

Plenary Session: June 1, 2002

Motives and Means to A Permanent Presence of Christian Environmental Professionals

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*"let none admire
that riches grow in Hell.
That soul may best deserve the precious bane."
John Milton*

Plastic Trees and Polluted Waters

In 1972, the city of Los Angeles decided to install 900 plastic trees and shrubs in concrete planters along the median strip of a major boulevard because the construction of a new box culvert along the strip had left insufficient soil to support real trees. The artificial replicas were to be constructed of factory-made leaves and branches that were wired to plumbing pipes, covered with plastic and then "planted" in aggregate rock covered with epoxy.

The advocates for this plan could marshal a rationale of coldly frightening logic. Only plastic trees, they argued, would survive in LA's smog-laden inner-city environment. And a plastic tree, however synthetic, would be much more attractive than a dead and rotting real one. The urban planner Martin Krieger, commenting in *Science*, defended the decision in terms of economic costs and benefits. He wrote, "the demand for rare environments is a learned one" and "conscious public choice can manipulate this learning so that the environments which people learn to use and want reflect environments that are likely to be available at low cost?" (Krieger 1973:451).

This is a statement of deadly force, if it is allowed to reach its logical conclusion. To some, the tale of plastic trees might be no more than an amusing story. But I believe, when the laughter has died, we ought to see it for what it really is, a fearful omen of how we are being taught to perceive the natural world.

Legal ethicist Lawrence Tribe, in his classic essay on environmental law and policy, "Ways Not to Think About Plastic Trees," rightly discerned the true significance of Krieger's statement. Tribe commented,

Policy analysts typically operate within a social, political, and intellectual tradition that regards the satisfaction of human wants as the only defensible measure of the good, a tradition that perceives the only legitimate task of reason to be that of consistently identifying and then serving individual appetite, preference, or desire. This tradition is echoed as well in environmental legislation which protects nature not for its own sake but in order to preserve its potential value for man (Tribe 1974:1325).

Tribe goes on to state that when human needs and preferences are treated as

the ultimate frame of reference, and when human goals and ends must be taken externally "given", rather than generated by reason, then *environmental policy makes a value judgment of enormous significance. And, once that judgment has been made, any claim for the continued existence of threatened wilderness areas or endangered species must rest on the identification of human wants and needs which would be jeopardized by a disputed development. As our capacity increases to satisfy those needs and wants artificially, the claim becomes tenuous indeed* (Tribe 1974:1326). With this judgment, the true identity and value of the created object is destroyed.

Closer to us here, in space and time, but not different in message and meaning, is Ontario's own recent scandal of the Walkerton water crisis. In this case, contamination of the Walkerton Ontario water supply

resulted in the deaths of seven people in the spring of 2000, deaths that many have blamed on a provincial government that eviscerated Ontario's environmental regulations, slashed the budget of the Ministry of the Environment, dismissed 40 percent of its staff, and privatized water testing services. Despite the scandal, the administration pressed forward with privatization of these and other environmental services. Perhaps, in Martin Krieger's view, people can learn to use, if not necessarily want, *E. coli* contaminated water, for that is certainly a water supply that can be made available to them at low cost.

As Christian environmental professionals, we practice our profession in a materialistic and individualistic culture that is increasingly bent on the abstraction of nature to pure categories of human need, and to an evaluation of our environment that finds its substance in the bottom line of a cost-benefit analysis. And we are the last real line of defense. The time has passed when we could assume that we could do our work in environmental research and management, as Christians, in a culture of such perverse assumptions without confrontation and without conflict. That day is over. What is needed today is not merely individual Christian environmental professionals doing their work as an expression of service to Christ and creation, valuable and noble as that may be. Rather, what is needed today is a community of Christian stewards who deliberately intend to form a permanent and pervasive professional presence, a presence that is inimitable by any other professional society or political coalition. Tribe noted, almost thirty years ago, that what environmental policy really needed was a new group of professionals who would be, in his words, "sensitive to the sorts of values and issues that analyses currently tend to slight –diversity, balance, aesthetic quality, reversibility, the claims of the future –and adept at modeling policy impacts in terms of such values" (Tribe 1974:1321). His words were a prophecy for us, the Christian community of environmental professionals.

