

Evangelicals, the Gnostic Impulse, and the Natural World

Trey Rice

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Dr. Todd Edmondson

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Introduction

In an article for the religious journal *First Things*, George Fox University Professor Abigail Rine Favale notes the overwhelming majority of her Christian students do not believe in bodily resurrection. Referring to George Fox as an Evangelical university, Favale came across this observation while teaching students about Stoicism. In discussion the majority of students claimed to find some Stoic views of the soul appealing - specifically those of Cicero and Seneca the Younger - ostensibly because they were compatible with Christianity. These included the concept of an immortal soul, that is fettered by the body and mercifully freed by death. When Favale countered this with the orthodox idea of a physical resurrection, students found it was more logical to believe in a disembodied soul. As one student put it, "It doesn't feel right to say there's a human body in heaven, when the body is tied so closely to sin."¹ This idea that the human body is tarnished or deceptive, while the soul is not, is older than Christianity. In philosophy its influence dates back to ancient Greece and the philosophy of Plato's Forms. It experiences a resurgence in the popular philosophies of the Hellenistic period and the later revival of Plato's ideas, known as Neoplatonism.² However this idea in its most extreme form is found where these ideas merged with Christianity in the early history of the Church. The result was a heresy known as Gnosticism, which held that the physical world was inherently evil, that every person possesses a nonphysical soul (or spark of the divine), and that we - our souls that is

¹ Abigail Rine Favale, "Evangelical Gnosticism," *First Things* 283 (May 2018): 13–15. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/05/evangelical-gnosticism>. Favale and I emphasize that these were the views of a couple of select Stoics. The vast majority of Stoics believed the soul was both perishable and transmutable. They also had a different relationship with death, viewing it as a natural part of the world's order, and therefore not something to either fear or haste to. The world too is natural and something to be accepted, not escaped from. Stoicism on this matter was reactionary towards the idealism of Plato. It certainly contrasts with Gnosticism in that the universe is perfect by design, since in a sense it *is* God.

² It should be noted that Neoplatonism and Gnosticism differ on the nature of matter. To the Gnostic matter is *evil*, while to the Neoplatonist matter more *deceptive* than it is *evil*.

- must escape the physical world for the ideal immaterial one. Humans are the only beings which possess souls, and so they are the only ones who can reach the immaterial world, or heaven. Thus, not only is the human body to be despised, but so is the rest of the natural world. This conception of the soul, heaven, and the natural world bears a passing resemblance to some strains of Evangelical Christianity today. This resemblance of ideas co-occurs with evangelical perspectives as a political bloc. In their political, social, and economic perspectives, contemporary evangelicals display an anti-ecological tendency. This tendency is displayed by evangelicals' election of politicians who are at best indifferent and at worst hostile towards environmentalism and ecojustice. Intrigued by the correlation between these religious beliefs and political decisions I have set out to answer the following question: Why do contemporary evangelicals appear to display an anti-ecological tendency in their political, social, economic perspectives? I have found that as a religious community, evangelicals over time have constructed a theology and approach to scripture to provide cover for their own political decisions, including those that affect environmental policy. This is enabled by a lack of theological literacy, which has created space within evangelicalism for false orthodoxies that bear more similarities to some gnostic approaches than they do to historical Christianity. The acceptance of these perspectives to justify political habits in turn creates a feedback loop, ensuring future generations will adopt a rewritten orthodoxy which guides them towards the political perspectives it was originally designed to justify.

Political Cover

Since the 1980s evangelical leaders have aggressively blended their political and religious identities, making it quite clear that being a Bible-believing Christian means to be

oriented to the right part (pun intended) of the political spectrum. In other words, being ultra-conservative on specific political topics, and to be staunchly Republican. Through most of the 20th century, even though conservative evangelicalism was associated with conservative politics, and fundamentalism did not totally retreat from politics, the United States was still seen as “safely Christian.” While there was an assumption that right religious belief leads to right political belief, the connection between the two was not a necessity.³ Historian William Trollinger uses a scene from his own life to demonstrate this. As a young evangelical Trollinger attended Campus Crusade’s Explo ‘72 conference, and was among other students protesting the Vietnam War. While those protesting were a tiny minority in a sea of conservative evangelicals, they were seen as “weird curiosities, and less as antichristian pariahs, for opposing GOP orthodoxy.”⁴ There has since been a discursive shift related to the Religious Right that it is a necessity to vote Republican. In other words, “true Christianity entails, even consists of, adherence to a particular form of conservative politics.”⁵ Historian Kristen Kobes Du Mez outlines this same trend, noting even though there is a theological definition of “evangelical”, what it means to be evangelical depends upon the world beyond faith. This is accentuated by how the demographic expresses high levels of theological illiteracy - particularly in regards to the Trinity - which calls into question just how central theology is to evangelicalism.⁶ Du Mez thus identifies contemporary evangelicalism as the place where the theological and political definitions meet one another: “For conservative white evangelicals, the ‘good news’ of the

³ William Vance Trollinger, “Religious Non-Affiliation: Expelled by the Right,” *In Empty Churches: Non-Affiliation in America*, edited by James L. Heft and Jan E. Stets, 194-221, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, First edition, Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W.W. Norton & Company, 2020, 6.

Christian gospel has become inextricably linked to a staunch commitment to patriarchal authority, gender difference, and Christian Nationalism, and all of these are intertwined with white racial identity. Many Americans who now identify as evangelicals are identifying with this operational theology - one that is Republican in its politics and traditionalist in its values.”⁷ Though not mentioned by Du Mez, this operational theology includes within it the denigration of the natural world, embraced out of a combination of political expediency, ideology, and a self-centered view of the world.

This denigration may be demonstrated most relevantly by analyzing contemporary presidential elections. Today the supermajority of evangelicals are members of or supporters of the Republican party, or candidates supported by it. In 2016, 80% of White Evangelicals or born-again Christians voted for Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump.⁸ In 2020, 60% of Protestants and 76% of White Evangelicals or born-again Christians voted for Donald Trump.⁹ That year the Republican party did not draft a new platform, but since their candidate was the same and had changed little on any issues, it can be assumed the Republican stance was basically what it was in 2016. The published 2016 platform states the goal of rolling back the “regulatory juggernaut” created by the federal government, singling out the Environmental Protection Agency, thus leaving the details of environmental policy to individual states.¹⁰ The document

⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸ “National Results 2016 Presidential exit polls,” CNN, November 10, 2016. <https://edition.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls/national/president>.

⁹ “National Results 2020 President exit polls,” CNN, December 4, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/election/2020/exit-polls/president/national-results>. Pew Research also examined evangelicals by political ideology. This found that 55% consider themselves conservative, 27% moderate, 13% liberal, and 6% answered “don’t know.” based the overlap of these statistics, it can be assumed the majority of these moderates supported Trump, though less so in 2020.

¹⁰ Republican National Committee, *Republican Platform 2016*, Cleveland, Ohio: Issued by the Republican National Committee (July 2016), 18.

downplays the severity of human impact on the environment, claiming the state of the environment has improved from year to year and there has been a sustained, “illusion of environmental crisis.”¹¹ When the platform does address how to ensure the environment’s further protection, it asserts, “Poverty, not wealth, is the gravest threat to the environment, while steady economic growth brings the technological advances which make environmental progress possible.”¹² This portion of the platform ends with the following conclusion: “We firmly believe environmental problems are best solved by giving incentives for human ingenuity and the development of new technologies, not through top-down, command-and-control regulations that stifle economic growth and cost thousands of jobs.”¹³ The messages of these statements are clear. We are not in a state of environmental crisis. Global warming and climate change are either not happening, not very serious, not caused by humanity, or not our responsibility. And if there is any danger to the environment, it does not come from wealth, but from poverty. The true friends of the economy are the economy growing agribusinesses whose practices leech nutrients from the soil, shower crops with toxic chemicals, and encourage/enable consumers to be disconnected from the land. On a global scale those who pose the greatest danger to the environment are not the United States, China, the European Union, India, and Russia - the top producers of fossil fuel emissions.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Ibid., 21.

¹³ Ibid., 22. The irony of this appeal to steady economic growth to provide technology for environmental protection is that very economic growth bears responsibility for the state of the environment. It also includes the fatal assumption that technology will always provide the solution to environmental problems. Even if climate change is real, serious, and caused by man, there is no threat it can pose that cannot be fixed by human technology. The final word is that any solution which stifles the economy’s growth or leads to job loss is undesirable (22). The platform lists no special or extreme conditions in which it would consider alternative solutions be either necessary or acceptable.

¹⁴ “Fossil CO2 emissions of all world countries - 2018 Report,” *Publications Office of the European Union* (November 2018). Cites these five governmental entities as the top five

To understand how a significant number of evangelicals arrived at this lack of integrity in terms of care towards the natural world, we must peer into the movement's historical development. Doing so will show how evangelicals have adopted a religious perspective that is - just to name a few traits - anthropocentric, individualist in the extreme, and apocalyptic to justify presupposed political beliefs.

Without going too far back into the origins of what can be called Evangelicalism, the aspects most relevant to the topic at hand will be examined. Though most religious historians point to the Second Great Awakening as the beginning of Evangelicalism, ideas which informed it came centuries before during the Protestant Reformation. This is where Philip Lee's study on Christianity and Gnosticism begins. After Lee expresses a general approval of several name recognition reformers - Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli - Lee goes on to take issue with Calvin's North American heirs: the Puritans. Here Lee argues that in the 18th century, around the time of the First Great Awakening, the Puritans split from reformers' views of covenant and salvation. While Calvin and other reformers saw covenant and salvation as an organic and corporate matter, the Puritans began to interpret it as an individual matter. This grew out of the Calvinist preoccupation with "the Elect." Calvin and the first Calvinists believed some were predestined to everlasting life and others predestined to everlasting death, but they did not believe it was the Christian community or individual's part to distinguish who fell into which group. However, during the 18th century evangelists such as Ebenezer Frothingham led the charge in making conversion the central question of Christianity. Thus he and those like him

producers of fossil fuel CO₂ emissions. All of them are listed by Climate Watch in the top ten producers of all Greenhouse Gases.

gave themselves the task of separating the sheep from the goats, assuming their own election qualified them to do so.¹⁵

This doctrine of The Elect has become a fixation among others in the evangelical community besides Calvin's heirs. For one it emphasizes a special place for humanity in terms of being saved. Not only is this perspective a form of human chauvinism, but also it possesses its own kind of selective elitism within itself. It isn't just that only humans can be saved, but only *some* humans will be saved. By making the shift from the corporate view of salvation effected through the Incarnation to the individual view of salvation based on our own act of faith, faith itself has effectively become a work we use to transact salvation. The saving work itself is thus taken off of Christ's death or incarnation and placed upon ourselves, the individuals. To the evangelical community this is the main purpose of proclaiming the gospel, so people might save their own platonic or gnosticized souls. Contrary to this, since the New Testament teaches that salvation cannot be earned, faith is not that which *earns* forgiveness of sins but is the proper *response* to the forgiveness of sins. Under this view, to ask the question of why we should proclaim the Gospel is almost silly. The word gospel means (and is) good news. Is there any other reason to proclaim it besides the nature of what it is? The evangelical view contrary to this is both individualistic and anthropocentric. In part because salvation has become dependent upon a work, how could parts of creation incapable of that work be redeemed? To this end the redemption in Christ is limited to (some of) humanity. Every other part of the natural world is left out of the party.

