

CHAPTER 21

Caring for Creation: The Evangelical's Guide



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Summary Understanding creation care as prolife helps the Evangelical and Catholic communities relate to environmental concerns as more than interest in fauna and flora, and as a primary matter of life for our children, the Majority World's poor, and even many of the economically disadvantaged in the United States, whose homes border some of our country's most toxic air, foulest water, and most polluted soil.

Introduction

The religious landscape is changing in the United States. Today, only 43% of Americans identify as white and Christian, in comparison with 81% in 1976. Yet even amid these shifting demographics, white Evangelicals still comprise 35% of the Republican Party (Cox & Jones, 2017). Together, Evangelicals and Catholics represent approximately 28% of the American populace, yet they consistently vote in disproportionately high numbers. Over 80% of white Evangelicals voted for Mr. Trump in 2016, representing 28% of actual voters. More broadly, the last three US presidential elections saw prolife voters average 45% of the electorate (Evangelicals 26%, Catholics 19%), and for many of these voters, their antiabortion (prolife) stance overrode all other electoral considerations.

With the American populace more conservative than progressive, it is not surprising that climate change continues to be a polarizing issue. Exacerbating the issue is the failure to recognize that values are the driving force behind these differing ideologies. Most attempts to mobilize Americans for a bright future utilizing clean energy and addressing climate change utilize language and value appeals that are inconsistent with the core values of conservatives. *The Righteous Mind: Why*

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Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion by Jonathan Haidt provides insight into how people formulate their moral foundations (Haidt, 2012).

Haidt's research on moral frames compares favorably with our experience in using messages geared toward the Evangelical community. These frames—tested in over 1000 presentations in churches, town halls, and Christian colleges around the nation—have been used to drive our education, which has resulted in over 3,500,000 prolife Evangelical Christians acting on climate, clean energy, and other related initiatives within the past 3 years.

Values/Morality-Based Messaging

Attempting to prove the science and pushing for government-based solutions as the major goal remain problematic for our community. While anecdotal, the following encounter described by one of our Creation Care Champions typifies our hypothesis.

Yesterday, I had an experience that was simultaneously so strange and yet so emblematic when it comes to encountering fellow Evangelical Christians on the issue of climate change.

The context of the situation was our town's monthly "First Friday" event, which is staged April through October, in Warrenton, VA, to stage a kind of block party between 5:00 and 9:00 p.m. Local craft and food vendors and all sorts of civic organizations set up booths along the street to advertise and sell their products or to publicize their organizations and causes. For the past several years we have participated in First Friday.

While manning the booth, I engaged a local pastor in conversation over climate change. The man leads a well-established local congregation and as we entered a conversation he resorted to many of the highly predictable tropes of climate change denial, e.g., "the science isn't settled," "there's no consensus," "it's a liberal political plot," "God granted us dominion over creation," and "the oceans aren't warming." On each point I summoned substantial and substantive reference to either publicly verifiable empirical data or actual reference to Scripture to counter his propositions, at which point he would immediately move on to the next denial trope without any rebuttal to the response I'd given him.

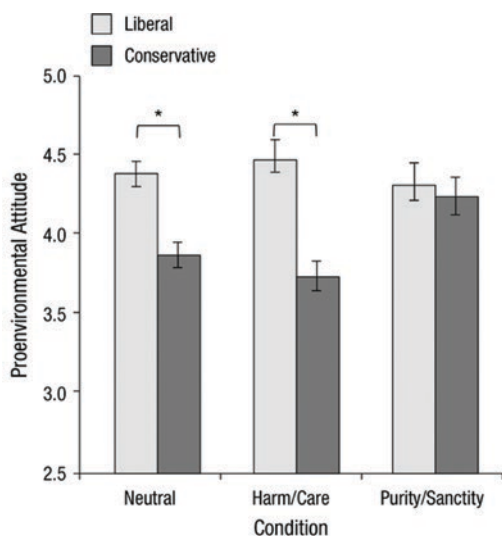
But, when we got to the matter of the warming oceans, why they are warming, the role that warming plays in modifying global climate patterns, and the mountain of empirical data that directly and unequivocally links this warming to the rise in atmospheric greenhouse gases resulting from increasing consumption of hydrocarbon fuels, things started down a path into certifiable weirdness.