My task today is, first, to explain why our world and our profession need the presence and influence of a community of Christian environmental professionals and second, to describe the qualities that such a community requires to influence a larger surrounding professional culture.

Understanding Our Current Condition

We live today in a culture that sees the world as a forest of plastic trees, a world in which people are ready and willing to reduce nature, and any discussion of its value, to pure abstractions of human need, appetite, and desire. In a world obsessed with environmental efficiency, natural trees that serve no purpose that, ultimately, technology cannot provide have no value. And when we have determined the end of their value we will have arrived at a moral judgment of terrible consequence. We will have shifted our focus as a species from the legitimate task of trying to discover the real content of a natural object's value to an abstract examination of the object's economic worth in light of our own self-interest.

When conservation biology first began to emerge as a distinct discipline in the late 1970's, its founder, Michael Soulè described it as "value laden and mission driven." In fact, Soulè went so far as to assert that conservation biology was defined, in part, by a number of value statements, what he called "normative postulates," that included such assertions as "biodiversity is good," "ecological complexity is good," and "biodiversity has intrinsic value" (Soulè 1985). And Soulè did not mean, in this context, that these things were "good" because the benefits of their continuance outweighed the cost of their maintenance. Rather, Soulè was asserting that these things had a worth of their own. And it was precisely this affirmation of normative value that provided the professional environment for the exponential growth of the modern conservation biology movement. Scientist were not attracted to the professional community of conservation biology simply to discuss what could be done to save endangered species. They were drawn, rather, out of the conviction that something ought to be done, and that the members of this community were the ones who ought to do it.

The expression of sin in our field will always surface in, among other ways, the relentless desire of humans to conflate the intrinsic value of *creation* with the personal benefits derived *from creation*. Thus we attempt, through techniques such as contingency valuation, to measure values of creatures by asking people how much they are willing to pay, or how much they are willing to be compensated, for their preservation. "Suppose," asks the social scientist, "that a tract of virgin prairie near your home, and slated for housing

development, is habitat for an endangered butterfly. How much would you pay to forego development and preserve the butterfly's habitat?" Then the respondent is asked to choose from an array of different dollar amounts. We repeat this procedure many times, sum the responses, compute the average, and pronounce the value of the butterfly. As the environmental ethicist Mark Sagoff has astutely pointed out, this approach is fatally flawed, no matter how many publications it generates, because it confounds value with benefit. Respondents who assign a dollar amount to saving the butterfly are not trying to express *the economic benefits of preserving the butterfly to them* but rather are expressing a *relative strength of moral conviction that the butterfly ought to be preserved* (Sagoff 2000). But if contingency valuation becomes the basis of environmental decision-making, it can lead to only one conclusion, that those who are willing to pay the most are those who will decide what we will do. If managers and policy makers find themselves painted into such a contingent valuation corner, there is little hope that they can make any decisions that will reflect the true value of created things. Managers and policy makers desperately need an alternative perspective, a radically different way of seeing and valuing the natural world.

Environmental study and conservation biology are today engaged in a great debate, indeed an intellectual civil war, as to which view will prevail, and contingency valuation is but one engagement in this widespread conflict. In conservation biology, the discipline's own growth and success have created an environment in which practitioners are increasingly tempted to define their success in terms of grants received, papers published, and influence gained. When such things become the coin of the realm, it is natural to retreat to forsake any stance of activism or advocacy and retreat to the safety of so-called "value neutrality," aided and abetted by a philosophy of scientific positivism. In this view, environmental science and conservation biology are to provide to decision makers with the scientific expertise necessary to resolve technical questions of policy formation and management action, and nothing more. We are to always keep a measurable distance between investigation and activism. And we are to shun all advocacy, or even any appearance of advocacy, as a threat to that most treasured value, professional objectivity (Barry and Oelschlaeger 1996). And it is precisely this positivist "ideal," coupled to the growing economic abstraction of the natural world, that reveals why the witness and community of Christian environmental professionals are so desperately needed today.