¹⁵ Philip J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, Oxford University Press, 1987, 76-78. For Calvin's heirs, this task had also already been undertaken in the 17th century, enshrined within the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

Moving to the 19th century, Timothy Gloege argues that while Enlightenment thought caused some to reject religion, its ideas influenced others to create new religious forms. In the later 19th century, one such form is the “evangelical” orientation, a hybrid of Protestantism and Enlightenment thought.¹⁶ This orientation challenged three aspects of what Gloege calls the “churchly” orientation. First, evangelicals shifted the center of authentic faith from the community to the individual’s personal relationship with God. Secondly they rejected tradition in terms of interpreting scripture. Instead, they claimed God speaks to believers directly through personal readings of the bible - sans application of any biblical studies. Evangelicals did acknowledge that divine messages might be misinterpreted, so a final belief was introduced: that authentic faith produces empirically measurable results.¹⁷ This idea reinvigorated belief and affirmed an expectation of saved souls and the reformation of a society plagued by social, political, and economic crises of the Gilded Age.¹⁸ The importance of this “plain” reading’s influence is that it fostered both individualism and anti-intellectualism within the evangelical community. Without regard to historical theology or exegesis, one could simply make whatever they wanted to make out of scripture, even construct a new orthodoxy to justify political positions.

The late 19th century was the heyday of higher criticism of the Bible, and the influence of liberal Protestantism was on the rise. With modernism also on the rise at the turn of the century, religious conservatives were anxious about a rise in people rejecting religion, or

¹⁶ Timothy Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism*, Vol. 1 [edition], UPCC Book Collections on Project MUSE, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015, 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6. Results used to validate faith included new converts, social reform (e.g. temperance), spiritual renewal, and for a few, miracles. Gloege also emphasizes that these beliefs are orientations, not creeds, similar to how Lee identifies a gnostic orientation, rather than explicit gnostic creeds.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

adopting forms of Christianity they viewed as unorthodox. There was also a perceived rise in individual immorality, particularly in regards to sins of the flesh. Through the preaching of Dwight Moody, Billy Sunday, and thousands of smaller names, moral teaching centered on the sins of the flesh and became identified with sexuality.¹⁹ What's important is that this was a turn toward the individual in a time of prevalent social evils, which contrasts with the approach of contemporary Social Gospel adherents. This turn inward would go on to also exclude issues surrounding the environment. Around the same time, wealthy evangelical oil tycoons Lyman and Milton Stewart funded the publication and distribution of *The Fundamentals* (1910-1915). These were a series of essays declaring the "fundamentals of faith," meant by some of its authors as a response to liberal Christianity. The original publication was not particularly militant in its crusade. For example, one of the essays suggests theistic evolution as a valid possibility.²⁰ According to the committee dedicated to their publication, the goal of these essays was to construct a new standard of "orthodox" belief that would primarily rally conservatives across denominations against modernism and theological liberalism.²¹ The second purpose of *The Fundamentals*, was to align this new "orthodox" standard with a corporate evangelical framework. This presented a challenge. Since this new standard actually broke from tradition, they needed to give it some sense of historicity. They did so by "discovering" an evangelical

¹⁹ Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 134.

²⁰ Susan L. Trollinger and William Vance Trollinger, *Righting America at the Creation Museum*, Medicine, Science, and Religion in Historical Context, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016, 4.

²¹ Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure*, 177. One essay, "Christianity and Socialism" by Charles Erdman, tackles the Social Gospel head on. In addressing those who point to the structure of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles, Erdman asserts that anything akin to Socialism in the Acts was meant to meet special crises of the times. Hence they do not set out any principles the Church is obligated to follow. Erdman further justifies this with the declaration that our hope is not in a new social order, but in the coming of Christ (Gloege 187).

orientation within pre-existing creeds.²² In this endeavor, the only way these authors could create a base set of “essentials” or “fundamentals” that did not explicitly conflict with or contradict specific denominational beliefs and practices was to redefine exactly what was fundamental. Gloege notes this was a pragmatic decision, made to foster wide acceptance, while also serving the double purpose to further an evangelical orientation; one that considers certain topics unimportant.²³ As Gloege summarizes:

Uniting a diverse coalition of evangelicals and churchly conservatives required a new orthodoxy that had a fabricated reputation, a patina of tradition, and the appearance that it could coexist with distinctive denominational beliefs and practices. In this way, *The Fundamentals* completely revolutionized the nature of ‘orthodoxy’ across nearly every denomination using seemingly conservative materials. In so doing, it served as a scaffold for the movement, but once that movement took on a life of its own, no one noticed that the scaffolding had collapsed.²⁴

Referring to American Christianity, this is where the term “fundamentalism” is derived from to refer to those who generally held these essentials. The term itself was coined in the 1920s in an attempt to further unite denominational lines against liberalism. In his study of fundamentalist schools, Adam Laats emphasizes the cultural aspect of fundamentalism, claiming it is more an attitude or an affiliation than a rigidly defined system of doctrine. It has always involved more than religious controversy: “Conservative politics and cultural attitudes have always played important but imprecise roles in defining fundamentalism.”²⁵ The story of *The Fundamentals* shows a past successful attempt to create a new “orthodoxy.” In doing so issues did not begin from a theological framework and then lead to political conclusions. Rather it was the other way

²² Ibid., 177.

²³ Ibid., 178. In conversations these creators did not hide that these new essentials were in fact, new (Gloege 184).

²⁴ Ibid., 192.

²⁵ Adam Laats, *Fundamentalist U: Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education*, Oxford University Press, 2018, 6.

around. The writers and sponsors of the fundamentals began with already held political views formed by culture and then formulated a theological framework to justify those views. This can be seen particularly in their response to the Social Gospel through Charles Erdman's essay "Christianity and Socialism," which advocates for a *laissez-faire* free-market economy while dismissing the organization of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles as a contemporary model.²⁶ Today's evangelicals are not much different. Operating with a reverence for free-market capitalism as their starting point, evangelicals adopt approaches that justify their already held political beliefs. This excuses the religious community from leveraging political influence to tackle social evils, including the denigration of the earth. Doing so also hampers theological discourse in its rigidity, thus encouraging theological illiteracy amongst common Christians in the pews.

In another response to higher criticism of the Bible, theologians at Princeton formulated the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, by which canonical scripture is the infallible product of guidance by the Holy Spirit, whether direct or indirect. By declaring the Bible as fully inerrant, fundamentalists could feel perfectly justified in using a piece of scripture however they pleased to justify their personal positions, regardless of whether their interpretation was theologically consistent.²⁷ As the Trollingers point out, a problem with biblical inerrancy is that it does not change the unstable nature of all written texts. Any number of "plain readings" can result in numerous different interpretations. Even if the scripture is infallible, it does not change the fact

²⁶ Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure*, 187. In addressing those who point to the structure of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles, Erdman asserts that anything akin to Socialism in the Acts was meant to meet special crises of the times. Hence they do not set out any principles the Church is obligated to follow. Erdman further justifies this with the declaration that our hope is not in a new social order, but in the coming of Christ.

²⁷ Trollinger and Trollinger, *Righting America at the Creation Museum*, 3. An example how theology is not central to evangelical consciousness is the tendency to speak in terms of whether or not a belief is "biblical" instead of whether it is theologically consistent.

its readers are not infallible. This is the inherent tension of *sola scriptura*.²⁸ That said, this makes “plain readings” among fundamentalists and evangelicals highly selective, and adherents to the doctrine can be perfectly secure in their own “plain reading” on the basis that it must be infallible. For example, most fundamentalists today insist the Bible affirms 6-days of creation, and yet do not adhere to the cosmology presented in Genesis 1: a three tiered universe, geocentricity, and an earth that is round, flat, and stationary.²⁹ The biblical inerrancy concept spread with help from Bible and prophecy conferences, and was finally cemented in the evangelical consciousness with the publishing of Cryus Scofield’s *Reference Bible* (1909). The same text was also a proponent of dispensational premillennialism. Dispensationalism, the idea that God has split history into defined periods of time, each with its own administrative plan given to it by God, is one created by Scofield’s predecessor, John Nelson Darby.³⁰

Dispensational premillennialism tends to go hand in hand with another characteristic of evangelical belief: an apocalyptic hope for the future, resulting in an otherworldly afterlife. Apocalyptic literature tends to portray the passing of an old age into the new as a result of cataclysmic events, taken by many common readers to mean the obliteration of the old order’s materiality to bring in the new.³¹ This view is a common reading of the Book of Revelation by evangelicals, who view it as a literal foretelling of the future. Several studies show that the majority of evangelicals believe the world will get worse until Jesus returns, ushering in this apocalypse. Therefore, disasters and horrible events that occur are interpreted as meaning that

²⁸ Ibid., 135.

²⁹ Ibid., 106.

³⁰ Trollinger and Trollinger, *Righting America at the Creation Museum*, 3. Though not listed as a “fundamental,” Dispensational Premillennialism was supported by the Stewarts and editors *The Fundamentals* (Trollinger and Trollinger 4).

³¹ Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age*, Oxford University Press, 2003, 51.

Christ's return must be imminent.³² One of the best-selling book series among the evangelical demographic since 1995 is *Left Behind* by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Among its readers, this series helped popularize apocalyptic eschatology in terms of a rapture, the antichrist, the tribulation, and ultimately the world's destruction. The particular apocalyptic eschatology that *Left Behind* presents is that of dispensational premillennialism. The premillennial part of this refers to a belief that after the rapture and years of tribulation, Christ will return to earth *before* a millennium of peace and prosperity, followed by the the earth's destruction. Today these beliefs are held by the majority of evangelicals.³³ Among fundamentalist organizations such as Answers in Genesis, who are publicly agnostic on the matter, there is still the use of similar rhetoric in this tradition. For example, AiG's Creation Museum does refer to the "Seven C's in God's Eternal Plan": Creation, Corruption, Catastrophe, Confusion, Christ, Cross, and Consummation. Though these refer to specific events, and not eras of time, the rhetorical use is still similar, as a dispensationalist would consider each of these events to signal the beginning or ending of an era.³⁴ This rhetoric is also echoed by an AiG article on climate change, written by none other than AiG's founder, Ken Ham. This article lays out dispensations of climate history from a Young Earth Creationist perspective: Groaning Creation (after the Fall), Global Flood, the cooling of the Earth after Noah's Flood (the only Ice Age according to AiG), a warming earth,

³² Ross Langmead, "Ecojustice Principles: Challenges for the Evangelical Perspective." *Ecotheology: Journal of Religion, Nature & the Environment* 5 no. 5/6 (Jan. 1999): 162.

³³ "Premillennialism Reigns in Evangelical Theology," National Association of Evangelicals, Sept. 28, 2021. <https://www.nae.org/premillennialism-reigns-in-evangelical-theology/>. 65% identify with Premillennialism, 13% with Amillennialism, 4% with Postmillennialism, and 17% with "Other."

³⁴ Trollinger and Trollinger, *Righting America at the Creation Museum*, 42-44.

and a “Final Change.”³⁵ This fifth period of change will be the final one. It will be the day of the Lord that comes like a thief in the night, it will burn up the earth, and a perfect new heaven and earth will be created (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10-13; Rev. 21:4, 22:3). The message is fairly clear, if the earth is heating up, it’s all a part of God’s plan and can only end in desirable things, that is, the destruction of the physical world and our escape from it.