At first, he flatly denied the cause of the atypical rise in ocean temperature as a thoroughly documented unnatural phenomenon with more than 70 years of direct observations correlating it with a commensurate rise in atmospheric CO₂, which is further correlated with increased hydrocarbon fuel consumption—i.e., a verifiable "given 'A,' then 'B,' then 'C'" chain of observation leading to causation. He then demonstrated no understanding of the relationship between climate and weather, citing that it was "hot" when he visited Africa and "it's always been hot in Africa" so there was no truth to what I just told him regarding what we're seeing in the oceans and the linkage to what we're seeing play out in climate. Then, as I had to busy myself with other tasks at the booth, he delivered his final assessment that, contrary to what he just asserted, the oceans are in fact warming after all, but the cause is that Hell is expanding and that is what is heating up the oceans, and that he could factually substantiate that from Scripture.

Some have asserted that simply being more winsome and compelling in communicating the science is the key to overcoming the climate conundrum in the United States. However, as exemplified in the story from our grassroots champion, this assumes both that science is well understood by the general population and that scientific evidence has an equally weighted value in our decision-making processes. However, that supposition is not correct for many in the Evangelical community.

Instead, reframing climate change and clean energy within an existing moral framework and adding individual action help to engage a much wider audience (Wolsko, Ariceaga, & Seiden, 2016). When solutions are presented as involving multiple sectors and actions, and are framed according to existing values and priorities, many previously disengaged individuals willingly engage and act on climate change. Change depends on engaging existing faith and moral frameworks. These frames must include children's health (unborn and born), the potential harm to future generations, business opportunities, efficient and limited government action, and hope. Solutions must also include practical and meaningful individual engagement.

Sanctity (the sacredness of life) and purity (being morally untainted) remain the top moral values for the conservative community. Therefore, any meaningful communication and education in our community must focus on these two primary concerns. And the best and most common messages for our community, as well as in the Catholic Communion, center on life (Feinberg & Willer, 2012).



Source: Feinberg and Willer (2012)

Creation Care: It's a Matter of Life

Modern man [sic] has been upsetting the balance of nature and the problem is drastic and urgent. It is not just a matter of aesthetics, nor is the problem only future; the quality of life has already diminished for many modern men. (Schaeffer, 1970)

Most people live lives as a seesaw, trying to balance work, family, values, and faith. Individuals change only when everyday life balance and values are impacted in such a way as to upset that tipping point; only as issues touch the center of our being and who we care most about are changes initiated and actions taken. When issues like climate change arise, it's very easy to dismiss them or deny them because it feels like one more additional stress on our already hectic everyday lives.

Most Americans understand that climate change is real and are concerned about it. But most still see climate change as a faraway threat, in both time and place, and as something that threatens the future of polar bears but not necessarily people. (The Medical Society Consortium on Climate and Health, 2017)

In introducing our theme, "Creation Care: It's A Matter of Life," one must be cognizant that for many US Evangelicals, there is a psychological distance between the impacts of climate change and their everyday lives. And recognizing this reality helps to explain why previous education attempts have failed and have allowed denial to exacerbate climate change inaction, as described by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway's book, *Merchants of Doubt*.

The Evangelical Climate Initiative (2006), The Cape Town Commitment (2010) by the Lausanne Movement (founded by Billy Graham & John Stott), and the *Encyclical Letter, Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home* (2015) all make persuasive biblical and moral arguments for addressing climate change. These documents remain central to a biblical understanding of creation care. However, all three documents most strongly highlight climate impacts in the Majority World. None would disagree that most impacts are already occurring in the developing world, and these statements address what should be a biblical priority; however, for conservative Evangelical Christians, it has provided an easy way to disassociate themselves from the threat. The perception of distance with respect to climate impacts allows climate change to be disregarded as irrelevant to one's family or to one's immediate concerns.

Polling yields conflicting results on the impacts of *Laudato Si'*. The higher impact end suggests increases in climate concern among American Catholics of 15% and perhaps as much as 13% among American Evangelicals (Mills, Rabe, & Borick, 2015). However, other polling indicates little or no impact of the encyclical on US Catholic and Evangelical thought. Perhaps the most telling survey came from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, which discovered that 11 months after *Laudato Si'* was published, only 32% of Catholics and 28% of Evangelicals had ever heard of or read the encyclical (CARA, 2016).

What matters is not the movement or the polling but how climate change threats and opportunities are made real to Evangelicals and others in the conservative faith community. And for that we must return to the message of life.

