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Steward-In-Chief: The Theology of George W. Bush and His Environmental/Conservation Policy

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Steward-In-Chief

The Theology of George W. Bush and His Environmental/Conservation Policy

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Abstract

The Christian faith of President George W. Bush has been a topic of ongoing discussion and concern since the beginning of his first term, particularly in regard to the manner in which his spiritual values inform his public policies. Nowhere is this concern more pronounced than in regard to his approach to environmental policy. This paper evaluates President Bush's spiritual development and discusses the ways in which the theological themes of "duty," "call," and his vision of the United States as the "*shining city on a hill*," influence and inform his environmental policies. The paper will assert that, given his theological and environmental values, President Bush is a "conservationist" and not an "environmentalist." The distinction between these two philosophical orientations is discussed as well as how the President's conservationist values are reinforced by his Christian faith and reflected in his policy initiatives.

Introduction

[1] George W. Bush startled many during his first campaign for the Presidency when he responded to a question regarding the identity of his favorite philosopher by citing the name "Jesus Christ." While many appreciated his candor and his willingness to affirm his devotion to Christ, others were put-off – wondering if America was about to elect a religious fanatic to the White House.

[2] Now that George Bush is in his second term as President, there are many that remain concerned regarding the extent to which his faith influences public policy – particularly in regard to his "faith-based initiatives," his values regarding human cloning and stem-cell research, his advocacy for the teaching of "intelligent design," and in regard to his position on

abortion. Less visible, but also important, is the relationship between Bush's theological values and his environmental policy.

[3] This paper contends that George W. Bush's environmental policies are very much intertwined with a distinctly Christian influenced set of values that he refers to as "compassionate conservatism," and will seek to clarify the connections between Bush – "man of faith" – and Bush – President and "Steward-in-Chief." To that end, this paper will provide an overview of Bush's spiritual development and will place his Christian faith within the broader context of American evangelical Christianity. Finally, the narrative to follow will demonstrate how Bush's values are grounded in significant scriptural, meditative, and theological texts that have not only influenced and nurtured his mature faith but have additionally informed his approach to environmental policy.

[4] This analysis is undertaken not simply because of the general interest that this President's faith has generated, but in an effort to help policymakers and historians interpret his past decisions and anticipate what environmental policies President Bush is likely to pursue given his particular theological persuasion. However, before beginning the process of analyzing Bush's journey of faith, it is necessary to first acquaint the reader with some of the basic theological terms and concepts that will be used to evaluate the nature of his theological beliefs.

Theological Foundations

Theological Coordinates of Faith

[5] When navigating one locates one's position on the basis of a set of coordinates delineating latitude and longitude. Likewise, any effort to locate George Bush's theological perspective along a spectrum of belief must begin with some basic definitions. The theological continuum can be construed in many ways and from many different religious traditions and perspectives. However, for the sake of this paper, the continuum of theological thought will be defined as one that is anchored at one extreme by a sense of religious "duty" that has been instilled, perhaps even "absorbed," through a lifetime of living and worshiping within a Christian community. This "theology of duty" or "theology of vocation" (Lincoln) is very much associated with the reformed Christian tradition; most visibly in the theology of John Calvin and particularly in regard to Calvin's belief that it is the duty of Christians to be "obedient to any governors whom God has established over the places in which we reside" (Calvin: Para. VIII). This sort of duty is required of God in that government itself is a divine gift bestowed upon humanity as "common grace" – or the presence of the divine among humankind that draws people toward civility and eventually communion with God.

[6] On the other end of the continuum of faith is a "theology of rebirth" or "born again theology." Unlike the theology of duty that is nurtured in individuals through growing up within the church and among Christians, born again theology discriminates between those who call themselves Christians by virtue of been reared in faith within the church, and those who have become Christian through a "call" or "conversion" experience. Those who have experienced "conversion" believe that God directly intervened in their lives and transformed them into new creatures – i.e., causing them to be "born again" into a new existence and calling them to a new and better life. Consequently, being born again is a central feature of

American evangelical faith and, while articulated in many fashions, is perhaps best expressed in the words of the Robert Schuller who wrote, “To be born again means that we must be changed from a negative to a positive self-image – from inferiority to self-esteem, from fear to love, from doubt to trust” (68).

