

Review: JAR1343

## CONSIDERING CREATION CARE

A Summary Critique of  
*Keeping God's Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective*  
edited by Noah J. Toly and Daniel I. Block

(IVP Academic/Apollos, 2010)

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“Taking good care of the Earth sounds like a good idea because it *is* a good idea.” So says my friend and colleague James Tonkowich in one of his lectures for the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation’s *Resisting the Green Dragon* DVD series.

He’s right, of course, and so are the authors of *Keeping God’s Earth: The Global Environment in Biblical Perspective*, who emphatically make the same point. The inherent rightness of taking care of Earth is an obvious inference from the facts that Earth and all that is in it are God’s handiwork, both glorifying God and displaying His glory, and that Earth is our home, without which humanity could not survive.

The editors and authors of *Keeping God’s Earth* introduce important biblical, theological, historical, scientific, ethical, and aesthetic issues related to what they generally call “creation care.” Most of the book is of high quality, and despite disagreements—some major—I think it deserves wide and careful consideration. This review will highlight some weaknesses, but that should not be taken as a general condemnation.

**Mapping Out the Book.** A helpful pattern of the book is for a chapter that is mostly empirical to be followed by one mostly biblical in focus, providing methodological balance. The contents are:

*Part One: Introduction*—“Introduction: Keeping God’s Earth: Toward an Evangelical Response to Environmental Challenges,” by Noah J. Toly and Daniel I. Block; Chapter 1: “Eschatology and Environmental Ethics: On the Importance of Biblical Theology to Creation Care,” by Douglas J. Moo.

*Part Two: Two Cities and the World*—Chapter 2: “Cities and the Global Environment,” by Block; Chapter 3: “A Biblical Theology of the City and the Environment: Human Community in the Created Order,” by M. Daniel Carroll R. [sic].

*Part Three: The Diversity of Life*—Chapter 4: “The Diversity of Life: Its Loss and Conservation,” by Fred Van Dyke; Chapter 5: “To Serve and to Keep: Toward a Biblical Understanding of Humanity’s Responsibility in the Face of the Biodiversity Crisis,” by Block.

*Part Four: Water Resources*—Chapter 6: “Water for Life: Global Freshwater Resources,” by Michael Guebert; Chapter 7: “A Biblical Theology of Water: Plenty, Food and Drought in the Created Order,” by David Toshio Tsumura.

*Part Five: Climate Change*—Chapter 8: “The Changing Global Climate: Evidence, Impacts, Adaptation and Abatement,” by Sir John Houghton; Chapter 9: “The Earth Is the Lord’s: Biblical Foundations for Global Ecological Ethics and Mission,” by Christopher J. H. Wright.

*Part Six: Conclusion*—Chapter 10: “Environmental Ethics: Bringing Creation Care Down to Earth,” by David Gushee; Afterword: “When the Gardener Returns,” by Douglas J. Green.

**Some Low Points.** First, frequently the authors stress the downside of various historical developments, ignoring the upside. For example, Toly’s discussion of cities neglects that urbanization enhances human health and longevity and reduces natural habitat conversion. Related to this, because solutions always follow problems rather than preceding them, the authors also often focus on the problems as short-term, static situations but neglect the solutions as long-term trends. Toly illustrates this by writing that “the most rapidly urbanizing regions of the world are also marked by desperate poverty” (p. 67). The same could have been said about the now-wealthy cities of the developed world fifty, a hundred, or two hundred years ago. Sound correctives to these weaknesses can be found in, for example, Hernando de Soto’s *The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World* (1989) and Indur M. Goklany’s *The Improving State of the World: Why We’re Living Longer, Healthier, More Comfortable Lives on a Cleaner Planet* (2007).

