

Getting into Hot Water: Evangelicals and Global Warming

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Since 2000 various evangelical groups and denominations have published significant statements on the issue of global warming. While there are major areas of disagreement, most notably about whether humanity is primarily responsible for climate change, there have also been surprising areas of agreement. Evangelicals have contributed a distinctively Christian voice by articulating a biblical case for stewardship of the environment, calling into question theologically errant views in the broader environmental movement, and articulating and implying some basic parameters for what would constitute acceptable public policy responses from an evangelical Christian perspective. Unfortunately, some evangelical environmentalists have also demonstrated a surprising failure of concern for truth and are at risk of undercutting the traditional evangelical strategy of using concrete help for the poor as a means of winning a sympathetic hearing for the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Introduction

The subject of anthropogenic global warming has become an issue of much discussion in American culture in general and among evangelicals in particular.¹ Both the national news media and the national political parties have taken note of the disagreement among evangelicals with varying degrees of approval.² Evangelicals do indeed have significant areas of disagreement with respect to climate change, yet, they also demonstrate considerable agreement over what theological data is relevant to the discussion, as well as over some of the principles important in judging proposed solutions.

This article will trace the development of engagement by evangelical groups and denominations³ with the issue of climate change and global warming and describe the areas of agreement and disagreement between evangelical environmentalists and their opponents. This will provide a basis for evaluating the evangelical contribution to the broader discussion. Evangelicals have contributed a needed, distinctively Christian voice to correct some of the assumptions and arguments of secular environmentalists. Unfortunately, some evangelicals have also demonstrated a surprising failure of concern for truth and are at risk of undercutting the traditional evangelical strategy of using concrete help for the poor as a means of winning a sympathetic hearing for the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Historical Overview of Evangelical Statements on the Environment

The past few years have seen considerable division among evangelicals over the question of anthropogenic global warming. Competing statements, beginning with the Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI)⁴ in 2006, and culminating in the Southern Baptist Declaration on the Environment and Climate Change (SBECI)⁵ in 2008, have received much attention from politicians and the national news media. Yet, the history of evangelical statements on the environment begins much earlier than 2006 and is characterized by a surprising degree of agreement.

In 1990, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution, “On Environmental Stewardship.”⁶ This resolution was followed four years later by the establishment of the Evangelical Environmental Network and the publication of its signature document, “An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation.”⁷ While neither of these documents directly addressed the question of global warming, they did lay the foundation for the debate that was to begin in 2000 and come to fruition in 2006.

The true beginning of the evangelical debate over global warming was marked by the creation of the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance in 2000. This group of conservative Jews, Catholics, and Protestants expressed concern about the nature and content of the growing debate over anthropogenic global warming. The work of this group formed the foundation for the position taken by many prominent evangelicals in the global warming debate. The writers of what came to be known as the Cornwall Declaration had three major concerns.⁸ The first was that many in the global warming debate demonstrated a theologically flawed view of humanity. Secular environmentalists often hold to an overly negative view of

man that ignores the positive potential of humanity to impact the environment for good. In contrast, unpeopled or pristine nature is idealized. The Cornwall Declaration, however, asserted that while humanity could do harm to nature, it could also manage the environment beneficially. The second concern was a focus on what the writers took to be improbable dangers instead of on firmly established risks to human life and the environment. Finally, the writers were concerned that many of the policies being proposed to deal with global warming would have an immediate and deleterious effect on the poor, especially those in developing nations.

In August of 2005, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention also expressed formal concern about the issue of global warming. Writing for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC), Andrew Lewis located “God’s intended relationship between humanity and the natural world [as] the starting point for a Christian response to the issue of global warming.”⁹ Lewis unpacked the Christian concept of stewardship in terms of our responsibility to care for creation and the privilege of “using what God has graciously given.” The ERLC acknowledged that “no one refutes that the planet is currently experiencing a warming trend.”¹⁰ However, it also called into question the validity of the science being used to undergird the claim of anthropogenic global warming. It disputed claims of a consensus among scientists that manmade carbon emissions were causing global warming. Surprisingly, the document then endorsed efforts to decrease carbon emissions, though it qualified this support by requiring that such efforts not harm the world economy or lead to greater poverty.¹¹ The ERLC’s policy statement concluded by recommending further research into the causes of climate change and whether or not global warming should be considered a crisis, a concern, or “an environmental nonissue.”¹²

Toward the end of 2005 and in early 2006, members of the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN) began circulating a document among evangelical leaders that would become the most publicized and controversial evangelical statement on global warming to date. The EEN submitted this document to the leadership of the National Association of Evangelicals in an effort to secure formal support for a declaration on climate change. It is at this point that we first see evangelicals in conflict over what should be the “official” evangelical position on global warming. A group of twenty-two prominent evangelical leaders, including Chuck Colson, James Dobson, John Hagee, D. James Kennedy, and Richard Land, urged the NAE to decline to endorse the EEN’s new statement. These leaders observed that “global warming is not a consensus issue, and our love for the Creator and respect for His creation does not require us to take the

position.”¹³ The letter also expressed the concern that a focus on global warming lay outside the primary evangelical rallying point—the task of missions and evangelism.

