

Preachable Moments: Evangelical Christians and Climate Change

Lisa Palmer June 28, 2012

Climate change has caused rifts among evangelical Christians, who are sharply divided on the topic. But more evangelicals now are examining a Christian response to the threat posed by a warming atmosphere.

Climate change is about science. Religion? Not so much. Yet it's religion that is among the main reasons many evangelical Christians remain skeptical about climate change. Add to the faith-based stumbling blocks a vacuum of leadership and ineffective messaging, and you find many evangelical Christians sharply divided on the subject.

About 60 percent of evangelicals think climate change has nothing to do with human activities. By comparison, less than half of all Americans, or 47 percent, share [that view](#). (Both figures are in sharp contrast to the overwhelming majority of climate scientists who agree that climate change is occurring and primarily caused by human actions.)

But the theological doors are beginning to open. Signs are that more evangelicals now are addressing climate change as a moral issue that appeals to the conscience of their Christian communities.

Accepting the science of climate change, and supporting policy action, however, has been risky among evangelicals. In 2008, Richard Cizik, then the vice president of government relations with the National Association of Evangelicals, lost his job for his stance on climate change, among other issues. Now, a shift is occurring. The same organization that gave Cizik his walking papers now is directly addressing climate change through theology and science.



Evangelical Organization's Climate 'Conversation Starter'

In a recently published 56-page document, "[Loving the Least of These](#)," NAE describes "how changes to the environment affect the most vulnerable," and explores "the biblical basis for Christian engagement, the science of a changing environment, how climate affects the poor, and practical ways to move forward," according to a press release.

Richard Cizik sees climate change as 'top-tier issue' for younger evangelicals.

"Every time there is a natural disaster, we grieve for the poor who are most affected, rally behind relief efforts, and support on-the-ground disaster teams," NAE President Leith Anderson said in a statement. "We are concerned when we hear projections that environmental changes threaten the lives of more and more people, particularly the extreme poor."

"Loving the Least of These" is a conversation starter, says Galen Carey, current vice president of governmental relations at the NAE. "American evangelicals have not yet reached a consensus on the issue of climate change," said Carey. "We hope that this paper will help our members reflect biblically and scientifically on the issues."

Who is an evangelical?

A Christian Protestant can identify as an evangelical in a number of ways:

- as a member of an evangelical Protestant Church, such as evangelical Baptist, evangelical Lutheran, or Pentecostal;
- as a self-described evangelical even if the person is a member of Protestant denomination whose congregation as a whole doesn't consider itself evangelical; or
- as a member of a non-denominational evangelical church.

The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), the largest organizing body of evangelicals in the U.S., represents 450,000 churches in 40 denominations. A 2007 Pew [religious landscape survey](#) indicated that 26 percent of Americans identified as evangelical Christians.

Recently at least one of the evangelical denominations, the Christian Reformed Church, issued [its own statement](#) on climate change. According to a news release, delegates in June agreed that:

- There is a near-consensus in the scientific community that climate change is occurring and very likely is caused by human activity.
- Human-induced climate change is an ethical, social justice, and religious issue.
- The CRC [Christian Reformed Church] is compelled to take private and public action to address climate change, especially since those who are already most impacted by it live in poor countries.

Younger Evangelicals Bringing Change on Climate

Cizik, who now leads the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good, points to changing demographics as a reason evangelical views on climate are changing. "Climate change is a top-tier issue for younger evangelicals," he said, adding that it's also the subject of a chapter he authored in the forthcoming "A New Evangelical Manifesto" (July 2012).

Cizik approves of the steps the National Association of Evangelicals has made to begin to discuss climate change, but remains sharply critical of its failure to take a stance on the issue.

"To say that you care about the consequences of climate change, but you aren't willing to take a position on legal action to curb it, it is like saying in the 1960s well, I appreciate the fact that African Americans want equality, but we're not going to do anything about it," Cizik said.

In 2006, Cizik formed the [Evangelical Climate Initiative](#) to urge action on addressing climate change. Its mission is to support evangelical belief in "Jesus Christ and his commands to love our neighbors, care for the least of these, and be proper stewards of His creation." Today 300 leaders have signed on to the initiative.

Mary Evelyn Tucker, co-director of the [Forum on Religion and Ecology](#) at Yale University, said in an interview that evangelical Christians are now taking science seriously, shifting their position, and making important inroads on climate change. Among the most effective is the Evangelical Environmental Network, she said.

"The theological doors that the evangelicals are now opening are extremely important," Tucker said. "Through their theology and interpretations of the bible, evangelicals are addressing justice for the poor and care for creation as it relates to climate change. They are trying to raise this voice of moral concern from these two angles, and they are immensely important contributions."

Despite the progress, evangelicals are fragmented on their climate stance.

No Pope or Bishop of Canterbury ... So Look to Pols

Texas Tech associate professor Katharine Hayhoe*, a prominent climate scientist who has authored 50 peer-reviewed publications, was an expert reviewer for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and in 2011 headed a National Academy of Science committee on stabilization targets for greenhouse gases.



“The evangelical world is the last significant holdout on the reality of this issue. Why is that?” asked Hayhoe, an evangelical Christian who spends an increasing amount of time discussing climate change with members of her faith community. “They don’t have a bishop of Canterbury or a pope to provide guidance. The evangelical church in America looks to their politicians to inform their beliefs rather than looking to their beliefs to inform their politics. It is no accident that every single GOP candidate in the recent primaries one by one openly denied the realities of this issue. There is a vacuum of leadership, and the evangelical community has looked elsewhere. It explains why, if you look at mainline denominations, their perspective on climate change is much different than evangelicals.”



*Hayhoe: Finds
'All-or-nothing'
approach
baseless.*

The other issue involves science. “There are some ancient divides related to evolution, age of the Earth, and stem cell research,” said Hayhoe, lead author of an upcoming 2013 U.S. National Climate Assessment. “On all of these lines you’ve had science on one side and evangelicals on the other. Along comes this new issue, climate change. What side are the scientists on? So it only makes sense that evangelicals have taken the other side.”

Attitudes on Climate Paired with Evolution, Stem Cell Research

Hayhoe, also the author of the 2009 book *A Climate for Change: Global Warming Facts for Faith Based Decisions*, with her husband Andrew Farley, an evangelical pastor, said that some groups have fed into this divide by making it an all-or-nothing issue: evangelicals have to agree with all divisive issues — with evolution, stem cell research — in order to believe in climate change. “That’s a completely false argument,” Hayhoe said.

Even though evangelicals in the U.S. have found little common ground or consensus on climate change action, the message that climate change will disproportionately affect the poor appears to be gaining traction, said Hayhoe, lead author of a National Academy of Sciences committee on greenhouse gas stabilization targets. . But she adds that the “stewardship of the Earth” message resonates better in other religious traditions but not so much among evangelicals, whose core value is loving people.

Hayhoe said the divide among evangelicals is real, but added that not all evangelicals are skeptical of climate change.

“People often tar evangelicals in the same breath. But what about the 40 percent that believes it’s a problem? There is really a lot of us who do care.”

** This story was lightly edited on June 29, shortly after initial posting, to update biographical information on Katharine Hayhoe.*

Additional reading: *Between God and Green: How evangelicals are Cultivating a Middle Ground on Climate Change*, by Katharine K. Wilkinson.

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