Christianity and Duty

[7] George W. Bush’s early faith reflected a theology of duty. He was primarily raised within the Presbyterian and Episcopal traditions, and hailed from a long line of deeply religious and spiritual people, including his great grandfather, Presbyterian minister James Bush, his grandfather Prescott Bush (who while a student at St. George’s Episcopal School considered studying for the ministry), and his grandmother Dorothy Walker (Prescott Bush’s wife) who was noted for her deep spirituality and devout church attendance (Aikman; Mansfield). As a young man, George W. Bush followed his father George H. W. Bush to Philips Academy where his Episcopal religious affiliation continued until he graduated and was enrolled as a freshman at Yale University – also the alma mater of his father.

[8] Stephen Mansfield describes these years at Yale as “nomadic years” in which Bush responded to the snobbery he had experienced while a student at Phillips Academy by adopting a partying (secularly-oriented) lifestyle. During these years, Bush drifted from the theology of duty that had characterized his earlier life, motivated in part by a most unfortunate conversation that he had with then-chaplain William Sloan Coffin at Yale. George W. Bush’s father had just lost the bid for a Senate seat from Texas to a Republican candidate by the name of Ralph Yarborough. Reflecting upon this loss in a conversation with the younger Bush, Coffin is reported to have said, “I know your father, and your father lost to a better man” (Kristoff). While it is probably an exaggeration to say that Coffin’s blunt and thoughtless comment drove George W. Bush from regular worship thereafter, it is not an exaggeration to suggest the Coffin’s comments reinforced Bush’s growing dislike for the “elitism” that he had encountered at Phillips and at Yale – an elitism that also extended into the church (as he then knew it) and among some of its ministers.

The Imprint of Midland, Texas

[9] Understanding Bush’s distaste for so-called Eastern elitism requires one to recognize the significant impact that growing up in Midland, Texas had upon him. Although Bush was the progeny of sophisticated and wealthy Eastern families, the young Bush had been reared in West Texas – a world dominated by oilmen, cowboys, roughnecks, ranchers, and risk-takers. It is within this community that young George W. established life-long associations and within this cultural setting that he defined his self-identity. Bush acknowledged the influence of Midland upon his life while running for President in 2000 when he said, “I don’t know what percentage of me is Midland, but I would say people – if they want to understand me – need to understand Midland and the attitude of Midland” (Carnes: 63). Moreover, Bush asserted that the values that Midland Texas embraces “are the same ones I hold near to my heart. The slogan ‘The Sky’s The Limit’ was meant for everyone, not just a select few. Midlanders believed if you work hard and believe it will happen, anything can happen” (Dallas Morning News Editorial Board).

[10] Midland is a small West Texas community with small town values - what journalist George Neumayr refers to as “the small town Christian America of Bush’s memory.” It is a place where Christianity is openly practiced – an experience scarcely found in larger urban areas. It is the sort of town where people comment about the working of miracles and prayer concerns in their everyday discourse, and is also a community where the concept of “duty” to God, country, community, and family prevails (Neumayr).

An Emerging Evangelical Faith

[11] Bush returned to Midland after graduating from Yale, and it is in Midland that he established himself as a businessman, married his wife Laura and started a family. It is also the place where he returned to a form of Christian faith and religious practice that typified the community. Again, as George Neumayr observes, “Midland’s Christianity” is consistent with that of George W. Bush in that it is “at once direct and affable, evangelical and ecumenical, salt-of-the-earth and perhaps a bit salty – not surprising given its frontier atmosphere through which ‘roughnecks,’ ‘wildcatters,’ and ‘bombardiers’ . . . have passed.”

[12] Bush wandered away from his Presbyterian and Episcopal roots when he returned to Midland as a young man. After marrying his wife Laura, he became Methodist – a denomination with clearly visible evangelical characteristics. However, according to those who knew him in Midland during the 1980s, it was the sharp downturn in the oil market that led him, and many other West Texas businessmen, into a deeper evangelical expression of faith. During that period of economic turmoil, Bush’s close friend, Don Jones (then president of one of Midland’s largest and fastest growing banks), became very active in a Christian organization known as the Community Bible Study group. It was through this Christian fellowship that Jones experienced a spiritual conversion, allowing him to finally walk away from a long-term drinking habit. Bush, who also had a serious and growing alcohol problem, was particularly impressed with the change he witnessed in Jones, and attributes Jones’ spiritual rebirth as one of the factors that ultimately brought him to move beyond the “theology of duty” to his Christian spiritual rebirth (Mansfield).

