

Evangelicals Should be Wary of the Politicization and Bad Science of Global Warming Alarmism

A Fact Sheet Provided by the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance

In recent months, the news has carried a spate of stories about Christians embracing the cause of global warming. These news stories highlight some evangelical leaders who have endorsed alarmist claims in their public statements, urged political action on climate change, and even screened Al Gore's movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*, in their churches. It's no surprise that some politicians are welcoming converts to the cause, or that the news media is making much of a supposed split in the "religious right" that could weaken its political influence.

Tellingly, not nearly as much attention has been paid to more cautious statements by Evangelicals who reject the claims of climate alarmism. The Interfaith Stewardship Alliance's [*Call to Truth, Prudence, and Protection of the Poor*](#),¹ for instance, provides a detailed biblical and scientific response to the much-heralded *Evangelical Climate Initiative*, but though it was endorsed by half again

as many scholars, many with relevant expertise, it went largely unremarked by left-leaning pundits.² It seems that Christians who embrace an extreme environmental platform make headlines, but those (for example, the National Association of Evangelicals and the Southern Baptist Convention) who support more reasoned, careful attempts at Biblical discernment rarely do.³ Given the disproportionate attention lavished on the former it would be easy to assume that Evangelicals are flocking to support measures like carbon taxes, energy rationing, and the Kyoto Protocol. This is simply not the case.

We must act prudently on politically hot topics that disproportionately impact our poorest neighbors, particularly when the science is not settled.

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Much more than partisan politics is at stake in the discussion about global warming. When, on the basis of bad science, Christians begin to support measures that will suppress the world's economies, not only are the

¹ See the [*Call to Truth*](#) and summarizing "[Open Letter to the Signers of the ECI](#)" at www.InterfaithStewardship.org.

² A full list of the over 130 signers (including climatologists, geologists, atmospheric physicists, biologists, and other scientists; environmental and other economists; and theologians, pastors and other Christian leaders) is available beginning on page 3 of the "[Open Letter](#)," which can be found at www.InterfaithStewardship.org.

The signers of the *ECI* were undoubtedly well-intentioned, but at least some seem to have been unaware of the document's scientific and economic ramifications. One eventually withdrew his name and signed the *Call to Truth*; another, the Rev. Dr. Joel Hunter, reportedly insisted, "The moral command to take care of the earth in Genesis 2:15 really doesn't need to wait on scientific conclusion. We need to do this regardless of what the science of it is. We need to take care of the earth and do what we can to stop the pollution and accumulation of greenhouse gases, because it's just the right thing to do." It seems difficult to square such a statement with biblical prudence.

³ For example, the Executive Committee of the 30 million member National Association of Evangelicals' stated that there is "ongoing debate regarding the causes and origins of global warming" and affirmed a "lack of consensus among the evangelical community on this issue." In June the 16 million member Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution at its Annual Meeting rejecting the use of environmentalism "as a wedge issue to divide the evangelical community...based on questionable science...resulting in less economic opportunity for our poorest citizens."

church's reputation and voice in the public square compromised but millions of the world's poor stand to suffer the direct consequences. Little thought seems to be given by advocates of strict climate change policies to the fact that affordable energy, which allows our poorest global neighbors to benefit from the global economy, will be made unaffordable by mandatory caps on energy production.

American Christians have a responsibility to think carefully and act prudently when confronting politically hot topics like global warming. The science of climate change is far from settled, and there are many misrepresentations of fact in movies such as Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*. With so much on the line Christians need to be armed with the very best information available; this fact sheet aims to help.

The Hype

When reporters, commentators, Hollywood script writers and other opinion-makers refer to "global warming," they almost invariably assume that it is caused by human activity and that its effects will be catastrophic. Despite very limited empirical evidence supporting it (and much to the contrary), the dogma of catastrophic, human-induced climate change is rarely challenged or its proponents questioned. Scientists, economists, ethicists and other educated observers with reservations about this theory are usually ignored or dismissed as "skeptics." Unlike science (which relies on facts and values skepticism), the global warming issue is fraught with hyperbole, emotion, and personal attack. Even worse, it lacks the civility that should characterize serious debate, let alone the humility and charitable assumptions about opponents that Christians should bring to the public square.

