



Global Warming— An Anabaptist Responds in Sermon

Loren Swartzendruber

Hear these words from the twenty-fourth Psalm, “*The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.*”¹ And this familiar text from the New Testament book of Colossians, “*For by him (Jesus) all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.*”²

Earlier this week I received an email from an Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) faculty member, to let me know she would be praying for me as I prepared for this morning. She added, “And, I’m sure you’ll find a way to add a little humor to the subject.” Unfortunately, there is not a lot of humor to be found in the subject of global warming. But, I did see a few things in the daily papers just this week that made me smile. An editorial in the *Daily News Record* (Harrisonburg, VA) of April 11, 2007, referred to several baseball games being postponed the previous weekend due to snow. Several cities in the U.S. set near records for low temperatures, and crops were likely damaged due to the cold weather. And then the closing line, “Yes, global warming seems to be on a roll.” Now, that may be somewhat amusing, but it is also sad. It is sad for two reasons.

It surely does not characterize critical thinking, a proficiency that we in academia believe is imperative to model as faculty and to cultivate in our students. No critical thinker would suggest that taking a snapshot of several days within the context of thousands of years is a good measure of weather patterns and temperatures. It neither proves nor disproves global warming.

The second reason for sadness is perhaps more subtle. The problem is called “global

warming,” but we in North America tend to look at just one small part of God’s earth to gather data for our preconceived notions. Our tendencies toward provincialism are all too prevalent. As an institution that seeks to prepare students to live in a global context, such a narrow point of view is inadequate.

Christians around the world celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Easter is a festival unlike any other in the church calendar. Jesus came into this messy, conflicted world, daring to take on our humanity, boldly entering into a world that God declared to be “good,” offering hope for the world’s redemption. Remember these words from the Apostle Paul:

*I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.*³

After studying pharmacy as an undergraduate at the University of Iowa, Loren Swartzendruber completed his B.S. at Eastern Mennonite University, M.Div. at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, and D.Min. at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary. Following a church pastorate, he was President of Hesston College (KS) from 1993–2003. In 2004, he became the president of Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, and continues in that role. This article is based on a “global warming sermon” delivered at an Eastern Mennonite University chapel service in the spring of 2007. Loren grew up in Iowa where he worked with his father in a family farm implement dealership. He and his wife Pat are the parents of four grown children.



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Article

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Peter Dula, EMU Professor of Bible and Religion, said:

We are beginning ... to articulate that the current ecological crisis is indicative not just of a Christian betrayal of creation, but of creation's God. It is not just a Christian abandonment of the environment but Christian abandonment of the scriptures. The old dualisms that enabled environmental neglect—soul/body, spirit/matter, rational/natural, redemption/creation—are breaking down. As they break down, some old theological truths are re-emerging. The redemption Christ brings is not redemption *from* creation, but redemption *of* and *for* creation.

Here we stand, in the early years of the twenty-first century. These are just a few minutes within one short day on a very tiny spot within all of God's creation. A mere blip on the screen of God's incredible movie, a movie without beginning or end, a movie of good/evil, pathos/joy, sin/redemption, Garden of Eden/destruction/new Jerusalem. This movie does have a plot, and it is going somewhere. This is a movie for which there is no Oscar.

We may be a small part of this grand cosmic story, but we cannot forsake hope and personal responsibility. Our children and grandchildren and great grandchildren will rightly expect an accounting of our actions or, God forbid, our apathy. Our faith and theology do not allow us to absent ourselves from responsibility. Nor can we yield to the tempting comfort of fatalism. We are created in God's image; therefore we have enormous responsibilities and opportunities.

So, what about global warming? What are the facts and are they indisputable? Is it for real, and if so, what will be the consequences? And if it is real, and there are consequences, is there anything we can do? Is it too late? The topic is clearly too large to address in just a few minutes, but let me offer some thoughts for our continuing dialogue.

There is a massive and mounting body of scientific evidence that global warming is a reality. Scientists from all around the world have gathered data and there is strong consensus among the world's leading experts

that global warming is well documented. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has released numerous reports concerning the scientific evidence for global warming and future implications.

Not everyone is convinced. The opinions against the reality of global warming generally fall into one of several categories: (1) it is a hoax being perpetrated on the American people; (2) it is primarily articulated by the liberal media; and/or (3) what we are experiencing now is simply a repetition of numerous cycles throughout past millennia.

I have real problems with some of these arguments. Scientists, as professionals, are inclined to go where the data lead them. Of course, every individual researcher has to make choices about what to study and the methodologies to be employed, but the peer review standards are far more objective and rigorous than the general public fully understands.

When Senator Inhofe of Oklahoma suggests the "American people" are being duped, he is not only ignoring the opinions of scientists in many nations of the world, he is suggesting that we are a very gullible people.

