



# Evangelical Environmentalism

A popular evangelical preacher says how the Sabbath, vegetarianism, and missions are reasons Adventists should become environmentalists.

by Debbie Case and Anthony Campolo

**T**he one religious figure to whom President Clinton referred in his January 1994 State of the Union message was "my friend Tony Campolo." Anthony Campolo, professor of sociology at Eastern College in Pennsylvania is an American Baptist minister and one of the most popular lecturers at evangelical colleges and universities. He has spoken on many Adventist campuses.

*Campolo is a founder of the Christian Environmental Association, and his most recent of many books is How to Rescue the World Without Worshiping Mother Nature. This telephone interview was conducted by Debbie Case, a graduate of Pacific Union College with a master's from Andrews University, is currently vice president of Maranatha Volunteers International.*

—The Editors

*A lifelong Adventist interviews Adventism's—and President Clinton's—favorite Evangelical.*

**Case:** The first thing I want to know is this: What does environmentalism have to do with Christianity? What's the link?

**Campolo:** It has everything to do with how you understand the doctrine of salvation. That Jesus

died for people—that's just one thing. If you think that Jesus died on the cross to rescue the world—that is, the cosmos—that's another. I personally believe that when Jesus died on the cross his salvation was to undo all the works of the devil—not only the works that the devil has performed in our own lives personally but also in the physical environment in general. Jesus came to make everything new. He not only makes us, individually, into new creatures, but he is also at work in the world to try to make his entire creation new, to try to restore it to what it was before the Fall.

I think that the calling of the Christian is to be converted, and as a converted person to be an instrument of God for the rescuing of all creation. That's what it says in the eighth chapter of Romans, starting at about the 19th verse. He calls upon us to recognize that not only do we need to be saved but that, through us, God will rescue all of creation and make everything new again. Consequently, your question revolves around another question: How big is your God and how big is his vision in salvation?

**Case:** That fits into one of the criticisms that people throw out: How much does God really want us to do? What difference will one person's action make?

**Campolo:** Well, each person does what he or she can. I always have this vision of millions and millions of Christians, each of them saying, individually, What can one person do? Obviously, if I do my part and you do your part, and each and every Christian does his or her part, the impact will be dramatic. I feel that saving the environment is something that has to be done individually because we are polluting it individually. I, as an individual, waste things. I, as an individual, use Styrofoam cups. I, as an individual, use aerosol cans. I, as an individual, drive when I ought to be walking. I, as an individual, use fluorocarbons. I, as an individual, waste paper. The list goes on and on. In reality, this movement requires more than demands for some holistic government action; it requires individuals to assume responsibility as caretakers of God's creation. So the answer to your question is a simple one: Individuals are the ones who created the

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problem; individuals are the ones who will solve the problem by the grace of God.

## Tony Campolo

**Case:** Can you tell us, on a personal level, what turned your attention toward environmentalism? What made you say, I, Tony Campolo, am going to choose to lend my energy, influence, and intelligence to this cause? What about it captured your imagination?

**Campolo:** Paul Tillich, the great theologian, said that Christianity, by definition, has always been answering the masses. We, as Christians, have put up the banner that says "Christ is the answer," and we have a right to do that, because he is the answer. We do not have the right to define what the questions are. The world defines the questions. In every age the questions are set by people outside the church, and the questions are simple. They come to the church and say, "Here are the things that concern us; these are the issues of our time. You say that Christ is the answer. What is his answer to this question?"

At this particular stage in history, the question of the future of our environment has been raised, not by the church, but by the people outside the church. They come to us and say, "You claim that Christ is the answer. Well, here's the question: Can the environment be saved?" We, as Christians, say, "Yes it can be saved, but only if we understand that the process of saving it must be directed by God and must be done in a biblically prescribed manner."

