

Bethel College Mennonite Church Creation Care Committee  
Creation Stewardship Note # 35, January, 2010  
SOME REFLECTIONS ON CLIMATE CHANGE<sup>1</sup>  
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**\*Climate change—a divisive issue\***

How should the thinking Christian respond to the climate change issue? If one listens to NPR, one tends to agree with the scientific consensus about climate change. In contrast, some of those who listen to AM political talk radio are inclined to think that climate change is much ado about nothing. Does Scripture provide guidance on this topic? This note is a modest attempt to explore this matter more fully.

Views vary widely on this matter--and are strongly held, even within the Christian community. James Inhof, a conservative Christian senator from Oklahoma says, that global warming is "...the second largest hoax ever played on the American people, after the separation of church and state." But in 2006 some 86 Christian leaders wrote the "Evangelical Call to Action" which made four major claims arguing for the reality of climate change and a Christian response: (i) Human-induced climate change is real; (ii) Consequences of climate change will be significant and will hit the poor the hardest; (iii) Our Christian and moral convictions demand our response to the climate change problem; (iv) The need to act now is urgent. Governments, businesses, churches and individuals all have a role to play in addressing this matter—starting now.

Those signing the document included Christian leaders such as Duane Litfin, President of Wheaton College; David Neff, Editor of *Christianity Today*; Rick Warren, Sr. Pastor of Saddleback Community Church; and Todd Bassett, National Commander of the Salvation Army. Among Mennonite leaders, the document was signed by Larry Nikkel, (then) President of Tabor College, and Loren Swartzendruber, President of Eastern Mennonite University.

But religious luminaries were also included in those who did not sign. They included James Dobson, Founder of Focus on the Family; Charles Colson of Prison Fellowship, Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention and Franklin Graham of Samaritan's Purse. Land, while recognizing the Biblical injunction to care for the earth, may have spoken for many of these when he said, "...human beings come first in God's created order. And that primacy must be given to human beings and for human betterment. If that means that other parts of nature take a back seat, well, then they take a back seat!"

**\*Views of the scientific community—and responses of the skeptics\***

Over the past 30 years most scientists agree that the earth is warming—about 1.3 degrees F. in the last century. As a result, polar ice caps are melting; glaciers are receding; sea levels are rising; dry regions are getting dryer and wet regions wetter. These effects are projected to accelerate over the next 100 years, as much of the growing carbon dioxide emission is trapped in the atmosphere. In 2001 the intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated there is a 65% chance that human activity is the basic cause. In 2007 the IPCC raised this percentage to 90%. The most conservative estimate of future warming is an increase of at least 6.0 degrees F. by 2100.

Many remain unconvinced of these conclusions. Reasons include: (i) distrust of science in general; (ii) reluctance to accept the view that human activity could change the global climate; (iii) suspicious of invested interests, such as energy producers, in these analyses; (iv) distrust of the environmental movement for ideological reasons; (v) reluctance to change comfortable lifestyles if the argument for climate change is accepted; and (vi) references to scientific data that doesn't support the consensus.

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<sup>1</sup> Based in part on a sermon by Rev. Ken Wilson, Sr. Pastor, Vineyard Church, Ann Arbor, MI.

### **\*What does a Biblical worldview have to say about this?\***

(I tread softly here—I am not a theologian or a Bible expert.) The Bible does not address climate change, but it seems to foresee the possibility that humans could have this type of global impact. I pose this as a question. Can we argue that, in the aftermath of the fall, God recognized our potential for harming the earth? Consider Gen. 6: 11-12: *Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways.* We might therefore conclude that man's capacity to affect the global system is well within the Biblical world view.

There may also be reason to suggest that a Biblical world view permits a positive view of science. The Biblical command for humanity was to "multiply and fill the earth." This anticipated the likelihood of the growing complexity of the world, for technology and the science that advances technology. The Bible also has a high view of reason *In the beginning was the word and word was with God and word was God.* (John 1:1). My understanding is that the Greek word "logos" is a concept that includes the idea of "reason". It is useful to note that Ecclesiastes honors medical science: *Honor the physician for the need thou hast of him...for all healing is from God. The most High hath created medicines out of the earth, and a wise man will not abhor them.* Can oceanographers and climate specialists be considered "physicians" of the earth? And Paul's letter to Timothy (II 2:15) exhorts us to *Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman...rightly dividing the word of truth.*

### **\*Christians, science, and the search for common ground\***

Science today is increasingly complex and most devout Christians are not scientists. Where can they get a true scientific perspective on these matters? May I suggest we get our science from qualified scientists, not the talk, political, entertainment or news people who host talk shows. Jon Stewart, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, as well as some of the more liberal talk show hosts such as Keith Olbermann and Rachel Maddow, are entertainers, not scientists. And we should be cautious about getting our scientific views from (with due respect) religious leaders. Whether human activity is causing global warming is a scientific question, not a religious question.

Believers should be looking for common ground. Christ says *Blessed are the peacemakers; they will be called the sons of God.* (Mt. 5:9). Some possibilities where a common view would seem acceptable to all those of faith:

- Conservation of fossil fuels (coal, oil, natural gas) make sense from economic, conservation and national security perspectives;
- Fossil fuels are a nonrenewable resource. There may be plenty for us, but intergenerational equity urges us to be considerate of future generations;
- Americans constitute 4% of the world's population, but we burn 25% of total fossil fuel consumption; demographic and geographic equity urges us to cut back in this area;
- Much of the US fossil fuel comes from Islamic states whose interests frequently differ from ours. Reduced imports by the US reduce export earnings for those states and, arguably, reduce their potential to do us harm..

### **\*What can thinking Christians do now to help an understanding of the climate change issue?\***

Again, a few suggestions:

- Downplay the "culture wars". Culture wars distract our efforts in seeking the common good. Let's not treat with contempt those with opposing views. Jesus spoke sharply against speaking with contempt: *...anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.... Anyone who says 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.*
- Seek information and wisdom from qualified experts in this complex area.
- Add love and tolerance to the equation. Seek cooperation on these matters across cultural, religious, political and national boundaries. Where necessary, learn to disagree without being disagreeable.
- Remember Peter's exhortation on living as strangers in a world increasingly hostile to a Christian world view.

*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*

*But do this with gentleness and respect. (I Peter 3:15b)*

(Note: Jim Goering, North Newton City Councilman, has been invited to serve on the Creation Care Committee as a wider community member. Floyd Bartel, Chair, Creation Care Committee)