[13] In addition to the influence of Don Jones, Bush’s journey toward embracing evangelical Christian “rebirth” was influenced by two noted evangelists – one of national reputation, and the other of international renown. Arthur Blessitt was a well-known evangelical figure throughout the U.S., and particularly throughout West Texas. In 1984 Blessitt was invited to conduct a revival in Midland to help soothe the troubled spirits of this community that had been economically ravaged by plunging international oil prices. Bush took note of Blessitt’s services, but declined from actually attending one of the meetings himself. Instead, he sent word to Blessitt that he would like to meet with him personally and privately. Subsequently, a meeting was arranged at Midland’s Holiday Inn coffee shop, where Bush was alleged to have said to the famed evangelist, “I want to talk to you about how to know Jesus Christ and how to follow him” (Mansfield: 69). Blessitt then asked Bush if he believed in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior – to which Bush replied that he was not sure. Blessitt responded by witnessing to his own faith and by praying for Bush to open his heart to the Lord.

[14] While Bush was moved by his experience with Blessitt, he was not “converted” in his faith until sometime later when his father invited a family friend, evangelist Billy Graham, to the family compound at Kennebunkport, Maine. During the visit, Graham and Bush took a

walk together on the beach during which Graham is reported to have asked Bush “Are you right with God?” to which Bush answered “No. But I want to be” (Carnes: 63). Bush recalls this event in *A Charge to Keep*, recollecting,

I knew I was in the presence of a great man. He was like a magnet; I felt drawn to seek something different. He didn’t lecture or admonish; he shared warmth and concern. Billy Graham didn’t make you feel guilty; he made you feel loved (Bush and Hughes: 136).

Bush’s conversation with Billy Graham proved to be the event that eventually led to his conversion experience – i.e., the conviction that he had been “born again.” Reflecting upon the fateful meeting with Graham, Bush observes,

Reverend Graham planted a mustard seed in my soul, a seed that grew over the next year. He led me to the path, and I began walking. And it was the beginning of a change in my life. I had always been a religious person and regularly attended church, even taught Sunday school and served as an altar boy. But that weekend my faith took on new meaning. It was the beginning of a new walk where I would recommit my heart to Jesus Christ (Bush and Hughes: 136).

[15] Clearly Bush’s interaction with Graham led to his conversion experience – one that was built upon a lifetime of Christian religious experience. So powerful was the experience that Bush began studying the Bible daily. Then, with the support of his good friend of many years, Midland resident Don Evans, Bush joined the Community Bible Study group that had supported his friend Don Jones in giving up his drinking habit. These habits of daily Bible study and cooperative Bible fellowships resulted in clear changes in Bush – changes so noticeable to those close to him that some months later his mother Barbara was overheard telling someone on the phone that “George has been born again” (Mansfield: 69). To this day Bush reads the Bible daily and every other year he reads the Bible in its entirety. Likewise, he has made it a habit to read an excerpt from the famous devotional *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers on a daily basis.

Duty and Call

[16] It is important to recognize that Bush’s decision to be “born again” in his faith in no way negates the importance or influence of the tradition of “duty theology” that he first learned in his hometown of Midland. Instead, his sense of duty was transformed by a new-found sense of “the call” – an experience frequently reported by those who have been “born again.” This sense of being “called” was of particular importance one Sunday in January 1999, two weeks after his brother Jeb’s inauguration as Governor of Florida. That Sunday, while worshiping with the Rev. Mark Craig, then pastor of the Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas, Bush heard the “call” that would eventually lead him to the White House. Rev. Craig, preaching on faithfully serving God, observed that he believed that at every level of society, people are “starved for leadership” and “starved for leaders who have ethical and moral courage.” As Bush remembers that memorable sermon, Rev. Craig was explaining to the congregation,

It is not enough to have an ethical compass to know right from wrong. America needs leaders who have the moral courage to do what is right for the right reason. It's not always easy or convenient for leaders to step forward [Craig acknowledged]. Even Moses had doubts (Bush and Hughes: 9).