The Inescapably Normative Nature of Environmental Stewardship

Environmental and conservation sciences are inescapably normative. Without normative values, conservation biology ceases to be conservation. Without normative values, environmental protection ceases to protect anything and becomes nothing more than environmental information. In these conditions, both are reduced to the status of awkward, untimely born stepchildren of applied ecology. If environmental scientists and conservation biologists supply nothing to the decision-making process but information and technique, then our role in the actual decision is trivial. In fact, the very existence of environmental science and conservation biology make a lie of logical positivism and its fruitless quest for a "value-free science." And so it should. How could we, with any scrap of intellectual integrity, pursue value free science in the study, protection, and conservation of a value-laden nature?

What ought to define a community of Christian environmental professionals is, first and foremost, that the environment is recognized as a *creation* whose locus of value resides in God and not in ourselves, and whose manifestation of value is found in God's declaration of its goodness and not our calculation of its commodity assets. For all the commodities, services, and benefits that creation provides to us, including the oxygen released by real trees and the water stored in uncontaminated aquifers, if we begin with treat creation as commodity we will end with a world of plastic trees and polluted waters. No one can demonstrate these truths more effectively than a community of Christian environmental professionals, and it is time that we did.

I am convinced that Christian environmental and conservation professionals should play a significant role in environmental management and conservation policy. But I am just as convinced that they must strongly assert that role, or they are destined to lose it. Traditionally, scientists have allowed managers and policy makers to set the agenda, and we have designed our research to answer the questions that they have asked. That

tradition has forced environmental professionals into what I believe is becoming an unacceptably narrow position, a position in which we cannot speak truth to the problems we are asked to solve, or to those who are asked to solve them. We must continue to supply accurate information; but we also must supply a great deal more. First, we must insist on a far greater role in determining the research and management agenda, so that policy makers and managers ask more meaningful questions about how environmental and biological processes really work, and we must insist that these questions be asked in a way that recognizes normative environmental and social values. Second, we must direct our own considerable research skills into the administrative and policy making process itself. That is, we must begin to conduct research on how decisions are made so that we develop a far more sophisticated understanding of how the policy making process works and a far more sophisticated capacity to influence the decision making process.

Environmental science and conservation biology require normative values, but on their own, they cannot intrinsically *generate or sustain* the normative values they so desperately require. The values needed to make these disciplines operative in their pursuit of science and faithful to their obligations to society can only be achieved by the leadership of a community of professionals within the field who possess a coherent and responsive ethic that understands why environmentalism and conservation *must* be value laden and mission driven, or else cease to be anything at all.

The Value of the Judeo-Christian Environmental Ethic

We live in a world that continues to demand an answer to the question, "Why should anybody care about environmental quality and biodiversity?" Unfortunately, professional scientists persist in responding with some of the most pathetic answers imaginable, but with the only answers permitted within their own traditions of secularism and scientific positivism. The evolutionary biologist E. O. Wilson is among those who see the dilemma most clearly. The human species, claims Wilson, "lacks any goal external to its own biological nature? Traditional religious beliefs have been eroded, not so much by humiliating disproofs of their mythologies as by the growing awareness that beliefs are really enabling mechanisms for survival" (Wilson 1978:3). Thus, argues Wilson, if our value systems are nothing more than a cumulative genetic-evolutionary inheritance, how can we choose among the many traditions that present themselves to us? And how can these systems be reliable when they evolved in conditions so different from the world humans inhabit today? Further, how can they provide any claim for moral certainty when moral decisions are nonetheless required? As Herman Daly and John Cobb put it, in responding to Wilson, "if there is no transcendental source of value that somehow makes contact with nature in the mind? if there is no providential force behind the genetic chance and environmental necessity of evolution, then to what, besides chance or whim, can one appeal?" (Daly and Cobb 1989:392). Wilson tries to escape the dilemma of his own belief system with a novel answer. "Fortunately," Wilson asserts, "this circularity of the human predicament is not so tight that it cannot be broken through an exercise of will" (Wilson 1978:196).