The Evangelical Environmental Network understands that a consistent, holistic prolife position requires care and concern for all life, and this perspective reflects others in our community as well. As *Focus on The Family* put it recently, “pro-life is not a political statement, it’s a way of life” (The Dignity of Life, [n.d.](#)). In a National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) statement on end-of-life concerns, the NAE states, “we are pro-life from womb to the tomb” (National Association of Evangelicals, 2014). This whole-life view expresses the best of our theological tradition, and it certainly reflects Catholic social teaching as well. The unborn child is very important to us, but so is each child of God at every stage of life.

If we believe Jesus’s words in John 10:10—“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”—or, as other translations phrase it, “abundant life” or “life abundantly”—how can Christians not be concerned about quality of life? Who would not pray for our children or grandchildren to have a high quality of life? An abundant life includes health, faith, family, and a fulfilling career in serving God through loving our neighbors. Without doubt, prolife should be about not ending pregnancy, but it must also be about assuring the right to have the opportunity for abundant life. We must have a whole-life theology that cares for the unborn and born alike.

As prolife Evangelicals, we want children to be born healthy, unhindered by the ravages of pollution even before they take their first breath. The medical community has long known the environmental impacts on our unborn children. The once-held belief that a pregnant mother gives her developing child complete chemical protection is untrue. One of the body’s protective shields against brain damage, called “the blood–brain barrier,” is not fully developed until after the first 3 years of life. Thus, in the unborn child, toxins can cross this incomplete barrier and accumulate in the brain, causing developmental disabilities and brain damage, resulting in lowered intelligence and learning problems. One study found that “the resulting loss of intelligence causes diminished economic productivity that persists over the entire lifetime of these children” (Trasande, Landrigan, & Schechter, 2005). In economic terms, the poisoning of our unborn children’s brains costs between US\$60 billion and US\$106 billion in the United States every year (Trasande & Liu, 2011).

Besides the critical neurodevelopment that occurs before birth, the other major reason babies in the womb are so vulnerable is bioaccumulation. Chemicals readily pass from the mother through the placenta. Unfortunately, a developing fetus, unlike the mother, cannot eliminate toxins through normal biological processes. In fact, one method by which a pregnant woman’s body removes chemicals is by passing them into her uterus.

Recent studies have shown that smog, air toxins, and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) like hydrocarbons, benzene, and formaldehyde have a disproportionate impact upon life in the womb. Stacy et al. at the University Of Pittsburgh found evidence that low birth weight in babies was associated with proximity to unconventional natural gas wells in Butler County, PA (Stacy et al., 2015), and McKenzie

et al. at the Colorado School of Public Health published peer-reviewed medical findings linking birth defects to methane production (McKenzie et al., 2014).

The American Lung Association's *State of the Air 2019* report stated that more than four in 10 Americans, approximately 43.3% of the population, live in counties that have monitored unhealthy ozone and/or particle pollution, and 141 million people live in counties with unhealthy levels of pollution. The latest childhood epidemics with strong links to petrochemicals and fossil fuel energy—that is, asthma, autism, attention deficit–hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and allergies—impact as many as one in three children in the United States (Bock & Stauth, 2007). Dr. Philippe Grandjean states, “We are facing massive prevalence of brain dysfunction, autism, and many other signs of ill health due to development insults. Because the exposures to toxic chemicals happen worldwide, the adverse effects are appearing now as a silent pandemic” (Grandjean, 2013).

In the 1960s, a woman living in the United States had a 1:20 chance of developing breast cancer in her lifetime; now the frequency is 1:8. Unfortunately, the breast cancer news is not good. According to Dr. Philip Rosenberg at the National Cancer Institute, breast cancer rates are expected to increase by 30% by 2030 (Rosenberg, Barker, & Anderson, 2015). The number of women diagnosed with breast cancer will soar (in the United States) from 283,000 in 2011 to 441,000 in 2030. The one glimmer of light in the research shows a slightly lower mortality rate due to more effective treatment.

While the modern medical field understands a great deal about breast cancer, much is still unknown. Doctors know that breast cancer rates are higher in the developed world than in the Majority World. They also know that only 30% of women with breast cancer have known risk factors such as genetics, late menopause, or having children later in life. The causes of 70% of breast cancer diagnoses are, as yet, unclear. Nevertheless, a growing body of research points to the environment, and especially suspect are chemicals and plastics that act like hormones in the human body. A large body of plastics such as bisphenol-A (BPA), high-density polyethylene (HDPE) and a host of other resins used in plastic bags and packaging (including bottles labeled BPA free), other plastics, and common fertilizers and pesticides all mimic estrogen (Yang, Yaniger, Jordan, Klein, & Bittner, 2011). These same chemicals have also been linked to potential male reproductive issues, including low sperm counts, malformed genitalia, and an increased frequency of undescended testicles (Jeng, 2014).

