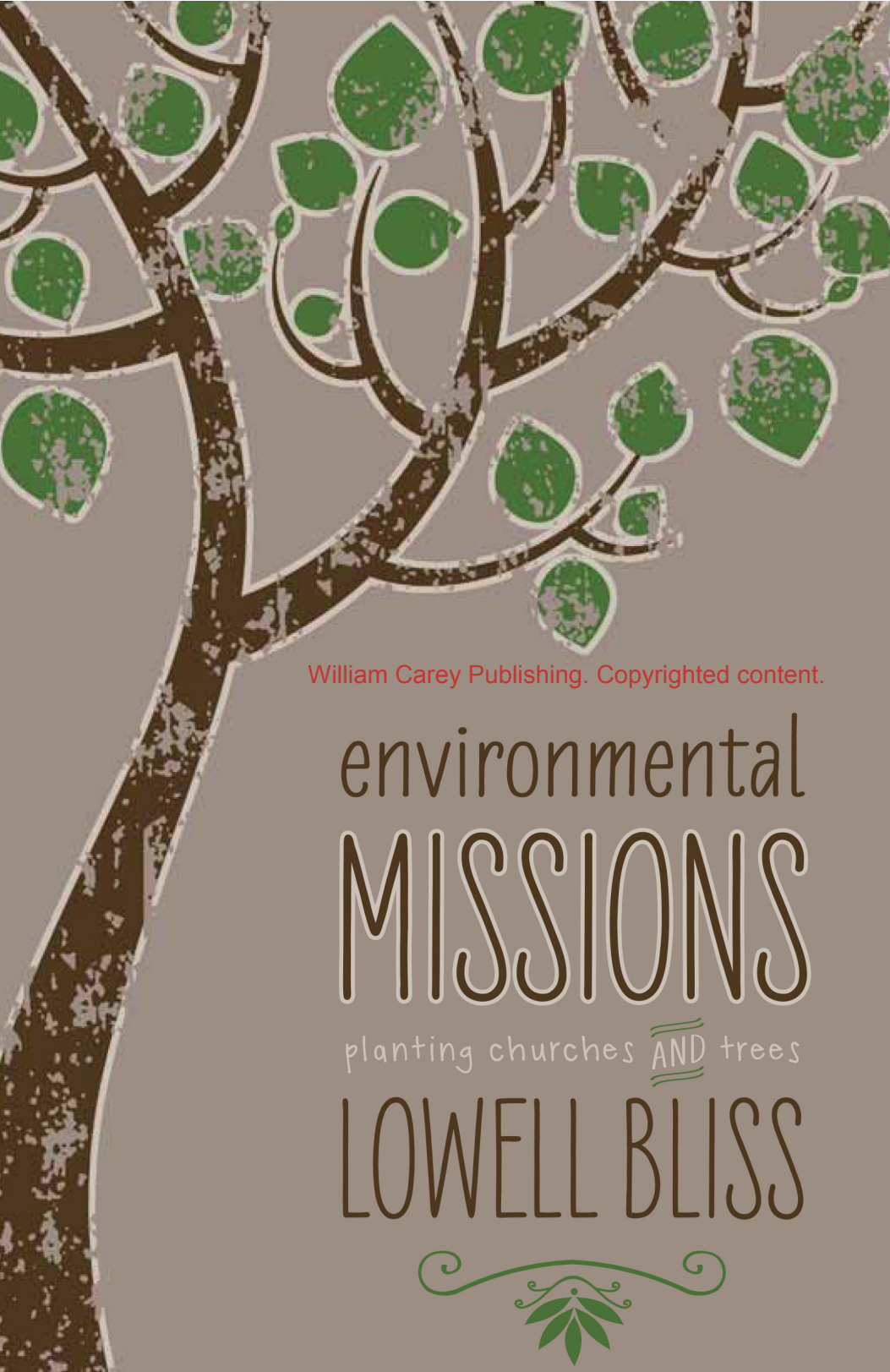


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environmental MISSIONS

planting churches AND trees

LOWELL BLISS

Environmental Missions: Planting Churches and Trees
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THREE WAYS MISSIONARIES CLEAR THE POLLUTED AIR

I've always assumed that the "sons of Issachar," as described in 1 Chronicles 12:32, represent a model for missionaries. They were "men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do." In the context of this passage, this meant gathering around David at Hebron "to turn Saul's kingdom over to him, as the Lord had said" (1 Chr 12:23). Of all the military contingents, Issachar's was likely among the smallest, but their value to the new kingdom was unique: they discerned the *kairos* moment, the time of divine opportunity.

