

Why Global Warming Means Colder Weather (and why Christians should care)

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[*Note:* A somewhat shorter, edited version of this article appeared in *Light and Life* (July/August 2007, pp. 10-11) and provoked considerable criticism and discussion in subsequent issues.]

It's a cold Sunday morning in early spring. At church I greet someone and the person, referring to the cold weather, says, "I'm ready for global warming!"

An innocent pleasantry. What makes it funny, of course, is the crazy contradiction. The climate is supposed to be warming—but the weather is cold!

Because people don't understand global warming and other aspects of climate change, they make it a laughing matter. Global warming isn't serious, people think; we can dismiss it with jokes.

When we do this, we miss critical issues of Christian discipleship.

What is Global Warming?

A little basic information can help. Yes, earth's climate is warming as never before. Earth has a worrisome fever, and the cause is human-made. In the past century (as someone has observed), humankind has scooped up the carbon, mostly oil and coal, laid down in the earth over millennia and spewed it into the air through millions of chimneys and tailpipes.

The year 2007 was the year the climate-change debate essentially ended; the year governments and companies from General Electric to Wal-Mart understood the urgency of switching away from fossil fuels in order to stop dumping carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. And the year they began doing something about it.

Yes, human-caused global warming is real. But it's tricky. Climate is hugely complex. Weather and climate form one of the most complex systems in the universe.

So "global warming" doesn't mean what it might sound like (and in fact is not the best term for the problem). It doesn't mean the weather will steadily get warmer all around the globe. What it means, instead, is the disruption of "normal" weather patterns and more and more extremes of both hot and cold.

Here's an illustration. Weather is a system, and so is the heating and cooling apparatus in your home. Imagine the weather outside is very hot, and your house is starting to get too warm. The outdoor temperature reaches 95 degrees.

But suppose your child, without your knowing it, turns on the air conditioner and sets it down to 60 degrees. After awhile you're feeling too cold. You're mystified. How can it be getting colder inside when it's getting hotter outside?

Then you discover what's gone wrong. Things make sense once you understand.

Global warming is like that. The more global warming kicks in, the more unpredictable the weather—too cold some days, then later too hot. Just like a person with a high fever suffering chills.

Here are some of the things global warming will mean, guaranteed: More frequent and more erratic storms, canceled flights at airports, more frequent and more severe floods, the disappearance of some species of birds and animals. Then the ripple effects: Rising insurance premiums, higher food prices due to crop losses, increased millions of refugees, more wars over scarce resources. And that's just for starters.

A Christian's Response

So what's the point, especially for Christian discipleship? Here are four key pointers:

First, *we should seek to understand the basic meaning of global warming*, especially from a Christian perspective. Christians should be informed. That's easy to do today, given the mushrooming of good solid information on climate change over the past years.

We should be alert, however, to well-funded phony organizations that claim to give information on climate change but really spread misinformation to undermine effective remedial action. Jeffrey Sachs, author of the widely acclaimed book *The End of Poverty*, suggests we look at the reputable website, *HYPERLINK "http://www.nextgenerationearth.org" www.nextgenerationearth.org* to get quick facts.

Second, we recall that *the earth is the Lord's, not ours*. God has an “everlasting covenant” with the earth (Genesis 9:16). Genesis 9:12 speaks of God's covenant between himself, Noah and his family, “and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come”—a three-way covenant between God, humankind, and the whole earth, with all its creatures.

So God has commissioned men and women to be his stewards. We don't own the earth or its creatures or its weather; God does. We are to take care of the good earth, not spoil it. God's command to humanity is to care for the garden (Genesis 2:15). He has never canceled that stewardship charge given to Adam and Eve.

In other words, God cares about the earth (his beautiful handiwork, after all), and so should we. So discipleship is stewardship—not just of time and money, but of the whole creation. This is basic teaching throughout Scripture—just look at what the Bible says about “the earth,” start to finish.

Theologies and books that say we should have no concern for the earth are unbiblical—just plain wrong. But doesn't the Bible say the earth and all its elements will be burned up? That's what some translations of 2 Peter 2:10 imply. In Scripture, however, fire usually is a symbol of cleansing and refining. John Calvin commented, “Heaven and earth will be cleansed by fire so that they may be fit for the kingdom of Christ.” Here Calvin and John Wesley agree. Wesley says, “Destruction is not deliverance. Whatever is destroyed, or

ceases to be, is not delivered at all”; and no “part of the creation” will be destroyed.

God is not in the destroying business but is in the refining, restoring business.

So when you think global warming, think Christian stewardship. Think personal responsibility to God. Think of Jesus’ parables of the talents.

Third, *we should remember the particular biblical concern for the poor, “the widow, the orphan, the alien,”* because these will suffer most from global warming. They are the most vulnerable, in part because globally the poor live mostly in vulnerable places, like the low coastal areas of Bangladesh. The climate problem is a human problem, especially for children and the poor.

Finally, *we can take practical steps to help reverse the negative effects of climate change.* Here are six simple things we can do: (1) Switch to low-energy, longer-lasting light bulbs in our homes—one good place to start. (2) Recycle everything that can be recycled, at home and at church, from cereal boxes and toilet-paper rolls to scrap metal. (3) Turn off lights and appliances when they’re not needed. (4) Find out what political candidates’ views are on creation care. (5) Praise and worship God for his good creation. (6) Read one good book on stewardship, such as Dr. Matthew Sleeth’s *Serve God, Save the Planet* (Zondervan, 2006) or *Redeeming Creation: The Biblical Basis for Environmental Stewardship*, by Van Dyke, Mahan, Sheldon, and Brand (InterVarsity, 1996).

These are some of the dimensions of practical holiness. Such steps not only honor God; they save lives. This is good discipleship, “reasonable worship” (Rom. 12:1).

Oh, and one more thing. *Love* the naysayers and the skeptics until they’re won over finally by the facts, by love, or by both.

(For a more in-depth treatment of the matters covered here, especially the biblical questions involved, see Howard A. Snyder, “Salvation Means Creation Healed,” *Asbury Journal* [Spring, 2007], and other articles in that issue.)

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