We are poisoning ourselves and our children, but, unfortunately, many in our pews have not yet made the connection. Until our communities understand and identify the problems using the language of their existing values, our communities have no way to internalize, accept, and act on the threats facing our children.

In a world where our children are poisoned by pollution, climate change is adding insult to injury. With rising temperatures, smog will get worse—impacting those with asthma and making life more difficult. Dengue fever (also known as bone-break fever because of the pain it causes)—a mosquito-borne disease never native to the United States—is now present in Florida, Texas, and Hawaii, at least in part because of our changing climate and warming temperatures. And in Pennsylvania,

my home state, Lyme disease has become almost epidemic as a result of earlier springs and later autumns. Just recently, the Centers for Disease Control stated that the number of counties with high rates of Lyme disease—including counties in Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, Connecticut, and Massachusetts—increased by more than 320%.

Lyme disease and other health outcomes offer the best opportunity for awareness and engagement in our Evangelical community. One could add related outcomes from extreme weather or any number of health catalysts. The critical takeaway is this: for the threat of climate change to be accepted, it must become real and personal. As numerous studies and simple human nature testify, until people recognize local impacts, the reality of crises in other regions or countries is easily discounted.

The Bible as the Source of Moral Value

If prolife values and children's health are the emotional key to opening the door for addressing creation care and climate, the Bible remains the door itself. Throughout the history of Protestantism, and especially in its Evangelical wing, the Bible has always been our primary rule of faith. Sola Scriptura remains our central theological statement. All Christians have open access to the Bible. While doctrine, tradition, experience, and scholarship play important roles depending on individual denominations or congregations, sharing Scripture's concern for creation care is paramount. Although it must be admitted that biblical interpretations do cause a fair amount of chaos, the Bible remains the basis for life in Christ. And, as such, scriptural biblical knowledge among US Evangelicals remains woefully lacking.

Some time ago, I led a community men's morning bible study in a conservative area of the United States. The teaching was based on the following:

For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:16–20 (New International Version))

The key verse is “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.” This Scripture tells Christians that we are not the owners of the Earth. The Earth, God's creation, was formed by and for God—by and for Jesus. Unfortunately, too many Christians, especially Evangelicals, do not understand the imperative to “tend the garden.”

As a case in point, immediately after sharing my thoughts and during a time set aside for reflection and discussion, one gentleman said, “I've read the Bible all my life, and I never saw this Scripture in the light of caring for the Earth.”

Humanity has been given a precious gift, a planet that can provide for all our needs if we only follow God and use it wisely. Just as we are called to love our neighbor, not subjugate him or her, the same applies to creation. Never does the Bible support the Earth being trashed or misused. Genesis states just the opposite. The Earth supplies the necessities for biological life; God designed creation for exactly this purpose. God created the garden and was the first gardener. For life to prosper, humans are to empower the garden to flourish. We have been clearly given the responsibility, being created in God's image, to reflect his image—God's presence—by caring for creation.

The sad reality is that our stewardship reflects our relationship with God. Upon a close reading of Genesis 3, we understand that original sin was the temptation to be god-like, to be in control. When we look back at human history, our principal failing always seems to be the desire to be in charge, combined with the inability to live within God-given limits. The Genesis account describes a universal order with God as the loving and very good creator, humans cast in his image as partners in maintaining creation, and all creation living in a sustainable relationship.

Our desire to be in control, however, breaks the order, attempts to bypass the limits, and injures our relationship with God, leading to a broken and unsustainable world. Each time we use more than we need or consume greater than our share, we perpetuate our brokenness, support our vanity, and continue disregarding God's limits. This distorts the creation and impacts all.

Throughout the Old Testament, God defines and provides deliberate instructions for tending the Earth. Although most Christians have not made the connection, the Bible provides definitive mandates to live in a reciprocal relationship with the nonhuman creation. In Deuteronomy, Numbers, and Leviticus, God gives clear instruction for Sabbath rest for the land, indications of crop rotation, and animal husbandry. There are strict ordinances regarding farming, livestock management, and land use in general. These conditions define the parameters for living in relationship with God, people, and the Earth in an integrated approach to abun

If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees their fruit. (Leviticus 26:3–4 (New International Version))

Overcoming our sin, our failure, requires a renewed study of Scripture and the resources to help both clergy and laity grasp the critical importance of creation care as an act of discipleship in following our Risen Lord. A renewed understanding of the Biblical mandate for creation care is central to our relationship with God, each other, and all creation. As John Stott—one of the great Evangelical leaders of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—wrote in his last book, *The Radical Disciple*, creation care is one of the “neglected aspects of our calling” (Stott, 2010).

