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Christians and Climate Change

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Abstract

"God's delight in his creation reminds us that we also should delight in it."

Posting about taking care of the earth 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.

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Christians and Climate Change

Dave Schelhaas

April 22, 2022

If I ask myself how I became a “climate change awareness advocate,” I have to go back about 35 years to a time when Dordt University (then Dordt College) received a grant from the Christian College Coalition to promote environmental stewardship. We created an introductory writing course that required students to read about and write papers on environmental stewardship especially as it related to food production. We titled the course “Your Plate, Your Pen and the Planet”; students often called it “Environmental English.” It was team-taught by Chris Goedhart of the Ag Department and Dave Schelhaas (me) from the English Department.

We taught one course each semester for one year, and after that, Goedhart taught one course a year for two more years. I know that some students resented being stuck in that course, and others—a few who have written to me years later to tell me it was the beginning of their life-long concern with environmental stewardship—appreciated the course. For me, it was also the beginning of a life-long concern for environmental stewardship and the particular stewardship issue of climate change.

Climate change or global warming was one of the issues we studied in our course, and in preparation for that, I read *The End of Nature*, Bill McKibben’s first book on climate change. McKibben has since written two more books on climate change and has become one of my most trusted voices on the subject.

So why have so many Christians been indifferent and even hostile toward the idea of climate change and our obligation to change our behaviors in order to slow the planet’s warming? Why, as Katharine Hayhoe says in her recent book, *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist’s Case for Hope and Healing*, are “white evangelicals...less concerned about climate change than any other group” (18)?

I realize that many of the readers of *In All Things* might identify as Reformed or another Christian group rather than as evangelicals. Yet for many years, I have heard disparaging remarks about climate change in the Reformed circles of my community. Unfortunately, many Christians who wouldn’t claim the description of “evangelicals” also disparage the idea of climate change.

For a number of years, I was part of a church group that focused its attention and energy on various creation-care issues, among them, climate change. We called ourselves “Creation Tenders.” In the last few years, we have not been active as a group, but we still try to live out the principles of creation care that we practiced on a larger, community-wide scale and continue to remind people of its importance.

What follows is a statement I put together with input from some of the Creation Tenders that tells what we did, and more importantly, why we did it. I offer it for your consideration because it is a powerful argument for Christians to be concerned about environmental stewardship—including climate change—and seek to live in ways that diminish our degradation of creation.

Here is the statement:

Who are we?

We are a group of people who acknowledge the biblical call to be stewards of creation. Recognizing that this is not always an easy task, we share our delight in the creation as we encourage one another to live thoughtfully and responsibly in it. Members meet monthly in the church fellowship hall at a Saturday noon “brown bag” lunch. Anyone interested in the nurture and care of creation is invited to join us. And then, join us also as we manage community gardens, plant and weed and harvest our own gardens, organize recycling drives, take instructional hikes at Oak Grove County Park, conduct creation care camps for our church’s kids, and do other activities that promote the old slogan: “reduce, reuse and recycle.”

We take our mission statement from the Christian Reformed Church’s *Contemporary Testimony*, “Our World Belongs to God”:

“As God’s creatures we are made in his image

to represent him on earth,

and to live in loving communion with him.

By sovereign appointment we are

earthkeepers and caretakers:

loving our neighbor,

tending the creation,

and meeting our needs.

God uses our skills

in the unfolding and well-being of his world.”

Why do we gather and work and play as Creation Tenders?

Because God loves the world. It pleased him when he created it, and he loved it so much that after humans sinned, he sent his son to earth “to reconcile *all things* to himself, whether things in earth or things in heaven” (Colossians 1). God’s delight in his creation reminds us that we also should delight in it. In fact, as Scott Hoezee says, “nurturing joy in the creation is our spiritual vocation—our job.”

Because God appointed humans to be the caretakers (the tenders) of the creation. Genesis 2:15 says, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and to take care of it.” (The Hebrew word for “take care of” is *shamar*, which can also be translated “serve,” though the word “serve” here does not mean *worship*, but means what we have in mind when we say “serve our country”—the attempt to protect and seek its well-being.) Four hundred years ago in his commentary on this text, John Calvin wrote:

“Let him who possesses a field, so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence; but let him endeavor to hand it down to posterity as he received it, or even better cultivated. Let him so feed on its fruits that he neither dissipates it by luxury, nor permits it to be marred or ruined by neglect.

