

Climate change 2: two evangelical views

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‘You can’t change the weather,’ we all used to say with a shrug, to make the point that some actions are well beyond the powers of puny humans. But a disagreement has opened up among U.S. evangelicals about the extent to which we can, or cannot, change the weather.

The purpose of this briefing is very limited. We simply want to outline the groups involved in this American Christian debate, and note some of their views. We will not evaluate the merits of their respective cases; that task is for future Social Issues briefings. We suspect that similar disagreements might be present among Australian evangelicals; however we don’t want attention to the U.S. scene to polarise our local scene. Rather, we hope that some recognition of the competing views might assist us to clarify the points at issue as we all consider our response to claims about climate change.

We will, however, take serious exception to two of the claims put by one of the parties concerned. These two claims go way beyond the issue of climate change and concern the nature of Christian ethics and the meaning of the term ‘evangelical’. It is important for us to name these two claims as wrong.

But first, **can people change the weather?** Christian debate on the American scene is, in part, about the extent to which global warming is ‘anthropogenic’, meaning caused by human activity. For signatories of a document by the Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI), the planet is warming *largely due to* human causes. The anthropogenic element implies an important moral claim: if humanity started it, then changes to human activity might also stop it. We have changed the weather, therefore we should attempt to change it again; and we should particularly do so, on this argument, out of respect for the world’s poor who will be most directly affected by climate change.

But for the authors and endorsers of a response document by the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance (ISA), the anthropogenic contribution to global warming is slight, and therefore human attempts to reverse it are overstated and will have little or no result, yet will be needlessly expensive and will involve unnecessary economic dislocations—to be felt most acutely by the world’s poor.

At this point it will be useful to pause, because the names and three letter acronyms begin to multiply. We thought it might help to list some of the protagonists in a table:

<i>Global warming is mainly anthropogenic, and policy initiatives should seek to halt it:</i>	
<i>Global warming is mainly natural, and policy initiatives should protect the economy:</i>	
<p>Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI) http://www.christiansandclimate.org <i>Key document:</i> ‘Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action.’</p>	<p>Interfaith Stewardship Alliance (ISA) http://www.interfaithstewardship.org <i>Key document:</i> ‘A Call to Truth, Prudence, and Protection of the Poor: An Evangelical Response to Global Warming.’</p>
<p>National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) http://www.nae.net Main spokesman: Rev. Richard Cizik</p>	<p>Authors of an open letter to the NAE http://www.citizenlink.org/CLNews/A000004114.cfm Main (?) spokesman: Dr James Dobson <i>(Focus on the Family, FoF)</i></p>

It is worth noting what the ECI and the ISA agree about. Both groups think that global warming is occurring; both are concerned for the plight of the poor; both want to be guided by scientific evidence, both think that humanity is called both to rule and to nurture God’s creation. However they disagree about:

- the causes of global warming (see above);
- the best way to assist the poor (ECI wants to halt rising sea-levels and changes to rainfall patterns, whereas ISA prefers the kind of abundant economic activity that will raise standards of living); and
- the way to read the scientific evidence (too big to summarise here!).

To a lesser extent, they appear to have a more subtle disagreement about Genesis:

- Genesis 1 emphasises humanity’s mandate for a monarch-like dominion over the creation. The commands to ‘subdue’ and ‘rule’ in Genesis 1:28 are very strong words (so much so that they offend

some environmentalists). But does this command envisage us bending every aspect of the earth to our will, or does it acknowledge the way humans are able to meet their basic needs from the earth (as vv29-30 imply)? Both groups seem to lay a different weight upon the concept of ‘dominion’, and to draw different conclusions from it.

- Genesis 2 emphasises humanity’s mandate to work the earth and watch over it. The man, and later the woman, remain embedded in and dependent upon the earth from which they are taken. The ECI and the NAE therefore speak of ‘creation care’ to describe this relationship, whereas the ISA speaks of ‘stewardship’ to describe it. Again, the emphasis is subtly different: we ‘care’ for things as an end in themselves, but we are ‘stewards’ of things that serve some other end.

We hope this brief outline is a useful snapshot of some of the issues at stake. Time and ability permitting, we hope in future briefings to survey some of the scientific debates about climate change, the technical debates surrounding some of the solutions proposed for it, and the economic debates about helping the world’s poor.

But we need to end on a negative note, and oppose two claims made by the authors of the letter opposing Richard Cizik and the ECI’s and NAE’s stance on climate change. There are useful moments of caution in this letter, as when it warns the NAE not to speak too quickly about matters beyond its scientific expertise. There is also some hurt reflected in the letter, and perhaps some apologies are needed if the NAE spokesman has spoken as intemperately as the letter’s authors claim he has done.

However when its authors assert that the NAE is ‘using the global warming controversy to shift the emphasis away from the great moral issues of our time,’ they add that ‘the great moral issues of our time’ are ‘notably the sanctity of human life, the integrity of marriage and the teaching of sexual abstinence and morality to our children.’ But of course if Jesus really is Lord of all, it makes little theological sense to restrict the ‘great moral issues’ to issues of sexual morality. While we at the SIE would agree that these are important moral issues, *evangelical* ethics is about bringing the good news of Jesus’ lordship to all areas of life. Just as Jesus’ lordship is good news for our understanding and practise of sex, so can it be good news for our use of the earth and our relationship with the poor.

That observation brings us to the most terrible failure of this letter, when it approvingly quotes *USA Today*’s definition that ‘evangelical’ was and is ‘the label of choice of Christians with conservative views on politics, economics and biblical morality.’ But Jesus and his apostles know of no such thing in their announcement of the *euangelion*, the ‘gospel’ or ‘good news’. The good news does not rest upon any political persuasion, economic theory, or sexual ethics. It is that the kingdom of God has come, subjecting all and every political, economic, sexual and environmental view to Jesus Christ, that he might lead us to forgiveness, peace and freedom in all of these areas and more. We think, then, that the understanding of ‘evangelical’ supposed by the authors of this letter, is not evangelical at all.

*Andrew Cameron & Lisa Watts,
for the Social Issues Executive, Diocese of Sydney*

Further Reading:

Brief summary of the dispute:

http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-evangelicals10mar10_0_7299079_full_story?coll=1

Proposed debate on the ‘great moral issues’ claim: <http://www.beliefnet.com/blogs/godspolitics/2007/03/jim-wallis-big-debate.html>.

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