Resonant ideas also exist within the evangelical conception of time. In an examination of fundamentalist rhetoric, Camille Lewis observes how the Sacred attempts to separate itself from the Secular. Thus when understanding their own past, a kind of sacred time is conceptualized, not for the purpose of remembering but for reviving in the present. Retelling Bible stories is rehearsal rather than a remembrance and conversion narratives act as a form of worship. As Lewis is keen to point out, this sacred time is not limited to the past and pushes into the future: “Even the future is not distinct since they discuss eschatological, apocalyptic end times as if they are existing forces at hand. This premodern, pre-nation notion of time perpetuates their desired separation from the dominant culture.”³⁶ This returns to a preoccupation with escape, from the dominant culture and the natural world, likely into the next dispensation.

In most recent decades evangelicalism and fundamentalism have grown closer, and the lines between the two have blurred. Part of this is because over the course of the 20th century Americans began to lump various conservative ideas and stereotypes into “fundamentalism.” Thus the identifier became more fluid and amorphous. To avoid the negative socio-political connotations of the term some, but not all, members of fundamentalism began to abandon the

³⁵ Ken Ham, “Global Warming-Normal in an Abnormal World,” *Answers in Genesis*, Answers in Genesis, December 11, 2020. answersingenesis.org/environmental-science/climate-change/global-warming-normal-in-an-abnormal-world/.

³⁶ Camille K. Lewis, *Romancing the Difference: Kenneth Burke, Bob Jones University, and the Rhetoric of Religious Fundamentalism*, Studies in Rhetoric and Religion, Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2007, 17.

term in favor of “neo-evangelicals” or more succinctly, “evangelicals.” This “evangelical” label however already existed for those who were a part of a broad Evangelical movement - led by figures such as the famous Billy Graham. Therefore, to confuse matters, since the 1950s the term “evangelical” has been used to refer to both the neo-evangelical reform movement and the wider area of conservative Protestantism, including those with fundamentalist views.³⁷

The rise of the Religious Right came amidst a series of Supreme Court rulings and cultural change, which evangelicals saw as a sign that the United States was turning its eyes away from God. For example, evangelicals lamented a perceived loss of traditional “family values,” spurred on by the sexual revolution of the 1960s and a greater breakdown of gender roles in society. In recent years the lamented phenomena has grown to include the increasing number of people who openly identify with the LGBTQ+ community. This was accompanied by Supreme Court cases striking down Sodomy laws and sections of the Defense of Marriage Act.³⁸ Much of this occurred in the context of the Cold War, amidst the rhetoric of Christian America versus Godless Communism. All these factors combined to create a religious and political conservative reaction that the nation was losing hold of biblical principles, as United States culture was becoming secularized and corrupted. This reaction caused evangelicals and fundamentalists to become united under one political banner, what can be called the Evangelical political bloc.

This alliance and growing close relationship between the two contributed to the aforementioned blurring of lines, as each has influenced the other. Fundamentalists, already practically less separatist than they claimed became even less so, taking a more explicit and

³⁷ Laats, *Fundamentalist U: Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education*, 6-7.

³⁸ See *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), *United States v. Windsor* (2013), and *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015).

active role in politics. Over time, the function of fundamentalist institutions, namely schools, began to change. Historian William Ringenberg distinguishes early fundamentalist schools - such as Bob Jones College - from others by their “soul-saving” evangelism, tendency towards authoritarian leadership, emphasis on religious purity over intellectual freedom, and tendency to support conservative politics.³⁹ Of particular concern to these schools was to educate students on the true meanings of the Bible, so students could equip themselves against errors such as evolution and a lack of dedication to missions.⁴⁰ Following this outline preparation for winning souls was presumed to be the goal of Christian higher education.⁴¹ What eventually changed was the emergence of a second function: Bible Institutes and colleges could provide a rigorous fundamentalist education to students, who could then move on to secular universities or society and remain steadfast Christians.⁴² Fundamentalists could interact in the secular world - politics and holding office - remaining Christian and all the while advancing their own political agendas. With their new orthodoxy created in the early twentieth century, these schools could educate students in the religious beliefs that would affirm their political beliefs as holy in the eyes of the Lord. Here theological illiteracy in the pews encouraged by new “orthodoxy” spread to higher education and thus more people pursued careers in areas such as ministry. Thus said ideas could be effectively evangelized and spread to more congregants of Christian churches. And in doing so certain political beliefs could themselves be affirmed by church leadership. It is no coincidence that fundamentalist schools, and evangelical ones such as Liberty University or Hillsdale College have become bastions of Christian conservative politics. As Laats notes,

³⁹ Laats, *Fundamentalist U*, 147.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 178, 181. So important was this aspect that students were evaluated at Moody Bible Institute and Biola College based on their missionary potential. If one did not meet this potential, they were liable to be dropped from the college enlistment.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 161.

fundamentalists have always played a part in public life. To its adherents, Fundamentalism - the movement - was always about more than theology, it was about reclaiming American culture.⁴³ With politics as the main goal and theology as a secondary factor, the former would have more influence upon the latter, instead of the reverse.

Meanwhile more evangelicals adopted the fundamentalist view of scripture. That is to say, they adopted the view that all scripture is the Word of God, verbally inspired and absolutely inerrant and/or infallible. There can be little to no compromise on this - hence the general definition of fundamentalism is applicable. Statistically this can be seen in the Pew Research Center's poll on the interpretation of scripture. The poll found that 55% of Evangelical Protestants said the Bible is the Word of God, and should be interpreted literally; 29% said the Bible is the Word of God, though not all of it should be interpreted literally, specific parts were unspecified; 4% said the Bible is the Word of God, but are unsure or "other" on how it should be interpreted; 8% said the Bible is not the Word of God; and 4% did not know altogether, or submitted the response, "other."⁴⁴

To add to this, most of the recent leaders of the Religious Right have been Evangelical Christians, though their views of scripture can be characterized as fundamentalist. Starting in 1979 we can point to Baptist minister Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority. Other leaders and groups became involved such as Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition, and now Robertson's Christian Broadcasting network. Today even more groups exist and leaders have risen to prominence such as James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family ministries, and the Alliance Defending Freedom, a coalition that advocates for close church-state relationships.

⁴³ Ibid., 259.

⁴⁴ "Interpreting Scripture," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, Sept. 9, 2020.

Others include the Family Research Council, now headed by Tony Perkins; Coral Ridge Ministries (Florida) founded by Rev. D. James Kennedy; and the American Family Association (Mississippi) founded by Rev. Donald E. Wildmon.⁴⁵

This brings us mostly full circle back to this paper's first points on evangelicals' current political stances on the environment. Timothy Lim notes that from the 1960s to the 1990s, most Evangelicals were ambivalent about environmental issues because environmental initiatives tended to be associated with New Age beliefs, interreligious unity, and liberal Protestantism. Lim does note there was the occasional evangelical theologian who invited fellow Christians to partake in creation care. The two examples used by Lim are Francis Schaeffer (e.g. *Pollution and the Death of Man*, 1970) and John Stott.⁴⁶ Schaeffer in particular was an influential member of the American Evangelical community in the 1970's and early 1980's. For context, Schaeffer's influence within the Evangelical community was on par with that of Billy Graham. Before his death in 1984, Schaeffer is also credited with first sounding the evangelical alarm on the normalization of legal abortion in society.⁴⁷ However Schaeffer's concerns for the environment did not have much effect on the overall religious-political climate. Studies from the 1990s show Christian belief was not statistically significant for positive attitudes toward the environment.

⁴⁵ Jeremy Leaming, "Religious Right." The Free Speech Center, Middle Tennessee State University, 2009. <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1375/religious-right>. Still others include Jerry Falwell Jr., the Bob Jones Family, Rev. Dr. Robert Grant's Christian Voice, Ed McAteer's Religious Roundtable Council, James Robinson, Paul Weyrich's Free Congress Foundation and Heritage Foundation, Franklin Graham's Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Robert Jeffress, David Barton's pseudohistorical Wallbuilders organization, John Piper, Marc Driscoll, Bill Gothard, and Tim LaHaye. I also note here that not all members of the Religious Right are Evangelical Protestants, though they make up a core constituency.

⁴⁶ Timothy Teck Ngern Lim, "Laudato Si: An Evangelical Response," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 41, no. 4 (Oct. 2017): 321–38.

⁴⁷ Frederick Clarkson, "Christian Reconstructionism: Theocratic Dominionism Gains Influence," *Eyes Right! Challenging the Right Wing Backlash* (pp. 59–80), Edited by Chip Berlet, Boston: South End Press, 1995. Schaeffer's 1981 book, *A Christian Manifesto* is credited as his most influential in discussing this topic.

Stronger factors were age, gender, education, and socioeconomic status. Amongst specific Christian beliefs, those who valued the natural world as God's creation were more likely to express concern about the environment.⁴⁸ In contemporary circumstances, leading climate scientist and evangelical Catherine Hayhoe has committed herself to bridging the gap between climate science and faith. Despite Hayhoe's activism though, she and evangelicals with similar beliefs are still in the minority, particularly when it comes to political representation.⁴⁹

According to Pew Research Center data (2014) there appears to be more evangelical support for environmental regulation and combatting global warming than their representative officials would imply: 48% said stricter environmental laws and regulations cost too many jobs and hurt the economy, 45% said stricter laws and regulations are worth the cost, 4% said they didn't know, and 3% said neither or both equally.⁵⁰ If these percentages do represent the makeup of all evangelicals nationwide, they certainly do not correlate with the views of evangelicals' elected officials. At the very least, those who believe stricter regulations would be worth the cost do not let it stop them from electing officials indifferent or hostile to environmentalism and creation care. This is possible because the environment is seen as a secondary issue, superceded by other issues, particularly those in the "culture wars." On the other hand the environment itself has also been caught in the culture wars. For example, proposals to combat climate change and shift to renewable energy such as those of the Green New Deal are lambasted by the Christian Right as Socialism - despite that these proposals do not place the means of the production into the hands of the government. The starting point is the reverence for an alleged free-market over all else.

⁴⁸ Ross Langmead, "Ecojustice Principles: Challenges for the Evangelical Perspective."

⁴⁹ Katharine Hayhoe, "I'm a Climate Scientist Because of My Faith-Not in Spite of It," *Christianity Today*, 21 Oct. 2021.

⁵⁰ "Views about environmental regulation," Pew Research Center, Washington D.C. (2014). It is worth noting these statistics are from 2014. It is quite possible that they have changed in the past seven years of increased polarization on political issues.

For evangelicals, religious views follow to support this reverence, lest it cause cognitive dissonance.

For evangelicals who read Genesis literally, there is an even higher correlation with climate change denial. Answers in Genesis - originally an outreach of the Creation Science Foundation - consistently downplays climate change and the degree of human influence on its acceleration. A testament to its popularity and influence is seen in its website statistics from 2014: 14.4 million website visits and 43.9 million page views.⁵¹ One “news” post asserts that more alarmist predictions of climate change have been miscalculated and exaggerated, which leads the author to downplay climate change as a whole.⁵² This article does mention that according to Genesis 1, we are responsible for the earth. However, “More research is clearly needed on this important subject. Unfortunately, some who contend that climate change is a man-made problem base their views on unverifiable ideas about the untestable past.”⁵³ If this statement seems confusing, it is based on AiG and Ken Ham’s peculiar distinction between “observational science” and “historical science.” What allegedly distinguishes the two is that “historical science” deals with evidence from the past. AiG claims that evidence from the past is not directly accessible (i.e. testable) and therefore nothing from it is verifiable - except, of course, that which is verified by scripture.⁵⁴ What the above quote means to claim is that since potential evidence/action for current changes in climate are in the past, it is nonverifiable. What

⁵¹ Trollinger and Trollinger, *Righting America at the Creation Museum*, 10.