Moreover, that this economy, and this diligence, with respect to those good things which God has given us to enjoy, may flourish among us, let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses. Then he will neither conduct himself dissolutely, nor corrupt by abuse those things which God requires to be preserved.”

Because one of our church confessions, The Belgic Confession, states that

“We know God first

by creation, preservation, and government

of the universe,

since that universe is before our eyes

like a beautiful book

in which all creatures,

great and small,

are as letters

to make us ponder

the invisible things of God..."

Because St. Paul writes in Romans 8 that "the whole creation has been groaning" because of humanity's fall into sin. Paul says that "creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay," and that the "children of God" will assist in that liberation. Creation Tenders wish to be God's assistants in that liberation.

Because we believe that the call to tend the creation has become an especially important obligation of the followers of Jesus today. As population increases, as global temperatures rise, as species decrease, as land and water are threatened by overuse and contamination, as humans—even Christians—exploit and damage the creation out of ignorance or greed, the earth's groans become louder. Covenant Creation Tenders want to do what they can to promote the healthful and careful cultivation of creation, to slow its abuses, to diminish the use of fossil fuels, and to foster in themselves and others' joy and wonder in the creation.

That's the statement.

If you are a Christian, you simply can't deny that you are called to be a caretaker of the Earth, this bountiful garden where God placed us with the command that we tend it, care for it. Yes, he also said, "rule over" and "subdue" it, but this means, as Calvin says, that we leave it better cultivated than it was when we arrived here.

We have, in some important ways, failed to obey this creation mandate, sometimes out of ignorance, sometimes out of neglect, often out of greed. As far as climate change is concerned, our greatest failure was, for a long time, one of ignorance. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, Earth's atmosphere had just 280 parts carbon dioxide per million, just the right amount of carbon dioxide to make Earth a lovely place for all kinds of life. In contrast, Mars, with no carbon dioxide, and Venus, with an atmosphere that is 97% carbon dioxide, are both uninhabitable. But as our use of fossil fuels increased, the average temperatures did also, and lots of things in our environment started going bad. Today, there are 420 parts carbon dioxide per million, and the health of the planet is getting steadily worse.¹ Other gasses also contribute to our warming climate, but carbon dioxide is the major villain.

When we discovered fossil fuels, we truly believed they were a most wonderful gift of God. They were accessible, inexpensive, and they powered our growing industrial economy. They warmed our homes. But they also warmed our planet, and we know now that continued extravagant use of fossil fuels will destroy our planet. Having read these statements from early

church fathers, from creeds and confessions, from Holy Scripture, from leading scientists who are Christians like Katharine Hayhoe, you may better understand my dismay at this sentence: “White evangelicals are less concerned about climate change than any other group.”² I don’t doubt it. But I am amazed by it.

Why the lack of concern among Christians? Climate science is as rigorous as other areas of science that we trust with our lives every day. One possible explanation is that many Christians are unaware of scripture’s *powerful* creation-care mandate. Another possible explanation might be that many Christians subscribe to a “this world is not my home, I’m just a-passing through, my treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue” philosophy. That sort of thinking can be countered by scripture—see the Romans 8 passage cited above³. Perhaps our preachers and Bible study leaders and catechism teachers must do a better job of instructing in a theology of creation care. Most young people (and old) have little or no understanding that they are called to be Earthkeepers.

To me, it seems clear that God loves this world and has charged us with the care of it. Creation waits with eager anticipation for its liberation from its “bondage to decay,” and it waits for the “children of God” who will carry out this task “to be revealed.” Living in this time of creation degradation, we should be asking ourselves if, perhaps, we are those children.

1. For additional reading, see Bill McKibben’s books or my review of *Eaarth* here. <https://inallthings.org/children-of-god-living-in-a-groaning-creation/?highlight=Eaarth>
2. Hayhoe, Katherine. *Saving Us*. P. 18
3. Because St. Paul writes in Romans 8 that “the whole creation has been groaning” because of humanity’s fall into sin. Paul says that “creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay” and that the “children of God” will assist in that liberation.