

## ENVIRONMENTAL DECLARATION SEEKS CONSENSUS ON CONTROVERSIAL VIEWS

by E. Calvin Beisner

In the next two months, leaders of various Christian denominations and parachurch ministries will be asked by the Evangelical Environmental Network to endorse an Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation finalized at a meeting near Chicago in late October. They might want to think twice before signing a document that, on the surface, seems innocuous but could pave the way for destructive notions in environmental curriculum planned by the network—and by the overarching Joint Appeal by Religion and Science for the Environment, an ecumenical group of which it is a part—for use in churches and Christian schools and colleges.

What, according to the Declaration, is the state of the environment? In a nutshell, “We and our children face a growing crisis in the health of the creation. . . . Yet we continue to degrade that creation.” And Christians’ responsibility? “. . . to work for godly, just, and sustainable economies which reflect God’s sovereign economy and enable men, women and children to flourish along with all the diversity of creation” and “to work for responsible public policies which embody the principles of biblical stewardship of creation.”

The vagueness of both points permeates the Declaration, shielding it from specific criticisms. Nonetheless, there is enough substance, in light of an earlier draft and relevant work by Calvin DeWitt, one of its chief authors, to reveal the underlying perspective: the views of the historically Left-leaning Evangelicals for Social Action, led by Ronald J. Sider, a prime mover behind the formation of the Network, and of the Joint Appeal and its co-chairmen, Carl Sagan, a Marxist professor of astronomy at Cornell University, and the well-known theological liberal Rev. James Parks Morton, dean of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. The wedding of ecological concern with Leftist, redistributivist economics is apparent in two statements in the history of the Joint Appeal. In June, 1991, after meeting in New York City, a “Statement by Religious Leaders at the Summit on Environment,” part of which affirmed “the indivisibility of social justice and ecological integrity. An equitable international economic order is essential for preserving the global environment. Economic equity, racial justice, gender equality and environmental well-being are interconnected and all are essential to peace.” In May, 1992, those and other religious leaders joined with Sagan and other scientists to issue a “Declaration of the ‘Mission to Washington’: The Joint Appeal by Religion and Science for the Environment,” part of which affirms that “the wealthy nations of the North, which have historically exploited the natural and human resources of the Southern nations, have a moral obligation to make available financial resources and appropriate technology to strengthen their capacity for their own development.”

### **Seven Degradations**

Central to the document is the assertion that the “growing crisis in the health of the creation” consists of seven “degradations of creation”: “1) land degradation; 2) deforestation; 3) species extinction; 4) water degradation; 5) global toxification; 6) the alteration of atmosphere; 7) human and cultural degradation.” The lack of specificity hinders attempts to test the Declaration for empirical veracity. The terms lend themselves to no direct empirical measurement. Only identifying specific concerns permits testing them.

#### *Land Degradation*

What is “land degradation”? Chief in the minds of the authors was probably the belief, as the earlier draft put it, that “we continue to degrade the soil through unsustainable practices of agriculture and animal husbandry, leading to abandonment or decline in productivity of

agricultural land.” Not much here is open to direct empirical measurement, but the claim that we are experiencing a “decline in productivity of agricultural land” is, and it is false. As pictured in figure 1, average world cereal grain (the most important agricultural product) yields per acre and production per person both rose steeply from 1950 to 1990. (Similar trends hold true not only for the world as a whole but for every major region and regardless of income level of the nations involved.) There is no reason to expect these trends to reverse.

### *Deforestation*

The prior draft claimed, “In both tropical and temperate regions we are rapidly destroying forests. . . .” No quantification here, but perhaps the claim is based on annual deforestation data published in the World Bank’s *World Development Report, 1993*, which reported, among others, annual deforestation of 13,800 square kilometers in Brazil’s legal Amazon for 1990. But such numbers are meaningful only as proportions of total forest (in this case, about a fourth of 1 percent), in the context of long-term trends (in this case, the annual rate fell 23 percent from 1989 to 1990, and it has fallen consistently since the early 1980s), and in the context of overall numbers for the world and its major regions. Although there has been significant net deforestation in some tropical rainforests in the past decade (especially in Brazil, Indonesia, and Mexico), worldwide data published by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization indicate that total forested area in both the temperate regions and the world as a whole was higher by the mid-1980s than it had been at the end of the 1940s—and rising.

The rainforest deforestation data can be deceptive also because they apply only to *natural* growth, and in the past decade *plantation* forests have contributed increasing amounts to total forested area, significantly reducing net deforestation.