Mark Craig's sermon captured George W. Bush's attention that Sunday and so did his mother. Following the service, Barbara Bush made a point of speaking to her son, reminding him that "He [Rev. Craig] was talking to you." During his four years as Governor of Texas, Bush had tried to live by an ethic like the one Mark Craig alluded to, but on that Sunday in 1999, Bush believed he was being called to do even more. Hearing the call, Bush responded by initiating the processes that eventually led him into two terms in the White House.

A Shining City on a Hill: Compassionate Conservatism and Manifest Destiny

[17] Bush's "compassionate conservatism" reflects his personal theology expressed within the context of public policy. It is a policy that is unflinchingly citizen self-reliant in its orientation while steering clear of the vision of complete citizen self-reliance embraced by more libertarian voices within his party. Bush's compassionate conservatism is based upon the belief that individuals are primarily responsible for their own welfare and that government should only become involved in the private lives of individuals in times of extreme hardship – such as during natural disasters (like Hurricane Katrina) or during times of significant market failures. He also sees a responsibility for government to be involved (primarily at a local level) in the education of children, in police protection, national security, and in managing the banking system. However, the bulk of what might be called "social services" Bush contends should primarily be the responsibility of families, local charities, and religious organizations and communities. Bush states:

Compassionate conservatism is neither soft nor fuzzy. It is clear and compelling. It focuses not on good intentions but on good results. Compassionate conservatism applies conservative, free-market principles to the real job of helping real people, all people, including the poor and the disadvantaged. My vision of compassionate conservatism also requires America to assert its leadership in the world. We are the world's only remaining superpower, and we must use our power in a strong but compassionate way to help keep the peace and encourage the spread of freedom (Bush and Hughes: 236).

By linking his "compassionate conservatism" to the nation's status as the lone surviving "superpower," Bush alludes to yet another significant theological theme that he acquired in his religious experience. He not only believes that God can "call" individuals to service, he also believes that the United States has been called (by God) to serve the rest of the world.

[18] This is not a new theological theme in American history. It has historically been referred to under the doctrine of "manifest destiny." During the mid-nineteenth century the concept of "manifest destiny" reflected the belief that America had a divinely ordained mission (a divine call) to spread American democracy and culture across the vast North American continent. This idea was perhaps best reflected in the vision of America conveyed in the famous historical narrative of the late nineteenth century, *The Frontier In American History* by Frederick Jackson Turner. In Turner's turn-of-the-century book, the "American West" rep-

resented the last setting in which the American nation was to be shaped by nature and divine will. To that end, Turner quotes the famous Congregationalist preacher of the late 1800's Dr. Lyman Beecher who provided a theological rationale for manifest destiny by observing, "It is equally plain that the religious and political destiny of our nation is to be decided in the West," [and that in the West] "A nation is being born in a day" (Beecher: 11).

[19] The ideas associated with the concept of manifest destiny were first articulated by the Puritan minister John Winthrop in his famous Arbella Covenant. Though not referred to as "manifest destiny" per se, Winthrop's ideas became the foundation upon which the concept was to exert significant influence upon the American continent and nation. In referring to the new colony "New England," Winthrop observed,

We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when he shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "the Lord make it like that of *New England*." For we must consider that we shall be as a *city upon a hill*. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.

The term "city upon a hill" has persisted as a theologically inspired description of the emerging American republic and was a term most recently used in American politics by George W. Bush's political mentor, Ronald Reagan. Reagan used the imagery of a "shining city upon a hill" throughout his presidency, but most clearly articulated what he meant by the term in his farewell address on January 11, 1989. In that address he said the following:

I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it and see it still. And how stands the city on this winter night? More prosperous, more secure, and happier than it was eight years ago. But more than that; after 200 years, two centuries, she still stands strong and true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what storm. And she's still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.

Earlier as Governor of California, Reagan referred to Winthrop's vision for America (which he associated with the idea of manifest destiny) in a prominent speech and said the following:

We cannot escape our destiny, nor should we try to do so. The leadership of the free world was thrust upon us two centuries ago in that little hall in Philadelphia. In the days following World War II, when the economic strength and power of America was all that stood between the world and the

return to the dark ages, Pope Pius XII said, “The American people have a great genius for splendid and unselfish actions. Into the hands of America God has placed the destinies of an afflicted mankind.” We are indeed and we are today the last best hope of man on earth (1974).