**Case:** You talk about secular society taking up environmentalism as sort of an agenda item—

**Campolo:** Well, I don't like to

use the term *secular society*. The secular society at large has answered the question because they sense that they are all in danger. When I say that somebody has made environmentalism their agenda, I mean that the world has asked that question, and the New Age movement has stepped forward and said, "That's a legitimate question, and our religion has an answer to it." We, as Christians, have to stand up and say, "Don't listen to those New Age people. They don't have the answer to your question; Jesus has the answer to your question."

**Case:** That leads me to another criticism. Some say that because people in the New Age movement have asked the question and responded to it in their own way, their philosophy scares off a lot of Christians, keeps them from becoming more involved in environmentalism. Now we both know that that's not an excuse, but in your book you have a wonderful explanation for why we should embrace environmentalism, rather than be afraid of a dangerous liaison with the New Age movement. Do you recall that passage?

**Campolo:** Basically, what I argue is that there are many reasons to be committed to saving the environment. The most important, I think, is for worship purposes. We often delude ourselves by thinking that only human beings were created to worship God. If you read the Bible, you will find that all of creation, all of nature was brought into being by God to glorify him and magnify him. The heavens were created to declare the glory of God; the firmament was created to declare his splendor; the animals were called upon to lift up their voices to the Lord. I can show you verses where the whales—what the Bible calls the leviathans of the deep—were created to sing hymns of praise to God. The trees are

supposed to clap their hands; the mountains are supposed to sing unto the Lord. When we defile nature, we defile the glorification of God. When we wipe out a species of whale, we have silenced the voice that was created to sing praises to God. When we disfigure the physical environment and make it ugly, we detract from the glory of God. Environmental irresponsibility is blasphemy, for it diminishes the reflection of the glory of God—it diminishes nature and the worship of God.

**Case:** In your book, you talk about when the original conflict between humanity and nature began, and it really goes back before we were even around.

**Campolo:** Yes, I think that one has to recognize that we must rescue the earth, so that it can point beyond itself to the only real God, the Lord Jehovah. In that, I think the title of my book, *How to Rescue the World Without Worshiping Mother Nature*, is important. It is so easy to get caught up in the New Age thinking where we begin treating the earth as though it, itself, were some kind of deity.

So often, our thinking is completely controlled by what has come out of Western theological thought. The Western theologians—Calvin, Wesley, Luther (and in the case of Seventh-day Adventists, Ellen White)—have become the important thinkers. There are Christians in other societies who have a lot of things to say to us on this matter—things that we need to hear. One of those sources of thought is the Eastern Orthodox church—the churches that belong to the Eastern nations, Russia, Greece, the Balkans, and so on. They say that before there was ever a fallen Adam and Eve, there was a fallen Satan. Sin did not begin with Adam; sin began with Satan. As a matter of fact, man and woman would not have sinned had Satan not been

there to seduce them. What we have to recognize is that, before human beings ever existed, there was a fall out of heaven by Satan and one-third of all the angels. There has been this great cosmic warfare going on, and the evil one and his forces have been at work trying to destroy the entire universe of God. Jesus, the son of God, has led the struggle against Satan and his demons. So when Jesus died on the cross, he not only died to save you and me; his death was part of a great cosmic struggle that was started before we were ever born. It just happened that Satan and Jesus decided to fight it out on this little planet called Earth. On the cross, Jesus not only delivered us from sin, but, as the Bible so clearly suggests, he also defeated Satan and all his host. He began rescuing all of God's creation from the power of the demonic.

**Case:** One thing I'd like you to talk more about is how—maybe these aren't your exact words—the devil uses the destruction of the environment to detract from God's glory.

**Campolo:** Yes, and that's what I say about worship. Satan is using us to destroy the environment because God created the universe to glorify him. Satan is at work trying to distract glory from God, trying to turn people away from God by diminishing his glory as Lord of the Universe.

**Case:** I'm interested in how the life of Tony and Peggy Campolo has changed now that you are championing the cause of environmentalism. How is your commitment reflected in your own personal life-style?