### *Species Extinction*

Neither the present version nor the earlier draft of the declaration specifies a rate or a long-term trend in species extinction, so we cannot know just what the authors claim is happening. Perhaps, however, they have in mind a claim like that of Calvin DeWitt, director of the evangelical Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, one of the Declaration’s main authors and the only one with specific expertise in environmental science, in his introduction to *The Environment and the Christian*: “Three species of creatures are extinguished *daily*” (p. 15, emphasis original). That comes to about 1,100 species per year. DeWitt’s claim is far lower than several numbers offered by Vice President Al Gore (with whom members of the Evangelical Environmental Network met before their October drafting conference) in his *Earth in the Balance*—about 8,000 per year now, projected to increase to 100,000 per year by the turn of the century (p. 24, graph), or perhaps about 1,000 per century (10 per year) now (p. 24, text, implied), or about 36,000 per year now (p. 28), or simply “thousands per year” (pp. 121, 143).

However, there simply are no empirical data to back up *any* claims of specific rates of species extinction. (Perhaps this explains the wildly varying claims throughout the relevant literature.) Even such leading prophets of species extinction as Norman Myers and Thomas Lovejoy frankly admit this. The numbers are based on dubious extrapolations from presumed relationships between deforestation rates and species extinction. Until observational data are forthcoming—and they do not appear on the horizon—there is no good reason to believe that species extinctions are occurring much more rapidly today than they have for thousands of years of human history—i.e., perhaps one per century.

### *Water Degradation*

Again, without specifics we can’t be sure what the authors mean by “water degradation.” The prior draft claimed, “We have used surface water carelessly, resulting both in depletion which threatens food production, and pollution which affects human health. In oceans, we have fished many stocks to the point of collapse, and diminish its productivity by using it as a sink for our

wastes.”

Consider freshwater. First, water is a renewable resource. Water consumed does not disappear; it reenters the ecosystem to be used again and again. Second, according to World Bank data, most countries presently withdraw (temporarily for use before returning to the cycle) only a few percent of total domestic natural water resources (from rainfall and river flow) each year. There is, in fact, such abundance of fresh water relative to human use that one of the chief reasons for its abuse is its very low cost. Third, additional supplies of fresh water, if needed, would be available anywhere in the world affordably by transport and desalination. Fourth, if water pollution were an *increasing* threat to human health, data should reveal a downward trend in the availability of safe water. But, as figure 2 shows, worldwide access to safe water is increasing. (The slight downward curve for high-income nations from 1985 to 1990 appears to result from statistical sample anomalies, not from actual decreased access to safe water.) Fifth, if water depletion were threatening food production, agricultural yields should be falling or costs rising, or both—the opposite is true.

There simply is no evidence that freshwater resources are significantly endangered. Local water pollution is a genuine problem, sometimes severe; but on a global scale, water pollution is insignificant and, in advanced economies, declining, as it will do as other economies grow to afford cleaner technologies.

Second, is pollution reducing marine fish populations? Not according to the best indicator we have—worldwide fisheries landings. FAO data show a steady increase not only in total landings from 1938 to 1990 (from about 20 to about 100 million metric tons) but also in landings per capita (from about 8 to about 18 kilograms per person). There is no indication that this trend has reached its peak and is about to reverse.

### *Global Toxicification*

This vague and undefined term appears, from its use in DeWitt’s *The Environment and the Christian*, to refer to pollution with chemical like DDT. But no data support major worldwide damage done by such chemicals—indeed, DDT appears to have done little of the damage earlier attributed to it (and it paid great benefits by reducing populations of disease-bearing insects like mosquitos, which spread malaria in tropical regions). Indeed, biochemist Bruce Ames of the University of California at Berkeley has pointed out that over 99.9 percent of all chemical pesticide residues in the food supply are produced by plants and other organisms, not by man, and that natural pesticides tend to be more powerful and more broad-spectrum than manmade pesticides, which are genetically targeted and thus effective at much lower doses while posing little or no risk to man.

### *Alteration of Atmosphere*

Apparently, granted the background both of the prior draft and of DeWitt’s *The Environment and the Christian*, this vague term refers to alleged global warming and ozone depletion. But hard data do not support the claim either that global warming and long-term ozone depletion are occurring or that there is a significant correlation between human activity and global temperature and ozone trends.

Robert C. Balling, in *The Heated Debate*, a comprehensive book on the global warming controversy, points out that of the approximately .45° C. century-long rise in global average temperatures, at most one-third might be attributable to human activity, and there are serious statistical, theoretical, and methodological reasons to question even that connection. (For instance, most of the increase occurred *before* human production of greenhouse gases began its strong rise in the middle of this century; it slowed significantly afterward.)

No one knows what is a “normal” concentration of stratospheric ozone—our data stretch back only to the 1950s, and during that time fluctuations up and down have been about equally large; there is no discernible long-term downward trend, as figure 3 illustrates. Furthermore,

fluctuations in ozone concentration correlate better with fluctuations in energy output from the sun than with human emissions of alleged ozone-depleting chemicals like chloro-fluorocarbons.