The NAE ultimately declined to endorse the new statement by the EEN. Thus, in January 2006, EEN launched the Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI) and published “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action.” This new statement was endorsed by eighty-six different evangelical leaders, including Leith Anderson, Timothy George, Duane Litfin, Ron Sider, and Rick Warren. The call to action asserted that (1) human-induced climate change is real, (2) the consequences of climate change will be significant and will hit the poor the hardest, (3) Christian moral convictions demand our response to the climate change problem, and (4) the need to act now is urgent. Governments, businesses, churches, and individuals all have a role to play in addressing climate change—starting now.¹⁴

The call to action was notable for its affirmation that global warming is due to manmade carbon emissions (i.e., anthropogenic global warming), its appeal to “general agreement”¹⁵ among scientists concerning the existence of anthropogenic global warming, and its assertion that “millions of people could die in this century because of climate change.”¹⁶ The statement appealed to a traditional evangelical priority as the basis for action—concern for the poor. This statement received widespread attention in the American news media and was taken as an indication that evangelicals were moving beyond their traditional concern in public policy: the sanctity of human life.

The establishment of the Evangelical Climate Initiative and the publication of the Call to Action provoked a quick response from both the evangelical members of the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance, recently renamed the Cornwall Alliance, and the Southern Baptist Convention. The Cornwall Alliance wrote an open letter to the signers of the Call to Action,¹⁷ and published a supporting document entitled “A Call to Truth, Prudence, and Protection for the Poor: An Evangelical Response to Global Warming.”¹⁸ These documents were endorsed by 113 evangelical leaders, including one former signer of the ECI’s Call to Action, Bishop Wellington Boone. The Cornwall Alliance affirmed the existence of global warming but argued that the impact would be moderate, and in some cases even helpful. It also disputed both the assertion that global warming is caused by humanity and the claim that there was any scientific consensus. The group cited a petition signed by over 19,700 scientists that denied the existence of anthropogenic global warming. It urged cost benefit analysis with respect to the impact of global warming policy on the poor and called for evangelicals to judge policy proposals by their likely results instead of their ostensibly good motives.

Likewise, the Southern Baptist Convention approved a resolution at its 2006 annual meeting, “On Environmentalism and Evangelicals,”¹⁹ which expressed concern over dependence on flawed scientific studies, the economic impact of global warming policy, and the danger of environmentalism dividing evangelicals and distracting them from spreading the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. Southern Baptists also expressed concern that some environmentalists were attributing equal value to human and to nonhuman creation. They made a point of affirming a moral hierarchy that values humanity over the rest of creation on the basis of God’s creation of humanity in the image of God and his command that humanity “exercise caring stewardship and dominion over the earth and environment.”²⁰ The resolution opposed “solutions based on questionable science, which bar access to natural resources and unnecessarily restrict economic development, resulting in less economic opportunity for our poorest citizens.”²¹

Southern Baptists returned to the issue of global warming at their annual convention the next year, June 2007, when they debated and adopted a resolution “On Global Warming.”²² This new resolution acknowledged accountability to God, the responsibility of humanity to exercise care and stewardship, and concern for the poor. It then affirmed the existence of global warming but acknowledged natural cycles of warming and cooling, lack of scientific consensus over anthropogenic global warming, and the historically positive impact of warming trends. It expressed concern over the economic impact of global warming prevention policy, and rejected carbon dioxide caps, though it supported cost effective measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Southern Baptists urged governments to pursue policies aimed at helping people adapt to climate change, emphasized cost benefit analysis of the impact of global warming policy on the poor and developing economies, and supported “public policy that helped provide immediate assistance to the poor and the most vulnerable people around the world, including access to clean drinking water and electricity, AIDS care and prevention, vaccinations, malaria eradication, and education programs.”²³

The firm stance of Southern Baptists on global warming was called into question in March 2008 by the creation of the Southern Baptist Environment and Climate Initiative (SBECI). Their statement, “A Southern Baptist Declaration on the Environment and Climate Change,” was signed by several prominent Southern Baptists including Danny Akin, president of the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, James Merritt, a former Southern Baptist Convention president, and Frank Page, who was president of the Southern Baptist Convention at the time.²⁴ Some in the media took this declaration to indicate a split among Southern Baptists on the subject of global warming.²⁵

Indeed, the SBECI asserted that “our current denominational engagement with these issues have often been too timid. . . . We can do better.”²⁶ The impression that the SBECI was breaking with previous Southern Baptist statements on global warming was strengthened by the fact the SBCEI borrowed extensively from the earlier ECI Call for Action, a document that the Southern Baptist Convention had reacted against a mere two years earlier. Like the ECI’s Call for Action, the SBECI appealed to “general agreement” among “those engaged with this issue in the scientific community,” regarding anthropogenic global warming. It also called for engaging “this issue without any further lingering over the basic reality of the problem.”²⁷

Most recently, the Christian Reformed Church in North America’s Office of Social Justice has endorsed the Micah Network’s “Declaration on Creation Stewardship and Climate Change.” This brief statement was adopted by a coalition of Christian relief and advocacy organizations at a July 2009 meeting in Limaru, Kenya. The Micah Declaration asserts that “failure to be faithful stewards has caused the current environmental crisis, leading to climate change,” and that if unchecked this will lead to severe ecological problems.²⁸

In summary, the history of organized evangelical engagement with the question of global warming can be divided into two basic periods. The first, 1990–2000, was marked by a growing concern over environmental issues broadly, saw the first significant Southern Baptist statement on environmentalism, and acknowledged the founding of the two organizations that would become the major players in the evangelical debate over global warming—the Evangelical Environmental Network and the Cornwall Alliance. The second period, 2005 to present, has been characterized by open dispute among evangelicals over anthropogenic global warming and how to deal with it.