**Campolo:** It's a lot of little things. We try to drive less, and I have made a big change in my travel and speaking agenda. What I do is sit down and plan my speaking engagements for the entire year at one time. If I get invitations from

Los Angeles, for example, I won't make separate trips to speak to that group and then again to another group and then another. I will say I am going to be in Los Angeles at a given time, so all of those groups that would like to have me speak in their area will need to schedule me that same weekend.

We try to use less water and other little things. We put bricks in the tank of our toilet; we make sure that our faucets don't leak. One begins to be very conscious of the environment. We don't use Styrofoam cups. We let the people at McDonald's know that they ought to change what they are using in the way of containers.

We do a green audit of our church—that is simply going through the church and asking all the ways that we, as a church, can save and cut back on environmental abuse. For example, are our windows insulated? Do we use disposable plates and cups at church suppers? Can we recycle the paper that we must use? Do we do unnecessary printing? There are a whole host of things that can be done as a people in the church.

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## The Bible

**Case:** If people wanted to start reading their Bibles systematically on the subject of environmentalism to establish a biblical foundation, where would you point people to in the Bible?

**Campolo:** Interestingly enough, it's all over the place, but let me make a suggestion to you. The American Bible Society has assembled a booklet with all the passages of Scripture that are related to the environment. If you write to the American Bible Society in New York City, they will send this to you for 50 cents. It's a brilliant collection of scriptural passages.

If I had to try to pick one place in the Bible to read about the environment, I'd probably pick the book of Psalms, because the Psalms are about worship. When you start considering the ways to worship and glorify God, the Psalms are filled with direction. Hymnals, too, are filled with the nature of worshipping God. Think of the great hymns that you know—"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee." Join with all nature, a manifold witness. "Great Is Thy faithful-

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ness" picks up that same theme. If you go beyond the hymnal, you'll find a lot of emphasis on nature joining us as we join nature in worshipping God.

**Case:** Let me ask you a question about a couple of people who have come out strongly against environmentalism—Pat Robertson and Rush Limbaugh. If you took the opportunity to talk to them, what would you say to Pat or Rush about why they shouldn't connect environmentalism with demonic motives?

**Campolo:** Well, I don't know what their motives are. I go to a place like Haiti and I see mass hunger, and the hunger is due to soil erosion and environmental abuse. Only 70 percent of the land is producing food. In the last 10 years Haiti has become a desert. People are suffering from that. When I go to Africa I see soil erosion and destruction of the environment everywhere I turn due to poor farming and careless agricultural techniques. I see the Sahara Desert expanding south over the continent of Africa at the rate of about two miles a year. I look at the United States and I see that the production of food per acre is beginning to diminish because there are so many chemicals used now. I see people not able to fish in certain rivers because the mercury level in fish has become dangerously high. I begin to wonder how many fish must be contaminated, how much of the earth's surface must become desert, how many people must be on the verge of starvation, how much devastation must there be before we say, "We've got a problem?" I just would like to know.

**Case:** So you would say . . .

**Campolo:** I live on the East Coast, and every summer the beaches have to be closed down because the water is too polluted for people to swim in it. What do these people say to all of this? Why do they take the position that they

do? I just don't understand it. I would like to understand them a little more. The Canadian government says that the ozone level over Canada last week was 20 percent less than it was 10 years ago. They have been keeping records of it. We can go to Maine and find lakes and ponds with no fish, because acid rain has killed them all. Do we have to pollute all the lakes and all the ponds? Will everybody have to end up getting cancer? Do we have to wait until every third world country becomes a desert before we say, "Stop! This is enough! This is wrong!"

**Case:** Some would say that environmentalists are putting the spotted owl and trees above people and their livelihoods. How do you respond?

**Campolo:** First of all, I have to say that argument is about the most fallacious one I have ever heard. The problem with the lumber industry is not the spotted owl; the problem with the lumber industry is that the American people aren't building houses right now. Any study will show that the number of new housing starts has diminished dramatically. The demand for lumber is evaporating, and that is the real issue.