### *Human and Cultural Degradation*

It is not clear either what this category includes or how it fits into an *environmental* declaration. If it is meant to say something about human health and longevity, it is flatly wrong. Average life expectancy worldwide has risen from around 30 two centuries ago to about 65 today, with nearly 50 percent of that gain occurring in the last forty years. This trend reflects improvements in the quantity and quality of food, clothing, shelter, hygiene, health care, and safety made possible by the astounding and unabated economic growth the world has been experiencing for over two centuries.

### *A False Picture*

These are just a few examples of factual errors underlying the view of the environment portrayed by the Declaration. More could be given. They illustrate a disturbing tendency among the Declaration's authors to mimic the claims of crisis current in the popular press and the secular environmental movement without checking the credibility of those claims. Evangelical leaders contemplating endorsing the Declaration or joining the Network should insist that these problems be addressed.

## **Theoretical and Theological Problems**

The Declaration is not all bad news. Refreshingly, it recognizes that poverty often causes environmental degradation, and so it supports the growth of “just[,] free economies” that create the wealth necessary to protect and restore the environment. It rightly calls Christians to the responsibility of stewardship (although it never specifies much about what actions that entails). It warns that many people are turning, in vain, to non-Christian religions for guidance in thinking about the environment. It firmly asserts the distinction between Creator and creature that has crumbled in the minds of many environmentalists West and East.

The Declaration suffers, however, not only from false factual assumptions like those examined above but also from some important problems in theory and worldview.

Take, for instance, the idea that we should work for “sustainable economies.” Precisely what is a “sustainable economy”? The Declaration doesn't make it clear, but if the phrase here borrows anything from its use in the secular environmentalist movement, it probably excludes the productive economies of the West, despite the demonstrable fact that these economies do better at protecting and even improving the natural environment than do less-developed economies.

More important are the theological weaknesses of the document, of which we can only cite only three examples here.

First, like many other Christian writings on the environment, the Declaration prominently quotes Psalm 24:1, “The earth is the LORD's, and the fullness thereof.” This is meant to remind us that we are only stewards, not absolute owners, of anything on the earth. The reminder is valid, so long as it is not pressed to the point of denying any true ownership by people. The Bible maintains a careful balance, recognizing God's ultimate ownership but also man's subordinate ownership. It not only says that the earth is the Lord's, but also that “the earth He has given to the sons of men” (Psalm 115:16)—a passage never cited in the Declaration.

Second, in its final words, the Declaration equates “God's good garden” with “our earthly home,” mirroring a mistake common to many Christian writings on the environment—I made the mistake myself four years ago in writing *Prospects for Growth: A Biblical View of Population, Resources, and the Future*: failing to distinguish the garden into which God put Adam and Eve and which He instructed them to cultivate and guard (Genesis 2:15) from the surrounding earth, much of which was wilderness and which God instructed mankind to fill, subdue, and rule

(Genesis 1:28). More important, the Declaration never mentions the curse God placed on the earth because of human sin (Genesis 3:17), by which He subjected the earth “to futility . . . in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:20-21). It is simply wrong, Biblically, to assume that nature untouched by human hands is better than nature transformed by wise, godly human stewardship.

Third, and most important, the Declaration claims that many of the degradations discussed above “are signs that we are pressing against the finite limits God has set for creation,” adding, “With continued population growth, these degradations will become more severe.” Underlying this notion is the idea that people are a burden rather than a blessing to the earth, that they are to be viewed chiefly as consumers and polluters rather than as producers and restorers. Hence the common notion that growing population is stripping the earth of its resources and choking it with pollution.

But Scripture presents a very different picture of mankind—particularly in light of the image of God and of the particular and common effects of the redeeming work of Christ on the cross. Although some parts of the Bible lead us to emphasize true knowledge and holiness (rationality and morality) as chief elements of the image of God in man (Colossians 3:10 and Ephesians 4:24), the immediate context of Genesis 1:26-28, which tells us that God created us in His image, suggests another emphasis, albeit related to these. Before reading, “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image,’” we read, “In the beginning God *created* the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1), and we enjoy a glittering saga of the abundance and variety God made. The immediate context of Genesis 1:26, then, suggests that creativity is a central aspect of the image of God in man.

True, man fell into sin, and that fall has had serious consequences, physical and spiritual, causal and judgmental, for the whole human race. It plunged us and our world into decay and death. But it did not obliterate the image of God, and more important, the redeeming death and the resurrection of Christ have set in motion the reversal of the curse. We should expect, therefore, to see even in unredeemed mankind some glimmer of God-given creativity—and we do. We should also expect to see multiplying creativity as the gospel and Kingdom of Christ spread over the globe—and we do.