⁵² Elizabeth Mitchell, “Climate Change Predictions Prove Miscalculated,” *Answers in Genesis*, Answers in Genesis, July 21, 2017. answersingenesis.org/environmental-science/climate-change/climate-change-predictions-prove-miscalculated/.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Trollinger and Trollinger, *Righting American at the Creation Museum*, 67-68. This distinction between the two “sciences” comes with its own issues. Then there is also AiG’s own selective use of “historical science” as verifiable evidence in the Creation Museum, as analyzed by Trollinger and Trollinger.

is verifiable is changing climate, not what caused it. Another post argues that *if* global warming is occurring, it is primarily because of natural causes, and that there is *no* consensus among scientists that man has had a hand in this. Michael Oard does acknowledge there appears to be a little global warming, but claims it is not as bad as environmentalists make it out to be. On top of this any changes that happen to be influenced by man are “miniscule” and “impossible to mitigate.”⁵⁵ The same writer then optimistically suggests there may be some economic benefits from global warming *if* it occurs. A concession is that, “at this point it is difficult to tell whether there will be a net benefit or a net harm.”⁵⁶ However, that is of course only a hypothetical since it is presented as an *if* scenario as opposed to what is actually happening: no major climate change, with little human responsibility for it. A third article by Wayne Spencer claims there is evidence not for global warming, but rather global *cooling*, and that this may be a future trend.⁵⁷ This same author goes on to assert that God designed the earth to be self-regulating, to prevent climate extremes in any case:

Isaiah 45:18 in the Old Testament says that God made the earth ‘to be inhabited.’ In many origins issues scientists have often seriously underestimated the complexity of life and the physical prerequisites for life. God has designed the earth as a system with ‘checks and balances’ which prevent climate from getting out of control... Earth’s climate is designed to be able to compensate for and even cancel out various climate effects. Earth’s atmosphere, the abundance of water on earth, and even the nature of the sun are all factors in what determine the temperatures we experience. We are stewards of the earth, but we must understand our planet’s climate realistically in the light of God’s design.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Michael J. Oard, “Is Man the Cause of Global Warming?” *Answers in Genesis*, Answers in Genesis December 11, 2020. answersingenesis.org/environmental-science/climate-change/is-man-the-cause-of-global-warming/.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Wayne Spencer, “Global Warming and Earth's Design.” *Answers in Genesis*, Answers in Genesis, May 15, 2018. answersingenesis.org/environmental-science/climate-change/global-warming-and-earths-design/.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

These checks and balances keep the climate change in control, preserving life in the biosphere. And so because this will always keep things from getting out of hand, we need not worry too much about responsibility for our actions.

In other posts by Ken Ham himself, he asserts that creationists do not deny climate change, only its cause. Because of Noah's global flood - which occurred only about 4500 years ago according to Ham - what we see today are the long term effects of the earth adjusting to that past catastrophe. In other words, climate has been changing ever since the flood, so it's normal. And so, "[variation in climate change] is not alarming and is not the direct result of modern human activity."⁵⁹ Climate change is only alarming if you are a secularist who sees tens of thousands of years of stable climate, followed by a correlation between change and the advent of modern man.⁶⁰ Ham goes on to emphasize that sin has left earth in a "cursed state." This leads to the final conclusion that, "Climate change is normal in an abnormal world. Until people are prepared to accept why this world is abnormal—because of sin—they will not be able to properly understand climate change and respond appropriately."⁶¹ To Ham and those like him, climate change is nothing to worry about. *If* it is happening, it is a sign of the coming final judgement, in which case it is actually a good thing. No need to worry about destruction of or changes in biomes when the end is nigh. The appropriate response to climate change is to repent and let God take care of it. Like some of the previous posts, Ham does give a single shoutout to stewardship: "Even if mankind's impact on climate is small, this does not mean that we should

⁵⁹ Ken Ham, "Climate Change and Aliens," *Answers in Genesis*, Answers in Genesis, November 22, 2014. <https://answersingenesis.org/blogs/ken-ham/2014/11/22/climate-change-and-aliens/>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ken Ham, "Global Warming-Normal in an Abnormal World," *Answers in Genesis*, Answers in Genesis, December 11, 2020. answersingenesis.org/environmental-science/climate-change/global-warming-normal-in-an-abnormal-world/.

not look after our environment. To the contrary, we need to do the best we can to use the environment for man's good and God's glory, as stewards of what God has entrusted to us. Good stewardship requires us to avoid rash decisions based on inconclusive evidence."⁶² Ham and Spencer's arguments to offer two different views. On the one hand Spencer claims the earth is valuable, but that God has created everything to be self-regulating, so we need not worry. Next to this, Ham's perspective is that if this is wrong and the earth is in trouble, then we still should not worry because the earth is simply a bit player in the drama crescendoing to the end times. AiG is covering all of their bases saying everything to possibly justify lack of support for environmental intervention. They declare to their purveyors that no matter what the scenario really is, be it checks and balances or the coming apocalypse, there's absolutely no need for humanity to be concerned about the natural world, much less get government legislation involved. Granted there is the appeal to stewardship, however this has its own issues we will get to. But for now previous comments raise skepticism towards AiG's alleged commitment to stewardship.

The justification of inaction is further supported by evangelicals' readings of Genesis and their creation doctrine. The reading of Genesis by evangelicals tends to be highly anthropocentric. Polls by the Pew Research Center found that those who believe the Bible should be read literally make up about 55% of evangelicals, and those who believe humans have always existed in present form is around 38% at a minimum.⁶³ How these two separate statistics square with each other is uncertain. One would think that those who believe in a literal reading would

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ "Interpreting Scripture," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, Sept. 9, 2020.; Cary Funk, "How highly religious Americans view evolution depends on how they're asked about it," Pew Research Center (Feb. 6, 2019). <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/06/how-highly-religious-americans-view-evolution-depends-on-how-theyre-asked-about-it/>.

translate to around half also believing in Young Earth Creationism. One possibility may be people's personal definitions of "literal." For example the Old Earth fundamentalists claimed theirs was a literal reading. Regardless, both evangelicals who have a literal reading and those who do not tend to adopt a more anthropocentric view. To begin there is the interpretation of Genesis 1:28: "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground'" (NIV). A common alternative to "rule over" is "have dominion" (KJV, RSV, NRSV). Other translations like the Common English Bible (CEB) opt for "master it" and "take charge of." For each of these, the language is interpreted by evangelicals endorsing complete human control, and indeed this appears to be so when taken at face value and isolated from the surrounding text. As the stewardship language of the AiG posts imply though, evangelicals - even the literalists - do not simply ignore chapter 2.

A common translation of Genesis 2:15 is, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (NIV). Alternatively, the final words of this verse have also been translated as, "to dress it [or till it] and keep it" (KJV). It is from this verse the language of stewardship emerges. When the topic of creation care comes up it is the language most evangelicals adhere to, if they do not take a dominion view. This has already been demonstrated for evangelicals who are most openly fundamentalist. For other evangelicals, the appeal to stewardship is made by the *Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship* (2000). The document displays the tendency for evangelicals to resist ecojustice, fearing it may be a slippery slope into New Age religion or pantheism.⁶⁴ It is not uncommon for religious conservatives to refer to environmentalism as its own religion. The document downplays global

⁶⁴ Langmead, "Ecojustice Principles: Challenges for the Evangelical Perspective."

warming, overpopulation, and biodiversity loss concerns as “speculative” and “of very low and largely hypothetical risk.”⁶⁵ A list of over 500 prominent Protestant signers can be found at the Cornwall Alliance’s website, including Charles Wendell Colson, James Dobson, R.C. Sproul, and Dennis James Kennedy.⁶⁶ The statement outlines that humanity has a responsibility to take care of creation, but insists environmental well-being depends on continued affluence, technological innovation, and the maintenance of capital. In other words, it declares a free-market economy is in the environment’s best interest, despite evidence to the contrary in cases such as deforestation, desertification, and climate change accelerated by mankind.⁶⁷ This supports an assertion by Lim that more evangelicals are willing to declare creation care as a Christian responsibility, so long as the work is done mostly with other evangelicals (i.e. by individuals in the church, without government involvement).⁶⁸ However, said work is small in scale or impact and does very little to alleviate the several issues listed above. This position of moral work as separate from political institutions is inconsistent with evangelicals’ vocal support of government control in other areas such as gay marriage, abortion, a legal death penalty, or militarized policing. The purpose of this statement’s sentiment is to give moral lip service to the idea, while failing to meet these standards in reality by reinforcing a political agenda in support of alleged “small government.” Though the statement speaks of God sustaining creation, the view expressed also implies an absent owner of creation, a deistic God who has granted humanity total authority over its management. It is from statements like this that theologian Norman Wirzba asserts that without external argument, stewardship is a neutral term as far as an

⁶⁵ *The Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship*, Cornwall Alliance For the Stewardship of Creation, 2000. <https://cornwallalliance.org/landmark-documents/the-cornwall-declaration-on-environmental-stewardship/>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Wirzba, *The Paradise of God*, 130.

⁶⁸ Lim, “Laudato Si: An Evangelical Response.”

actual program for creation care goes. In a culture that does not appreciate creation it is rendered ineffective, as it may be used negatively by projects such as the Cornwall statement and AiG.⁶⁹ Other statements, such as *Evangelical Christianity and the Environment* published by the World Evangelical Fellowship attempt to offer a balanced position on God's relationship to the world, but heightens God's distance - and therefore care - from the world. One of the drafters, Loren Wilkinson, speaks of God being "completely distinct from creation" and that God "upholds it, but is not present in it."⁷⁰

The Gnostic Connection

These perspectives adopted by evangelicals over time have more in common with some approaches of Gnosticism than they do with historical Christianity. A key portion of this statement is "some". As I will demonstrate through a survey of early gnostic thought, some of the doctrines mentioned in the previous section possess a gnostic bent. But I will also demonstrate that while evangelicals tend to be gnostic in some ways, they paradoxically are not gnostic in others.

Like most religious systems, Gnosticism is not monolithic. It is best understood as a river, containing many streams and tributaries breaking off in different directions. Because of this, beliefs among many gnostics differ, however there are two ideas that remain common to the vast majority of gnostics: (1) That the natural world is evil and must be escaped and (2) an anti-intellectual, yet elitist approach to individually revealed knowledge. Other than this Gnosticism possessed no strict creeds and embraced an anarchistic approach to knowledge, thus why it

⁶⁹ Wirzba, *The Paradise of God*, 131-132.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Langmead, "Ecojustice Principles: Challenges for the Evangelical Perspective."

contains so many “streams.” This can be observed by Frederik Wisse’s thesis that a majority of Gnostics were unorganized or existed outside of the Church.⁷¹ Until 1945, most of what was known by scholars about Gnosticism came from ancient Christian writers who opposed it as a heresy in their works. Perhaps the most famous of these works was *Against Heresies* by Irenaeus of Lyons. Several other Church Fathers also wrote theological polemics against the first major heresy of early Christianity.⁷² These were written addressing the organized gnostics inside the Church who identified as Christians (e.g. Valentinians, Marcionites, Manicheans). In 1945 the discovery of a dozen gnostic codices at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, allowed the ancient Gnostics to finally speak for themselves. The discovery provided evidence to corroborate the Church Fathers’ reports of what Gnostics believed, while also illuminating the diversity of gnostic thought.