Hope

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13 (New International Version))

Hope should be the paramount aspiration for any Christian. We believe in a God who healed the sick, who proclaimed that the greatest commandment was to love, and who overcame death to restore humanity and all creation. However, hope—while solidly based in faith—must have tangible and physical realities. One need only consider the well-known Biblical passage of “Doubting Thomas” as an example.

Compounding our inaction is the doom so readily served up by many in the climate space. This is not to minimize climate threats or impacts, but gloom instills doom, and combining the two in the human heart often leads to paralyzing fear. Climate impacts are already bad, but we must not make them worse by spreading apathy and cynicism. Strides have already been made in addressing climate, but to mobilize the world, a real prescription of hope is required (Ojala, 2012).

Climate change is the greatest moral challenge of our generation, as each of God's children worldwide is impacted. However, properly addressing climate solutions provides the greatest opportunity for hope. As we address the threats posed by a changing climate, the potential exists to turn energy poverty into energy prosperity and to replace resource scarcity with sustainable economies.

Clean energy is the foundation for a sustainable world, and that energy transition is well underway. Remarkably, the pace and scale are greater than experts have forecasted. According to Michael Liebreich at Bloomberg New Energy Finance (BNEF), from 2016 to 2017 the United States saw wind installations increase by 262%; solar installations by utilities increase by 4645%; solar installations by homeowners and businesses increase by 143%; utility power purchase agreements for solar and wind increase by 83% and 71%, respectively; and investment in energy efficiency grow by 100%. Moreover, households paid 20% less for electricity and natural gas. Climate pollution in the United States is down 23%, and our 2025 Paris Climate Agreement Goals have been halfway reached (<https://about.bnef.com/summit/event/new-york/new-york-highlights/>).

While not wishing to oversell technological advances, the decline of fossil fuels is happening quicker than many anticipated. In a recent meeting with a family-owned fossil fuel company, the chairperson stated, “Our family has benefited economically for three generations in the petroleum business. However, our business will not survive into a fourth generation, and we are doing everything possible to divest and reorganize our family's holdings.”

A close second to renewable energy in the work toward a sustainable, abundant future is sustainable and nutritious food. As *National Geographic* reported in 2017, the Netherlands is already meeting the sustainable food challenge (<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/09/holland-agriculture-sustainable-farming/>). It is the world's second largest “exporter of food as measured by value, second

only to the United States, which has 270 times its landmass,” and has reduced its water needs for growth of key crops by up to 90%, eliminated pesticide use almost entirely, and reduced antibiotics in poultry and livestock by up to 60%.

The above are just a few examples of the hope that is possible as we continue to decouple fossil fuels from our economy and build a sustainable world that offers abundant life for all creation. Hope alone does not change our future, but without hope we will never rise to overcome the challenges. In our book, *Caring For Creation: The Evangelical's Guide to Climate Change*, my coauthor, Paul Douglas, writes, “We are not hopeless and we are not helpless.”

Conclusion

Securing a total commitment to solving the global climate crisis requires the engagement of the United States. A primary reason for the lack of leadership to date has been the inability to motivate Evangelicals. As Evangelicals remain the largest single political force in conservative American political life, it is paramount that a substantial portion of our community become climate champions.

While recent polling suggests that over 60% of Evangelicals understand climate science, the failure to properly communicate climate change within the community's existing value sets keeps climate action from becoming a priority. This is not a surprise. Very few systemic changes have ever occurred without a personally perceived threat to one's values or way of life. US engagement in World War II would likely have never occurred had the naval base at Pearl Harbor never been attacked.

Facing the fear of losing one's way of life (i.e., a fossil fuel-based economy), coupled with conservative philosophical concern regarding big government overreach, makes it easy to understand how denial and confusion campaigns have worked so extremely well in the Evangelical community.

However, the Evangelical *Titanic* is turning. By using values consistent with our community and by helping Evangelicals understand climate impacts more personally, we are opening hearts to realize the danger, to understand the clear biblical message, and to hope for a better future for our children.

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