We have an economic problem that comes from 12 years of overspending. We have a recession that is difficult to overcome because the national debt is so high. To blame the slump in the lumber industry on the spotted owl is just a way of blaming something that can't talk back. But beyond that, there is a price to be paid for rescuing the environment. If there weren't, there would be no controversy. It is expensive to save the environment. We all have to pay a price, and we must make sure that this price is borne equitably by all members of society, not just by one group of people.

If workers in the lumber indus-

tries of Oregon and Washington State are going to be penalized as we become environmentally responsible, the rest of us must find ways to help them and bear that cost. It must be understood that we all share the cost, and it is going to cost something to save the environment. But the cost of not saving the environment is even higher.

Another thing we must recognize is that Japan and Germany are far ahead of us in developing industries that are environmentally sound, developing products to substitute for ones that are environmentally destructive. In the process, they have created a huge number of jobs in new industries related to environmental concerns. The United States ought to be entering the environmental movement with great enthusiasm, recognizing that there will have to be a whole new line of products, a whole new line of industries created in the face of this emergency. Sooner or later, America will have to confront the environmental crisis. What I fear is that we are so shortsighted that, by the time we get around to developing those new products and the industries that will create them, Japan and Germany will have monopolized the markets.

**Case:** We'll be falling behind again.

**Campolo:** We're already behind; the question is, Are we going to take the steps necessary to catch up? I don't think Americans yet recognize the number of new industries and products that will be created by becoming environmentally responsible, but the Japanese and Germans do. Let me give you an example.

Most people know that one of the major causes of the destruction of the ionosphere is fluorocarbons that we use in coolants for refrigeration. Well, Dupont comes along and finds a substitute that does not pollute the atmosphere. They re-

search it, produce it, and now Dupont is the only company mass producing it. Tens of thousands of new jobs have been created in the State of Delaware, producing this new gas, because countries all over the world are buying it.

I look at the people in Oregon and Washington State, and I would argue strongly that some of them may lose their jobs. It is the responsibility of the rest of us to see to it that they do not suffer disproportionately, that we provide means of employment and opportunities for those who are displaced.

For instance, mining in West Virginia devastated that state. They are trying to restore it now. There is money to be made in the restoration process, but a lot of people also lost their jobs with the decline of strip mining. When people are displaced because of environmental action, it is important for the government to step in and develop alternate economies.

**Case:** Will the fact that Al Gore is vice president have a tremendous impact on the government's being more environmentally friendly?

**Campolo:** I have no idea what's going to happen. Gore has written a good book, and I think they are trying to take some steps that need to be taken, but the environment has not been high on the agenda in this administration. Of course it is only a new administration, and they had to get a new budget passed that just squeaked through. Now they are dealing with the health plan, so the environment has been put on the back burner. In spite of the rhetoric, not much has happened. I should point out, however, that the last president, George Bush, said he was going to be the environmental president, and not much happened there either. So there's been an awful lot of talk, but in reality there has been little action from the government. At least this administration has entered into the

Brazilian Treaty, the treaty on the environment, which I think is a step in the right direction.

**Case:** So we can't really blame the Democrats or the Republicans?

**Campolo:** No, I think we have to get it back to you and me. In the end, it's a problem that has been created on the individual level, and it has to be solved on the individual level. Government policy won't change things. We, as individuals, must change our life-styles.

## Practical Steps

**Case:** One of the things you're well known for, Tony, is your activism, effecting change in creative and unusual ways, such as buying up stock in corporations. Can you talk about your strategy in relation to the rain forests?