This diversity is observed in the nature of the Gnostic Gospels themselves: Each text is produced by individual self-reflection, and this self-derived knowledge is held to be knowledge of God. Supposedly anyone could obtain such knowledge of God from themselves and only themselves, instead of referring to any kind of outside authority.⁷³ In his *Refutation of All Heresies*, Hippolytus quotes an alleged letter by the Gnostic Monoimus:

If you wish to know the all, abandon your search for god, creation, and like entities - and search for him from yourself. Learn who it is who absolutely makes everything in you his own, saying: ‘my god, my mind, my thought, my soul, my body.’ Moreover, learn from where grief comes, from where rejoicing, from where love, and from where hatred. Learn the cause of your being awake against your will, of feeling sleepy against your will, of being angry against your will, and feeling affection against your will. If you investigate

⁷¹ Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 4.

⁷² Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 5. These Church Fathers include Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Origen.

⁷³ Elaine H. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Vintage Books Edition, Random House, 1989, xx.

these matters precisely, you will find him in yourself, one and many, in accordance with that [single] stroke, since from yourself you will have found the way out.⁷⁴

The term Gnostic comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning “to know.” Of course the Church fathers also claimed to know things about God. But the Church fathers’ knowledge differs from the Gnostics in that it was based on a common knowledge in the form of the words of the Word of God, that is, Jesus. Gnostic knowledge is set apart as secret, and revealed only to a few.⁷⁵ In the Gnostic gospels Jesus speaks not of sin and repentance but of illusion and enlightenment: “For whoever has not known himself has known nothing, but whoever has known himself has simultaneously achieved knowledge about the depth of all things.”⁷⁶ He comes as a guide to save humanity from spiritual ignorance.⁷⁷ And so the importance of knowledge in Gnosticism is that this secret knowledge is a *saving* knowledge. Hence each of the Gnostic Gospels are highly personal texts, designed to describe the writer’s attainment of special knowledge. In these Gnostic circles, “if [knowledge] was not personal, it was not Gnostic.”⁷⁸ Said knowledge is not rational knowledge though. The way the Gnostics used the term *gnosis* is best understood as “insight,” a kind of intuitive process of knowing oneself, and thereby knowing the divine.⁷⁹

This idea of saving knowledge in Gnosticism parallels the evangelical view of salvation and concern with the Elect. For the gnostic, in order to be saved one must come to a special knowledge of God and in *exchange* they are granted salvation. In Evangelicalism, particularly in its missions, there is a similar idea. This is that we must spread the Gospel to those who have not

⁷⁴ M. David Litwa, *Refutation of All Heresies*, Writings From the Greco-Roman World, Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016, 607.

⁷⁵ Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 4.

⁷⁶ *Book of Thomas the Contender*, Nag Hammadi Library 189, 138.16-19. Hereafter NHL.

⁷⁷ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, xx.

⁷⁸ Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 4.

⁷⁹ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, xix.

heard it or else they will be damned. In other words, one must *possess knowledge* that Christ died for our sins in order to make the transaction of belief for salvation. Unfortunately this transactional theology leaves plenty of poor folks out to dry on the matter of salvation: those who died before Christ, people on the other side of the world in the years following Christ's death, and today anyone Church missions don't make it to who still don't know about Christ's existence. It is also reminiscent of the individual element of mystery religions also present in the time of early gnosticism and Christianity. Though Lee does not use the term "transactional," I believe this is what he is getting at when writing of the evangelical turn towards an individual view of salvation. As noted Lee places the blame on Calvin's heirs, though he also attempts to absolve the original reformers (Luther, Calvin, Swingli) of charges of gnosticism. Conceding they did display gnostic tendencies, these were tempered by a strong foundation in the Hebrew Bible, eucharistic theologies - though the three certainly differed - and a general rejection of the gnostic elite view of knowledge. Calvin in particular cites Irenaeus - a chief anti-gnostic - on multiple occasions in his writings.⁸⁰

The evangelical approach to knowledge and what it means for those saved also falls within the gnostic framework. The "plain reading" approach advocated by the evangelical mind is generally without regard for Christian tradition, scholarship in biblical studies, or exegetical studies. On the whole it is focused on the individual's personal experience with scripture and is anti-intellectual, which matches the bill one of Gnosticism's hallmarks: A framework of anti-intellectual, individually revealed knowledge. Pagels highlights the *Apocalypse of Peter*, which proposes those who are enlightened can discriminate for themselves what is true and false. The enlightened few are not subject themselves to any outside authority or scholarship.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 65.

⁸¹ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 106.

Additionally this framework emphasizes that the enlightened shall be few in number, hence further justification to assert themselves as elites. The way evangelical views of salvation require knowledge of God likewise creates an elite few who have been enlightened when viewed through the perspective of all humans who ever have or ever will live. This framework has no qualms with declaring that in the end there shall be more people in Hell than in the Kingdom of Heaven.

One of the most distinguishable - and relevant - characteristics of Gnosticism is its view of the natural world as repulsive to God and to individual spirituality. The Gnostics had a tendency of reinterpreting established teachings of Christianity and Judaism. This begins with the creation narrative. The Gnostic creation narrative presented in *On the Origin of the World* goes back before the beginning of Genesis. In this story divine beings emanate or are born from the true God, who is nameless and beyond categories. Since all things emanated from this God, it may be referred to as the Monad (as it was called by some Gnostics). Each of the divine beings which came from the Monad existed in male and female counterparts. One of these female counterparts, Sophia (Wisdom), reproduced without her partner. The result was a creature called Yaltabaoth (or Yaldabaoth). Sophia became ashamed of her taboo creation and hid him in an isolated space. Alone, Yaltabaoth came to believe himself as the only being in existence and decided to do some of his own creating. What he created is the universe as we know it and everything in it, including us.⁸² Then Yaltabaoth committed an act of evil by continuously declaring, “It is I who am God, and there is no other one that exists apart from me.”⁸³ The mortal

⁸² Peter M. Burfeind, *Gnostic America: A Reading of Contemporary American Culture & Religion according to Christianity's Oldest Heresy*, Pax Domini Press, 2014, 22-23; It should be noted there are variations of the Gnostic creation myth in several of the other Gnostic Gospels, such as *The Gospel of the Egyptians*.

⁸³ *On the Origin of the World*, Nag Hammadi Library.

“authorities” created by Yaltabaoth are referred to as “forces of chaos.” This meant to be read as a negative, since the opening lines of *On the Origin of the World* claim to tell the origin and root of chaos.⁸⁴ That root is Yaltabaoth. Because this world’s creator is abominable and chaotic, so is everything he has created. This creator God - a “jealous” God - hid his true nature from his creations and so the Hebrew Bible does so in kind, with the Book of Genesis beginning not at the beginning, but *in medias res*. The being Christians worship as creator, God, and Father is not the true God. The Gnostic Valentinus clarifies that all the qualities theologians like Ignatius of Antioch and Clement of Rome ascribe to God are only qualities of the *creator*: “Valentinus, following Plato, uses the Greek term for ‘creator’ (*demiurgos*), suggesting that he is a lesser being who serves as the instrument of the higher powers. It is not God, he explains, but the demiurge who reigns as king and lord, who reacts as a military commander, who gives the law and judges those who violate it - in short, he is the ‘God of Israel.’”⁸⁵ In the narrative Sophia discovers what the demiurge has done and takes pity upon a single piece of his creation: humanity. Sophia then casts a spark of the Monad into humanity, granting all of its members a soul and creating a dualism of body and spirit.⁸⁶

This creation myth either originated the gnostic view of the world, or more likely it justified a pre-existing view by giving it life in the form of myth. This view of the world is that everything that physically exists is a mistake, because it was produced by a would-be God who originated as a mistake. And since the world is the result of a cosmic blunder, *all* matter is seen through the lens of decay, and because it is in decay, then matter must be in error. As one gnostic teacher writes to their student Rheginos:

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 37.

⁸⁶ Burfeind, *Gnostic America*, 23.

The after birth of the body is old age, and you exist in corruption. You have absence as a gain. For you will not give up what is better if you depart. That which is worse has diminution, but there is grace for it... What, then, is the resurrection? It is always the disclosure of those who have risen. For if you remember reading in the Gospel that Elijah appeared and Moses with him, do not think the resurrection is an illusion. It is no illusion, but it is truth! Indeed, it is more fitting to say the world is an illusion, rather than the resurrection which has come into being through our Lord the Savior, Jesus Christ.⁸⁷

The Gospel of Philip then translates what this means for life and death: “Light and Darkness, life and death, right and left, are brothers of one another. They are inseparable. Because of this neither are the good good, nor evil evil, nor is life life, nor death death. For this reason each one will dissolve into its earliest origin. But those who are exalted above the world are indissoluble, eternal.”⁸⁸ One can be content being either alive or dead, because each are connected to the material. Death itself possesses no value - even if needed to give life - because to exist as one of the dead would imply a person is still connected to their body after death. It would imply perhaps that the person *is* their body after death. The only acceptable result is escape from both life *and* death, into that which is indissoluble and eternal. In the gnostic worldview, this then calls for a different reading of Christ’s resurrection. In *The Treatise on the Resurrection*, the resurrection referred to is not a physical resurrection, but a spiritual one. The resurrection is not of the illusive character of the world. It’s experienced in the soul as, “the revelation of what is, and the transformation of things, and a transition into newness.”⁸⁹ And so the teacher advises his pupil to not, “live in conformity with this flesh for the sake of unanimity, but flee from the divisions and the fetters, and already you have the resurrection.”⁹⁰ Other Gnostic texts describe the crucifixion

⁸⁷ Malcolm L. Peel, “The Treatise on the Resurrection,” ed. James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 1st U.S. ed. Harper & Row, 1977.

⁸⁸ James M. Robinson, editor, “The Gospel of Philip,” *Nag Hammadi Library*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988, 150.

⁸⁹ Peel, “The Treatise on the Resurrection.”

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

of Christ. In the *Apocalypse of Peter* Jesus describes the physical and spiritual parts of Christ as separate: “He whom you saw being glad and laughing above the cross, he is the Living Jesus. But he into whose hands and feet they are driving the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute. They put to shame that which remained in his likeness. And look at him, and [look at] me!”⁹¹ This separation of physical and spiritual parts of a person contrasts with the view presented in the Hebrew Bible, in which there is no reference to a spiritual part of a person which is either immortal or exists separately from the body (i.e. the physical part). The ancient Hebrews did not possess this conception of the soul. Before Greek ideas about the soul entered Jewish thought, particularly in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint), the Israelites had no notion of a “soul.” To the ancient Israelites - and writers of most of the Hebrew Bible - the biblical concept of man was that of a “psycho-physical whole” made of mind, body, and spirit. Here, spirit refers to the breath of life that God breathes into all breathing - or perhaps living - things.⁹² In the New Testament, neither the soul nor its immortality are necessary for the Gospel’s proclamation. And its proclamation is that the dead shall be resurrected, not that souls which floated up to God’s heaven shall remain there or that said souls shall be rejoined to their bodies.⁹³ By separating the physical and spiritual parts of Christ and calling the former the substitute of the latter, the author of the *Apocalypse of Peter* holds up the soul as more valuable

⁹¹ *Apocalypse of Peter*, NHL 344, 81.15-24. There was also a Docetic influence amongst a number of gnostics. Some believed Christ to be wholly an illusion. Others disagreed with Docetics that before the crucifixion Christ was bodily, after the “resurrection” though Christ’s human appearance was an illusion (Burfeind 25; Peel).