Now here is a truly incredible statement! Can human will break a logical circularity? Or can one evade an inescapable conclusion of logic by an exercise of will? As Daly and Cobb point out, "One could understand how will might be appealed to as a general urge to action, but not as a criterion for deciding which action to take. The resolution of Wilson's dilemma requires a criterion, not an urge. Not only does Wilson appeal to will while professing not to believe in it? but he also requires that will perform the miraculous tasks of breaking a purely logical circularity and serving as a criterion as well as an urge. This just will not do," (Daly and Cobb 1989:393).

In fact, Wilson's dilemma is yet another faucet of the problem of plastic trees. When human beings reduce all of nature, including their own nature, to nothing but an abstraction of their own desires, ultimately an abstraction of their genetically fixed instinct for survival, conservation has no meaningful reality. Our noblest longings for beauty in our environment and for a glorious diversity of life in our world are reduced to irrational, subconscious responses to needs long past, evolutionary will-o-the-wisps that wander over our psychic landscape, enticing us with their form, disappointing us in their substance. Too cowardly to tell our poor,

ignorant public that conservation and environmental protection are evolutionary illusions rooted in a mindless survival instinct, we are reduced to repeating to a listening world the mindless, self-centered mantra that we must protect the environment because it is in our own best interest to do so, and nothing more. Jonathan Newman, a professor at the University of Oxford, wrote to me recently about his own frustration with the current value wasteland in environmentalism and conservation that this kind of thinking has produced. "I ask my students," he wrote, "to write an essay explaining why we should give a damn about biodiversity. They respond with arguments about the economic value of different species. But that is a difficult argument to win because not every species is valuable to us" (Newman 2002:xiii). Newman is right, and we will continue to see the trivialization of environmental and conservation values as long as we permit the values of the creation around us and everything in it to be abstracted to expressions of human appetite and evolutionary self-interest. The arguments that reduce creation to individual entities of human self interest are easy to make. They hardly require the training of a college education or the dignity of a spokesperson with advanced degrees. But, although such arguments are easy to construct, their shallowness is just as easy to recognize, and, thus, they have no power to stir the mind or move the heart. Aldo Leopold put it well, "In our attempt to make conservation easy," he wrote, "we have made it trivial. When the logic of history hungers for bread and we hand out a stone, we are at pains to explain how much the stone resembles bread" (Leopold 1966:246). And it is only a short interval before what is trivial is reduced to what is unnecessary.

Advice to Christian Environmental Professionals

Philosopher Alvin Plantinga wrote that, when he first began his career in philosophy, "Few establishment philosophers were Christian, even fewer were willing to admit in public that they were, and still fewer thought of their being Christian as making a real difference to their practice as philosophers. The most popular question of philosophical theology at that time was not whether Christianity or theism is *true*; the question, instead, was whether it even *makes sense to say* that there is such a person as God" (Plantinga 1984:253).

Plantinga made these remarks in the inaugural issue of the journal, *Faith and Philosophy*, a journal that was to become an important intellectual forum for a fledgling community of Christian philosophers. In an article entitled, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," Plantinga points out that Christians did not overcome the reigning paradigm of logical positivism of the 1950's and 60's by trying to prove that there is such a person as God, or by trying to prove that making claims about God's existence made philosophical sense. Rather, Christians began to establish a professional identity in philosophy when they stopped trying to play the game according to rules set by positivists and instead declared a new set of assumptions that was uniquely their own, fully informed by their knowledge of God's revelation in the word of scripture and the person of Jesus Christ. But in order to establish a distinctively Christian professional community, Plantinga insists that three things are pre-requisite: autonomy, integrity, and boldness.

