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A DEEPER SHADE OF GREEN

I had spoken in front of large audiences before, but this was different. This was an assembly of college students, and having recently been a college student myself, I knew that it would be a tougher crowd than *Mystery Science Theater*. College students are easily bored and overly critical, eager to laugh and happy to do it at your expense if you give them the slightest reason.

A horn bellowed a high note and the band started playing, which signaled the precession. I marched behind the college president, who was robed in his academic regalia, as we entered an arena filled with more than a thousand students and faculty members.

I wondered why they invited me to be the keynote speaker for the school's annual convocation. I had been selected by the college's vice-president of admissions because he felt "a young face might connect better with the students" and because my passions and recent work corresponded to their

chosen theme for the upcoming school year: “It’s Easy Being Green.” I felt they could have scored a well-known speaker with little effort.

Three months earlier, I had eagerly accepted the invitation, but my excitement soon turned to panic. I felt a lot of pressure to perform. The night I received the invitation, I couldn’t stop pacing. “Looks like I have gotten myself into another mess again, Lord,” I prayed and prayed. I prayed that I wouldn’t be boring and that God would find a way to use my message to have an impact on someone. I even tried some breathing exercises I found on the Internet to help me relax. (In the end, I chugged some cold medicine and passed out.)

I spent countless hours during the weeks leading up to the event asking friends and colleagues for pointers on the best angle to attack the subject. I knew preparation was the key, so I began reading every book I could get my hands on in hopes that I would be ready for any postspeech questions. I collected heaps of material from others who had spoken in similar venues and on similar subjects. Finally, I scheduled a lunch with the vice-president to chat about the event.

The VP said they were excited to have me speak as he slowly poked at his crab cake. I was curious to know what they were doing to promote the event.

He told me that each year his staff picked a theme for the school year, which they promote campus-wide. This year they chose environmentalism. To help the students begin the journey down the green path, they provided every student a copy of an environmental book and a green T-shirt with “It’s easy being green” printed across the back. Every student would read the book and then listen to me unpack the

whole “green thing” for him or her. It sounded like a solid plan, and I was happy to play a part. I looked forward to seeing the book.

When the book arrived, I had no idea what to expect. The school is a prestigious academic institution, so I assumed the book would be scholarly. I hoped it wouldn’t be too thick. It is a Christian college, and I thought the book would perhaps take a juicy, theological angle, which I would love.

When the book arrived, I ripped open the package like a seven-year-old opening a gift from Santa. I pulled out a tiny book with a green, embossed cover.

I was stunned. With less than 150 pages of text between the covers, the slim volume seemed better suited for a coffee table than a classroom. I was also surprised by the book’s content. It had nothing to do with theology. Each chapter concluded with an essay from a celebrity—Justin Timberlake, Cameron Diaz, Will Ferrell, Jennifer Aniston, and Ellen DeGeneres—on how to live green.

Slouching back in my red recliner and staring at the book, I asked myself: “What message is this book sending?” The only answer I came up with frustrated me: “You should ‘go green’ because it’s cool.”


THE GREEN TRAIN: ALL ABOARD

Where is America today? America is standing in a check-out lane with a pack of cool-looking, compact fluorescent lightbulbs. America is swinging by the neighborhood grocery store to snatch up a couple rolls of unbleached, recycled paper towels. America is not cold because she is wrapped in organic cotton and faux fur. America is not stranded on

the side of the road because she is purchasing hybrid vehicles in record numbers. America is not hungry because she has been munching on gourmet organic snacks. America is bragging about these things everywhere from the homeowners' association to church events.

“Clearly, eco-awareness is no longer beardy, worthy, or dull,” writes Mimi Spencer of the *UK Guardian*. “In one of the greatest retail revolutions of our times, it’s hot. Green is glam. Sustainability is sexy.”¹ Green is like the star high school quarterback of cultural movements. What was once reserved for Birkenstock-wearing flower children has hit mainstream culture. Green is the new black. It’s trendy, en vogue, and cosmopolitan.

Like most trends, going green has become a source of pride. That’s why, when you hear some people talk about how they have gone green, it sounds more like bragging than advocacy. I think about a lady I encountered not long ago at the mall. She was talking on her cell phone at a volume that invited, if not begged, me to eavesdrop. “Nonorganic milk?” she exclaimed with a mixture of Valley Girl drawl and utter disgust. “Eww! I wouldn’t touch that stuff.” She told her friend on the other line (and everyone within a hundred feet), in no uncertain terms, how much good she was doing for “the world.”