⁹² Zachary Alan Starr, *Toward a History of Jewish Thought: The Soul, Resurrection, and the Afterlife*, “The Ancient Israelites Had No Notion of a ‘Soul’ and Envisioned Neither Reward Nor Punishment in a Postmortem Existence but Were Focused on the Here and Now,” Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2020.

⁹³ Robert Farrar Capon, *Genesis: The Movie*, W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2003, 137.

than the body. Valentinian texts such as the *Tripartate Tractate* and the *Interpretation of Knowledge* emphasize Christ's humility in taking human form:

He it is who was our Savior in willing compassion, who is that which they were. For it was for their sake that he became manifest in an involuntary suffering. They became flesh and soul, that is, eternally which (things) hold them and with corruptible things they die. And as for those who came into being, the invisible one taught them invisibly about himself. Not only did he take upon himself the death of those whom he thought to save, but he also accepted their *smallness* [my emphasis] to which they had descended when they were born in body and soul. [He did so] because he had let himself be conceived and born as an infant, in body and soul.⁹⁴

I become very *small* [my emphasis] so that through my humility I might take you up to the great height, whence you had fallen.⁹⁵

The smallness to which these authors speak is not a smallness to be affirmed as more orthodox readings of the canonical Gospels indicate - not to mention the insights of Liberation Theology. Rather it is a smallness to be despised. Jesus is an agent of the Monad, sent to reveal the nature of the cosmos and thus lift humanity up from its humiliating smallness. We may be saved when we realize the truth and undergo *palingensia*, or rebirth, a strangely coincidental parallel to the evangelical conception of being "born again."⁹⁶

Because this spiritual rebirth is the aim of humanity and the reason for which Christ came, the Gnostic tradition regards the "inner spirit" as the essential part of every person. And so all physical experience, be it pleasure or pain, is only a distraction from spiritual reality.⁹⁷ Many gnostics rejected family, sex, business, politics, leisure, and ordinary employment. Some lived as ascetics - though with a differing understanding of their relationship with the natural world than early Christian monastics, who lived as ascetics or hermits. For example, a gnostic ascetic would

⁹⁴ *Tripartite Tractate*, NHL 87, 114.33-115.11.

⁹⁵ *Interpretation of Knowledge*, NHL 430, 10.27-30.

⁹⁶ Burfeind, *Gnostic America*, 23.

⁹⁷ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 101.

give up bodily pleasures out of a belief that those body pleasures are sinful or evil in themselves. A Christian monastic who practices asceticism would likely not view these things as sinful in themselves. But a monastic may voluntarily give up such pleasures, because they may distract oneself from one's focus on the goal of communion with God. Said communion also differentiates from gnostic meditation. The gnostic meditates for the sake of gaining secret knowledge and attaining salvation. For the monastic, communion with God is an end in itself, not the means to an end of salvation. Other more organized Gnostics such as the Valentinians would partake in some of these pleasures, but always placed them as secondary to the interior path to gnosis.⁹⁸ One might participate in the world, but ultimately it is folly to expect it to mean or amount to anything worthwhile. The only thing to be desired is escape into the immaterial world. Some Gnostics ridiculed the idea of bodily resurrection. This ridicule towards the body is echoed by the Jesus of the *Gospel of Thomas*: "If spirit came into being because of the body, it is a wonder of wonders. Indeed, I am amazed at how this great wealth [the spirit] has made its home in this poverty [the body]."⁹⁹

This is where the gnostic hallmark that the natural world is evil and must be escaped comes in. Escapism finds itself within the evangelistic enterprise, for which Evangelicalism is named. One of the characteristics that defines historical Evangelicalism according to Historian David Bebbington is "activism."¹⁰⁰ In particular Bebbington describes evangelical activism as

⁹⁸ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 145-146.

⁹⁹ *Gospel of Thomas*, NHL 121, 38.33-39.2. The Gnostic Gospels understand "spirit" and "soul" as synonymous, rather than the spirit as God's "breath of life," and the soul as the product created from the unification of the breath of life with the flesh.

¹⁰⁰ Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure*, 12. The issue of defining Evangelicalism is a complicated one because it has many dimensions. Is it historical? Political? Theological? All of these or some combination? Or is it better understood as a kind of dialectical community? Should only those who actively identify as evangelicals be called evangelicals, or is there, as Gloege suggests, an evangelical "type" which can be applied from an outsider's perspective? This is made more complicated because evangelicals are admittedly diverse, in part because of differing "plain

driven by the quest for souls. Bebbington cites a clerical manual from 1830, which states that ministers should acquaint themselves with people's wants so as to win their affections. This manifested itself primarily in domestic and foreign missions movements and organizations, and still does today. Thus the gospel would be spread and souls saved through actions of service.¹⁰¹ Gloege notes this definition is one of self-understanding. A definition from an outsider's perspective may include the following additions: the emphasis on individualism, faith in a divine "plan," a dispensational framework, and focus on the "results" of faith (e.g. missions).¹⁰² The latter of these grows out of an expectation that if one is faithful, it will result in empirically measurable results, by which the Elect and enlightened stand out from those who are not. It was this same evangelistic enterprise which provided the impulse to found the influential Moody Bible Institute in the late 19th century. In Moody's sermons, one can find the rhetoric of gnostic escape as a part of what Moody saw as his ordained mission: "I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, 'Moody, save all you can.'"¹⁰³ In this analogy the ship represents the natural world. It is a wrecked vessel and the only hope is not to redeem the vessel itself - whether by ourselves or through God's grace - but to evacuate and abandon it entirely. To Moody and those like him the focus of Christianity is making sure everyone has personally RSVPed for a lifeboat, rather than caring about the ship itself. This reading of the Gospel again emphasizes anthropocentrism, where the only care Christians should have is for the state of souls (ship's passengers) with less regard for the surroundings those souls

readings" of scripture - another connection to the gnostic impulse. I acknowledge these complexities, but cannot address them in their entirety here.

¹⁰¹ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History From the 1730s to the 1980s*, London: Routledge, 1993, 10-12.

¹⁰² Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure*, 12.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 127. It is also notable that MBI developed ideals for the purpose of creating a "respectable" evangelicalism compatible with middle class norms and culture (Gloege 9).

find themselves in. This view of souls as things that separate from bodies and float up to an other worldly heaven bears a similarity to the gnostic conception of the soul: a spark of the divine unique to humanity. And generally verses about humanity being created in the image of God are used by evangelicals to support this reading. This is despite the phrase *nephesh chayyah* (Greek: *psyche zosan*. Latin: *animam viventum*) meaning “soul [or spirit/breath] of life” is attributed to all land and sea animals in Genesis 1. Additionally, there is a long tradition in both non-Christian (Plato, Aristotle) and Christian (Thomas Aquinas) philosophy of assigning a soul or *anima* to all that has life.¹⁰⁴ Adopting the view of the soul that has more in common with gnostic sources is politically expedient for evangelicals. If only humans possess souls, and the value of humanity is predicated on this, while other living creatures do not, it becomes easier to put aside the call and any issues of moral conscience in caring for creation. It also calls into question just how valuable the human body is, given that our value comes not from it, but from the soul within.

Here is where I must emphasize that evangelicals are not wholly equatable to early gnostics, though they have adopted some of their perspectives. The adoption of some of the perspectives is selective. Like their own evangelical predecessors, contemporary evangelicals do engage with the world, and so do not always appear gnostic, since gnostics tended to retreat and refuse participation in sex, business, and politics. Primarily what they share in common is the gnostic impulse towards extreme individualism and escape, along with views of soul that bear resemblances to one another in passing. As Lee states, “The concentration on self is a natural result of the passionate need to escape the world. Because no one can actually escape the real world except by death (suicide being the ultimate self-actualized escape), the only other solution is to effect an escape by withdrawal into the self.”¹⁰⁵ Evangelicals cannot simply escape except

¹⁰⁴ Capon, *Genesis: The Movie*, 137.

¹⁰⁵ Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 10.

by suicide, so the actualized escape into the self has consequences for their relationships with this world. One can deny the world's goodness, but must still live within it. In doing so the inward escape is then projected outward through one's politics, here meaning the way we choose to live our lives within the context of communities both human and nonhuman.¹⁰⁶ Lee refers to a "gnostic orientation." In regards to evangelicals I will opt for the term "gnostic impulse." This is more directional and displays the fact that something drives people to adopt a gnostic perspective or orientation. The gnostic impulse mainly influences evangelicals' relationships with the nonhuman natural world, though it can also be selective towards the human world. For example, evangelicals are well known for their concern for the well-being of the unborn. This is a position that does not reflect the opinions of someone committed to a fully gnostic worldview. Likewise, a gnostic could care less about the condition of one's culture, hence to be involved in the culture wars not gnostic either at face value. However, evangelicals lack of political commitment to the poor and disenfranchised aligns more with the gnostic orientation away from worldly concerns. To the gnostic, one's material needs are irrelevant at best, and evil at worst. What really matters is the soul and whether or not it has been enlightened. The goal is escape, and enlightenment is the only way to escape our bodies upon death. Why care for the body when it is the very thing holding humanity back? We should be more concerned with enlightening (evangelizing) others than caring for physical needs. Another example is that many unborn children saved by anti-abortion laws are born into poor families. Meanwhile states that have the most restrictive laws regarding abortion access also possess higher infant mortality rates.¹⁰⁷ Though the government

¹⁰⁶ Admittedly evangelicals are not the only one's who do this, though for the purpose of my study I focus on them. The same might be said for those of the far reaches of Liberal Theology.

¹⁰⁷ Roman Pabayo et al, "Laws Restricting Access to Abortion Services and Infant Mortality Risk in the United States," *International journal of environmental research and public health* vol. 17(11)(May 2020): 3773. doi:10.3390/ijerph17113773. Though this correlation is

could leverage its legislative abilities to decrease poverty and infant mortality rates, the majority of evangelicals support politicians who either advocate for lack of government involvement in the economy in theory, or in practice enact laws and subsidies that place more wealth into the hands of the wealthy. This aggravates the wealth gap, and by consequence also increases mortality rates, of both infants and the general populace. The disregard for the poor is a gnostic position, care for the lives of the unborn is not. Like the early fundamentalists in relation to the Social Gospellers, evangelicals tend to emphasize individual moral issues than they do socially or communally responsible ones.

This can be demonstrated by the rhetoric of organization such as AiG. Another statement by Ham contains the standard admonition that the West is abandoning God's Word, particularly in regards to homosexuality and transgender identity: "We need to stand against the gender revolution to protect children, and individuals who are confused about their gender..."¹⁰⁸ Likewise, at the Creation Museum, a section called Graffiti Alley displays evidence for these claims in the form of magazine and news articles that American culture has abandoned scripture. Present are the Supreme Court's removal of mandatory Bible readings and Lord's prayer from schools. Then there is evidence that some recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance remove the phrase "under God." Others include school shootings, abortion, euthanasia, evolution in public schools, atheists, searches for aliens, the War on Christmas, people questioning the existence of Hell, religious diversity, and gay marriage. Curiously there are no magazine covers or newspaper articles about corporate malfeasance, income inequality, persistent widespread poverty,

significant, it cannot be identified as causal due to the limitations of the study and complexity of the issues in public policy.

