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Waking Up to Climate Change Are Evangelicals Too Late?

by
James W. Skillen[©]

In February, a diverse group of evangelical leaders released "Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action" (www.christiansandclimate.org/statement), arguing that (1) human-induced climate change is real; (2) the consequences will be significant (especially hurting the poor); (3) Christian moral convictions demand a response; and (4) the need to act is urgent; governments, businesses, churches, and individuals all have a role to play.

As a moral alarm, the call to action is welcome. We can only hope that it will encourage more Evangelicals and other Americans to pay attention to the growing scientific evidence of climate change and the role that humans are playing in that change. As an evangelical statement, however, the call to action has several weaknesses that reflect the relative immaturity of Christian responses to environmental degradation.

First, the statement conveys little sense of having been written relatively late in the day. The signers do admit that "until recently [climate change] has not been treated as a pressing issue or major priority. Indeed, many of us have required considerable convincing before becoming persuaded that climate change is a real problem and that it ought to matter to us as Christians." But having now been convinced, the signers appear ready, quickly and confidently, to offer a "moral argument" that is sufficient for the day.

As Christian leaders, the statement says, "we recognize both our opportunity and our responsibility to offer a biblically based moral witness that can help shape public policy in the most powerful nation on earth, and therefore contribute to the well-

being of the entire world.” “We are proud of the evangelical community’s long-standing commitment to the sanctity of human life,” the statement goes on, but “we also offer moral witness in many venues and on many issues. . . . Our attention, therefore, goes to whatever issues our faith requires us to address.”

Evidence of global warming, however, has been mounting for some time [1] as a consequence of many trends that Evangelicals have been slow to call into question: 1) the unquestioned push for energy-intensive economic growth, 2) ever expanding American use of nonrenewable energy, and 3) a relatively cautious engagement with the nations of the world to address the multiple evidences of environmental degradation that lead to and follow from climate change. To suggest, therefore, that evangelical “attention” has now, in good time and in proper order, moved from pro-life advocacy to a moral call to do something about climate change sounds too casual, too naive, too oblivious to the track record of Evangelicals on climate change and environmental stewardship.

The second weakness of the statement is its implication that this “moral witness” amounts to something “that can help shape public policy in the most powerful nation on earth.” The statement, however valuable, barely gets beyond a moral appeal. It is not something that will help shape the kind of public policies that are needed right now. The signers are individuals representing a wide variety of institutions, some of which (colleges and universities) may indeed have natural scientists, political scientists, and economists who have something significant to say about what is needed to slow or stop global warming. But this document does not present a public-policy agenda to which the signers have committed themselves and for which they can give leadership. They do not represent an organization prepared for action. Toward the end of the statement, the signers agree that “national legislation requiring sufficient economy-wide reductions in carbon dioxide emissions” is needed, and such legislation should achieve its aim “through cost-effective, market-based mechanisms such as a cap-and-trade program.” But the statement does not explain what would be “sufficient,” or whether this kind of legislation will be adequate to deal with climate change, or how such legislation can be tied into international agreements to deal with what is a obviously a global problem.

Early in March, less than a month after the climate-change call to action was released, Sen. Pete Domenici (R-NM), chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, said that no global warming legislation would come out of his committee this year. Members of his committee were negotiating a bill to require reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, he said, but added, “frankly, I don’t know how to write it, and I don’t think anybody does.” Committee members are too divided about what the bill should do and how it should do it. In other words, if Evangelicals want to help shape public policy in this area, they have an extended, difficult, and detailed job to do that must go far beyond a general call to action.

Let me repeat, I am not demeaning the statement for what it is. However, its weight is such that its signers and sympathetic readers may feel morally satisfied simply by signing it and perhaps by urging their members of Congress to sign an emissions-reduction bill if and when it is ever ready, or by deciding that their next car purchase will be a hybrid. But all of this together does not add up to a serious public policy response to climate change at this late date in the process of global warming. Although one of the statement's footnotes cites documents that offer convincing evidence of climate change, the document does not suggest any means of organizing sound public-policy development and action from within the evangelical community.

Third, the first two weaknesses are closely connected to the document's inattention to government's international diplomatic responsibility for this and related issues. The Bible calls Christians to responsibility, the statement says, but in light of the Bible, who bears what kind of responsibility to do what? The statement addresses Evangelicals as an undifferentiated group or community that should "respond to the climate change problem with moral passion and concrete action." But individuals who consider themselves Evangelicals and who read this statement cannot take the kind of "concrete action" that will make a political/governmental difference without organizing themselves in some civic way with a very significant and serious policy agenda. The statement applauds certain senators who are framing legislation and it applauds a number of corporations that have "moved ahead of the pace of government action through innovative measures." But what else do Evangelicals need to do, not merely as individual moral voices, consumers, and energy users, but as citizens responsible to help shape public policy?

The statement doesn't try to answer this question. Nor does it highlight the urgency of the action needed. But why couldn't the signers, if they represent a "movement" as they claim, agree to take some follow-up action that would put money where their signatures are? For example, why not find out who, in all of their respective organizations, has expertise on the environment and public policy and agree to bring them together in roundtable workshops to develop a public policy agenda, or agree to put up some funding to support policy research and a comprehensive advocacy plan, or agree to identify and support those organizations represented by the signers that are currently working in the public policy arena to address climate change and related issues.

Beyond that, since Evangelicals are a worldwide network, why not set forth a 10- or 20-year plan for bringing Evangelicals together from around the world to address, in common, the public policy challenges facing all their governments and all relevant international organizations?

Having agreed to sound the moral alarm contained in this statement, the signers should not stop now. They have only begun to fight, and their evangelical audience is not yet racing to catch up with them or to pass them in active engagement.

Notes

[1]In his 1996 Kuyper Lecture (published in 1998—see Calvin DeWitt below), DeWitt cited the following articles on the subject of climate change: James G. Titus, “Effect of Climate Change on Sea Level Rise and the Implications for World Agriculture,” *HortScience* 25, no. 12 (1990), 1567-72, and Richard A. Houghton and George M. Woodwell, “Global Climatic Change,” *Scientific American* 260, no. 4 (1989), 36-44.

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For further reading and action

“For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility,” National Association of Evangelicals (2004): www.nae.net

“On the Care of Creation: An Evangelical Declaration on Care of Creation,” Evangelical Environmental Network: www.creationcare.org/resources/declaration.php

Calvin B. DeWitt, *Caring for Creation: Responsible Stewardship of God’s Handiwork*, Center for Public Justice and Baker Books (1998): www.cpjustice.org

James W. Skillen, “Liberalism and the Environment,” and “Citizenship and Electoral Reform,” in Skillen, *In Pursuit of Justice: Christian-Democratic Explorations* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 111-127, 129-146.

“Agenda for Climate Action,” The Pew Center on Global Climate Change (2006): www.pewclimate.org

Thomas Hayden, “The Heat is On: Greenhouse Gases and Inaction May be Roasting our Children’s Future,” a review of three new books on climate change, in *The Washington Post’s Book World*, March 12, 2006.

Carl Zimmer, “Sweating It,” a review of two new books on climate change, in *The New York Times Book Review*, March 12, 2006.