The argument that this is a "liberal" agenda is rapidly cracking. I seriously doubt that all of the scientists involved are either liberal or conservative politically. Recently, the political world was shocked to witness a dialogue between Newt Gingrich and John Kerry in which Kerry was rendered almost speechless by Gingrich's assertion that global warming is a reality. Arnold Schwarzenegger is hardly an icon of liberalism, but he has become energized about what he believes is a serious challenge to the future of the planet.

What I find most distressing about this debate, as is the case for so many debates in our society, is how quickly it becomes politicized. In my opinion, this is a scientific and a theological/moral issue, not one to be politicized. To ignore a potentially devastating world problem because a particular politician has become a major spokesperson for it, is frankly disturbing.

We know there have been climate cycles in the past. Ice ages have come and gone;

If global warming is a reality ..., the projected impact will be devastating unless we can mobilize our best minds and behaviors to reverse the trends. As a Christian church, we are called to love the world that God created. ... We do have the human capacity ... to address the realities, test ideas for change, and project possible outcomes.

we know that from geological research. There is just one small (or large!) problem with the idea that this is just another “routine” cycle—we are now on this side of the industrial revolution, and there are far more people on planet Earth than at any other time in history. Assuming a normal life span, I will have lived during a time when the world’s population will have grown from two billion to nine billion.

Let us be honest—there are all too many people, including those in the Christian church, who behave as though some lives are more dispensable than others. The expectation of Jesus, “To love our neighbors as ourselves,” is an inconvenient truth. Sometimes it is assumed that “neighbors” are only those who reside within the borders of our own nation. And then only if they have been here for at least a few years.

If global warming is a reality, and there are those who genuinely believe it is not so, the projected impact will be devastating unless we can mobilize our best minds and behaviors to reverse the trends. There are plenty of places where any of us can research what experts are saying about the potential impact of unmitigated global warming. The IPCC report notes: “Observational evidence from all continents and most oceans shows that many natural systems are being affected by regional climate changes, particularly temperature increases.”⁴

We are, however, the ones who are producing the most greenhouse gas emissions and can best afford countermeasures to limit its consequences. This is a looming humanitarian catastrophe. Recently the U.S. military was ordered to begin preparing contingency plans because it is recognized that this is a threat to global security.

What if the scientists are wrong? What if global warming proves to be the biggest hoax in recorded human history? Does that let us off the hook for making changes? I think not. For myself, I would rather be guilty of being duped while having made an effort to support “care for the creation” initiatives, even if my grandchildren and great grandchildren eventually call me ignorant, than to disregard current realities and hope the problem goes away. I do not want my descendants to question my commitment to be a good steward of what God entrusted to our generation.

As a Christian church, we are called to love the world that God created. Where do we go from here? We do not have all the answers for how changes can be made and their potential impact. We know some things, but there is much more to be done in the next decade to ascertain the impact of specific changes. A column by George Will (*Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 12, 2007) suggested that since some proposed changes would appear to have negligible impact, we should question the reality itself. Again, in my mind, this is an example of fuzzy thinking.

Of course, we are learning as we go. Of course, we will make mistakes. What else is new? We do have the human capacity, I believe, by the gift of God, to address the realities, test ideas for change, and project possible outcomes. Just because some proposed “solutions” are extreme or over the top, does not mean that we should ignore reasonable considerations.

We should celebrate those achievements already realized. I am grateful that EMU has long led the way among higher education institutions to gain efficiencies in energy usage. Because of research done by science faculty and careful work by leaders of our Physical Plant staff, we have been saving large amounts of energy for several decades. In an AAPA (formerly Association of Physical Plant Administrators) 2004–2005 Facilities Core Data Survey of energy usage by ninety universities across the entire U.S., EMU ranked third from the best in the least energy used per gross square foot of building space. That is a remarkable achievement. EMU’s usage cost is \$0.90 per gross square foot. The comparable numbers at three other Virginia institutions are \$1.53, \$1.78, and \$1.98.

As we go forward with building and renovation plans, we will utilize proven “green” technologies. With many inputs, we intend to make EMU a model institution in which our use of resources is consistent with our theology and faith.

As a university we can make decisions that are environmentally friendly; I invite us as individuals and families to examine our practices to better reflect our biblical understandings. To students at EMU and all across the world, I extend this challenge: hone your God-given talents, grow your entrepreneurial skills, and stretch your scientific minds to co-create, with God, a better world. As disciples of Jesus, we can do no less.

I close with the prayerful words of Patricia Winters:
Giver of life and all good gifts:
Grant us also wisdom to use
only what we need;
Courage to trust your bounty;
Imagination to preserve our resources;
Determination to deny frivolous excess;
And inspiration to sustain through
temptation.⁵
Amen. ★

Notes

¹Psalms 24:1–2 (New International Version).

²Colossians 1:16 (New International Version).

³Romans 18:18–23 (New International Version).

⁴Working Group II Contribution to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fourth Assessment Report; Climate Change 2007: Climate Change Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, April 6, 2007, 2.

⁵Elias Amidon and Elizabeth Roberts, eds., *Life Prayers: From around the World: 365 Prayers, Blessings, and Affirmations to Celebrate the Human Journey* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 115.