

## **CLIMATE CHANGE AS A CASE STUDY IN DECIDING** **Dr. Jeffrey K. Greenberg Wheaton College**

It really seems to be time to take sides and get off of an unstable seat upon the fence.

The tree (of evangelicalism) is being shaken right to its roots. Chuck Colson actually believes that an axe or wedge is being applied to split this tree apart. The recent concern results from the unexpected turn toward a new environmental conscience among biblically and politically conservative Protestants. Colson's *Breakpoint* commentary (Sept. 8, 2006) accuses "liberal" influences of infiltrating the evangelical ranks and using the climate change controversy as a wedge to divide us. He is right in that this issue finally has the force to divide opinion. He is wrong about the motivation and its source.

Why now a climate change in evangelical understanding? Evangelical environmentalism has been around for a good long while but previously failed to make leading pundits pay so much attention. Francis Schaeffer published *Pollution and the Death of Man* back in 1970. Evangelicals for Social Action spawned the Evangelical Environmental Network and later, a coalition of groups formed the Christian Environmental Council that met once a year over eight years for fellowship, worship (of the Creator, not the Creation) and mutual support. Even though the efforts of these meetings were not generally publicized, one initiative did make a big difference. A unified CEC statement on the federal ESA, Endangered Species Act was delivered to legislators in Congress. The statement which urged a biblical rationale supported the ESA and asked that it not be politically weakened. Some politically conservative members of Congress admitted that the CEC statement from biblically-conservative Christians came as a surprise. Washington D.C. insiders even believe it may have been this support that led to the act's renewal. The CEC was not the tool of the political-spiritual-social Left; most participants typically identified with and voted for Republicans.

Ten years or so later, there is a new momentum among the Jesus-loving, Bible-believing evangelical crowd. The interested are directed to view the recent PBS production, *Is God Green*, in the Bill Moyers series on cultural issues. To distill a key part of the story line, it shows how a 2004 conference in Oxford, UK came to be the inspiration for the ECI, the Evangelical Climate Initiative. This is a document signed by a wide array of the perceived leadership among evangelicals. To sign ([www.christiansandclimate.org](http://www.christiansandclimate.org)) means an affirmation believing that the great majority of quality science indicates, that not only is Earth's overall temperature rising, it is doing so at a remarkable rate. More importantly, the affirmation is also that (unnecessary) human actions have contributed to the warming and other climate-changing consequences. The initiative calls for serious consideration of our role as responsible stewards of God's world.

At Oxford, Rich Cizik, Vice President for Government Affairs of the National Association of Evangelicals, was compelled to realize the severity of the climate change issue after speaking with Sir John Houghton. Houghton is a highly-respected atmospheric physicist, the Co-Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, author of many books and articles on the issue, and an outspoken evangelical Christian. Cizik returned home with a zeal to do something of substance about Creation-care stewardship. The drafting of the EPI and its circulation seeking signatories is a story worthy of more space. However, as the initiative gathered support, it also began to attract negative attention from some evangelicals with a history of opposition to pro-environmental action. There are various themes to the opposition, including an abhorrence of anything that might be identified with “non-Christian” organizations and their agendas. This is a sense of guilt-by-association that does not seek truth in evaluating issues by their own characteristics. Note that perhaps the most substantial opposition to setting policy based on climate-change dangers is supposedly from science. The argument is that unless scientific data in all its various forms agree and can “prove” greater hazard (costs) in no action than in the measures needed to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, etc., then we should not rock the boat. Above all other concepts, this argument must be examined and critiqued.

Uncertainty is the excuse. Few will completely deny that human activities can modify the environment. But is it really that big a deal? Human nature is such that it is easy to convince of something when one is already so inclined. It is harder to bring the open and unconvinced to a new decision, and all but impossible to change strong convictions, with or without hard data as evidence. Scripture’s dramatic perspective comes from the words of Jesus, “ If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if one should rise from the dead” (Luke 16:31). As it turns out, the strongest of the anti-ECI, anti-environmentalism convictions derive from extreme economic and political loyalties. These biases are also worthy of significant examination, but distract from the main point. Instead of today’s propensity for vilifying those in opposition, let’s attempt a positive support of responsible stewardship.