[20] Arguably, the central theological tenet informing all of Bush’s public policies, domestic and foreign, is that God has given humanity the gift of liberty and that America (with all of its wealth and influence) has been divinely “called” to spread that liberty. This theme was prominent during Bush’s 2000 presidential campaign, when he embraced the sentiments of Ronald Reagan, saying, “our nation is chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model to the world” (Nielsen). Bush went on to reassert this theme once again in his 2003 State of the Union address, leaving little room for conjecture as to his meaning: “Americans are a free people who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America’s gift to the world, but God’s gift to humanity” (Barnes: 146).

Bush’s Approach to Environmental Policy

Liberty, Free Trade, and the Environment

[21] If liberty is God’s gift to mankind, George W. Bush is convinced that the way to bestow this gift of liberty is through free trade in global markets. Only free trade promotes the exercise of free choice in the market place. For Bush, promoting such free trade involves “tearing down barriers, everywhere, so the whole world trades in freedom,” (Bush and Hughes: 66), and it is in regard to the issue of “tearing down barriers” that Bush’s environmental policies can be best understood.

[22] For Bush, one of the principal barriers to free trade is restrictive government regulation. Given his pro-free-trade and open-market orientation, it is not surprising that one of the first actions he took after becoming President was to reject U.S. support for the Kyoto accord and to seek to eliminate and/or weaken what he considered to be unnecessary or inefficient federal environmental regulations. To achieve this end, he appointed a conservative to the important position of Director of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), tapping former New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman. This appointment was of major significance in that it led many environmentalists to wonder whether “‘moderate’ Republicans like Whitman willing to play loyal soldiers” to the Bush administration really do any good for anyone (Hart).

[23] During her two and one-half years as Director of the EPA, Christine Todd Whitman loyally served the Bush administration as it sought to reduce environmental regulation. While EPA administrator, she supported administration efforts to distance themselves from a government report that associated global warming with increased human air pollution, reverse a Clinton-era ruling that reduced the level of arsenic that would be tolerated in drinking water, open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) for oil exploration and production, store nuclear waste in Yucca Mountain, Nevada, expand the number of permits allowing Midwest power plants to continue operating despite having insufficient air pollution controls, and expand logging within the nation’s national forests and preserves (Ifill).

[24] Not all of the issues Whitman backed drew the ire of environmentalists. Particularly noteworthy was her support for the reduction of emissions from diesel engines in 2003 and her support for eliminating recreational vehicle traffic within the Big Cypress National Preserve in Florida (The Wilderness Society). Even so, Whitman did not get along with some of the more conservative members of the Bush administration (being comparatively moderate in her political views) and eventually resigned from the Bush administration.

[25] In the opinion of many politicians and environmentalists, the environmental record of the Bush administration has been exceedingly poor (Kennedy: 2004). For instance, the Wilderness Society of Washington, D.C. includes the following in its long list of Bush-era environmental failures:

- Urging oil drilling in the Arctic refuge and in the Arctic Ocean;
- Pushing oil and gas leasing in proposed wilderness areas;
- Oil drilling off the coast of California and Florida;
- Under-funding national parks and wildlife refuges;
- Permitting the use of recreational vehicles, commercial helicopter air taxis, hazardous materials storage, and oil and gas exploration activities within the Alaskan wildlife refuges;
- Weakening safeguards for roadless areas in national forests.

[26] Similar criticism has been directed at the Bush administration from the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) who further criticize the administration for (among other failures):

- Weakening fuel standards for gas-guzzling automobiles;
- Slashing critical-habitat protection for salmon in the states of California and Washington;
- Failing to protect children from rat poisoning risks;
- Allowing for natural gas exploration in federally owned land in Utah;
- Opening up wilderness areas for road building and timbering.

By comparison, the Bush administration believes that they have been very successful in implementing their environmental philosophy that involves:

- Focusing upon results – “making our air, water, and land cleaner”;
- Employing the best science and data to inform decision-making;
- Encouraging “innovation and the development of new, cleaner technologies”;
- Continuing “America’s ethic of stewardship and personal responsibility through education and volunteer opportunities, and in our daily lives”;

- Expanding “Opportunities for environmental improvements” by including the efforts of the states, tribes, local communities, and through the efforts of individuals (The White House).