In today’s economies, driven by rapidly expanding knowledge (itself reflecting the image of God), human creativity is multiplying. The average person in advanced economies produces several times more resources than he consumes in a lifetime, leaving following generations with more, not fewer, resources per capita than existed before. This is precisely what we should predict based on the Biblical revelation of the image of God in man, of the effects of wise and diligent work, and of the transforming effects of the gospel. It is also borne out in long-term economic data showing falling prices for extractive resources (mineral, vegetable, and animal) and rising prices for people (labor). Since price is a measure of scarcity, the falling resource prices demonstrate diminishing resource scarcity, while the rising labor prices demonstrate—contrary to intuition in light of our growing numbers—increasing scarcity of people!

The Declaration completely ignores this creative aspect of human beings. The closest it comes to it is saying that we should “sustain creation’s fruitfulness.” Frankly, under the curse, creation isn’t particularly fruitful: “thorns and thistles it shall grow for you” (Genesis 3:18). Mere hunting and gathering of what grows naturally can support only one or two people per square mile in the best natural habitats, not the over 100 people per square mile living worldwide; it is by hard work that mankind transforms the cursed earth—the wilderness—into a garden.

Do Christians have a responsibility for the environment? Certainly, and the Evangelical Environmental Network is right to remind us of that. But we also have a responsibility to think and act in regard to the environment in a manner that reflects the full spectrum of Biblical

revelation and a prudent regard for truth in empirical issues. The Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation, sadly, falls seriously short of these two ideals.

## Sidebar to “Environmental Declaration Seeks Consensus on Controversial Views”

### Who Are the Players?

The Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation is being promoted by the newly formed Evangelical Environmental Network, an offspring of Evangelicals for Social Action, whose president, Ronald J. Sider, is perhaps best known for his book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. According to ESA intern Allen Johnson, who has been coordinating the Network’s activities, the Network is one of four groups—one Jewish, one Catholic, one mainline Protestant, and one evangelical—that have been formed as a national religious and scientific partnership to address environmental concerns. The partnership itself—the Joint Appeal by Religion and Science for the Environment—was prompted by an appeal, in 1990-1991, by a group of thirty-four prominent scientists led by Carl Sagan and Stephen Jay Gould, to America’s religious community to become informed and active in environmentalism.

Sider has had a strong hand in guiding the Evangelical Environmental Network and the drafting of the Declaration, but the most important contributions to the environmental picture painted in the Declaration apparently came from Calvin DeWitt, a professor at the Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin and director of the evangelical Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies in Mancelona, Michigan. DeWitt is author of *A Sustainable Earth: Religion and Ecology in the Western Hemisphere* and of *Missionary Earthkeeping*, contributed a chapter to the book *Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources*, has lectured widely on the environment, stewardship, and religious ethics, and edited the book *The Environment and the Christian: What Can We Learn from the New Testament?* (reviewed in *World*, February 15, 1992).

Other contributors to the drafting process, according to Johnson, include

- Gordon Aeschliman, former editor of *World Christian* magazine and recently named editor of the new magazine *Prism* planned for release by the ESA. He is co-author, with Tony Campolo, of *50 Ways You Can Help Save the Planet*.

- David McKenna, retired president of Asbury Theological Seminary.

- Steve Hayner, president of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

- Loren Wilkinson, professor of philosophy and integrative studies at Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia, and editor of the book *Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources*.

- Robert Seiple, president of World Vision International.

- Susan Drake, a U.S. State Department employee who took part in the U.N. “Earth Summit” environmental conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, last year.

- Cliff Benzel, coordinator of the drafting process for ESA.

- Paul Thompson, vice president for advocacy and education of World Vision International.

- Corean Bakke, a leader in evangelical urban ministry.

- Thomas Oden, a professor of historical theology at Drew University.

- Paul Gorman, executive director of the Joint Appeal by Religion and Science for the Environment; a non-evangelical, Gorman sat in on the October drafting meeting only as an observer, according to Johnson.

According to Johnson, of all the participants in the drafting process, DeWitt is the only one

with specific expertise in environmental science and theory.

Organizers hoped for the participation of Richard Land, director of the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, but although he made comments on a draft he did not attend the October meeting.

They also tried to enlist the cooperation of Robert Dugan, director of the office of public affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals, and Richard Cizik, a policy analyst for the NAE, but both declined because of concerns that the drafting committee and the document leaned heavily to the Left. According to Cizik, he and Dugan urged Sider to include representatives of a more conservative perspective with expertise in environmental policy in the drafting process, naming specific people, but none was included.

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