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10-16-2018

# Seared and Bleared, Smudged and Smelly

David Schelhaas  
*Dordt College*

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## Recommended Citation

Schelhaas, David, "Seared and Bleared, Smudged and Smelly" (2018). *Faculty Work Comprehensive List*. 982.  
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# Seared and Bleared, Smudged and Smelly

## **Abstract**

"Most evangelicals oppose the very idea of climate change and are trying to inoculate their children so that they do not catch the 'climate concern' disease."

Posting about why some Christians are climate change deniers from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/seared-and-bleared-smudged-and-smelly/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, climate change, environmental management, Christians, science

## **Disciplines**

Christianity | Environmental Sciences

## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

# in things

October 16, 2018

## Seared and Bleared, Smudged and Smelly

**Dave Schelhaas**

It was what turned out to be my last literature class after 45 years of teaching literature. We had read nature poems by Mary Oliver, Richard Wilbur, William Wordsworth, and Gerard Manly Hopkins; and on this last day of the semester, we were reading Hopkins' sonnet "God's Grandeur" with its powerful description of the depredation humans have wrought upon Earth:

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

These words reveal as bleak and dismal a description of the natural world as one can imagine. Later in the poem, this view is tempered by Hopkins' conclusion that because of the presence of the Holy Ghost, "Nature is never spent" (9). But I wanted to focus first on Hopkin's description of the damage humans have done to the creation, so I asked the students what this quatrain suggested to them.

They noticed that he blames business (trade) for some of the abuse; that human work or labor can smudge the land; that the repeated "have trod" and the description of "bare" soil tells us that in certain places growth is no longer possible; that human activity tends to stink up an area; and that humans are out of touch with nature.

We began to talk of the human activities that damage the earth today: poor farming practices, clear-cut logging, mountain top mining, multiple kinds of water pollution. Then I mentioned the unrestrained burning of fossil fuels that produces carbon dioxide

which is the primary cause of global warming/climate change. Suddenly the room grew quiet. Knowing that climate change was a somewhat controversial topic, I asked how many of them believed it was occurring and was partially caused by human activity. Of the thirty-three sitting there, two raised their hands.

I asked the rest of them why they did not believe that human activity was causing climate change. Most of them tried to disappear into their desks. Obviously, they did not know much about it but had, at the very least, heard the idea of global warming ridiculed on sub-zero January days. They did not want to answer. But one hand slowly went up.

One of my best students said he had been taught in his Christian high school that Christians did not believe human-caused global warming was occurring. He could not remember exactly why but he remembered that his preacher had also spoken against it.

This idea was something new to me. Another student said something similar, and other heads nodded. Apparently, some people thought of climate change as a liberal plot of some kind. I had been beating the drum for climate change awareness for many years in my writing and literature courses, and there had always been a significant number of students who did not agree with me. But no one until now had told me that to join the effort to reduce CO2 emissions was not Christian. When I pressed them, I sensed a broader fear, a sort of mistrust of science. Naturally, college presents students with new (and thought-provoking) ideas; and at Dordt, these ideas claim the Calvinist tradition as part of its heritage. John Calvin can become downright ecstatic about the marvels of scientific study. Here is just one quote from Calvin on science:

In disquisitions concerning the motions of the stars, in fixing their situations, measuring their distances, and distinguishing their peculiar properties, there is need of skill, exactness, and industry, and the providence of God being more clearly revealed by these discoveries, the mind ought to rise to a sublime elevation for the contemplation of his glory<sup>1</sup>

Can the providence of God be more clearly revealed by scientific study of climate? I think it can. But according to the Pew Research Center, only 25 percent of white evangelicals accept the scientific evidence that human-caused climate change is occurring.<sup>2</sup> Other researchers say the number may be 40 percent. However, most evangelicals oppose the very idea of climate change and are trying to inoculate their children so that they do not catch the “climate concern” disease.

My purpose in this essay is not to show that the biosphere is getting warmer and that we should all join in the efforts to slow this warming down—although I believe that both

of those statements are true. Rather, I will attempt to give a partial explanation for the fact that many Christians are climate change deniers.

I will begin with a story about a son and his mother. Dr. Larry Louters teaches chemistry at Calvin College. In 2013, Louters, along with 20 other Calvin faculty members and 200 evangelical college professors, sent a letter to Congress asking senators and representatives to take action on climate change.

During an interview with the Calvin College *Campus News*, Louters was asked why he and his colleagues sent the letter. He noted that people have contrasting ideas about climate change, saying “people don’t judge the science very effectively, not just Christians, but all folks have this schizophrenic view of science.” He stated that a “single opinion can bear as much weight as quantified data that has been reproduced.”

Then he told a sweet little anecdote: He shared that in talking with his mother about climate change, she would end all arguments by saying, “Well, Rush Limbaugh says climate change is a hoax.” One can imagine him exclaiming in frustration, “Mom I’m your son and I’m a scientist! Why do you choose to believe Rush Limbaugh?”

But that raises a more basic question: Why are these opinion-makers, who are often uninformed about science, able to exert such influence among Christians? Some of them garner trust almost automatically because they are cable TV commentators or conservative radio gurus. Some have earned trust because they are pastors. But other factors are at play as well.

One of these factors is known as dominion theology, and I will discuss this topic in greater detail in my next essay.