An Inconvenient Truth is just the most recent, prominent example of how the issue has become distorted. Most public discussion, like this movie, is emotionally charged and fraught with hyperbole, but lacks scientific basis or consideration of the implications that energy policy holds for the world's poor.

The Science

An Inconvenient Truth, billed as a scientific presentation of the causes and effects of global warming, is in fact a powerful emotional argument that relies on exaggerated and distorted scientific claims. Its conclusion, that humans are warming the globe beyond a theoretical point of no return, is not supported by the facts. Consider the following examples:

Misreading or misrepresenting the evidence

- The movie makes much of the Arctic's recent warming but ignores historical periods of warming that meet or exceed today's temperatures—as recently as the 1930s.
- It assumes that rising insurance payments for natural disasters like hurricanes, floods, and wildfires are evidence of global warming, ignoring the role of increased development in high-risk areas near coastlines and wilderness forests.
- It claims that the rate of global warming is accelerating rapidly, when the rate has been constant for the past 30 years—roughly 0.17°C per decade.

- It states that U.S. tornados occurred more frequently in 2004 than ever before, ignoring the role of more sensitive equipment able to detect smaller storms. (When this is controlled for, it becomes clear that tornado frequency has declined for over fifty years).⁴

Overstating the case

- It overstates the case for linking recent warming and the frequency and severity of tropical storms.
- It blames global warming for Europe's killer 2003 heat wave, which climatologists agree was caused by unrelated anomalous circulation in the atmosphere.

Ignoring evidence that doesn't support its conclusions

- It cites a three-year study as support for claiming that the Antarctic is losing ice mass, while failing to mention a study of the preceding ten years that found just the reverse.⁵
- It warns of "significant and alarming structural changes" in the submarine base of West Antarctic Ice Sheet (WAIS), but fails to explain that the melting and retreat of the WAIS "grounding line" has been going on for thousands of years. At the rate of retreat observed in the late 1990s, the WAIS would disappear in about 7,000 years.

The problems with *An Inconvenient Truth* (of which these are just a few) illustrate the common myths that prevail in the public discussion about global warming. Several articles that refute and debunk the scenario presented in the movie in more detail, as well as other misperceptions about climate change, are listed at the end of this fact sheet. The articles, along with an informative video by the Friends of Science Society, can also be found at www.InterfaithStewardship.org/pages/factsheet.php.

The Church

Beginning with Adam and Eve, God's people have throughout history sought to steward creation for His glory. Every age presents new challenges and opportunities, and our era is no exception. Children of modernity, we are marked by remarkable self-confidence in the face of inscrutable complexity and are easily seduced by hubris. Given our love of action and addiction to crises, our response to climate change alarmism requires wisdom, humility and prudence.

Here are several steps each of us can take:

1. Pray for wisdom and humility as you examine this issue. Be aware of your own temptations: alarmism, for example, appeals to worry and misplaced self-confidence can mask pride. Ungodly motives are contrary to Scripture and to prudent action.

⁴ When counting only Category F-3 or greater tornados (which have been tracked for decades) there has been a downward trend since 1950.

⁵ Isabella Velicogna and John Wahr (University of Colorado) are cited for finding an overall loss in Antarctic ice mass during 2002-2005, but a study by University of Missouri professor Curt Davis and colleagues that found an overall ice mass gain during 1992-2003 is ignored.

2. Study the Scriptures. Our natural environment and responsibility to steward it are addressed in God's Word. (Genesis 1-3, Job 38-41, Psalm 104, Romans 8:19-23, and Colossians 1:15-18 provide a good starting point.)
3. Read up on environmental stewardship, including the topic of global warming. There are many excellent books and articles; because of his commitment to Scripture, Dr. E. Calvin Beisner's *Where Garden Meets Wilderness* is an excellent place to start.
4. Share this document with family, friends, and church acquaintances who have expressed their concern about environmental stewardship. Perhaps this can provide a starting point for constructive dialogue.
5. Stay informed. Individuals can keep up to date by subscribing to the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance newsletter; churches are invited to join the Cornwall Network, an association of congregations who endorse and promote the conclusions of the Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship.⁶

Consider how damaging it is when churches give bad science and poorly thought-out policy recommendations their stamp of approval! At their best Christians have historically answered the call to speak truth to society by resisting the prevailing prejudices of their times, instead championing Biblical standards of truth, justice, and mercy. Their leadership in the fights for the abolition of slavery and for civil rights bears witness to this important role. Evangelicals and people of faith everywhere should be strongly concerned when some churches become co-opted for a political cause that is, ultimately, damaging to a basic concern of Scripture: care for the poor.