Second, like other evangelical environmentalists, the authors frequently accept empirical claims common in the larger environmental movement without checking to see whether they are supported by solid empirical evidence or are just hypotheses. For example, Van Dyke repeats the common claim, “Current extinction rates are estimated to be 100 to 1,000 times higher than historical extinction rates” (95–96). The claim is the output of mathematical models, in other words, is hypothesis, not evidence, though people treat them as if they were data (what one observes empirically).<sup>1</sup> The models were found highly inaccurate when, for instance, the International Union for the

Conservation of Nature commissioned a worldwide field study to provide empirical evidence for high extinction rates. Instead it found, in every locale tested, almost no extinctions.<sup>2</sup> Interested readers can consult well-known sources such as Bjørn Lomborg's *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (2001), Julian Simon's *The State of Humanity* (1995), or the annual *Index of Leading Environmental Indicators* for able support for contrasting views on this and many other exaggerations common to environmentalist literature.

Third, much environmental writing makes broad generalizations that can be misleading. An instance is Guebert's writing that "pollution is contributing to a rapid decline in the quality of water resources" (149). In some places, that's true. In most, however, water quality is improving in response to economic development. This illustrates the "environmental Kuznets Curve."<sup>3</sup> Emissions rise in early economic development but peak and then decline as growing wealth makes emission reduction more affordable, and human health and longevity, dependent more on wealth than on environment, improve through all three periods.

Fourth, environmentalists rarely address the need to prioritize on the basis of comparative cost/benefit analysis. Those chapters that mention it generally assume that mitigating catastrophic anthropogenic global warming (CAGW) should be our highest environmental priority. Yet major studies, such as those of the Copenhagen Consensus Center,<sup>4</sup> indicate that many times more lives would be saved for every dollar spent on, for example, preventing water-borne diseases, or direct attacks on malaria-carrying mosquitoes, than for every dollar spent attempting to reduce future global warming. Finite economic resources make triage unavoidable.

Fifth, and following naturally, this book's authors, like most evangelical environmentalists, take claims of CAGW at face value and show no awareness of the serious challenges to those claims by serious scientists.<sup>5</sup> They also tend to lionize Sir John Houghton, former chairman of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), assuming that his position and his being an evangelical together make his word final—and he wrote the chapter on climate change for this book. For example, when Bill Moyers (in the 2006 PBS program, "Is God Green?") asked former National Association of Evangelicals Vice President Richard Cizik why he trusted Houghton, Cizik replied, "Because he's an evangelical." Yet at the time several of the most outspoken critics of the case for CAGW were evangelicals whose credentials as climate scientists equal Houghton's: Roy W. Spencer, principal research scientist in climatology at the University of Alabama, Huntsville, and lead scientist on NASA's Advanced Microwave Scanning Radiometer experiment aboard the Aqua Satellite (the world's top source for truly 24/7/365 atmospheric temperature data at all altitudes in all locations around the planet); John Christy, another principal research scientist in climatology at UA Huntsville and a lead author for the IPCC; and David Legates, director of the Center for Climatic Studies and assistant professor of geography and climate at the University of Delaware. (There are others.) Spencer and Legates were lead and contributing authors, respectively, to the climate science chapter of the Cornwall Alliance's *Renewed Call to Truth, Prudence, and Protection of the Poor: An Evangelical*

*Examination of the Theology, Science, and Economics of Global Warming*, which provides some initial arguments against CAGW.<sup>6</sup>

Sixth and finally, the authors make little attempt actually to integrate a biblical worldview (as distinct from biblical motivations to honor and serve God) with their scientific understanding. Yet CAGW is an issue on which precisely such integration begs to be done. The fundamental assumption of CAGW is that a minute change in atmospheric chemistry— CO2 content rising from 270 thousandths of one percent to 540 thousandths of one percent— could cause catastrophic warming that would threaten human and other species' existence. One might as well praise the work of an architect who designed his building so that when someone leaned on one wall all feedbacks would magnify the stress until the building collapsed. I doubt that anyone would call such architectural design good, let alone "very good" —yet that was God's evaluation of Earth after He created it (Gen. 1:31). And it so happens that what we know of overall climate feedbacks is that rather than being positive and so possibly driving a positive feedback loop leading to catastrophic results from minor perturbations to a fragile climate, they are negative, eliminating about 58 percent of greenhouse warming (making Earth's average surface temperature about 59°F instead of 140°F; it would be about 0°F with no greenhouse effect), making Earth's climate robust, resilient, and self-correcting—precisely what we should expect from a system designed by an infinitely wise, powerful, and benevolent Creator.