[27] The Bush administration points to a long list of environmental accomplishments that they believe illustrate how their environmental philosophy has been effectively implemented. Some of the key accomplishments to which this administration points include:

- Brownfields Program: “Accelerating the cleanup of brownfields to better protect public health, create jobs, and revitalize communities.”
- Healthy Forests Initiative: “Helping restore the health and vitality of forests and rangelands, and helping reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfires.”
- National Park Restoration: “Restoring the quality of our cultural, natural, and historic resources, fulfilling [The President’s] commitment to address the park maintenance backlog” [and] “for the first time in history, [providing] the National Park Service a full condition assessment and a facility condition index to prioritize ongoing maintenance needs.”
- The Farm Bill: “Providing more than \$40 billion over a decade to restore millions of acres of wetlands, protect habitats, conserve water, and improve streams and rivers near working farms and ranches.”
- Cooperative Conservation: Directing the “Department of the Interior’s land managers [to team] with communities, non-profits, States, and citizens to remove invasive species, reduce stream bank erosion, and enhance habitat for threatened and endangered species.”
- Clear Skies Initiative: “Dramatically [improving] air quality by reducing power plants’ emissions of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, and mercury, by approximately 70 percent over the next 15 years, more than any other clean air initiative.”
- Cutting Mercury Emissions: “For the first time ever, the Bush Administration will impose a mandatory 70 percent cut in mercury emissions from [power plants] by 2018.”
- Reducing Greenhouse Gas Intensity: “reducing the ratio of greenhouse gas emissions to economic output by 18 percent by 2012 compared to 2002.”
- Tax Incentives for Renewable Energy and Hybrid and Fuel-Cell Vehicles: Providing “tax incentives totaling \$4.1 billion through 2009 to spur the use of clean, renewable energy, and energy-efficient technologies, such as hybrid and fuel-cell vehicles, residential solar heating systems, renewable energy produced from landfill gas, wind, or biomass, and efficient combined heat and power systems.”
- Climate Change Research Funding: Committing “\$238 million for the Climate Change Research Initiative (CCRI), a \$70 million, or 42 percent, increase over 2004.” To include “\$57 million to accelerate efforts to advance understanding of the role of aerosols on climate, better quantify carbon sources, and improve the technology and

infrastructure used to observe and model climate variations” (The White House, 2004).

The full array of environmental accomplishments that the Bush administration cites is extensive, and the activities described above are but a portion of that more extensive list. However, even a cursory review of the environmental initiatives that the Bush administration chooses to tout demonstrates a significant theme throughout the Bush administration’s environmental policy, and that is the dominance of the concept of “stewardship.”

Environmental Policies and a Theology of Stewardship

[28] Bush’s theology of “duty” and “calling” and his vision of the United States as the “shining city on the hill” are important foundations for his environmental policy. However, to fully understand why Bush so readily engages in environmental initiatives such as the ones described above, one needs to understand the theological foundations that informs his sense of “stewardship.”

[29] Bush’s theology of stewardship is not unlike that of many evangelical Christians and is grounded in the creation story of the Old Testament of the Bible. According to the narrative in the book of Genesis, humankind is called upon by God to be a steward of the created world. According to this account, God quite literally, “took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). In effect, God created humankind to care for the world, and in requiring humans to till the land, obligated humanity to assume the role of steward. This particular understanding of the relationship of humankind to the world is one that has been criticized as being excessively “anthropocentric” since it legitimizes the right of humans to oversee use of the planet’s natural resources. Many environmental philosophers have taken issue with this theological hermeneutic, arguing that it justifies human exploitation of the earth (White; Naess; Sessions). Though Bush is very familiar with the criticism of environmental groups in this regard, he remains comfortable with serving as “Steward-in-Chief” (responding to his Christian “duty” and “call”) – believing that the gifts of the earth are the bounty of God made available for human use.

