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ABSTRACT

Scholars and journalists alike interpreted “A Southern Baptist Declaration on the Environment and Climate Change”, a document released in 2008 by a group of American Southern Baptists, as evidence that American evangelicals were becoming increasingly concerned about the environment. Using the tools of textual analysis, I show that this was not the only interpretation of the document at play. While journalists and scholars understood the Declaration as addressing the need to halt climate change, for a group of key Southern Baptist signatories, the document expressed a need for Southern Baptists to engage more actively in the public environmental discourse, lest they relinquish this domain to secular and liberal voices. Critically, the latter group viewed the Declaration as compatible with climate change scepticism. My analysis shows how cultural context informs climate change attitudes, while also suggesting socio-historical factors—particularly evangelicals’ embattled mentality—that may support climate change scepticism in Southern Baptist circles.

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Introduction

Since the emergence of an evangelical environmental movement in the mid-1990s, a growing body of literature has sought to analyze its origins, motivations, and potential (e.g. Danielsen; Kearns, “Noah’s Ark”, “Cooking”, “Religious”; Wilkinson; Zaleha and Szasz). Much of this literature has focused on social movement actors, whom scholars divide into two camps: ‘liberal’ or ‘green’ evangelicals who work with environmentalists and ‘conservative’ or ‘brown’ evangelicals who oppose them (e.g. McCammack; Zaleha and Szasz; Kearns, “Religious”). While these studies have revealed much about evangelicals’ engagement with the environmental crisis and climate change, less is known about the factors that motivate such opinions, especially outside activist circles. This question is particularly important because, the greening of evangelicalism notwithstanding, polling data and quantitative studies indicate that evangelicals remain the most sceptical religious group regarding climate change (Jones, Cox and Navarro-Rivera; Smith and Leiserowitz). This scepticism appears to result not only from their relatively conservative political views, but also from aspects of their religiosity (Kilburn).

To understand better how evangelicals' religiosity may be related to their attitudes toward climate change, I examine how social context and cultural identity have shaped attitudes toward the environment and climate change in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), America's largest Protestant denomination. Specifically, I use the tools of textual analysis to examine how a group of Southern Baptist leaders sought to engage both environmental issues and climate change by signing a document known as "A Southern Baptist Declaration on the Environment and Climate Change" (hereafter, 'the Declaration'). Although it is usually viewed as a straightforward example of the greening of evangelical Christianity, I reveal that there in fact existed two different interpretations of the document, which I call the "climate change interpretation" and the "stewardship interpretation". According to the climate change interpretation, advanced by the national news media and academic observers, the Declaration called for action to halt anthropogenic climate change. In contrast, according to the stewardship interpretation, advanced by a group of key Southern Baptist signatories, the Declaration simply called for environmental stewardship and permitted a range of stances toward climate change, including scepticism that it was a serious problem caused by human activities. I suggest that a key factor supporting the stewardship interpretation may have been the evangelical culture of tension and embattlement (Smith et al.), a culture that seems to have encouraged some signatories to view the Declaration as a chance to reclaim discursive turf from liberal and secular cultural opponents.

My results suggest that those who seek to interpret evangelical pronouncements on the environment should not naively assume that their interpretations are the only ones that can be produced from such texts. The differences between secular and evangelical audiences are substantial and it is only by seeking to understand the social contexts that inform each group's perspective that scholars can attempt to offer a full account of these meanings. For those concerned about the environment and climate change, doing so is important because it provides important clues as to why it has been so difficult to inspire concern about climate change in certain cultural contexts.

Evangelicals, Southern Baptists, and the Environment: A Brief History

Like many Americans, evangelicals began to pay attention to environmental problems in the 1960s. Although facing disinterest from the evangelical mainstream for many years, an evangelical environmental movement slowly began to build momentum with the formation of organizations such as the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies (founded in 1979) and the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN). Founded in 1993, the EEN became the principle hub for evangelical environmental activism at the national level. Over subsequent decades, a number of environmentally concerned evangelical organizations and ministries emerged, including Mathew Sleeth's non-profit Blessed Earth and Tri Robinson's church the Boise Vineyard, but the EEN has arguably remained the most visible (Kearns, "Green" 158; Wilkinson 20).

Although evangelical environmentalists were initially hesitant to tackle the issue of climate change, the situation changed in 2002, when the influential evangelical leader Richard Cizik became convinced of the issue's importance (Wilkinson 22). In 2006, Cizik and a handful of other evangelical leaders working under the auspices of the Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI) drafted a document known as "Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action" (hereafter, 'the Call to Action'). Due in part to Cizik's participation, the

group was able to obtain signatures from members of the evangelical establishment and well-known mega-church pastors. As was widely reported in the US media, this made a convincing case that evangelicals were ready to throw their weight behind the issue. It was in this context of great optimism about the potential of evangelicals to contribute to the climate movement that the Southern Baptist Declaration appeared.