¹⁰⁸ Ken Ham, "Sad Consequences of Gender Revolution Laws," *Answers in Genesis*, Answers in Genesis, March 5, 2019. answersingenesis.org/family/gender/sad-consequences-of-gender-revolution/.

pollution, or environmental damage or relations.¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, concern is expressed most for the state of individual persons' souls, as opposed to more existential or communally responsible threats such as poverty and climate change. This could offer a window into evangelicals' concerns within the world about patriarchy, gender roles, and Christian Nationalism that Du Mez's work covers. To the evangelical, erring from these and towards the specific things in Graffiti Alley places one's immortal soul in danger of eternal damnation. This is despite Paul's declaration that, "So now there isn't any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1 CEB). And as established by chapter one of John's Gospel, and Paul - or Paul's heirs - in Ephesians and Colossians, all things have been in Christ from the very beginning. The same framework also exhibits how fundamentalists have never truly separated from culture.

If fundamentalists were truly separatist, it would mean abandoning the evangelistic enterprise. Lewis argues the rhetoric of religious fundamentalism best fits the analogy of a romantic suitor: "To begin the wooing cycle, courtiers must first separate. They work to earn the gaze of the forsaken by making the idealistic dream a reality... They seek identification not through victimage or comedy, but through consummation - a physical union that joins the Other to themselves and pushes the Other away from the dominant."¹¹⁰ Therefore, separatists are not completely concerned with joining the divine, because they intentionally remain in view of mainstream culture.¹¹¹ As an example, Lewis points out how Bob Jones University (BJU) - the centerpiece of her rhetorical case study - lays out a code of behavior and ethical guidelines for the University family. Lewis argues the purpose of this is two-fold: for students to preserve their

¹⁰⁹ Trollinger and Trollinger, *Righting America at the Creation Museum*, 157-162.

¹¹⁰ Lewis, *Romancing the Difference*, 8.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

sectarian beauty, and for this beauty to woo the mainstream Other towards God.¹¹² Returning to Laats's observations, fundamentalists always played a role in public and political life. This role is more about reclaiming a specific variety of American culture than it is about theology. As I've argued, the reason evangelicals have adopted gnostic influences in some areas, but not in others, is because it justifies presupposed political beliefs such as this particular view of American culture.

This abstract view of the person extends also to the Kingdom of God. The *Gospel of Thomas* ridicules those who think of the Kingdom of God in physical terms, or as a particular place¹¹³: "Rather, the Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will realize that you are the sons of the living Father. But if you will not know yourselves, then you dwell in poverty, and it is you who *are* [my emphasis] that poverty."¹¹⁴ On two occasions in the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus's disciples ask when the Kingdom and "new world" will come. In answer he replies, "What you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it... It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying 'Here it is' or 'There it is.' Rather, the Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it."¹¹⁵ The Kingdom is neither coming, nor a future event to be waited upon. It is already here, both within and without, though it cannot be seen. These verses do bear similarities to a verse from Luke's Gospel: "Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you."¹¹⁶ However, Luke's Gospel, like the other

¹¹² Ibid., 66. Such ethical codes are not exclusive to openly fundamentalist schools, but also evangelical ones such as Liberty University, and those founded in the Stone-Campbell tradition such as Milligan University.

¹¹³ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 128.

¹¹⁴ *Gospel of Thomas*, NHL 118, 32.19-33.5.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 123-130, 42.7-51.18.

¹¹⁶ *Gospel of Luke*, King James Version, 17:21. Some versions, such as the Common English Bible, say, "God's Kingdom is already *among* you."

synoptic gospels, counters a potential gnostic reading through references to worldly events ascribed to the Kingdom of God: the captive shall be set free, the deaf shall hear, the blind will see, all shall be healed, the oppressed shall be liberated, and peace will reign over the earth. The *Gospel of Thomas* and other Gnostic Gospels contain no such references. Jesus' role as a miraculous healer is omitted in favor of a depiction that limits him to teacher, revealer, and spiritual master.¹¹⁷ While the Kingdom of the synoptic gospels exists in the material world - paradoxically both here and yet still coming - the Kingdom of the Gnostics best symbolizes a spiritual transformation of consciousness¹¹⁸:

Jesus saw infants being suckled. He said to his disciples, "these infants being suckled are like those who enter the Kingdom." They said to him, "shall we, then, as children, enter the Kingdom?" Jesus said to them, "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same so that the male will not be male nor the female [will be] female; and when you fashion eyes in place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in the place of a likeness; then you will enter the Kingdom."¹¹⁹

And so true entry to the Kingdom is dependent upon the transformation of one's internal being, attained by self-knowledge, or knowledge of divine power within.¹²⁰ This transformation is then consummated in the escape of death.

This gnostic view of the Kingdom as an otherworldly realm the soul goes to after death lends itself to evangelical views of apocalypticism and the natural world. When a believer dies it is common for evangelicals to say they have already gone to heaven, though their bodies are in the ground. A gnostic reading of John's Gospel comes to a similar conclusion. This reading

¹¹⁷ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 130.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹¹⁹ *Gospel of Thomas*, NHL 121, 37.20-35.

¹²⁰ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 140. In Gnostic thought though there are often exceptions. For example, on this note *Allogenes* acknowledges limits to self-knowledge.

identifies the “dwelling place” (John 14:2) Christ is preparing as somewhere other than the created world. This is why gnostics in the first centuries rejected the idea that Jesus was human or not a really a physical being, because to do so would create a potential contradiction: that the incarnation is “the most intimate identification with [creation]” does not square well with the idea that we must escape creation.¹²¹ Though evangelicals seek to escape creation, they do not deny Christ’s physicality, meaning they exist within this potential contradiction. This escape flies in the face of the resurrection though. To the Christian gnostic it is easier to believe we go to an immaterial heaven than to believe we are reborn into a world similar to this one. We may give lip service to Christ’s physicality, but the moment we deny the resurrection of our own bodies, we deny the incarnation.¹²² The evangelical theology of escape also lends credence to Christ’s statements in John about not being of this world (John 8:23, 17:14, 17:16). If all the world is a stage, to the evangelical, everything that actually matters happens offstage. In fact their very goal is to leave the stage and exit the playhouse to enter the only world that ultimately matters: Heaven. As theologian Robert Farrar Capon puts it, “the actual *play* of history doesn’t count except as credit or debit entries in a metaphysical ledger. It’s the ledger that’s reality to them; the actual world of matter, they dismiss with the wave of the hand.”¹²³ This temptation towards escaping the play of history focuses on the individual, given evangelicals belief that the individual must openly confess Christ and be baptized to be saved. That said, in this vision the created world lacks any of its own inherent integrity. And if this is so, why should we care if it is

¹²¹Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*, 2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, 2019, 214.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 276.

¹²³ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Mystery of Christ... & Why We Don’t Get It*, W.E. Erdmans Pub. Co., 1993, 160.

going to be destroyed? To the apocalyptic its destruction is actually a good thing, seeing as how it fulfills not so much the coming of the Kingdom, but humanity escaping to it.

Outside of Revelation there is also the assertion the Apostle Paul favors an otherworldly heaven given all his writing on the spirit being opposed to the flesh. Wirzba asserts there is evidence to believe Paul is *not* thinking this way. In Paul's epistles, the Church incarnates the righteousness of God by being imitators him and the baptized no longer live according to utilitarian precepts of the world. In this kind of life, "They live no longer according to the flesh and its ways, but according to the spirit. As Christians are called to share in the ministry of Christ, they will work out in their material lives acts of healing, feeding, and companionship that marked Christ's life on earth."¹²⁴ Paul's dichotomy between flesh and spirit isn't the same as the Socratic, Platonic, or Gnostic distinction between body and soul. The latter views split everything into material and spiritual, whereas Paul's view speaks to a person's whole being - body, soul, and spirit. This falls squarely within the Hebraic tradition. What Paul means by flesh and spirit, is how a person may live within, "two different governing powers or spheres of influence."¹²⁵ Life according to the spirit affirms and continues the life of Christ, a physical life of healing and reconciliation. Life according to the flesh is egotistical and seeks for our own lusts, often to the detriment of others. So to care for creation is to embrace Paul's virtuous spirit and reject the sinful flesh. Paul and his heirs in Colossians and Ephesians are writing in the context of stoics and early gnostics with dualistic worldviews between body and soul. In particular they are trying to counter such thought and even evangelize to those who hold these beliefs. To do so they appropriate the dualistic language and images used by these philosophies, but turn them on their heads so they can be used by the Holy Spirit. By reading these epistles

¹²⁴ Wirzba, *The Paradise of God*, 51.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

fully in the stoic or gnostic lens, we undo the very work these writers were trying to accomplish and turn good images into bad ones. These bad images are then used to justify the denigration of the earth, or lead otherwise decent people to believe there is nothing wrong with doing so.

These positions are justified by readings of Genesis, particularly views on creation and the Fall. Though the gnostics would have completely disregarded Genesis as propaganda for the demiurge, these readings ultimately lead to similar conclusions regarding the natural world. In seeking to escape the created world, many evangelicals have also made an adversary of death. In particular this concerns the folks who read Genesis literally, but it also includes plenty who have given up literal interpretation, and yet have not thought much on what Genesis 1-3 means in light of this. As mentioned earlier the gnostic also makes an enemy of physical death, because to do otherwise might imply that one still remains a part of this world after one has died, instead of drifting off into the indissoluble and eternal. The issue here is not so much with the process of dying - which leads to the good escape - but actually *being* dead. Among the literalist crowd the Fall in Genesis 3 is read as the entry of *physical* death into creation. Before this there was supposedly no such thing as death, or at least animal death. Some literalists do acknowledge a vegetarian creation in which plants were consumed, but maintain this was not *death* per se in the sense plants were never *alive* in the same sense - that is, “biblically” - as humans or animals.¹²⁶ After the occurrence of the Fall, the world entered into a state of decay, in other words causing death. Consequently this is also why diseases exist, why crops “die” before we can eat them, why natural disasters happen, and the reason climate change occurs. All these things are viewed as errors in light of the Fall, just as the gnostic might view them as errors since they are a part of

¹²⁶ Todhunter, Michael. “Do Plants and Leaves Die?” *Answers in Genesis*. Answers in Genesis, October 5, 2019. answersingenesis.org/biology/plants/do-leaves-die/.

creation regardless of a Fall. When this idea meets the anthropocentric view that the Incarnation exists and Christ died only to save man,¹²⁷ it presents the fallen world as irredeemable as it exists. And so the only recourse for the cursed state of the earth is destruction. God has no place for this world, non-human things in it, or what comes with those things such as death.

Norman Wirzba emphasizes the temptation to reject death comes from sin - particularly in the form of pride. We make death our enemy because it mocks our own sense of vanity, that life exists for human self-enlargement and glorification. Death becomes an enemy because this sinful self-regard changes life into something God did not intend it to be, that is, it brings in the kind of death which is evil: death caused by a disregard for life. Death is twofold. It is both physical and spiritual. This spiritual death has twisted life and our relationships with God, each other, and creation. It is within this context that we can only see death as the full expression of evil in the world. Wirzba asserts that, "Death is evil insofar as it is a force that degrades life. It is not evil if it follows a fulfilled life, a life enriched by the kenotic, self-offering love that is the mark of God's own life."¹²⁸ When we deny the kind of sacrificial death that is positive, the deaths of plants and animals for our own survival and health, we open ourselves to a life in which the world ceases to be a concern: "Though our bodily metabolism may continue, we have in effect denied the life-giving, life-sustaining power of the spirit and have instead become self-centered and isolated according to the ways of the flesh."¹²⁹ Death after all is the engine of creation, both old and new. Nothing can live without the death of others to sustain it, from the carnivore to the vegetarian. Without the death of billions of leaves there would be no such thing as topsoil to grow healthy vegetation from. The Church's sacrament of baptism is itself a

¹²⁷ Ham, "Climate Change and Aliens."