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According to the Institute for Grocery Distribution, nearly 70 percent of today’s shoppers reach for more expensive grocery items if they are marked as organic, fair trade, or free range.² Sales of groceries labeled organic have grown by an unbelievable 20 percent a year for over a decade now.³

People are even eating green, and many are willing to pay big bucks to do so.

Everything from your neighborhood supermarket to couture fashion has been marked by the fad. An outdoor-wear company, Patagonia, produces fleece jackets made from recycled plastic bottles. Diane von Furstenberg, Oscar de la Renta, Nike, and Levis all offer eco-friendly items. Even Sam's Club now sells jeans and T-shirts made with organic cotton, making Wal-Mart the largest purchaser of organic cotton in the world as of 2006.⁴

The green revolution has even infiltrated corporate America where large companies fall over themselves to at least appear to be environmentally conscious. Despite a struggling economy, executives strive to consume less energy, cut down on harmful emissions, and invest in sustainability. The computer juggernaut Dell is working with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to lower its carbon emissions footprint and launched an ambitious reforestation program called "Plant a Forest for Me." Ten percent of the electricity at the company's Round Rock, Texas, headquarters already comes from renewable sources.⁵

Every time I turn on the television, it seems a celebrity is promoting his or her newest environmental pet project. Bono's wife has a line of environmentally responsible designer clothing named Edun ("nude" spelled backwards), Leonardo DiCaprio drives a relatively inexpensive hybrid, Julia Roberts wrapped her twins in eco-friendly diapers and lives in a solar-powered home, and Arnold Schwarzenegger has converted his Hummer to run on hydrogen fuel. Celebs have helped spread environmentalism well beyond the sandalista crowd by helping make it cool, if not sexy. "Have

you joined the mainstream on this issue yet?” asks *Fortune* writer Adam Lashinsky in his article “Be Green—Everybody’s Doing It.”⁶

Even though Hollywood has thrown a red carpet over the green movement, if you step on it, you’re likely to fall through. I picked up recent issue of *Vanity Fair* that was devoted entirely to addressing environmental issues. The widely read periodical, which is loaded with ads for fashion lines, fragrances, and the latest Mercedes Benz, filled this special issue with tips and articles on going green. The magazine even went to the expense of hiring Annie Leibovitz to shoot a cover full of celebrities for the issue. Unfortunately, when it came down to taking its own advice, *Vanity Fair*’s Lincoln Navigator-driving editor, Graydon Carter, decided to print the issue on less expensive, nonrecycled paper.⁷

The message reverberating through culture beckons us to “go green” because we will look better and feel better and fit in, but the movement often feels flimsy and lacking moral foundation.



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TREND OR TRUTH?

I never want to run away from anything because it is considered cool or fun by the secular world. I also never want run toward anything because it is considered glam-worthy. Some say the latter tendency is a mistake that many in my own generation have made, which produces faith communities indistinguishable from the rest of culture.

Both cultural separatism and cultural syncretism are unhealthy and unproductive.⁸ As a Christian, I want to enjoy many of mainstream culture's gifts and even participate in, contribute to, and shape culture. On my journey to a biblical understanding of creation care, I had to address the green fad. I immediately stumbled upon several problems.

Fads are fleeting. I've gone to the mall and purchased a stylish outfit or the latest electronic gadget, and by the time I get home, it was "so five minutes ago." Our world moves fast, and industries are always thinking ahead of us and making the "latest and greatest" quickly obsolete. Real problems that affect real people can't be latched onto a trend. Fads can't possibly outlive the problem.

Readers who are older than I may remember the hippie movement that peaked in the 1960s and 1970s. (For some of you, this time might be slightly hazy, but you may still remember parts of it!) Environmentalism was all the rage during these decades, much as it is today. The Clean Air Act was enacted and extended with support from both political parties; pictures of the earth taken by astronauts raised awareness of the earth as a sensitive, life-supporting ecosystem; and tens of thousands of American colleges and schools celebrated Earth Day for the first time.

Environmentalism then went to Washington and into the courts, leaving its grass roots behind. Professionals and lawyers were soon running the movement, and the regular folks were cut out of the process. As political tides changed, corporations became king and environmentalism lost its stylishness in the public consciousness. Popular support waned, and political parties began using the environment as a weapon to beat each other up. Clean air and water became

greater problems, and land was clear-cut to make way for cookie-cutter neighborhoods. Today, eco-awareness is making a comeback. Unfortunately, the problems don't go away simply because the fad has reemerged.

Fads come and go, but environmental problems require steady work and constant attention. If we take God's plan to care for creation seriously, we cannot do so because it is trendy. If that's our only motivation, we will find ourselves in dire straights tomorrow when public interest and attention have waned.