The SBC is an evangelical denomination that is known for its religious and political conservatism, although this conservatism is not monolithic in either regard (Ammerman 3, 72–126). Still, regarding climate change, the denomination has officially followed the typical politically conservative position of climate change scepticism (Zaleha and Szasz 219–20). This stance was formalized in 2007, when delegates to the denomination's annual meeting approved a resolution that questioned the reality of climate change and urged Southern Baptists to “proceed cautiously in the human-induced global warming debate” (SBC, “Resolution on Global Warming”). Given this history, the appearance of the Declaration in 2008 seemed to mark a major shift. It was not a formal SBC document, but it nevertheless appeared to indicate that Southern Baptists, like evangelicals more broadly, were ready to tackle climate change.

The Declaration's origins can be traced to Jonathan Merritt, who conceived of the idea while a student at the SBC-affiliated Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS). Having been introduced to ‘creation care’ (a term many evangelicals use to refer to environmental stewardship) through a class, Merritt began to delve more deeply into the topic on his own. When he learned about the ECI, he decided to pursue a similar project within Southern Baptist circles (personal interview, 10 August 2012). As the son of the former SBC president James Merritt, the younger Merritt was well positioned to gain support for such an effort from respected Southern Baptist leaders and had soon enlisted five such individuals to help him. The result was the Declaration, a document that Merritt felt was “really sound, theologically, and that also was distinctly Southern Baptist in its tone and its approach” (personal interview, 10 August 2012). Merritt then gathered signatures, reaching high-profile leaders like Frank Page, then president of the SBC, Jack Graham, a former SBC president, and Danny Akin, president of SEBTS, as well as pastors and lay members from around the country.¹ In partnership with the EEN, Merritt initially planned to announce the Declaration in an event at the National Press Club, but intense pressure from the group that had backed the SBC's official policy of climate scepticism—the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC)—led him to change course. Cancelling the National Press Club event, he contacted a *New York Times* reporter who announced the release of the Declaration in an article published on 10 March 2008. In addition to the article in *The New York Times*, independent stories appeared in the major national news outlets *National Public Radio* (NPR), *Time*, *CNN.com*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. Influential papers like the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post*, both among the top ten newspapers in terms of circulation at the time, also printed versions of the *Associated Press* story, as did at least 35 local newspapers.² With significant media coverage, the Declaration soon entered the scholarly literature as an example of evangelicals' growing interest in tackling the issue of climate change (see Bergmann; Harrington; Kearns, “Religious”; Wilkinson). Although Merritt himself clearly viewed climate change as a real and serious problem (personal interview, 10 August 2012), however, this was not the case for all signatories.

Methodology

For cultural studies scholars, it is standard to assume that a text contains multiple potential readings. This is because readers have different assumptions, perspectives, and reading habits that shape how they interpret a text. This insight has been fruitfully applied to a wide range of texts, but it has not yet been applied to texts produced by green evangelicals, perhaps because activist texts are assumed to be created expressly for the purpose of advancing a particular position and therefore to afford little opportunity for alternative readings. While leading readers to expect it to be unambiguous, however, the Declaration was produced under unique circumstances that resulted in a more open-ended text. Most significantly, its primary author was young, inexperienced, and under significant pressure from the powerful ERLC; he was also guided by those with greater experience and prestige in the Southern Baptist community. These factors resulted in a text that was more conciliatory than previous examples in the *genre*. Further, perhaps due to the primary author's position of relative obscurity and institutional powerlessness, the Declaration relied heavily on explicit appeals to traditional Southern Baptist values and commitments to establish its authority within the broader Southern Baptist community. While these appeals were apparently designed to assure potential signatories that the text represented an authentically Southern Baptist voice, they also enabled a reading of the text as consistent with the Southern Baptist 'tradition' of scepticism regarding climate change, rather than as seeking to break with tradition. Textual analysis is the ideal tool for understanding how these different readings were possible.

For textual analysts, a text's potential meanings become actualized whenever a reader encounters a text, yet this does not mean that each reader has a unique interpretation, creating an infinite galaxy of meanings. Rather, because certain groups have similar contextual knowledge, they tend to produce similar meanings from a particular text. As the cultural studies scholar Janice Radway has pointed out, readers thus interpret texts as members of "interpretive communities" (Radway 11). I apply these insights to two interpretive communities: the first is comprised of the national media and scholars, while the second is comprised of Southern Baptist pastors who signed the Declaration and spoke publicly about this decision in two Southern Baptist-affiliated newspapers. That these two groups have different socio-cultural positions is readily apparent; the national media and scholars largely belong to (and help produce) the secular world, whereas Southern Baptist pastors are immersed in both the broader culture of evangelicalism and in the culture of the Southern Baptist tradition.