On balance, *An Inconvenient Truth* is to climate science what *The Da Vinci Code* is to church history—speculative, full of exaggerations, and calculated to entertain, but of very little real value in discovering the truth. Much of its data is misleading and one-sided, and many of the key findings on which its conclusions rest are just plain wrong.

Hype gets more attention than does prudence. Thinking Christians should know better.

Additional Resources

- [Interfaith Stewardship Alliance](http://www.interfaithstewardship.org) (<http://www.interfaithstewardship.org>)
- [A Call to Truth, Prudence, and Protection of the Poor: An Evangelical Response to Global Warming](http://www.interfaithstewardship.org/pdf/CalltoTruth.pdf) (<http://www.interfaithstewardship.org/pdf/CalltoTruth.pdf>; the list of 130+ endorsements begins on page 3 of the [Open Letter](#), next item)
- [The ISA's Open Letter to the Signers of the Evangelical Climate Initiative](http://www.interfaithstewardship.org/pdf/OpenLetter.pdf) (<http://www.interfaithstewardship.org/pdf/OpenLetter.pdf>)

⁶ The Cornwall Network, *Cornwall Declaration*, newsletter subscriptions and archives are all available at www.InterfaithStewardship.org.

- [An Examination of the Scientific, Ethical and Theological Implications of Climate Change Policy](http://www.interfaithstewardship.org/pdf/ISA_Climate_Change.pdf) (http://www.interfaithstewardship.org/pdf/ISA_Climate_Change.pdf)
- “[Greener than Thou](http://www.worldmag.com/articles/11745),” a *World Magazine* article on the global warming debate among Christians with quotes from ECI signatories (<http://www.worldmag.com/articles/11745>)
- ISA [letter requesting the National Association of Evangelicals](http://www.interfaithstewardship.org/pdf/NAE-appeal_letter.pdf) acknowledge the lack of consensus (http://www.interfaithstewardship.org/pdf/NAE-appeal_letter.pdf)
- Text of the National Association of Evangelicals Executive Committee response: “Recognizing the ongoing debate regarding the causes and origins of global warming, and understanding the lack of consensus among the evangelical community on this issue, the NAE Executive Committee, while affirming our love for the Creator and His creation, directs the NAE staff to stand by and not exceed in any fashion our approved and adopted statements concerning the environment contained within the *Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility*.” (The NAE’s [For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility](http://www.nae.net/images/civic_responsibility2.pdf) can be accessed at http://www.nae.net/images/civic_responsibility2.pdf.)
- Southern Baptist Convention’s [Resolution on Environmentalism and Evangelicals](http://www.sbcannualmeeting.org/sbc06/resolutions/sbcresolution-06.asp?ID=8) (<http://www.sbcannualmeeting.org/sbc06/resolutions/sbcresolution-06.asp?ID=8>)
- [Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship](http://www.interfaithstewardship.org/pages/cornwall.php) (<http://www.interfaithstewardship.org/pages/cornwall.php>)
- [Cornwall Network](http://www.interfaithstewardship.org/pages/cornwallnetwork.php) (<http://www.interfaithstewardship.org/pages/cornwallnetwork.php>)
- “[Energy, Environment and Economics: A Guide for State Legislators, The Fourth Edition](http://www.dr5.org/2006EEEBook.pdf)” (<http://www.dr5.org/2006EEEBook.pdf>), published by the American Legislative Exchange Council, 2006

Other articles about *An Inconvenient Truth*

- “[An Inconvenient Truth: Climate Change is Indeed a Moral Issue](http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=4938)” (<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=4938>)
- “[Al Gore's An Inconvenient Truth: One-sided, Misleading, Exaggerated, Speculative, Wrong](http://www.cei.org/pdf/5539.pdf)” (<http://www.cei.org/pdf/5539.pdf>)
- “[Questions for Al Gore](http://www.tcsdaily.com/article.aspx?id=052506C)” (<http://www.tcsdaily.com/article.aspx?id=052506C>, by *Call to Truth* co-author Roy Spencer)