Another problem with pop environmentalism is that it's not accessible. I can't afford to fill my refrigerators and pantry with only organic groceries or buy one of those neat little hybrids. If going green means spending money—upgrade your vehicle, buy new lightbulbs all at once, redo your wardrobe in organic cottons—some just can't afford it. Patagonia jackets and eco-friendly snacks are an option for those in the upper class, but to have a true impact on global issues, we must find globally accessible solutions.


Twentieth-century explorer and ecologist Jacques Yves Cousteau said, "The sea, the great unifier, is man's only hope. Now as never before, the old phrase has a literal meaning: We are all in the same boat." We *are* all in the same boat. We float together, and we sink together. The environment—whether polluted or healthy, preserved or exhausted—affects all humans, though not always at the same time or in the same ways. We are in this thing together, and we must work together to make a difference.

The biggest reason I reject pop environmentalism is because it cheapens the issue. We have deeper reasons to go green. We serve the Creator of the planet that green living

preserves. He created this earth and took the time to tell us His plan for it. The God of this universe has given us the great task of caring for our planet. I like the way Charles Colson addresses this issue in his book *The Body*:

We should be contending for truth in every area of life. Not for power or because we are taken with some trendy cause, but humbly to bring glory to God. For this reason, Christians should be the most ardent ecologists. Not because we would rather save spotted owls than cut down trees whose bark provides lifesaving medicine, but because we are mandated to keep the Garden, to ensure that the beauty and grandeur God has reflected in nature is not despoiled... Francis of Assisi should be our role model, not Ted Turner or Ingrid Newkirk.⁹

Why should we be consumed with a “trendy cause” when we have been given a sacred task? I encourage the things mentioned above. Energy-reducing lightbulbs, fuel-efficient vehicles, and organic foods are wonderful. The caution is not *what* we are doing, but *why* we are doing it.

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Environmentalism takes many forms and draws from many motivations. At times, I find myself agreeing with someone of another religion or political persuasion about what should be done, but my motivation for doing it is vastly different. My motivation is God’s truth. One of my

best friends, Don, is an agnostic and tends to be rather liberal politically. I am an unashamed follower of Jesus Christ and tend to be more politically conservative. We often find ourselves agreeing more than we disagree, but although we agree about what to do, our motivations differ. (He says I am his “favorite Christian to hang out with.” I am waiting for him to change his mind about that.)

A DEEPER GREEN

When I think, act, respond, and live biblically, I have found people are disarmed—like my friend Don. When I am grounded in Scripture, my fellow Christians who view environmentalism as Earth worship, for example, begin to grasp the “theology of nature” and understand that I can’t help but worship the Creator. They also realize that it is impossible to worship the Creator fully without valuing all of His creation.

Until I met Dr. John Hammett and faced challenges like preparing for the college speech, I hadn’t mapped out God’s plan and didn’t understand how much He loves this earth or why He loves it so much. I didn’t understand the precious role we have been given to oversee the earth and help it to flourish. My speech that day went great, and even the cynical college students loved it—not because I am the best speaker, but because God has given me such illuminating material.

Psalm 119:105 says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” The Bible tells us how to live and why. It illuminates our steps and gives us a purpose for living. Our witness is most compelling when sacred Scripture drives it.

Our words will be most convincing if we offer deeper, more substantive solutions to our world's problems. While addressing environmental problems, ordained Baptist minister and journalist Bill Moyers wrote, "What we need to match the science of human health is what the ancient Israelites called 'hocma'—the science of the heart, the capacity to see, to feel."¹⁰



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Hocma is a Hebrew word that the Bible often translates as "wisdom." In the Scriptures, *hocma* is often found alongside justice, understanding, knowledge, discretion, prudence, humility, and faithfulness.¹¹ How different our world would be if our lives expressed those traits. How vividly our lives would contrast the uninspiring trends on magazine covers. Our approach to the planet would stun people if it were filled with wisdom, justice, knowledge, and humility. What would happen if we lived life in this deeper shade of green?

Moyers is right. We need to combine science and facts and figures and sometimes even trends with supernatural wisdom. But *hocma* ultimately comes from God. As the ancient King Solomon—someone who knew more about *hocma* than anyone who has ever lived—once remarked, "For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Prov. 2:6 NASB).

The world searches for truth in culture and history and science, but Christians know that the purest and most significant truths are found in Scripture. While the others are helpful, the Bible is our bedrock.

The trends and styles that culture exalts are not inherently

wrong. That just isn't an optimal place to build a strong foundation for issues of this magnitude. We have an operator's manual for our planet right in front of us in the Bible, and we must allow that manual to change our thinking and behavior.

PLAN POINT: Rather than "going green" because it's trendy, God wants us to live according to the truth of His Word.
