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“Have Dominion over the Earth”

“God gave us these things to use. After the last tree is felled, Christ will come back.”

James Watt made this famous statement regarding the use of natural resources. This Christian belief is erroneous and misguides policies towards the environment. Unless Christians along with all people change our attitudes towards the earth, global warming and its effects will only worsen. We need to confront climate change because our collective wellbeing depends on the environment and because we are called as Christians to care for the earth, serving God’s vision of shalom throughout all of creation.

The United States, a country where 83 percent of people identify themselves as Christians, is the worst polluting nation in the world (Poll). The United States alone accounts for a quarter of the earth’s greenhouse gases, even though it has only five percent of the world’s population (U.S. Evangelicals).

Most of the greenhouse gases emitted by the United States and by other wealthy countries result from unneeded luxurious and wasteful living. Our jump-in-the-car attitude and buying habits produce thousands of tons of carbon dioxide every year. According to Barbra Kingsolver, “The average food item set before a U.S. consumer traveled 1,300 miles to get there. If Mr. Average eats ten or so items a day (and most of us eat more), in a year’s time his food will have conquered 5 million miles by land, sea and air,” (Houser, 30). This is a shocking fact, as most people don’t even think twice about where their food came from, or how far it traveled to reach their table. Transporting food long distances is also extremely inefficient. To transport just five

calories worth of strawberries from California to New York costs 435 calories of fossil fuel (Houser, 30).

Along with increased hurricane activity, such as we saw last year, some possible effects of global warming seen in the near future if nothing is done are increased flooding, droughts, forest fires, famine, and species being pushed to extinction (Consequences). David King, Chief Scientific Advisor to the British Government, recently brought the crisis into focus. He stated, “In my view, climate change is the most severe problem that we are facing today—more serious even than the threat of terrorism” (Extremes of the Earth).

The need to survive is an important reason for environmental concern. Without a healthy planet that is able to produce enough needed resources, people cannot live. If climate change continues to occur on the predicted course, drought will lead to decreased food and water production, and storms, floods, and fires will destroy land, property, and people’s lives. Our wellbeing depends on the environment.

However, some Christians, such as Watt, believe that the issue of climate change and the general care for the environment are unimportant to God. All the earth’s resources can, and should be used now so that they are not wasted when Jesus returns and the world is destroyed. They say that instead of spending time preserving and restoring the environment, we should focus on what they believe really matters, and that is a spiritual agenda—i.e., saving people’s souls for heaven. For those who believe this, what happens on earth is not as important as what happens for heaven.

This belief about the environment can’t be further from the truth. Christians should, and need to confront global warming because God calls us to. We hear this theme occurring from the very beginning of time, when God created the earth and “saw that it was good.” It is clear that

we are stewards of the earth, as God entrusted Adam, Eve, and their descendents to care for the earth and to have “dominion” over it (Genesis 1:26, 28). People often interpret the word dominion as being similar to domination. Those that interpret it this way see the earth as having a lower status than people, and existing only for our own use. Another occurrence of “dominion” clarifies its meaning in terms of a king’s responsibility to serve his people (Psalm 72). A king’s role is not to dominate over others, but is to care for and protect those in his care.

Elsewhere in the creation story we see that “God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). Here God presents the world as a garden and people as its gardeners, carefully tending it. Acting as a steward, or “gardener” of God’s creation means living in a way in which we recognize that every-thing belongs to God. We are not to use the earth as we please, but care for it as God intended.

The Bible also speaks to the care of creation in the Apocrypha. The author of The Wisdom of Solomon writes, “Do not bring on destruction by the works of your hands; because God does not delight in the death of the living.” The writer goes on to say, “For God created all things so that they might exist; the generative forces of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them” (1:12-14). Global warming clearly defies this wisdom. The effects of global warming, which humans have brought by the work of our hands, are extremely destructive. The “poison” that this scripture speaks of can also be used to describe the toxins humans create such as carbon dioxide, produced from the burning of fossil fuels, that contributes to global warming.

Another reason why Christians need to confront climate change is because the effects of it disproportionately hurt the poor. “Those least able to cope and least responsible for the greenhouse gases that cause global warming are most affected,” said Jonathan Patz, a professor

at UW-Madison's Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies (Climate Shift). The World Resource Institute noted that annually, more than 60 percent of global industrial carbon dioxide emissions come from industrialized countries, where only about 20 percent of the world's population lives (Climate Justice).

The floods that occurred in Bangladesh six years ago are one example of how the effects of climate change are disproportionately hurting the poor. According to researchers, the floods were worsened by climate change. Josna Munshiganj, a mother who was stranded during the flood asked, "How can I live with my baby like this? If he falls in he'll be washed away." In a country where the per capita income is as low as US \$440, as many as 20 million people were stranded or left homeless as a result of the flood (Bangladesh).

God cares deeply about the poor, as evident in over 300 verses concerning the poor in the Bible. The prophet Jeremiah wrote, "Thus says the Lord: act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed" (Jeremiah 22:3). The rich creating unnecessary pollution that harms the poor is certainly not acting with justice and righteousness. Instead, God calls us to help the poor by delivering them from this injustice.

The urgent need for action against climate change is highlighted in a recent report, financed by the British government. The 700-page report, which came out on October 30, 2006, says, "Failing to act now to prevent global warming will cost the world economy \$6 trillion," and could result in a "worldwide depression." According to Tony Blair, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, "It is not in doubt that if the science is right, the consequences for our planet are literally disastrous. And this disaster is not set to happen in some science future many years ahead, but in our lifetime" (Britain Sounds Alarm).

Climate change also interferes with God's vision of shalom: wholeness, harmony, and collective prosperity in all of creation. God speaks of shalom in Ezekiel. God says, "I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the LORD. I will provide for them splendid vegetation, so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the insults of the nations. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord GOD" (Ez. 34:26-31). Climate change threatens the very thing God has set forth for the world, as God wants the earth to be fruitful and provide for human needs.

So what actions can Christians and non-Christians take to challenge climate change? Simple actions include: buying local products, biking or walking instead of driving, using less energy for heating and cooling, buying fuel efficient or alternative energy vehicles, using public transportation, and being politically aware and involved. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the crowd, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?" (Matthew 6:25). If Christians would heed this call to live simply, greenhouse gasses could be dramatically reduced. Christians often get caught up in society, seeking happiness by acquiring wealth and material possessions, only to find out that Jesus is correct. Life is more than food and the body more than clothing.

Therefore, as Christians we are called to care for the earth, serving God's vision of shalom. As world citizens, we need to confront climate change as our collective wellbeing depends on the environment. Instead of thinking that God gave us the earth to use, we need to have right dominion over the earth, realizing that the earth belongs to God in the first place, and

that we are called to be stewards of it. Only upon recognizing this, will we be able to confront the severe problem of climate change.

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