

A Biblical Bioethical Response to Climate Change

John E. Silvius, Senior Professor of Biology, Cedarville University

Background

The climate change debate is calling for Christians to take a stand and be willing to make major lifestyle changes to promote energy conservation and reduction of carbon dioxide gas. A 2007 Reuters Survey of 14,000 people in 21 nations revealed that 68% worldwide are worried about climate change; and 57% of Americans are worried. Many of those concerned disagree that humans are responsible. Some who believe that humans are contributing to global warming are adopting a lifestyle that promotes energy conservation, reduces greenhouse gas production, and encourages elected officials to enact policies that favor these strategies. Still others may be ambivalent about climate change but believe that each of us has a responsibility for “creation care” regardless of whether we have reason to worry about the future of planet Earth..

Thesis

Because the debate about whether humans are responsible for climate warming is complex and because it is possible to find respectable people including climatologists on both sides of the debate, it is important that we base our analysis and resultant actions upon a proper biblical, environmental ethic.

Aims:

1. To identify motivations for concern about human-induced global warming.
2. To evaluate the respective contributions of fear, duty, and pursuit of the virtues as motivations for our behavior toward the environment.
3. To begin to form a Christian response to environmental concerns based upon biblical environmental ethics which recognizes God’s plan for the present age and beyond.

Questions to Consider:

1. What factors have helped launch “global warming” into the news over the past few years? What motivates human concern about the future of planet Earth? Describe your concerns.
2. To what extent is *fear of consequences* a legitimate basis for concern about climate change? What role does *fear* play in guiding moral and ethical behavior? What are its limitations?
3. To some, the evidence for human-induced climate change is too uncertain to merit changes in lifestyle. Yet, Joel Hunter, president of the Christian Coalition, says we still should take action. From reference #3 below, how is his motivation for action different from one based upon fear?
4. Mr. Hunter is calling for a response based upon what we *ought* to do. Consider the biblical foundation for the biblical environmental stewardship ethic:
 - a. Dominion as Stewardship – Humans created as God’s image-bearers (representatives) and given dominion (Gen. 1:26-28) and stewardship responsibility (Gen.2:15) over creation

b. Conservation and Fruitfulness – Hebrew word *abad*, “to till” or “to serve” (Gen. 2:15), and the Heb. *shamar*, “to keep” or “to preserve” the potential of the garden to yield its bounty (*instrumental value*) and beauty (*aesthetic value*) in return to mankind. This reciprocity is the basis of “con-service” or *conservation*. See Deut. 22:6-7; Ezekiel 34:18

c. Intrinsic Value – creatures have value in and of themselves as seen in the fact that

d. “God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.’” (Gen. 1:22),

e. God gave animals purposes...and...they wait for Him to provide. Psalm 104: 18; 24-27

f. God intends “The Land” as the *subject* of the Sabbath, to receive rest – Lev. 25: 1-4

5. In what way does a knowledge of the biblical environmental stewardship ethic (see 4. and Reference 4. below) bring us beyond fear of consequences as a motivation and provide a greater role for “relationship”, “trust”, “scientific inquiry”, “creativity?” Do Christians in general, or you in particular, see a conflict between the *duties* of “creation care” and “Christian ministry?”

6. As discussed in Reference #3 (below), *virtue ethics* may provide an even higher motivation for a proper human response to “environmental concerns” than fear or even duty *per se*. Virtue ethics focuses upon *how* we develop virtues- habits that produce godly character and moral excellence. It is concerned not only with *what we ought to do* (*i.e.* duty), but also the kind of person we are becoming by our doing.” Consider and discuss how the following “green” or “environmental lifestyle” actions might accomplish both “creation care” and develop “moral virtues” of love, discretion, moderation, and justice:

- a. Choosing less energy-intensive options for transportation and recreation (*e.g.* walking or bicycling *versus* driving the car; hiking or horseback riding *versus* riding an ORV.
- b. Resisting materialistic trends by reducing and/or redirecting allocations of money and time to reflect virtues of love, moderation, justice, *etc.*
- c. Deciding to reduce carbon emissions by car-pooling or using public transportation; or developing a lawn equipment cooperative with your neighbors.
- d. Supporting ministries (*e.g.* family camps, foreign missions) by giving financially and promoting “creation care” principles.

Selected Resources:

1. Evangelical Environmental Network. <http://www.creationcare.org/resources/scripture.php>
2. Two evangelical Christian views of human responsibility toward global climate change:
 - a. “An Evangelical Call to Action – Statement of the Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI)”: <http://www.christiansandclimate.org/statement>
 - b. “Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship” Statement of the Interfaith Council for Environmental Stewardship, <http://www.stewards.net/CornwallDeclaration.htm>
3. Silvius, J.E. 2007. Christians and Creation Care. *Cedarville Torch* 28(1): 20-22. http://www.cedarville.edu/centerforbioethics/files/articles/silvius_torch.pdf