Robynn and I returned from India in 2007. Any cross-cultural experience has the potential of becoming a universe unto itself, especially one as chaotic as our North Indian city. We had allowed ourselves to get isolated and weren't greatly aware of the global news. So returning to North America, it was natural as per the missionary model of Issachar to ask, "What's happening in the broader world? What is the nature of these times?" Apparently, we were told, the planet was getting warmer. While in India, I had heard only the briefest mention of the greenhouse effect or global warming. I had heard that former vice president Al Gore had won an Academy Award for a documentary built around a PowerPoint presentation. And so we rented his DVD documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* in order to learn more.

In this introductory chapter, I want to recognize upfront that an environmental approach is a controversial topic in the North American evangelical church of the twenty-first century. You'll notice how thoroughly

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I've delimited my audience. An environmental approach is generally well accepted outside of the US and Canada, and even in North America had remarkably few evangelical detractors until around 2008. Nonetheless the audience for this book is largely North American, and the record temperatures of the year 2012 were surpassed only by its political heat. So I am aware that I have lost many potential readers who have judged my book by its cover. They saw the title and left the book on the bookstore shelves. You can imagine some of the consternation of my editors when they learned that I wanted to recognize the controversy, as if to confront it head on, by leading not only with the prickly issue of climate change but also with the one environmentalist most vilified by evangelicals: Al Gore.

But look back. I didn't lead with climate change and Mr. Gore. I led with the sons of Issachar. I led with a missionary mandate that we understand the times and that we humbly apply influence as to what the Great Commission church should do. The spirit of Issachar is just one of the three ways in which a missionary approach can clear the smog-ridden air around the environmental controversy. We'll never be able to sustain an honest consideration of environmental missions as a new category within the labors of the church unless there is enough initial oxygen in the room for us to breathe. Let's see if we can clear some of the air.

One Lone Villager from Issachar Investigates

For however much we might want to dissect Gore's argument in *An Inconvenient Truth*, here's an indisputable fact from my first viewing of it as a recently furloughed missionary: the Indian subcontinent was mentioned throughout the movie. At one point, a satellite map of India flashes to the screen and the imagery is of such high resolution that you can identify the Ganges River and where it bends from south to north past our old home. The statistic accompanying the map claims that in June 2003, temperatures in Andhra Pradesh reached 122° F, killing more than 1,400 people. In another segment, Gore reports how on July 26, 2005 in Mumbai, thirty-seven inches of rain fell in twenty-four hours, the most an Indian city has ever received in one day. Water levels reached seven feet, and the

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death toll in Western India reached a thousand. I actually have my own memories of that event. Mumbai is the financial capital of India. On the day of the flood, banks across the country, including in our city, were forced to close. The documentary went on to discuss how climatic changes are increasing the range of disease vectors, and I heard names with which I was familiar: malaria, dengue fever, avian flu. Both Robynn and I had contracted dengue in the past year. Al Gore quoted Tony Blair's science advisor, who has claimed that "because of what is happening in Greenland [i.e., addition of land-based ice melt to the world's oceans] the maps of the world will have to be redrawn." He then showed what would happen if the West Antarctic ice shelf or the Greenland ice shelf collapsed, or half of both. We saw animated satellite photos of Florida, the Netherlands, and Beijing, of sea levels encroaching on these populated areas. And then there was a photo of Calcutta and Bangladesh, and the threat to 60 million people there. The movie spent a year in production, so the producers felt obliged to invite Gore back for a Special Features update. Gore referred back to the heat wave in Andhra Pradesh in 2003, but then he said, "This past summer, not too far to the north in Pakistan, on the Indian subcontinent, it reached 125.6 degrees Fahrenheit."[1] The slide showed the city of Multan on the map. Multan is in the lower Punjab of Pakistan, near where Robynn grew up.