Evangelical Contributions to the Debate on Global Warming

Since 2005, evangelicals have divided into two roughly opposing camps over the question of anthropogenic global warming. Official statements of the Southern Baptist Convention through its resolution process, its Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, and the Cornwall Alliance have typically rejected the theory of anthropogenic global warming and catastrophic climate change predictions.²⁹ They assert that it is more likely that global warming will be moderate and have moderate or even helpful effects on the environment over all.³⁰ They also argue that the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions is unlikely to have significant

impact on global warming.³¹ These groups have focused primarily on the impact of climate-change policy on developing economies and the poor.³² On the other side, the Evangelical Environmental Network, through its Evangelical Climate Initiative and (as it seems) the SBECI have affirmed the existence and danger of anthropogenic global warming and have called for action to prevent it.³³

Despite conflict among evangelicals over the existence of anthropogenic global warming, there has been a great deal of consensus on the theological basis for addressing environmental degradation. Most evangelical statements appeal to the fact that God is the creator of the world as a basis for understanding the value of nonhuman creation,³⁴ and many note that God is its owner.³⁵ Virtually every evangelical statement on the environment and climate change acknowledges that God has commissioned humanity with the responsibility of stewardship/dominion over the earth³⁶ and that the execution of this responsibility has been perverted by sin, with negative impact on the environment.³⁷ Evangelicals have also, almost without exception, affirmed the responsibility of Christians to care for the poor as an important factor in considering environmental policy.³⁸

These theological emphases have apologetic value in that they have been intended to confront non-Christian culture where the culture holds flawed views concerning the environment. Evangelicals affirm that human presence in the world is and can be a good thing over against those who see humanity as blight on an otherwise pristine world. Humanity is the very image of God, not a virus infecting the body of “mother earth.”³⁹ They have also consistently, if indirectly, affirmed the Creator-creation distinction. They have denied pantheism and decried the idolatry of nature worship.⁴⁰ Evangelicals have affirmed, again indirectly, that property rights are relative and subordinate to the divine ownership of creation. In none of the documents described have evangelicals simply “caved” to environmental religiosity. Where there is agreement, evangelicals have affirmed agreement, but, where “green” doctrine is contradicted by Scripture, evangelicals have usually not hesitated to speak the truth from Scripture.

Surprisingly, evangelicals have also expressed some agreement with regard to environmental science and public policy. They have affirmed the existence of global warming (though not necessarily *anthropogenic* global warming)⁴¹ and have called upon Christians to be better stewards of the environment both as individuals and as parts of larger groups and institutions.⁴² Moreover, they have often affirmed the value of capitalism and free markets in addressing environmental problems⁴³ and have encouraged wealth creation and adaptation strategies to deal with global warming.⁴⁴ They have affirmed cost effectiveness as a criterion for judging policy proposals,⁴⁵ and they have encouraged care for the poor while expressing concern that global warming prevention policies can

have the unintended effect of harming the poor.⁴⁶ There have also been a substantial number of statements acknowledging that global warming is not the most important issue that evangelicals face; the priority is still the task of evangelizing the world with the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ.⁴⁷

Methodologically, both sides in the evangelical discussion on global warming have also taken advantage of cost-benefit analysis as a tool for evaluating competing policy proposals. To be sure, however, they have applied this tool in somewhat different ways. The EEN and the SBECI focus their analysis on the costs of global temperatures rising significantly versus the benefits of preventing global warming. Their premise is that significant reductions in humanity's carbon emissions will result in a stabilization or reduction of global temperatures. In contrast, official Southern Baptist statements and statements by the Cornwall Alliance focus on the immediate costs to developing nations and the poor of global warming prevention policies versus the immediate costs and benefits of addressing other problems, such as providing clean drinking water and affordable electricity.

Key Deficiencies in Evangelical Statements on Global Warming

The attempt to craft a distinctively evangelical response to a public policy problem is a challenging exercise at best. Evangelicals are found in most Protestant denominations and are hardly a monolithic group. They are divided by most, if not all, of the doctrinal concerns and pragmatic agendas that caused denominational splits among Protestants in the first place. Nevertheless, a small core of commitments unifies evangelicals as those who have a belief in the truth and authority of the Bible, a focus on the cross, a desire to see individuals converted, and an activism aimed at meeting physical needs in order to win a platform for sharing the gospel.⁴⁸

The statements of the evangelical environmentalists should be judged deficient when held to this standard. Evangelical belief in the truth and authority of Scripture points to a deep concern for truth in general, a concern that is undercut by the way in which some evangelical environmentalists have argued their case. Moreover, the moral calculus and public policy positions dealing with global warming advanced by some evangelical environmentalists presents a significant barrier to meeting the present physical needs of the poor in order to win a platform for the gospel. The unintended result may well be that the spread of the gospel among the global poor and developing nations will be slowed.