Stewardship and the Parable of the Talents

[30] Bush’s theology of “stewardship” supports the other theological themes identified in his belief system (duty, call, and his vision of America as the “shining city on the hill”) by legitimizing use of the earth’s divinely endowed gifts in the most productive and efficient way. To fully grasp this facet of stewardship, one must consider it within the context of the New Testament parable of the “talents.” This important parable attributed to Jesus is reported in Matthew 25:14-30. According to this story, three servants were given “talents” (a form of currency of that day) to invest. Each servant was given a different amount, with the expectation that each would leave the master and invest these talents as wisely as possible. Later, after having invested their money and reaped the profits of those investments, the servants were expected to return to their master and report how effectively they had managed the resources given to them. According to the parable, the following exchange occurred when the servants returned to their master’s home:

Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, “Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have

made five more talents.” His master said to him, Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, “Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.” But his master replied, “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness; where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:20-30; New Revised Standard Version).

[31] This parable is familiar to most Christians, and its meaning is interpreted straightforwardly. God gives each of us “talents” (both personal talents in the modern sense of the word and worldly resources) that he expects us to use to best advantage. He is pleased with those who use those resources to best advantage and is angry with those who fail to use the divinely bestowed resources to their fullest. Consequently, it should come as no surprise to anyone that George W. Bush’s theology of stewardship is a direct reflection of the injunction from Jesus - “For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have abundance.”

Theologically Informed Conservationism

[32] Bush’s theological tradition calls for him to function in his Presidential role as the “good and faithful servant” described in the parable from the Gospel of Matthew. Moreover, Bush believes that the United States is called to be the “good and faithful” servant to God *in all things* – concerning those issues on the domestic and foreign fronts and in regard to the environment. Even so, as the parable demonstrates, the “good and faithful servant” is the one who uses the natural resources of the world to the greatest advantage.

[33] Bush’s adherence to this tenet is what makes him “Steward-in-Chief,” and is the principle reason why he can never be mistaken for an “environmentalist.” Instead, George W. Bush is a “conservationist” in the tradition of the farmer who is interested in cultivating his land in such a way that not only is it a productive resource for him and his family, but will also be a productive resource for his children and their children. His approach to conservation is also like that of the rancher, who wants to preserve his range-land and pasture indefinitely, so he does not increase the size of his herd beyond the productive capacity of the land. Likewise, Bush’s theologically informed conservationism is akin to that of the forester

who recognizes how long it takes for a sapling to become a fully formed tree, and does not clear cut the forest to the point where it can be destroyed by wind and water erosion.

[34] In today's parlance, the term that is used to describe such an approach to managing natural resources is "sustainability" – a word that became very popular following the publishing of the *Brundtland Commission Report*, where sustainability was defined as a process by which nations meet "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (Brundtland: 51). However, the approach to conservation that Bush embraces is more nearly like the utilitarian approach expressed by the Father of Conservation, Gifford Pinchot; defining conservation as pursuing "The greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time" (48). According to Pinchot,

The central thing for which conservation stands is to make this country the best possible place to live in, both for us and for our descendants. It stands against the waste of the natural resources which cannot be renewed, such as coal and iron. It stands for the perpetuation of the resources which can be renewed, such as food-producing soils and forests; and most of all it stands for an equal opportunity for every American citizen to get his fair share of benefit from these resources both now and hereafter (79).

Pinchot's conservation vision would ultimately become known as the "wise use" model of conservation (Cowdin) – a model with theological roots going back to the "Parable of the Talents" and a vision that would appear to inform the "conservation" policy of George W. Bush.

Bush is Not An Environmentalist

[35] Environmental activists throughout the nation will always find themselves disappointed with the policies of George W. Bush because, simply put, Bush never was and never will be an environmentalist. In the tradition of Gifford Pinchot, George W. Bush can only be understood as a conservationist. He believes that the resources of the planet are a charge from God to use to their fullest potential and to conserve and care for. He does not worry about depleting natural resources (at least not in the foreseeable future) because he believes that God has given humankind resources in abundance and he relies upon this abundance in developing his economic and environmental policies. In this regard, Bush's theologically informed environmental policy is optimistic – a characteristic that boldly contrasts with the pessimism reflected by most environmentalists.

