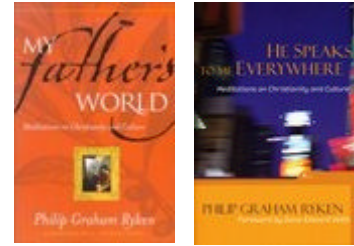


Window on the World

Window on the World is our weekly opportunity to examine our culture from the vantage point of biblical Christianity. Here you will find the text from Dr. Ryken's "Window on the World" talks from Tenth Presbyterian Church's evening service. If you missed one or wanted to send a copy to a friend, you will be able to find them here. Please note: there is no "Window on the World" on third Sundays, selected other Sundays, or in July and August.

Windows on the World before September 2005 are available in an older format. [Click here](#). Many of these are now published in [My Father's World: Meditations on Christianity and Culture](#) (P&R Publishing, 2002) and in [He Speaks to Me Everywhere: Meditations on Christianity and Culture](#) (P&R Publishing, 2004) by Philip Graham Ryken.



Global Warming

Dr. Philip Ryken



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General

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Full Text:

Believe me when I say that the Inuit are worried. Living on the edge of the Arctic Circle, these native hunters are used to dealing with extreme cold. What they are not used to is the kind of winter they have just been through, when they have seen polar bears stranded, dying on pieces of ice that have broken up and floated away, when they have seen rain showers in February, when it is usually twenty degrees below zero, and when they have seen robins hopping around their villages in early spring time. These are things neither they nor their ancestors have ever seen before.

It is not just the Inuit, either. The year 2005 was the warmest year on record—warmer even than 2004, or 2003. The signs are everywhere: glaciers are melting, permafrost is thawing out, hurricanes are rising. The result, say some scientists, is that we are rapidly reaching the tipping point beyond which some of our natural resources may never recover.

The term "global warming" first emerged in public consciousness at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Basically, the argument is that burning oil, gas, and coal—especially in the Western industrial nations, although also now in places like China and India—is releasing unprecedented amounts of carbon dioxide. These greenhouse gases trap heat in the upper atmosphere and will end up warming our climate by anywhere from 1 to 5 degrees Celsius, depending on the atmospheric model. Rising temperatures on land and at sea will cause climate extremes that add to the frequency and severity of natural disasters around the globe and threaten human life itself.

From the outset this hypothesis sparked scientific and political controversy. Is the world really getting warmer, or not? If it is, what are the consequences, and what—if anything—can be done about them?

Politically speaking, the issue of global warming has usually been associated with liberals and environmentalists,

not conservatives or evangelicals. However, a broad coalition of more than 80 evangelical leaders recently established the Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI) and released a statement called *Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action*. In addition to giving an urgent warning of the dangers of global warming and outlining moral principles for biblical environmentalism, this document offers specific legislative initiatives for limiting the use of fossil fuels. “Christians must care about climate change,” the statement reads, “because we love God the Creator and Jesus our Lord, through whom and for whom the creation was made. This is God’s world, and any damage that we do to God’s world is an offense against God himself.”

I mention all of this to point out the difference between politics, economics, science, and theology. An important part of “thinking Christianly” is knowing specifically what kind of thinking we are doing on a particular issue.

As far as theology is concerned, Christians are agreed—or at least they ought to be—that human beings have a duty of care for creation, including their fellow creatures. Our God has told us to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, nurturing it with benevolent care and ruling it with wise stewardship (see Gen. 1:28). This is non-negotiable. Therefore, if it is true that our globe is getting warmer, and that human activity is largely responsible for this, and that the consequences may be deadly, and that we can do something about it, then it follows that as Christians we have a responsibility of concern for global warming.

However, proving each “if” statement requires scientific evidence. Therefore, properly speaking, there is no uniquely “Christian” viewpoint on whether the globe is getting warmer or not. That is a scientific question, not a theological question, and the best people to answer it are qualified scientists. Today nearly all of them agree there is mounting evidence that we are making our world warmer. But climate is complex, and some scientists disagree. Some say the evidence is inconclusive. Some say we are simply in a cyclical natural warming pattern that has little to do with what human beings are doing. Others argue that global warming may actually be beneficial to the atmosphere and the people who live in it. My point is that these questions can only be settled by science, not on the basis of anyone’s religious commitment.

The economic and political issues add further levels of complexity. Suppose the evangelical environmentalists are right about the science of global warming. They may still be wrong about what we should do about it. Limiting carbon dioxide emissions would have severe repercussions on the global economy, and this too would have an effect on people for whom we have a responsibility of care, especially the poor. Then there are all the questions to resolve about the most persuasive way to bring whatever political changes are needed.

Again, there is and there can be no single “Christian” position on these questions. We cannot simply equate faithfulness to biblical Christianity with any scientific opinion or policy platform for the environment.

What Christians can do is use our God-given reason to analyze the scientific, political, and economic issues involved. We can also make sure we are reasoning on the basis of solid biblical principles concerning our sacred calling to care for creation and to love our neighbor. Then we can follow the dictates of conscience in fulfilling our responsibilities as scientists, theologians, politicians, and citizens, as the case may be.

I find myself intrigued (and not a little horrified) by the possibility that we may have such a dramatic effect on our environment that eventually it will become uninhabitable. It reminds me of the terrarium I designed in grade school, which became so hot and humid inside that all the plant and animal life was completely destroyed. Maybe that is how the world will end, with self-inflicted natural catastrophes that are at the same time mighty acts of divine judgment. Given our natural depravity, this would make perfect sense: fallen human beings damaging our environment and ourselves so badly that in the end the only thing that could save any of us would be the Second Coming of the Son of Man, who has promised to make all things new (Rev. 21:5).

[Information for this Window on the World came from various articles in *Christianity Today*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Washington Post*, and *World*]