Insufficient Concern for Truth

The actual existence of anthropogenic global warming, its cause by human carbon dioxide emissions, and its prevention by drastic reductions of those emissions lies at the core of the case made by evangelical environmentalists. Like many secular environmentalists, evangelicals convinced of the case for the origin, impact, and solutions to anthropogenic global warming have appealed to scientific consensus on these issues as the basis for their public-policy prescriptions. Yet, the appeal to scientific consensus by evangelical environmentalists is particularly surprising in light of the traditional skepticism with which evangelicals generally have greeted grandiose scientific claims. In particular, evangelicals have typically rejected the scientific consensus concerning naturalistic evolution. Both the creation-science and intelligent-design projects have been promoted and funded by evangelicals in the face of fierce opposition by those holding to the reigning scientific consensus.⁴⁹

Historical evangelical skepticism of scientific consensus is well grounded, given the nature of science itself. Consensus is not the standard of scientific proof. Science is about validating or falsifying hypotheses that can be tested through experimentation. No one has described this better at a popular level than the late Michael Crichton,

... consensus science [is] an extremely pernicious development that ought to be stopped cold in its tracks. Historically, the claim of consensus has been the first refuge of scoundrels; it is a way to avoid debate by claiming that the matter is already settled. Whenever you hear the consensus of scientists agrees on something or other, reach for your wallet, because you're being had.

Let's be clear: the work of science has nothing whatever to do with consensus. Consensus is the business of politics. Science, on the contrary, requires only one investigator who happens to be right, which means that he or she has results that are verifiable by reference to the real world. In science consensus is irrelevant. What is relevant is reproducible results. The greatest scientists in history are great precisely because they broke with the consensus.

There is no such thing as consensus science. If it's consensus, it isn't science. If it's science, it isn't consensus. Period.⁵⁰

Crichton goes on to review the track record of consensus science. Consensus in medical science was wrong about the causes of fever in women following childbirth, which once killed one in every six new mothers. Scientific consensus was also wrong about the cause of pellagra, a disease which killed tens of thousands in the 1920s. Crichton also mentions Jenner's work on smallpox,

Pasteur's work on germs, and medical consensus on "saccharine, margarine, repressed memory, fiber and colon cancer, hormone replacement therapy ... the list of consensus errors goes on and on."⁵¹

In each case, people appealed to consensus when the scientific evidence was insufficient to prove their position. In some cases, this error was compounded by ideological commitments such as racism or classism. Where the science is clear, no one appeals to consensus. Nobody says the consensus of scientists agrees that $E = mc^2$. "Nobody says the consensus is that the sun is 93 million miles away. It would never occur to anyone to speak that way."⁵²

Evangelicals ought to be wary of consensus science in the area of climate change, just as they have been wary of consensus with regard to the origin of the species. Consensus is neither a standard for proof nor a mark of probability in scientific inquiry.

What makes appeal to scientific consensus by evangelicals even more surprising is that consensus is a standard of proof that evangelicals have historically rejected in other, even more important, areas. In theological studies, evangelicals have insisted that the historical consensus of Christian theologians and church teachings be judged by the Scriptures. They have preferred the standard of *sola Scriptura* (the idea that Scripture alone possesses supreme authority in matters of faith and practice) to the authority of the *magisterium* of the Roman Catholic Church. In textual studies, evangelicals have been rightly wary of "the assured results of higher criticism," and in lower criticism, most have favored the critical texts of Scripture over the majority texts (which construct the text by ascertaining the consensus reading of all available manuscripts). Especially in biblical interpretation, evangelicals judge proposed readings of the text by the case they make and their success at handling the lexical, grammatical, and historical data derived from and tied to the text in question. While evangelicals are rightly aware of and respectful of widely received readings of the text, these are regularly tested against the text itself when evangelicals publish new commentaries.

In short, consensus is a standard for truth that evangelicals would never accept in any other important area of study. Consensus may appropriately mark the growing acceptance of a well-made case about reality, but evangelicals have traditionally rejected it when offered in place of such arguments. The search for truth—historical, theological, or scientific—is about understanding reality as it is. Therefore, appeal to consensus as an argument for the truth of a view is a method that is inappropriate to the goal. It is a standard for truth that is not part of any legitimate field of inquiry, including scientific inquiry, and indeed is one that evangelicals have rejected with respect to other major scientific theories. Why, then, would evangelicals appeal to consensus over anthropogenic global

warming? Whether intentional or not, appeal to consensus has the effect of marginalizing dissenting voices and stifling free inquiry. It cuts off debate over the actual validity and merits of the consensus position. Appeal to consensus in science, as in theology, textual studies, or biblical interpretation, as the primary argument for one's position is a failure of concern for truth.

The perception that there is failure of concern for truth among some evangelicals regarding claims about anthropogenic global warming is strengthened by the reaction—or lack thereof—from evangelical environmentalists to the debunking of their claim that a consensus over anthropogenic global warming even exists among scientists. In 2006, the ECI claimed that there was general agreement among scientists, and cited the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report's executive summary, statements by the U.S. National Academy of Science, and statements by the political leaders of the G8 nations. This assertion of consensus became the basis for ending debate and initiating drastic action, “we are convinced that evangelicals must engage this issue without any further lingering over the basic reality of the problem.”⁵³

In response, the Cornwall Alliance's “Open Letter to Evangelicals” and its supporting document “Call to Truth” made a particular point of debunking the claim that any such scientific consensus existed.⁵⁴ They pointed to the Oregon Petition, which states

We urge the United States government to reject the global warming agreement that was written in Kyoto, Japan in December, 1997, and any other similar proposals. The proposed limits on greenhouse gasses would harm the environment, hinder the advance of science and technology, and damage the health and welfare of mankind.