[36] Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. has asserted that "George W. Bush will go down in history as America's worst environmental president" (2003, 2004), but Bush could care less what Kennedy thinks. Julian Borger of the *Guardian* has described Bush as an "ignorant" leader who "doesn't have a clue" when it comes to environmental policy," but Bush brushes these words aside. Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) asserts that Bush is undertaking an "assault on the environment unlike anything I have seen in public life." Senator Hillary Clinton (D-MA) claims, "The state of our environment is getting weaker and weaker, dirtier and dirtier," and Senator Patrick Leahy (I-VT) observes, "When it comes to the administration's policies on the environment, every Friday seems to be Friday the thirteenth" (McCaslin). None of these comments serve to deter Bush from his course, for his policies are only perceived as a "fail-

ure” or ill conceived if one assumes an environmentalist rather than a conservationist perspective.

[37] Environmentalists are pessimistic about the capacity of the planet to sustain human life if current consumption trends continue. They believe the planet’s resources are scarce and irreplaceable. By comparison, conservationists, while aware of the limits that can be placed upon any natural resource, are nevertheless optimistic that with consistent conservation efforts and the development of new technologies and techniques for harnessing the earth’s resources, the earth’s resources should be sufficient to care for the planet’s growing population for many years to come.

[38] Environmentalists pessimistically point to market forces as the culprits in the ongoing and permanent destruction of the earth’s natural resources and see market economics as a major factor in the inequitable distribution of wealth across the world. Conservationists, on the other hand, see in market economics a force that can lift millions of people out of poverty and can bring liberty and self-sufficiency to all who will participate in its opportunities and who will diligently exert an effort to seek a better and freer life for themselves.

[39] Environmentalists see the consumption-oriented ethic enshrined in capitalism as the major factor contributing to the ecological decline of the planet. Conservationists, by comparison, point to war, poverty, disease, political-upheaval, illiteracy, religious fanaticism, and ignorance as the major factors threatening the world’s ecological resources. Rather than fighting “societal affluence” as an ecological “disease,” conservationists want to see the world’s resources used in an equitable and efficient way to make all the people of the world as affluent as possible. To that end, they would educate the world regarding how to most efficiently utilize and consume natural resources and would champion the development of technologies to more efficiently locate and harvest natural resources, and would pursue the development of alternate and more plentiful resources that can be substituted for scarce or non-renewable resources.

[40] Ultimately, Bush’s conservationism is guided by his theology of duty (to steward the resources of the world), by his theology of call (to maximize the benefit of the world’s resources through free and open markets in the interest of spreading God’s gift of liberty to all people) and by his vision of the United States as the “Shining City on a Hill” (guiding the world toward democracy). In the eyes of his critics, Bush’s conservation philosophy and its supporting theology is all together too simplistic, naïve, and mean spirited. Yet to the millions of Americans who share his evangelical faith, his ideas possess the virtue of making “common sense,” and are clearly and easily extrapolated from the Old Testament story of creation and the New Testament’s Gospel parables.

[41] Moreover, Bush’s faith and his approach to public policy are entirely consistent with the values he learned in his hometown of Midland, Texas. Having grown up in a part of the world where making a living entailed deriving value from the natural resources of the land, it is second-nature for Bush to grasp the legitimacy of a farmer contributing to the common-good by using the resources of the land to make a living, or, for that matter, to apply the same principle to the rancher, the forester, the miner, or the “wildcatter.” Bush grew up in a community where everyone directly or indirectly made their living from the land, and was

nurtured in the Church to be grateful for the divine gifts of water, land, and the bounty to be found in both.

[42] Only those whose experiences are remote to those of Midland, Texas could possibly be puzzled as to why Bush believes what he does and chooses to be so utilitarian in his approach to public policy in general and environmental policy in particular. Only those unfamiliar with traditional American Christian faith and practice could possibly be confused or even surprised regarding why Bush chooses to adopt environmental policies that so consistently deal with nature as a set of resources to be used for economic gain, personal pleasure and individual liberty. Finally, only those whose experiences have been primarily shaped by growing up in urban or suburban settings could fail to appreciate how obviously telling it is that this President chooses to escape the burdens of the White House by retreating to his ranch in the heart of central Texas to spend time clearing brush, repairing fence, tending to cattle, and toiling on land where he finds meaning, fruitful labor, and a measure of peace.

[43] In the end, the theology and environmental sentiments of George W. Bush are straightforward and easy to anticipate – if one takes time to objectively examine his roots and his faith. Failing to appreciate these important contributions to the policies of this President will ultimately result in “*misunderestimating*” his influence in this important policy arena.

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