Autonomy is a wonderful word, and it describes a wonderful condition – a condition of independence, a sense in which one is not bound hip and hand to every intellectual or professional fashion, but rather free to pursue unique purposes and inquiries intrinsic to one's own nature and calling. The time has come for Christian environmental professionals to intentionally create such autonomy, to develop a professional community that explicitly states its own assumptions, pursues questions important to those assumptions, and deliberately nurtures and mentors new professionals within the guidelines of those assumptions. In other words, to begin to move toward autonomy is at the same time to move toward intellectual and professional sustainability. We cannot presume that new Christian environmental professionals will simply pop up out of the ground, however attractive some of us here might find such an organic model of intellectual regeneration. Rather, we will grow and flourish as an intellectual presence in environmentalism when we choose to make binding and lasting social contracts that define ourselves *together* as a community. Michael Soulè, the founder of conservation biology, reflecting on the founding of that discipline, noted "Disciplines are not logical constructs; they are social crystallizations which occur when a group of people agree that association and discourse serve their interests. Conservation biology began when a critical mass of people agreed that they were conservation biologists," (Soulè 1986:3). Today is the day for each of us to ask ourselves this question, "Am I an environmental

professional who happens to be a Christian, or am I a Christian environmental professional?" There is a universe of difference between the two.

A Christian community is born among environmental professionals when a critical mass of people determine that they really are Christian environmental professionals, not simply environmental professionals who happen to be Christian. It begins to grow when such professionals determine that their association together is not merely a pleasant diversion but an essential element of being an environmental professional, and that such association and discourse not only serve their own interest, but that of the society around them, that indeed such association is essential to that society and to the integrity of environmental professionalism. Further, they must understand that forming a professional community is essential to defining not only what they will study and how they will engage in management and policy decisions, but equally essential to understanding who and what they are as professionals. But a society of Christian environmental professionals must be autonomous precisely so that it can resist the temptation to abandon difficult issues, particularly issues of value and mission in environmental management, and maintain its focus on these matters even when it receives no encouragement to do so from the profession at large. And we must become autonomous as a community precisely so that each of us can resist the temptation to embrace the false autonomy of individualism that so defines modern popular and professional culture. We really do need one another and we really must offer accountability to one another to pursue purposes greater than our own individual expression and achievement. Our professional culture needs our community. Our community requires its own autonomy.

A second reason that autonomy is necessary is because only in a permanent professional community can we begin the determined process of moral formation that will allow individuals to develop the kind of professional character and virtues needed to resist the vices of an individualistic, materialistic professional culture, which is itself a reflection of an individualistic, materialistic society. Modern professional environmental culture, left to its own devices and prejudices, produces careerists. Our mission is to produce stewards. We all know that many people enter the environmental field with the highest and noblest of motives. They intend to protect the environment, maintain healthy ecosystems, save endangered species, and educate an ignorant public. Unfortunately, their mentors have given them the impression that following these ideals is not going to cost anybody anything, least of all their own advancement. Rather, they have every expectation of being rewarded for their good work and noble motives.

Unfortunately, anyone who has actually worked in the field knows that it ain't necessarily so. In a recent review of Forest Service employees in the United States, Paul Schneider documented multiple cases of employees who were not merely reprimanded, but terminated for such activities as attempting to protect archaeological sites, finding endangered species in proposed timber sales, or trying to reduce timber harvests to benefit wildlife or watersheds. Still more disturbing were internal perceptions by the employees about their own agency. When asked to choose from 20 attributes which they felt would be most rewarded by the Forest Service, employees asserted that the three most rewarded attributes were meeting targets, being loyal to the Forest Service, and promoting a good public image of the agency. The three least rewarded traits were a sense of care for future generations, the preservation of healthy ecosystems, and a strong professional identity (Schneider 1992).