There is no convincing scientific evidence that human release of carbon dioxide, methane, or other greenhouse gasses is causing or will, in the foreseeable future, cause catastrophic heating of the Earth's atmosphere and disruption of the Earth's climate. Moreover, there is substantial scientific evidence that increases in atmospheric carbon dioxide produce many beneficial effects upon the natural plant and animal environments of the Earth.

This short statement had, at the time, been signed by over 19,700 qualified scientists, over 7,700 of whom were specialists in areas making them especially well suited to evaluate the effect of carbon dioxide on the atmosphere and life on earth. The Cornwall Alliance also pointed to an open letter of April 6, 2006, to the then-Prime Minister of Canada by 60 qualified scientists asserting that there was little evidence that human carbon dioxide emissions were causing global warming and that there was “little reason to trust model predictions of

the future” regarding the extent of warming.⁵⁵ Finally, they also cited the Leipzig Declaration that called into question the claim of anthropogenic global warming and was signed by over 110 scientists and meteorologists.⁵⁶

Today, the evidence that there is no scientific consensus over anthropogenic global warming is even stronger. The Oregon Petition, mentioned above, has now been signed by over 31,000 qualified scientists.⁵⁷ Of these, more than 17,100 are specialists in areas that make them particularly competent to assess the impact of carbon dioxide emissions on the climate. As recently as March 4, 2008, a group of 722 scientists signed the “Manhattan Declaration,” presented at the 2008 International Conference on Climate Change.⁵⁸ This declaration explicitly rejects claims that global warming is being caused by human carbon dioxide emission and denies the assertion that the impact of global warming will be catastrophic.

To be clear, the significance of documents such as the Oregon Petition, Leipzig Declaration, and Manhattan Declaration is *not* that they serve to replace one consensus with another. Such a move would merely replicate the error of appeal to consensus. Rather, these documents are clear evidence that *there simply is no consensus among scientists that global warming is caused by human carbon dioxide emissions.*

Despite the fact that there is no consensus over the cause, effect, or prevention strategy among qualified climate scientists, the Evangelical Environmental Network and its daughter organization, the Evangelical Climate Initiative, have not acknowledged the failure of their key claim to motivating action on global warming—the existence of a scientific consensus. Given the fact that the ECI’s “Call to Action” acknowledges that the scientific facts on global warming are the key to the whole project, this failure is disturbing.

The SBECI attempts to express a deeper degree of humility. The signatories acknowledged that they are not scientific experts in climate change. The document also attempts to take seriously the critique made against the ECI “Call to Action” concerning the lack of a consensus among scientists about anthropogenic global warming. It recognizes,

that if consensus means unanimity, there is not a consensus regarding the anthropogenic nature of climate change or the severity of the problem. There is general agreement among those engaged with this issue in the scientific community. A minority of sincere and respected scientists offer alternate causes for global climate change other than deforestation and the burning of fossil fuels.⁵⁹

Unfortunately, this statement is not as clear as it might be. It is unclear what, if any, meaningful difference there is between consensus and general agreement. Certainly, “if consensus means unanimity, there is not a consensus...”; but *consensus* simply does not mean “unanimity.” In fact, in the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, entry 1a for *consensus* is “general agreement.”⁶⁰ Thus, Statement 2 of the SBECI equivocates.

The wording of the statement also would seem to create a dilemma for its signatories. The authors of the SBECI acknowledged, “we do not have special training as scientists to allow us to assess the validity of climate science.”⁶¹ It is unlikely that this statement was intended to be taken in a strong sense. If intended strongly, then the lack of scientific training that prevents evangelicals from assessing claims concerning anthropogenic global warming to be false would also render them unable to judge it to be true. It is unclear how “climate change” can be addressed “prudent[ly]” apart from a rational assessment of the claims regarding global warming’s causes, effects, and the viability and impact of proposed “solutions.”⁶²

Instead, the SBECI statement disavowing scientific expertise should be read as an acknowledgment of where the authors do, and do not have, formal competence. That the authors of the SBECI are not trained climate scientists is a true and humble admission. However, that fact does not relieve both authors and signers of their responsibility “to assess the validity of climate science.” In fact, by calling for action on the basis of that science, they have implicitly assessed it to be valid.

In the absence of formal training in climate science, evangelicals can appeal to consensus, pursue the scientific debate to the best of their ability, or articulate principles for action that stand independently of the science. Given SBECI’s intent to be humble in its claims and the problems with consensus (both in science generally and the climate-change debate in particular), the SBECI statement could be strengthened by taking its stand solely on the acknowledged expertise of its authors and signatories—the ability to articulate a biblically grounded, Christian perspective on the principles that are relevant to the issue at hand. This would entail deleting language that implies acceptance of a particular position in the debate as a basis for action and calling for public policy regarding climate change to be based on truth (including sound science).