In sum, *Keeping God's Earth* is a generally helpful book but needs to be read in tandem with other voices. In this way its too- ready embrace of environmentalist exaggerations and myths can be balanced with a careful examination of the pagan worldview, theology, and ethics that permeate much environmentalism.<sup>7</sup>

—E. Calvin Beisner

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## NOTES

- 1 Sociologist of science Myanna Lahsen documents and discusses the failure even of many scientists, especially climate modelers, to recognize that models and their output are not evidence but hypotheses (however sophisticated) in "Seductive Simulations? Uncertainty Distribution around Climate Models," *Social Studies of Science* 35/6 (December 2005): 895–922, online at [http://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/admin/publication\\_files/resource-1891-2005.49.pdf#search=%22%22Myanna%20Lahsen%22%20%22Seductive%20Simulations%22%22](http://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/admin/publication_files/resource-1891-2005.49.pdf#search=%22%22Myanna%20Lahsen%22%20%22Seductive%20Simulations%22%22).
- 2 T. C. Whitmore and J. A. Sayer, eds., *Tropical Deforestation and Species Extinction* (1992), 55, 85, 93, 94, 96, 102, 127, 128. The authors also acknowledge the lack of sound empirical basis for estimating species extinction rates; 9, 11, 55, 56, 57, 93, 95.
- 3 I discuss this on pages 13–16 of "What Is the Most Important Environmental Task Facing American

Christians Today?" online at <http://www.theird.org/Document.Doc?id=25>. A more thorough and technical discussion is in Indur M. Goklany, *The Improving State of the World: Why We're Living Longer, Healthier, More Comfortable Lives on a Cleaner Planet* (2007), chaps. 5–8.

- 4 See [www.CopenhagenConsensus.com](http://www.CopenhagenConsensus.com). See also William D. Nordhaus, *A Question of Balance: Weighing the Options on Global Warming Policies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).
- 5 See, e.g., S. Fred Singer and Craig Idso, *Climate Change Reconsidered: The Report of the Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change* (Chicago: Heartland Institute, 2009) (online at <http://www.heartland.org/publications/NIPCC%20report/PDFs/NIPCC%20Final.pdf>). Among the best of the shorter, less technical treatments are Christopher Essex and Ross McKittrick's *Taken by Storm: The Troubled Science, Policy, and Politics of Global Warming*, 2nd ed. (Ontario, CA: Key Porter Books, 2008); Patrick J. Michaels and Robert C. Balling's *Climate of Extremes: Global Warming Science They Don't Want You to Know* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2010); and Roy W. Spencer's *The Great Global Warming Blunder: How Mother Nature Fooled the World's Top Climate Scientists* (New York: Encounter Books, 2010). A particularly helpful book because it carefully introduces lay readers to the basic principles of each related scientific discipline before it begins to discuss that discipline's contribution to our understanding of climate and the global warming debate is Doug L. Hoffman and Allen Simmons's *The Resilient Earth: Science, Global Warming, and the Future of Humanity* (USA: BookSurge, 2008).
- 6 Online at <http://www.cornwallalliance.org/docs/a-renewed-call-to-truth-prudence-and-protection-of-the-poor.pdf>.
- 7 See, e.g., James A. Wanliss, *Resisting the Green Dragon: Dominion, Not Death* (Burke, VA: Cornwall Alliance, 2010); Peter Jones, ed., *On Global Wizardry: Techniques of Pagan Spirituality and a Christian Response* (Escondido, CA: Main Entry Editions, 2010); and Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).