Our Christian biblical-moral commitments along with scientific confidence constitute the weight of assurance needed to move toward effective action. Justification for this decision begins with physical observation of a multitude of processes operating globally and with the two operators of concern, nature and humanity. Of course, people are components of the overall grand earth system. We may be included along with all living actors, earth worms, bacteria, burrowing crustaceans, insects, elephants, molds, etc. and the longer list of mostly abiological processes, glaciers, cyclonic storms, landslides, volcanic eruptions, coastal waves, chemical erosion, etc. Some believe that we need not worry about anthropogenic influence on this world because it is so big and we are relatively so small (and few). Once we can accept that climate change with the

current global warming trends are real (again, few deny this), there is still the major contention that change is “natural” and will occur as a consequence of megacycles. Any human-induced alteration would be dwarfed by the regular natural systems. In testing the hypothesis that humans are not that significant as agents of change, Prof. Hooke and geoscience graduate-students at the University of Maine gathered tremendous amounts of data assessing the extent and cause of physical/chemical change globally each year. After significant review by other earth scientists, the very comprehensive research was acknowledged to indicate that people are as effective (for better or worse) in modifying the land, sea and air as all the other factors combined. We are indeed very much a special creation, with the ability to unilaterally convert the desert to garden and the garden to desert.

Given our status as unique actors, consider some of the cases in which humans have actually caused climatic alterations on regional scales. There is no doubt that within a single human generation, vast tracts of land in Tanzania, south of Lake Victoria have been transformed from lush forest to degraded, arid waste land. World Vision filmed a tribal elder living in the region since birth. In his memory there has been deforestation and the loss of through-flowing streams, virtually all mammals and most birds, fertile soil, and the seasonal rainfall events that maintained the environment. The regional degradation was not a coincidence of natural change over 70 years or so. It was very obviously initiated by poor land-use practices and deeply injured people as well as other life precious to its Creator. This East-African saga is reminiscent of the brilliant story, *The Man Who Planted Trees*, by Jean Giono, published in 1985. The same scenario of human-modifying loss can be documented for many, many places on earth. Open any larger text on environmental science or environmental geology and you can see myriad testimonies, often with photos of degradation.

Following the above realizations, we then may take a fairly safe leap of faith scientifically to relate the additive effect of thousands of macro examples on the mega system of earth climate. The real burden of proof should not be on those warning of our culpability in harming God’s good earth. It should be on the anti-environmental thinkers to show that how we have behaved and continue to behave has not been a heavy blow to the health of the planet and its creatures. If by any reasonable chance we are responsible for unwisely or selfishly manipulating the environment, then it is our biblical mandate as the Master’s caretakers to fix the problems as well as we are able. Can we not at least agree upon that? This version of the “cautionary principle” is counter to selfish interests and may mean that our treasured affluent lifestyles need alteration.

To further the call for a decision, we might need to be reminded that unarguable “proof” is extremely rare in any reality and that people actually live as probability thinkers. This is to say what most scientists well understand, that confidence comes in proportions. If we knew that air travel was safe 51% of the time and fatal 49% of flights, then how many would accept the risk? Of course this is true

for many circumstances but not all. A crucial election can be won with 51% of the vote (or perhaps less), and yet we may be subject then to someone with actual power over life and death. Even though the vast majority of cases where abortions are elected without real threat to maternal life in this country, only 2% or so of the harder cases are emphasized to justify keeping existing law. The raw data and percentages pointing one way or the other don't tell all of the story. Why do some opponents of pro-environmental legislation, regulation, preservation and even conservation ask for absolute proof? I am convinced without such unrealistic proof.

When the Evangelical Environmental Network first circulated as a petition the document, *An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation* in 1994, the wording was such that some of us, especially in science, could not sign it. After wise revision and now with even stronger supporting evidence, signing on seems like an important spiritual duty. The most controversial section in the 1994 document concerns global climate change. Twelve years later the issue has come due for advocacy among God's people. The ECI offers us a chance to unite and show the world that we do truly care about more than just Heaven and proscribing what is sinful in others. Positive measures to individually and corporately repent of our hurtful attitudes and practices are available from various sources, including the Pew Center on Global Climate Change ([www.pewclimate.org](http://www.pewclimate.org)).