**Campolo:** Well, there are two things that we need to do. First of all, we have to save the rain forest, and there's only one way to do it—buy it. As outrageous as that sounds, it's not impossible. Let me point out what you probably already know. You can buy rain forest for ap-

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proximately \$100 per acre. As a matter of fact, an organization called the Christian Environmental Association is doing just that. If people want to do something, \$100 will buy an acre of rain forest in Belize. That's not out of reach for most middle-class people. You will receive a deed to indicate that you own that acre, and you can even go down and visit your chunk of land. It is possible for us to buy thousands and thousands of acres of land. In the end, litigation and political action will not do anything. Whomever owns the rain forest will decide what happens to it.

The second thing I think we need to do is put together teams, primarily young people, who will go to every Earth Day celebration. In the midst of all the carryings on, usually under the auspices of the New Age movement, we have to be present with our Bibles and our tracts, winning people to Jesus Christ.

## Adventists

**Case:** I'm involved in short-term missions, and sometimes people tell me that I'm stretching it to tie environmental issues in with short-term missions. How would you respond?

**Campolo:** Well, on a basic level, a great way of raising money for these projects is by the collection and sale of discarded aluminum cans.

Second, when we go overseas, part of what we are trying to do is to help our brothers and sisters in other countries assume environmentally responsible forms of farming. Improper plowing and farming destroys the top soil in third world countries. By helping teach environmentally responsible farming, not only do we help protect the environment, but we also help them preserve the land so that they will

be able to produce more food for their people.

Finally, I think there are projects that we need to get into—reforestation, for example. Our little mission organization invested some money in a group of missionaries called the Floresta organization. They have gone to the Dominican Republic and planted millions and millions of trees.

We can raise the same questions about how our churches function overseas as we raise about the way they function here in the States. Are they being environmentally responsible? Are we teaching new converts a commitment to the rescuing of creation?

**Case:** Do you think Jesus' coming is going to be timed so that we don't destroy ourselves?

**Campolo:** I am an optimist. I believe that Jesus is the ultimate rescuer of the planet, and I believe that the Scripture says he begins rescuing the planet through us, but he completes it at the day of his coming. Here's what the Bible says: He who has begun the good work in us will complete it in the day of his coming. We are called to be instruments through which he initiates his redemptive work in the world, but we should not fool ourselves into thinking that we can complete it. That is what the Second Coming is all about.

**Case:** When we talk about concern for the environment, people ask, "Why should we really be concerned about it if Jesus is coming soon?" This is particularly relevant for Adventists.

**Campolo:** Why go to school and put all those years into education if Jesus is coming any day now? Why brush your teeth? Why clean your house? Why do anything just because he may not come?

What's interesting to me is that Seventh-day Adventists have not leaped on the environmental issue. One of the things that all solid

environmentalists argue against is the eating of red meat. We are making this a celebrated cause. We are saying it's demonic. We look at the rain forest being destroyed in Brazil and Belize. It's being turned into land for grazing cattle. Not only are the indigenous people, the Indians, being displaced; not only are the rain forests being destroyed so that global weather patterns are being disrupted; land is being used for the production of beef—one of the most ruinous things for our health. It's giving us heart trouble, it's giving us high blood pressure. Adventists should be saying, "What's going on here?"

Let's cut the consumption of red meat, not just because it's unhealthy, but because we cannot survive on this planet if more and more people become red meat eaters. Producing red meat instead of grain produces less protein per acre, and protein is what we need in order to feed the hungry and sustain the poor of the world.

**Case:** Doesn't this go beyond the health aspects of meat eating, and relate to resting on the seventh day, the sabbatical of the land?

**Campolo:** That, I think, is crucial—the whole concept of the Sabbath. Seventh-day Adventists have a very limited concept of the Sabbath. They keep talking about the seventh *day*. What about the seventh year and the 50th year? What about the whole description of Sabbath in the 25th chapter of Leviticus? Isn't it much more than just allowing us to have a day for our own personal restoration? Doesn't it also involve the restoration of the land and the restoration of all nature? Isn't Sabbath bigger than just people? The Sabbath is about the restoration of people (that's the seventh day), the restoration of land (the seventh year), and the restoration of the entire social order (the year of Jubilee). All three are part of the concept of Sabbath.