I am well aware of the accusations of political demagoguery and scientific sensationalism that surround *An Inconvenient Truth*, but here's the question I wrestled with: what kind of missionary would I be if my ears didn't perk up at every mention of my people group; if I didn't at least wonder, "What if even half of this is true?"; if I didn't feel compelled to investigate further? Hadn't our church sent Robynn and I to India specifically to love those people portrayed in those photos of suffering? We just happened to be back in the US for meetings in the weeks following the Bush vs. Gore election of 2000, so we got to experience firsthand the acrimony of the evangelical Christian population toward Gore, some of it from our own family, our own mission colleagues, our own missions supporters, and

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our own church. We heard the evidence that made many people think that when it came to the truth, Al Gore was, at the least, a serial exaggerator.

It's not surprising, considering recent political history, that evangelical Christians have treated Al Gore and his global warming documentary like the character in Aesop's fable, ascribing to the Boy Who Cried Wolf the approbation, "No one listens to a liar, even when he is telling the truth." But actually there's one last scene in Aesop's fable that none of us ever stop to extrapolate. On the day after the exasperated villagers chase the boy out from among themselves, they go up to the hillside only to discover that, this time, there actually was a wolf, but now their flocks are all dead. Yes, the boy is foolish, but in the end, so are the villagers. You should always send at least one person up the hill to investigate. There is too much at stake if you don't. And so maybe I felt like that one villager, compelled by a missionary love for the parched of Multan and the displaced of Bangladesh, for the drowned of Mumbai and the dengue-fevered of our city. I went off to investigate. It seemed like the responsible thing to do.[2] In January 2008 I submitted to my leadership at Christar a fifty-page report entitled "A Church-Planting Missionary Looks at Global Climate Change."

Environment's Most Basic Definition

I believe that missionaries possess a second unique investigative capacity, one which I describe as the ability to "lop off the *-ism*." My best Indian friend was a Hindu Brahmin, whom I will call here by a different house name, Golu. One of the first things that Golu taught me was that Hindus rarely refer to Hindu*ism*; that is, to an organized religion. At the most, the term is *sanatan dharma*, a rule of life. My initial interactions with Golu proved that, for whatever my training had taught me about Hindu*ism*, it was more important to know the individual Hindu—in other words, "lop off the *-ism*" as soon as possible. For that matter, my friendship and growing love for Golu drew me away from religious labels altogether. I tried to understand him as a human being, to know and to be known. In a similar fashion, I have no desire to write this book as a defense of environmental*ism.* I believe we are well advised to be wary of anything that has an *-ism*

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attached to it. This can also apply to movements within the church, such as Evangelical*ism*, for which we can multiply examples: Methodism, dispensationalism, creationism. It's not that these movements, as *-isms*, are unbiblical, but because they are not *de facto* biblical. We must hold every *-ism* up to the light of Scripture and "test the spirits."

If environmentalism in recent times has not been offered an opportunity to be addressed by Scripture, has not had a fair trial in the testing of the spirits, it may be because of *-isms* other than its own. Some evangelicals fear that environmentalism is a modern paganism: half-naked druids worshiping the earth, hugging trees, preferring the life of a California condor over the life of a human fetus. Even taking a step back from these stereotypes isn't reassuring. Environmentalists seem too quick to invoke Henry David Thoreau, transcendentalism, even Buddhism. Scientism as well leaves many of us wary of environmentalists. Since *creation care* is still a relatively new term within the church, you are more likely to hear the word "creation" brought up in a discussion of *creationism*, and thus in the context of an antagonism: creationist versus evolutionist, faith versus science. In other words, even the word "creation" seems to unconsciously put many of us on the defensive. We can't quite bring ourselves to trust the scientist whose lament over the loss of biodiversity doesn't extend to the extinction of Jesus in our universities. And finally, we can be upfront about the current politics of environmentalism, what we might call factionalism, or partyism, a term for political partisanship. It is a documented fact that most voters in the US who identify themselves with Evangelicalism also associate with the Republican party. Some of these evangelical voters are surprised to learn that the modern conservation movement began under the Republican administration of Teddy Roosevelt. Environmentalism's greatest policy successes—the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency—were all signed into law by Richard Nixon. As recently as 2008, the most faithful introducer of climate change legislation was Senator John McCain. Newt Gingrich wrote the book *A Contract with Earth* in 2007. But American politics have rarely been so polarized as today. While

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