Ultimately, however, evangelicals will not be able to remain neutral with respect to the claims concerning anthropogenic global warming. Public policy will be made, and it will either be made on the basis of the validity of anthropogenic global warming or the rejection of anthropogenic global warming. Whichever turns out to be the case, evangelicals’ traditional commitment to truth demands

that the decision be made in light of the fullest possible accounting of the facts. Evangelicals need not all become experts in climate science, though some certainly should. At a minimum, evangelicals can insist that public policy be based in sound science rather than ideology and spurious appeals to consensus.

Appeal to consensus is a useful rhetorical tool to cut off debate and marginalize dissenting voices. Admission that there is no scientific consensus regarding anthropogenic global warming would mean the loss of this tool for the evangelical environmentalist agenda. One would no longer be able take anthropogenic global warming through carbon dioxide emissions as a given that can merely be asserted. There would be no shortcut to the prescription of public policy. In short, it would force evangelicals to evaluate the competing claims about the cause, effect, and solutions (if necessary or possible) of global warming in order to assess their validity. Failure to succeed in rightly evaluating competing explanations is an all-too-human possibility; failure even to try is a deplorable lack of concern for truth.

Evangelism and Ministry to the Poor

One major motivation for all of the evangelical statements on climate change has been a genuine concern for humanity's treatment of God's creation. Another motivation, no less important, has been an apologetic concern to engage non-Christians with a Christian witness. The heart of the evangelical witness in the world is the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ Jesus alone. Seeking the conversion of men, women, and children is the *sine qua non* of evangelicalism. The priority of missions and evangelism has made evangelicals cautious about the potential of social ministry to overtake and swamp concern for the souls of men. As a result, evangelicals have traditionally subordinated social ministry to evangelism by seeing social ministry as a means to win a hearing for the gospel. Evangelicals have heeded the warning of James 2:14–16 that a faith that does not meet real physical needs is of no practical value.

Care for the poor, while a real good in and of itself, also serves the furtherance of the gospel. This strategy explains, in part, why evangelicals have taken great pains to tie their concern for the environment to concern for the poor. Some appeal to Christ's command to love our neighbor; most affirm our responsibility to care for the poor. The connection between care for the poor and environmental concern is the fact that both the environment itself and human treatment of the environment by the private and public sectors will affect the poor, especially in developing countries.

Unfortunately, the public-policy response to global warming proposed by some evangelicals makes actually helping the global poor more difficult. The resources of the developed world are vast, but they are still limited. Addressing global warming through capping carbon dioxide emissions at 20 percent of current levels by 2050 will be hugely expensive.⁶³ Directing a large portion of our resources at this problem will mean that other problems cannot be met.⁶⁴ We may be able to meet some needs, but we cannot meet them all. Furthermore, if global warming prevention strategies have a negative impact on the economies of developed countries (as seems likely), this will further shrink the pool of available resources for addressing the pressing needs of the global poor.

If helping the poor in developing nations is made more difficult by the public policy proposals of evangelical environmentalists, then these policies would also undercut the traditional evangelical strategy of using social ministry to win a favorable hearing for the gospel. Drastic reductions of carbon dioxide emissions call for sacrifice on the part of both rich and poor nations. The rich however, are better able to absorb these changes with only marginal adjustments to their lifestyle. The global poor face the more difficult choice. To poor nations, the choice between electricity from expensive and/or unreliable carbon neutral sources and inexpensive, reliable fossil fuel burning sources is no choice at all. If required to build only carbon neutral power plants, which they cannot afford, they will not have power at all. The result will be continued exposure to a wide range of environmental hazards that lead to disease, malnutrition, and early death.

To hear a Western (i.e., rich!) evangelical environmentalist tell the poor that they must sacrifice the technologies that would improve the length and quality of life for them and their families in order to achieve a merely speculative benefit they will never see can only make the poor less likely to listen to the gospel that the evangelical brings. Such disillusionment will only deepen when it is realized that those evangelicals continue to enjoy the same lifesaving technologies they are effectively asking the poor to forego.

Conclusion

Evangelicals have entered the discussion of climate change somewhat late in the game; but they have entered with a will. Far from being a case of “me-too-ism,” evangelicals have been more than willing to offer a distinctively Christian voice by articulating a biblical case for stewardship of the environment, calling into question theologically errant views in the broader environmental movement, and articulating and implying some basic parameters for what would constitute acceptable public policy responses from an evangelical Christian perspective.

These statements can be strengthened by clearly rejecting appeal to consensus and explicitly insisting on sound science as the basis for shaping public policy. Evangelicals should also clearly insist on the priority of concern for the most immediate needs of the global poor and developing nations. Concern for long-range problems of uncertain validity should not take precedence over the clear and present needs of the poor, lest we undercut the credibility of our claim to care for the poor (both physically and spiritually) in the eyes of those very poor to whom we seek to present a credible gospel witness.

