was tempted in the last century to become the civil religion of socialism that reverences state ownership, then certainly conservative Christianity has since become the happy mistress of capitalism that enshrines private ownership. No wonder then that private ownership and private enterprise are defended by many conservative Christians as vigorously as the doctrine of the Trinity or salvation by grace.

For increasing numbers of us who consider ourselves post-liberal and post-conservative, words like private (meaning personal and individual), ownership (meaning autonomous personal and individual control), and enterprise (meaning autonomous, personal, individual control over projects that use God's world for our purposes) seem to fly in the face of kingdom values. Values such as community (meaning seeing beyond the individual to the communal), fellowship (which means sharing, holding in common with the community, not grasping as “mine!”), and mission (meaning our participation in God's projects in God's world for God's purposes).

Can there be some alternative to the extremes that either deny or enshrine private ownership? Could a biblical stewardship that celebrates God's ultimate ownership someday fuel a new grace-based economy — just as private ownership currently fuels our greed-based consumerist economy (or as government ownership fuels a control-based socialist economy)?

A stewardship economy doesn't see every majestic mountain as a potential site for strip-mining operations, nor does it see forests as board-feet of marketable lumber, nor does it see this spring-fed emergent wetland (drained and bulldozed) as a lucrative site for a “housing development” (an unfitting term if there ever was one, since bulldozers and pavement un-develop in hours what it took God's creation centuries to develop). Rather, whatever we “own” (including the molecules and cells that constitute our bodies) is really lent and entrusted to us by God, received by us and reverently used for a time, after which we must let go one way or another — either through giving and voluntary sharing, or through dying and involuntary relinquishing.

So, what do we do differently in this emerging theological habitat, this new stage in the spiritual forest succession? That remains to be seen. But for starters, we see differently, and we care differently, and we value differently — and if those differences catch on, with Christianity being the largest religion in the world, there are bound to be good effects in our world.

Ultimately, those effects will have to go beyond the important but limited conservation actions of individuals (recycling, reusing, abstaining, etc.).

The effects of caring will have to change our systems — transportation systems that depend on fossil fuels and that divide and devastate our nonhuman neighbors' habitats, housing systems that maximize human impact through suburban sprawl, farming systems that violate rather than steward land, advertising systems that make us want more stuff that we don't need and that will soon fill even more square miles with trash. Even our family systems will need reconsideration. For example, we may realize that nuclear family (of so much Christian focus) and “subatomic family” (i.e., the nuclear family further split by divorce) both require (and waste) more resources than the truly traditional family — the extended or “molecular” one. Could extended families and intentional households ever make a comeback? If they do, it will be good news for all of creation — including humans.

Okay. Enough talk. I need to continue my survey. It's one little way as a member of my watershed (one's watershed being one's most important creational address, by the way — more important than nation, state, or zip code) that I can express my care for creation. A care that flows from my identity: a creature who wants to care for other creatures, because I am made in the image of a Creator who cares for us all. I hope you'll find your own ways to express care too, wherever your creational address.

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