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Evangelicals warming up to scientists' warnings; [SOUTH PINELLAS Edition]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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Some evangelicals want to change the climate within their own movement. Several dozen presidents of seminaries, colleges and universities, 20 board members of the National Association of Evangelicals, and pastors of behemoth churches such as Rick (Purpose Driven Life) Warren - 86 in all - have signed an "Evangelical Call to Action" on global warming. The document, released on Feb. 8, goes further than the Bush administration in admitting that human activity is causing a precipitous rise in planetary temperature. These leaders say "any damage that we do to God's world is an offense against God himself." They call for legislation to reduce greenhouse gases and a governmental commitment to "proper stewardship" of the planet. As the Rev. Jim Ball, organizer of the Evangelical Environmental Network's "What Would Jesus Drive?" campaign, says, "Reducing pollution is loving your neighbor."

Full Text (838 words)

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But some evangelicals want to change the climate within their own movement. Several dozen presidents of seminaries, colleges and universities, 20 board members of the National Association of Evangelicals, and pastors of behemoth churches such as Rick (Purpose Driven Life) Warren - 86 in all - have signed an "Evangelical Call to Action" on global warming. The document, released on Feb. 8, goes further than the Bush administration in admitting that human activity is causing a precipitous rise in planetary temperature. These leaders say "any damage that we do to God's world is an offense against God himself." They call for legislation to reduce greenhouse gases and a governmental commitment to "proper stewardship" of the planet. As the Rev. Jim Ball, organizer of the Evangelical Environmental Network's "What Would Jesus Drive?" campaign, says, "Reducing pollution is loving your neighbor."

It's startling to see some of the religious right embracing such a supposedly "leftist" cause, but, as Shannon Estenoz argues, "the Christian environmental ethic has been around for a long time." Estenoz, the Fort Lauderdale-based national regional director for the National Parks Conservation Organization, has long studied the relationship between faith and environmentalism. Many evangelicals, she says, embrace environmentalism by rebranding it as "Creation Care." Even the misery-soaked Book of Job sings the glory of nature from "the waves of the sea" to "the Bear and Orion."

"The only conclusion you can reach reading either or both of the Old and New Testaments," says Estenoz, "is that creation is good."

And if we don't take care of it, the Book of Revelation warns there will come a time for "destroying the destroyers of the earth."

It remains to be seen if the Bush administration has read that far in their much-thumped Bibles. Between the damning congressional report on Hurricane Katrina, the damning U.N. report on Guantanamo, and hearing the vice president constantly referred to as "the shooter," they might not have noticed that a good-sized chunk of their right flank has just fallen off.

Conservative columnists, however, are on the case. The reliably dim Cal Thomas scolds evangelicals for paying attention to the "kingdom of this world" and sniffs that Jesus didn't ask his people to do anything about global warming. (Then again, Jesus could be absent-minded: He also forgot to endorse the death penalty and tax cuts for the rich.) Meanwhile, the New York Times' John Tierney says that, thanks to these deluded "Creation Care" evangelicals, making us feel guilty for our "sinful desires to cut down trees and burn fossil fuels," environmentalism is now America's "one truly national religion."

Of course, White House-friendly evangelicals such as James Dobson of Focus on the Family, Charles Colson, the convicted Watergate conspirator, Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association, and Florida's own D. James Kennedy of Coral Ridge Ministries, dismiss their brethren's call for action on America's energy gluttony. For these worshipers in the Church of St. James Watt, "real" Christians can never make common cause with people who

think Darwin got it basically right, that the earth is a lot older than 6,000 years, and that our natural heritage might sometimes be more important than money.

This is an election year (in case you hadn't noticed) so it will be interesting to see if Congress' evangelical Republicans reach out to formerly reliable red-state voters who have upped and turned green. So far, the Bush administration has been not just antienvironmentalism, but antitruth. Recently, a 24-year-old political appointee at NASA (job qualification: working as an intern on the 2004 Bush presidential campaign and lying on his resume about having a college degree) tried to stop James E. Hansen, the agency's premier climatologist, from even using the term "global warming." Surely if Dr. Hansen had to go there, he could quote John Tierney who assures us, "the warming could be mild enough to produce net benefits."

Oh, yeah: A report has just been released showing that the Greenland ice cap is melting at an accelerating rate. There's enough frozen water in Greenland to raise global sea levels a good 20 feet. But by all means let's be positive. All those believing souls who settled for a house in Orlando will finally own beachfront property, praise the Lord.

Diane Roberts is author of Dream State, a book about Florida.

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