Notes

1. The theory of anthropogenic global warming is the idea that human actions, particularly through the release of carbon dioxide (CO²) into the atmosphere, is a significant contributor to or cause of a rise in average global atmospheric temperatures. The term *climate change* is, in the present context, often used as a synonym for *global warming*. Anthropogenic global warming is to be distinguished from global warming in that the first view explicitly requires human causation for global warming, while the second does not require it.
2. For one example of many in the media, see CNN, “Global Warming Gap Among Evangelicals Widens,” 3/14/2007. Last viewed on 11/16/2008 at: <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/03/14/evangelical.rift/index.html>. For one example of stories on the political impact of evangelical environmentalism see, Peter Sachs, “Democrats, Evangelicals Team Up on Global Warming,” The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 6/30/2006. Last viewed on 11/16/2008 at: <http://pewforum.org/news/display.php?NewsID=10821>.
3. Individual evangelicals have been writing about environmental issues since the 1970s. It is only in more recent years that evangelical denominations and advocacy groups have taken up this subject. While the contribution of individuals to the discussion is of interest, our focus will be on major evangelical groups that have made significant statements on the issue of global warming. Some evangelical denominations have addressed the question of environmentalism, but not of global warming specifically, and so are not included in this study (Assemblies of God and Church of God International, Cleveland, Ohio). Other notable denominations that have made no statement on the issue include the Evangelical Free Church of America, the General Association of Regular Baptists, and the Presbyterian Church in America.
4. “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action,” published by the Evangelical Climate Initiative, January 2006. Hereafter, ECI-2006. Last accessed on 11/16/2008 at: <http://christiansandclimate.org/learn/call-to-action/>.

5. "A Southern Baptist Declaration on the Environment and Climate Change," published by the Southern Baptist Environmental and Climate Initiative, March 12, 2008. Hereafter, SBECI-2008. Last accessed on 11/16/2008 at: <http://www.baptistcreationcare.org/node/1>
6. "On Environmental Stewardship," a resolution adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana, June 1990. Hereafter, SBC-1990. Last accessed on 11/16/2008 at: <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=485>.
7. "An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation," published by the Evangelical Environmental Network, June 1994. Hereafter, EEN-1994. Last accessed on 11/16/2008 at: <http://www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php>.
8. "The Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship," published by the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation, Spring 2000. Hereafter, Cornwall-2000. Last accessed on 11/16/2008 at: <http://www.cornwallalliance.org/articles/read/the-cornwall-declaration-on-environmental-stewardship/>.
9. Andrew Lewis, "Policy Statement on Global Warming," The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, August 1, 2005, 1. Hereafter, SBC-2005. Last accessed on 11/16/2008 at: <http://erlc.com/article/policy-statement-on-global-warming>.
10. *Ibid.*, 2.
11. *Ibid.*, 3.
12. *Ibid.*, 4.
13. "Appeal Letter to the National Association of Evangelicals on the Issue of Global Warming" (exact date uncertain). Last accessed on 11/16/2008, at: <http://www.cornwallAlliance.org/articles/read/appeal-letter-to-the-national-association-of-evangelicals-on-the-issue-of-global-warming/>.
14. ECI-2006, Claims 1–4.
15. *Ibid.*, Claim 1.
16. *Ibid.*, Claim 2.
17. "An Open Letter to the Signers of 'Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action' and Others Concerned About Global Warming," published by the Cornwall Alliance, June 2006. Hereafter, Cornwall "Open Letter," 2006. Last accessed on 11/16/2008, at: <http://www.cornwallalliance.org/docs/an-open-letter-to-the-signers-of-climate-change-an-evangelical-call-to-action-and-others-concerned-about-global-warming.pdf>.

18. E. Calvin Beisner, Paul K. Driessen, Ross McKittrick, and Roy W. Spencer, "A Call to Truth, Prudence, and Protection for the Poor: An Evangelical Response to Global Warming," published by the Cornwall Alliance, June 2006. Hereafter, Cornwall "Call to Truth," 2006. Last accessed on 11/16/2008 at: <http://www.cornwallalliance.org/docs/a-call-to-truth-prudence-and-protection-of-the-poor.pdf>.
19. "On Environmentalism and Evangelicals," a resolution adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in Greensboro, North Carolina, June 2006. Hereafter, SBC-2006. Last accessed on 11/16/2006 at: <http://www.sbcannualmeeting.net/sbc06/resolutions/sbcresolution-06.asp?ID=8>.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. "On Global Warming," a resolution adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in San Antonio, Texas, June 2007. Hereafter, SBC-2007. Last accessed on 11/16/2008 at: <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1171>.
23. Ibid. Note: The convention deleted the following language by a 60-40 margin:
RESOLVED, That we encourage continued government funding to find definitive answers on the issue of human-induced global warming that are based on empirical facts and are free of ideology and partisanship; and be it further... ;
RESOLVED, That we support economically responsible government initiatives and funding to locate and implement viable energy alternatives to oil, reducing our dependence on foreign oil and decreasing the amount of CO² and other greenhouse gas emissions; and be it further ...
Last accessed on 11/16/2008 at: <http://erlc.com/article/erlc-president-reacts-to-southern-baptist-declaration-on-the-environment-an>.
24. SBECI-2008.
25. Jane Lampman, "Southern Baptist leaders urge climate change action: But their unofficial call to action has kindled skepticism within the conservative denomination." *Christian Science Monitor Online*, 3/12/2008. Last accessed on 11/16/2008 at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0312/p02s03-usgn.html>.
26. SBECI-2008, preamble.
27. Ibid., Statement 2.
28. "Declaration on Creation Stewardship and Climate Change," adopted by the Micah Network, Limaru, Kenya, July 13–18, 2009. Last accessed on 10/4/2009 at: <http://www.micahnetwork.org/en/events/past-events/global/triennial-global-consultation>
29. Cornwall-2000; SBC-2005; Cornwall, "Open Letter," 2006; SBC-2007.

