

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Issue of “Settled Science:” Climate Change

Genesis 1:26ff explains that humans are God’s dominion stewards over His world. In fact, as this text makes clear, this stewardship responsibility is part of being in the image of God. Humans are accountable to God for this stewardship. It is therefore only common sense that it is not good for humanity to be spewing tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Managing the environment is important and to wantonly destroy or do harm to God’s world is irresponsible and hardly pleasing to God. But consider the language that is being used today when it comes to human causation of what is known as “climate change.” Recently, President Obama declared that “[T]he debate is settled. Climate change is a fact.” But is it “settled”? Is there absolute certainty in science that changes in the climate are due to human causation? There are several important facts that raise some serious questions about how “settled” this branch of science really is.

Steven F. Howard, visiting scholar at the University of Colorado, helps us put all of the news about climate change in perspective. For example, he demonstrates that the third National Climate Assessment that the White House released in early May generated alarming headlines in the media and came on the heels of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s most recent report, which also generated the same type of headlines. The National Climate Assessment report is 829 pages long, and has an additional 137 page “highlights” summary. The report was produced by “more than 300 experts guided by a 60-member Federal Advisory Committee.” The report argues that significant economic impacts of human-caused climate change in the US are already occurring: “Corn producers in Iowa, oyster growers in Washington State, and maple syrup producers in Vermont are all observing climate-related changes that are outside of recent experience.” Howard argues that “these are less scientific facts than they are political statements. While climate change can indeed be measured in economic terms, proof that they are ‘human-caused’ is far from definitive.” Howard also shows that the “mitigation” chapter in the report “implicitly recognizes the unreality of the conventional climate agenda and it concludes with an acknowledgement that we need much more research on affordable low-and non-carbon energy sources along with more basic climate science research into key ‘uncertainties.’ Anyone else who talks this way gets called a ‘denier.’” Such “refreshing realism” was totally ignored in the alarmist media as it covered the National Climate Assessment report.

Also, consider these facts:

- If climate change is a “settled science,” then why do its predictions keep changing? Columnist Charles Krauthammer recently observed that the great physicist Freeman Dyson argues that climate change scientists deal with the fluid dynamics of the

atmosphere and oceans, but ignore the effect of biology (i.e., vegetation and topsoil) on climate. Further, atmospheric scientists Richard McNider and John Christy maintain that climate scientists deal with climate models that have been “consistently and spectacularly wrong in their predictions.”

- The climate change advocates predict more extreme weather such as hurricanes and tornadoes as a result of global warming. But as Krauthammer demonstrates, in all of 2012, only one hurricane made the US landfall. And 2013 saw the fewest Atlantic hurricanes in 30 years. In fact, in the last half-century, one-third fewer major hurricanes have hit the US than in the previous century. Further, in terms of tornadoes, last year saw the fewest in a quarter-century. And the last 30 years (of presumed global warming) has seen a 30% decrease in extreme tornado activity (F-3 and above) versus the previous 30 years.
- Between 1998 and 2013, the Earth’s surface temperature rose at a rate of 0.04 degrees Centigrade a decade, far slower than the 0.18 degrees Centigrade increase in the 1990s. Meanwhile, emissions of carbon dioxide (which would be expected to push temperatures upward) rose uninterruptedly.
- *The Economist* recently published an article which focused on important factors that could have a much deeper impact on Earth’s climate than we realize. These are factors that are rarely discussed and are never mentioned in media reports on Earth’ climate.
 - (1) The sun’s power output fluctuates slightly over a cycle that lasts about 11 years. The current cycle seems to have gone on longer than normal. Why? We do not exactly know. So for the last decade, less heat has been reaching Earth than usual. What is the effect of this on the Earth’s temperature? Rarely is this even mentioned. And, of course, this has nothing to do with human activity and its effect on Earth’s temperature.
 - (2) Pollution throws aerosols (particles such as soot, and suspended droplets of things like sulphuric acid) into the air, where they reflect sunlight back into space. The more there are, the greater their cooling effect. This then is about cooling, not warming of the Earth.
 - (3) Volcanoes do the same thing, so increased volcanic activity has a cooling effect on Earth. The point of all this is that current climate models underplay the delayed solar cycle and the effect of pollution that actually produces a cooling effect, not a warming effect on Earth.

As I read all of this material, I began to reflect on the claims of President Obama, many environmental groups, the National Climate Assessment report and even the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Climate change science is not a “settled science.” One cannot speak in absolute terms about the complexities and nuances of Earth’s climate and make the bold, absolute claim that human activity is causing global warming and leading to greater and more catastrophic storms, including hurricanes and tornadoes. The data simply does not bear this out.

What then do we do? As Christians, we understand that human beings have **dominion** authority over God’s world. It matters how much carbon dioxide we dump into the air. It matters how many pollutants of all types we dump into the air. It matters how we care for

the soil, the trees and our water. Pollution of water, for example, is ethically wrong. Reasonable stewardship of all dimensions of God's world is our obligation. We are to exercise prudent and measured stewardship over every aspect and every part of God's world. But it is ethically suspect to be alarmist and extreme in comments that reflect more of a political agenda than the certainties of a "settled science."

See Steven F. Hayward in the *Wall Street Journal* (8 May 2014); Charles Krauthammer in www.washingtonpost.com (25 February 2014); and *The Economist* (8 March 2014), pp. 81-82.