¹²⁸ Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 159, 161.

¹²⁹ Wirzba, *The Paradise of God*, 52.

reenactment of death.¹³⁰ In John 15:13, Christ claims there is no greater love than this: “to lay down one’s life for his friends.” Christ himself died on the cross. And for our part we hold this to be a good death, the temporal sign that Christ has been with us all along, dying as we die and resurrected as we hope to be someday. Indeed this presents a mystery for those concerned with the problem of evil, but Christ, “does not take good and evil or life and death as problems to be solved; he takes them as Mysteries to be embraced.”¹³¹ God is the great inventor of ecology and this is the house he has established for us. As Christ dies he says *Tetelestai* - “It is *finished* [or *completed* or *perfect*].” Even so, nothing changes. Misery goes on. His resurrection has made all things new and yet where we are much remains the same: “The warriors keep on warring, the dying still end up dead - and the world he has already translated into heaven continues to go to hell in a handbasket. In his mysterious love of goodness - and in his even more mysterious tolerance of evil - he still lets both be, because in him their harmony is already restored.”¹³² Rejecting this gives way to gnostic perspectives, and so enters the rejection of physical death and concepts associated with it.

There is a tendency among fundamentalists in the evangelical community to reject the way God created the *imago dei* and all other living things: evolution. Doing so is used to support that any death or anything that causes it can be good. Now, the evolution side of this is something evangelicals are split on. A Pew Research survey found that whether evangelicals responded that humans evolved depended on how the answers were presented. Both of two surveys asked: “Which statement comes closest to your views?” The first version gave

¹³⁰ Capon, *The Mystery of Christ*, 136. Also see Ecclesiastes 3:1-2 - “There’s a season for everything and a time for every matter under the heavens: a time for *giving birth* and a time for *dying*, a time for *planting* and a time for *uprooting* what was planted” (CEB).

¹³¹ Capon, *Genesis: The Movie*, 222.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 294.

respondents two options: “Humans have always existed in their present form” and “humans evolved.” In this scenario 66% chose the former. However, the results changed when three options were specified: “Humans have always existed in their present form,” “humans evolved; God had a role,” and “human evolved; God had *no* role.” In this scenario, 62% said humans evolved - with 58% saying God had a role, and 4% saying God did not.¹³³ This reveals that Evangelicals may feel conflicted about expressing a belief in human evolution, *unless* they are able to emphasize in their answer that God played a role. Simply saying “humans evolved” may carry too many deistic or atheistic connotations to be comfortable with on its own, so in the first survey most opted for saying humans have always existed in their present state.¹³⁴ This brings up a tension within the evangelical view, showing that there exists such a view that creation is good or from God, yet still maintains that we must escape it. That said, even evangelicals who do not read Genesis literally possess the tendency to view death - or rather *being* dead - in a negative light, as demonstrated by common beliefs such as the soul floating up to heaven after death.

The consequences of this evangelical view of death can be seen in action in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic. During this event, evangelicals are the demographic who most vigorously oppose vaccine mandates, mask mandates, stay-at-home orders, and economic shutdown on the basis that we as Christians should not be afraid of being killed by the virus. Under the gnostic framework I have outlined, this makes perfect sense. One should not fear a death which brings escape from this fallen world. If it happens to come because of our disregard

¹³³ Cary Funk, “How highly religious Americans view evolution depends on how they’re asked about it,” Pew Research Center (Feb. 6, 2019). <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/06/how-highly-religious-americans-view-evolution-depends-on-how-theyre-asked-about-it/>.

¹³⁴ Cary Funk, Greg Smith, and David Masci. “How Many Creationists Are There in America?” *Scientific American*. *Scientific American*, February 12, 2019. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/how-many-creationists-are-there-in-america/>. Similar conclusions were found among Historically Black Protestants.

for portions of life, then it is all the better for us and entirely to our benefit. Concurrently, this view provides a convenient cover for political convictions regarding how we should respond - or not respond - to the occurrence of a pandemic.

Conclusion

These theological views and approaches to scripture I outline bear a resemblance to some gnostic perspectives and have been actively constructed and adopted to justify evangelical voting habits. Beginning with the *imago dei* and the human monopoly on souls, salvation doctrine and a fixation upon the Elect creates a theology with little to no concern for the natural world. Since the natural world cannot be redeemed by Christ in the same way humanity is, the natural world is consigned to oblivion in its fallen state and its destruction becomes merely a utilitarian bit player in the apocalyptic play. The appeal of the natural world as only valuable through its usefulness to the apocalyptic view of history parallels the view that the natural world's value comes only from its material usefulness. It only matters so much as humanity is able to use it and take from it for our own purposes. The gnostic approach to scripture affirms this, despite Genesis's repeated affirmations of the natural world's (ontological) goodness. Ironically this gnostic reading allows Christians most concerned with material goods - for themselves - to sleep well at night. In addition it provides many evangelicals in the political arena with religious cover for opposing public policies that would aid reconciliation between humanity and the natural world, despite that this religious cover clashes with historical doctrines.

One such historical doctrine is that of *creatio ex nihilo* ("creation from nothing") which was first formulated by Theophilus of Antioch in the 2nd century. Within 100 years it had become a central tenet of faith. This doctrine holds that God created the world from out of

nothing, and that to keep it from falling back into nothingness it must be held together by God - or Christ if you take the phrasing of apostle John and writers of Ephesians, Colossians, and Hebrews. Combined with this idea is that because God is a self-sufficient being, nothing outside of God's own self is necessary to existence. Therefore all of creation is wonderfully unnecessary, created not for necessity's sake, but by love, out of love, for love. As I've mentioned God constantly holds all things in being (cf. Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3). From this we can conclude there is nothing that exists that God does not love, for if God ceased to love it, it would cease to exist. This is the mystery that the more literal minded cannot tolerate for the sake of their own pride, that God could love things that can take our own lives, from sharks, to hurricanes, to microorganisms. Because of the close relationship between life and death, once a person cannot see the good in one it becomes all the more difficult to see good in the other. This is the alienation evangelicals experience with the natural world. What they long to return to is a supposed world of early Genesis that cannot be physically returned to. Indeed the solution they formulate to our earthly quandary is one in which we escape to a new imagined world, free of all the troubles physical being might bring us (emphasis on us). But the coming of this new world cannot be fully realized until the complete destruction of the old.

This construction has been enabled by a general lack of theological literacy in the evangelical community. Sometimes this illiteracy is passively demonstrated. For example, based on conversations with students, Favale concludes her students were not willfully rejecting doctrine, but lack knowledge of the foundational beliefs of historical, creedal Christianity. This includes not only the Nicene Creed of the Patristic Age, but the Reformation as well.¹³⁵ To these students, who are representative of a larger Evangelical community, most of Church history - and

¹³⁵ Favale, "Evangelical Gnosticism."

historical theology along with it - is shrouded in obscurity. As Favale observes, “they are not self-consciously Protestant, but merely ‘nondenominational.’ Their Christian identity is unmoored from any tradition or notion of Christianity through time.”¹³⁶ Many Evangelical Protestants are from Reformed, Baptist, or Pentecostal traditions or denominations. A significant number also come from nondenominational churches. It’s those from the latter who are more likely to be less conscious of their own Christian tradition, and where many of their assumptions about the Bible come from. In other cases this illiteracy is actively encouraged. Take for example the advertisement of the plain reading approach in the first half of the twentieth-century. As Gloege argues this was part of an attempt to create a new orthodoxy - to affirm certain political beliefs - that presented itself as the true Christianity that has existed all along. The lack of rich theological discourse or education in historical theology enabled the adoption of the plain reading approach. Those who still advocate this approach today reflect a continuing lack of education in historical theology. This same active encouragement is still carried out by organizations today. BJU’s campus museums dedicate themselves to rhetorically convincing their audience that BJU’s fundamentalism is associated, “with an older ‘evangelism’ rather than, to them, a diluted ‘neo-evangelicalism’ that sacrificed the message for the sake of broader appeal. These fundamentalists alone continue to carry the torch of Pentecost that others, in their view, tried to dim.”¹³⁷ Lewis describes how David Beale - a Bob Jones University church historian - claims fundamentalism to be more than a literal interpretation but as the “lengthened shadow of Moses and the prophets, of Christ and the apostles, of Augustine and Calvin, of the English Separatists and Puritans, of Wesley and Whitefield, of the German Pietists and the English Brethren, of London’s Spurgeon and Princeton’s Warfield - and of all who continue loyal to its

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Lewis, *Romancing the Difference*, 26.

[fundamentalism's] principles and genius."¹³⁸ Under this paradigm fundamentalism is presented as consistent with the history of Christianity. The Christian fundamentalist movement is something not created in the past 150 years, but is rather something that has always been. This encourages the audience they need not look any deeper into Augustine, Calvin, and the rest because they are assured what they find there will be consistent with true "orthodoxy": Fundamentalism.¹³⁹ Though this appears to place itself at odds with evangelicalism, as the Evangelical movement has become more fundamentalist, its adherents too have taken a similar view of where they stand in Christianity's history. Another way this illiteracy is actively encouraged is in Christian education itself. Lewis notes that BJU as a school was intended to produce evangelists rather than professionals in theology or biblical studies.¹⁴⁰ This same phenomena can be observed in the founding of evangelical schools, given the evangelistic impulse that feeds the Evangelical movement. Since ministers are the theological teachers for many of their congregants, theological illiteracy then filters down from pulpit leaders to the congregants in the pews. This allows said illiteracy to become self-sustaining. These are the factors which allow false orthodoxies to take root and flourish.¹⁴¹

In his comments on *The Fundamentals*, Gloege states that once the ideas in *The Fundamentals* took hold, the movement of new "orthodoxy" they created took on a life of its own.¹⁴² Many evangelicals today find themselves in a similar situation. Though theological

¹³⁸ Lewis, *Romancing the Difference*, 28.

¹³⁹ This paradigm also possesses hints of gnostic elitism, given that it claims only those who are fundamentalist exist under the shadow of historical Christianity. And therefore only those who are fundamentalist may be considered truly Christian.

¹⁴⁰ Lewis, *Romancing the Difference*, 26.

¹⁴¹ Though I single out the gnostic heresy, there others that have worked their way into the evangelical consciousness. The evangelical transactional view of salvation may also be read as pelagian-esque, that is salvation by works, by turning faith itself into a work.

¹⁴² Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure*, 192.

positions are taken to give cover to their political positions, their adopted “orthodoxy” has taken on a life of its own. It has been perpetuated by church communities and within the family units which pass on religious beliefs. To those being brought up in evangelical families and being taught explicitly religious ideas ahead of explicitly political ones, this theological framework that has adopted gnostic views makes evangelical political positions appear perfectly natural by the time they reach voting age. Though evangelical politics influences their theology, at a certain point this turns back on itself and normalizes the conclusions that come from holding a theology with gnostic influences. For future generations, the political motivation to adopt gnostic approaches to scripture creates its own feedback loop. Once the feedback loop develops, illiteracy - active and passive - keeps things moving. Concurrently, illiteracy and selective gnostic views become self-sustaining in the contemporary evangelical community. If I may borrow an image from Gloege, evangelicalism can be understood as a building that is under construction with approaches to scripture acting as scaffolds used in the building process. This building is like the church’s work in the Kingdom, always under construction or developing but never quite finished by our own works. However evangelicals who have adopted gnostic approaches find themselves in a position similar to the early fundamentalists. Though they are still working, supposedly propped up by gnostic approaches, the scaffolding has already collapsed.

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