30. Cornwall, "Call to Truth," 2006.
31. SBC-2005; Cornwall, "Call to Truth," 2006; SBC-2007.
32. Cornwall-2000; SBC-2005; Cornwall, "Open Letter," 2006; SBC-2006; SBC-2007.
33. ECI-2006; SBECI-2008, Statement 2.
34. EEN-1994; Cornwall-2000; SBC-2005; ECI-2006; SBC-2006; WeGetIt.org, 2007; SBECI-2008.
35. SBC-1990; SBC-2005; ECI-2006; SBECI-2008.
36. SBC-1990; EEN-1994; Cornwall-2000; SBC-2005; ECI-2006; Cornwall, "Open Letter," 2006; SBC-2006; SBC-2007; WeGetIt.org, 2007; SBECI-2008.
37. SBC-1990; EEN-1994; Cornwall-2000; ECI-2006; SBC-2006; SBECI-2008.
38. SBC-1990; EEN-1994; Cornwall-2000; SBC-2005; ECI-2006; Cornwall, "Open Letter," 2006; SBC-2006; SBC-2007; WeGetIt.org, 2007; SBECI-2008.
39. EEN-1994; Cornwall-2000; SBC-2006; WeGetIt.org, 2007.
40. SBC-1990; EEN-1994; Cornwall-2000; SBC-2005; SBC-2006.
41. SBC-2005; ECI-2006; Cornwall, "Call to Truth," 2006; SBC-2007; SBECI-2008.
42. SBC-1990; EEN-1994; SBC-2005; ECI-2006; SBC-2006; WeGetIt.org, 2007; SBECI-2008.
43. EEN-1994; SBC-2005; Cornwall-2000; ECI-2006; SBC-2006; WeGetIt.org, 2007; Evangelical Climate Initiative, "Principles for Federal Policy on Climate Change," 5/2008. Hereafter, ECI-2008. Last accessed on 11/16/2008 at: <http://preview.christiansandclimate.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/05/principlesforfederalpolicyonclimatechange.pdf>.
44. Cornwall-2000; ECI-2006; Cornwall, "Call to Truth," 2006; ECI-2008.
45. ECI-2006; Cornwall, "Call to Truth," 2006; SBC-2007; ECI-2008.
46. Cornwall-2000; SBC-2005; Cornwall, "Call to Truth," 2006; SBC-2006; SBC-2007; WeGetIt.org, 2007; ECI-2008.
47. Cornwall, "Call to Truth," 2006; SBC-2006; SBC-2007; SBECI-2008.
48. See David Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody*, vol. 3 of *A History of Evangelicalism*, ed. David Bebbington and Mark Noll (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 23.

49. See Ben Stein's recent documentary, *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* for a trenchant critique of the way in which scientific consensus is being used to stifle legitimate inquiry and study, as well as the ways in which appeal to consensus has led to horrific public-policy positions in the past.
50. Michael Creighton, "Aliens Cause Global Warming," speech to the California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, California, 1/17/2003. Last accessed on 11/16/08 at: <http://www.michaelcrichton.net/speech-alienscauseglobalwarming.html>. For more scholarly presentations of the nature of scientific knowledge, see Jarrett Leplin, *A Novel Defense of Scientific Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Andre Kukla, *Studies in Scientific Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. ECI-2006; Claim 1: Human-Induced Climate Change Is Real.
54. Cornwall Alliance, "Call to Truth," 8–10.
55. "Open Kyoto to Debate: An Open Letter to Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada, from 60 Expert Scientists" published, April 6, 2006. Last accessed on 11/16/08 at: <http://www.lavoisier.com.au/articles/greenhouse-science/climate-change/openletter2006-3.php>.
56. "The Leipzig Declaration on Global Climate Change (2005, revised)," published 2005. Last accessed on 11/16/108 at: <http://www.sepp.org/policy%20declarations/LDrevised.html>.
57. Oregon Petition, "Global Warming Petition Project." Last accessed on 11/16/08 at: <http://www.petitionproject.org/>.
58. Science and Public Policy Institute, "The Manhattan Declaration on Climate Change," 3/12/2008. Last accessed on 11/16/08 at: http://scienceandpublicpolicy.org/commentaries_essays/manhattan_declaration.html.
59. SBECI-2008; Statement 2.
60. Miriam-Webster Online Dictionary s.v. "consensus." Last accessed on 11/16/08 at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consensus>.
61. SBECI-2008; Statement 2.
62. SBECI-2008: Statement 2. The title assertion for this section is, "It Is Prudent to Address Climate Change."
63. This is the goal called for by the ECI's "Principles for Federal Policy on Climate Change," 5/23/2008, Articles 1 and 4. For analysis of the cost of implementing CO²

caps on Great Britain alone, see Bjørn Lomborg, “Global warming: Why cut one 3,000th of a degree? Britain’s efforts to reduce the speed of global warming will cost huge sums of money and have a pitifully tiny effect.” *UK Times*, 10/1/2008. Lomborg estimates that the cost to the UK alone would be 100 billion pounds per year (about US\$150 billion).

64. See here the work of the Copenhagen Consensus 2008. Last accessed on 11/16/08 at: <http://www.copenhagenconsensus.com/Default.aspx?ID=953>.