The secular response to the modern Christian environmental movement has had two distinct phases. In the 1970's and 1980's, professional and academic circles used the "toothache" strategy – they did their best to ignore it and hope that it would go away. But by the 1990s, it had become clear that Christian environmentalism was not going to evaporate, and a second strategy was employed. This second response, more subtle and sinister than the first, has been to subvert Christian environmentalism to secular purposes, to manipulate the moral power of the stewardship ethic to non-Christian ends, and to make Christian environmentalists the ceremonial chaplains of current environmental culture. This second strategy offers multiple seductions as Christians are invited to a place at the table, to speak, to write, to share in the secular environmental agenda. Although we should never refuse an opportunity to speak truth in any context, neither

should we ever accept conditions that limit the truth we are allowed to speak. Christian environmentalism must not be reduced to becoming the motivational flame-keeper of an environmental movement that does not really believe the Christian truth about the environment as a creation of God. The present problems of engagement with secular environmentalism further reveal our need for autonomy as a community. We must speak to, and with, our colleagues on environmental matters. But we must not, we dare not, let Christian truth be absorbed or trivialized into a secular agenda.

Plantinga's second admonition for Christian philosophers is that they develop a greater level of integrity. And that is good advice for us. In fact, without community integrity, we will never achieve community autonomy. With Plantinga, I speak of integrity as meaning, for a community of professionals, a sense of integral wholeness, or being "all of one piece." In the practices of a professional society, in establishing journals and publishing research, we need to explore and develop systematic biblical positions that provide a foundation to address specific issues comprehensively. We must start making an intentional effort to ensure that our position on issue A is consistent with our stance on issue B. And we must speak systematically to related arrays of issues, not simply to one issue at a time. It is, in part, through demonstrating integrity in this way, this determination to genuinely be "one thing," that we will draw new professionals to us. It is precisely our ability to not only prescribe the right action in matters of environmental policy or management, but also to give compelling reasons about why it is the right action, that will make us a community that others will be drawn to and want to join. Through a determined practice of social, organizational, and communal integrity, we can begin the process of building the kind of professional character that enable us to resist a surrounding professional culture of shallow alternatives, however attractively offered. It is in an autonomous community that we call one another to this kind of professional integrity.

Planting's third plank of advice is the admonition for greater boldness, which he speaks of in terms of emotional strength or self-confidence. Boldness is a necessary element of making our professional presence meaningful as a community. But, in a sense, it is also the easiest of the three admonitions to follow, as long as we are faithful to the first two. Indeed, boldness is a natural outgrowth; a "residue" of community autonomy and professional integrity. Specifically, if we are diligent to build a professional community with a strong measure of autonomy, of freedom from worry about what the world, or other professional communities, think of us, and if we live and work in that community with integrity, it will not be so hard to be bold. Specifically, we are emboldened both by the continuing and persistent support of colleagues who are brothers and sisters in Christ ("autonomy-based boldness") and by the boldness that comes from knowing that our position is internally and comprehensively consistent ("integrity-based boldness"). If we create a professional organization of Christian environmental professionals with whom we discuss, explore, and critique our ideas together, we will not likely be intimidated by the first wind of criticism that blows in the face of our views or our actions.

There are already many organizations of Christians concerned with the environment and conservation. There is the Evangelical Environmental Network. There is the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies. There is A Rocha, and Florista, and ECHO, and a score of others. But there is not yet an organization composed entirely of environmental and conservation professionals engage directly in the practice of research, consultation, management, and policy. In short, there is presently no organization that can bring a permanent presence of professional expertise and Christian perspective to the environmental debate in the way that a community of Christian environmental professionals can. I believe that the formation of such a community, such a professional society, should be the most important outcome of this conference. Let us be intentional. Let us begin the building of that community, a community marked by autonomy under the authority of Christ, integrity in oneness with his purpose, and boldness through our confidence in him and in our love and support for one another. I am convinced that, without the prophetic presence and witness of such a community in conservation and environmental science, our profession will increasingly retreat into the safety and irrelevance of a value-neutral positivism, one that is willing to provide information without guidance, data without direction, and analysis without discernment. And if we who are Christian environmental professionals fail to extend our influence beyond the sphere of our private virtues to the public evaluation of management and

policy by an informed Christian community, we too will become marginalized, even unnecessary. And, if we fail to act, that will be exactly what we deserve. Let us prove that we might be capable of something better. Let us not leave here without beginning the formation of a permanent society of Christian environmental professionals.

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