To disclose the different meanings that these two interpretive communities produced, I follow an analytical scheme developed by cultural studies scholar Mikko Lehtonen, who recommends considering (1) how potential meanings are actualized in particular interpretive communities using different contextual cues and (2) the historical and cultural reasons for which particular communities produce particular meanings (Lehtonen 144). Following this scheme for each interpretive community, I first give details of the elements of the climate change interpretation by analyzing the five independently reported news stories about the Declaration that were published in influential national media outlets (listed above) as well as the *Associated Press* story (Zoll) which was widely re-published. I then examine the contextual and textual factors that enabled this interpretation. Secondly, to explore the stewardship interpretation, I analyze the statements that Southern Baptist signatories made about the Declaration in articles published in the *Baptist Press* (the SBC's official

news service) and *The Christian Index* (the Georgia Baptist Convention's news service). I then examine the contextual and textual factors supporting this interpretation. Critically, I show that the different contextual clues each interpretive community employed directed its respective readers' attention to different aspects of the text, enabling the two contrasting interpretations to emerge.

To supplement the textual analysis, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with Jonathan Merritt and eleven pastors from Georgia who had signed the Declaration, ten of whom were sceptical that climate change was occurring or that it was due primarily to human activities. All interviews were conducted between July and August 2012. Apart from Merritt and other public figures, names given below are pseudonyms.

With about 18% of the state's population claiming SBC membership, Georgia is one of the denomination's strongholds (ASARB). Having been raised outside the state capital (Atlanta), Merritt also had strong networks there, as indicated by extensive coverage in the Georgia-based *Christian Index* and a series of opinion pieces about the Declaration printed in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Atlanta's flagship newspaper (not analyzed here). Georgia pastors were therefore well positioned to be knowledgeable about the Declaration and the controversy surrounding it. However, the pastors I interviewed are not a representative sample of signatories, but a means of providing greater—if necessarily preliminary—insight into the mindset of sceptical signatories. As a final note, readers are advised to read the Declaration (contained in Appendix A) before proceeding to the following analysis.

The Climate Change Interpretation

The climate change interpretation entailed four basic assumptions: 1) the Declaration was primarily about climate change; 2) the Declaration favoured action to halt climate change; 3) the appearance of the Declaration indicated a shift in opinion among Southern Baptists on the issue; 4) this shift was an extension of previous efforts to 'green' the evangelical tradition. Although this interpretation also appeared in the academic literature, it was largely produced by the national media, so I focus on that coverage here.

That the national news media assumed that the Declaration was primarily about climate change is evident from their headlines, which asserted, for example, that "Southern Baptists Back a Shift on Climate Change" (Banerjee, *The New York Times*) or that "Southern Baptist Leaders Take Unusual Step of Urging Fight against Climate Change" (Zoll, *Associated Press*); only the headline of the story in *Time* bucked this trend, linking the Declaration instead to the greening of evangelicalism (Van Biema). Although the Declaration also addressed environmental stewardship, the national news stories tended to discuss the Declaration without reference to this aspect.

Most of the news stories also claimed or implied in their leads that the Declaration said climate change should be stopped. CNN's lead claimed, for example, that "Several prominent leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention said Monday that Baptists have a moral responsibility to combat climate change" (CNN). NPR, *Time*, and *The Christian Science Monitor* stopped short of writing that the Declaration said climate change should be stopped, but they implied that this was its message by describing it as a challenge to the SBC's official resolution of 2007, which advocated climate scepticism (Hagerty; Van Biema; Lampman). Five of the six stories supported their assertion that the Declaration represented a shift in opinion by referring to the lines stating that "our current denominational engagement with

these issues have often been too timid” (lines 43–4). *The Christian Science Monitor* story was the exception (Lampman).

Finally, all the stories except the very brief *NPR* story placed the Declaration within the larger context of the greening of evangelicalism. According to *The New York Times*, for example, “the Southern Baptist signatories join a growing community of evangelicals pushing for more action” on climate change (Banerjee). Similarly, according to *Time*, “the position of Evangelicals in general (of whom Southern Baptists represent a sizable piece) has been swinging ever greener” (Van Biema). Only *The Christian Science Monitor* story noted that there was a difference between the Declaration and previous examples of greening (Lampman).

Contextual Factors Enabling the Climate Change Interpretation

The national news media formed the climate change interpretation, as readers do, by using contextual clues to inform their understanding of the text’s meaning and intent (Lehtonen 126). Probably the most subtly powerful of these contextual clues was the Declaration’s *genre*. Readers expect declarations to announce an opinion or a position—perhaps one that is controversial—and to stand by it. The Declaration did not overtly embrace climate scepticism (as had the official SBC resolution), so readers were led to expect that it would make a strong statement in favor of the opposite position.

A second key contextual factor, explicitly referred to in most of the news stories, was the broader phenomenon of the greening of evangelicalism. The year 2008 was a time of particularly high expectations on the part of scholars, activists, and journalists about the green evangelical movement’s potential (see, for example, Wardekker, Petersen and van der Sluijs; McKibben; Brinton). That a narrative arc of ascension was already in place encouraged the national news media to interpret the Declaration as extending the curve. In addition, although only indirectly referred to in most of the news stories, the EEN’s Call to Action—which was the most recent, high-profile example of evangelical greening—also likely affected how the media read the Declaration. The Call to Action was widely regarded as a significant contribution to global warming activism in the US and the superficial similarities between it and the Declaration would have invited a parallel reading of the two texts. Finally, that the Declaration’s spokesman Jonathan Merritt clearly considered climate change to be a real and serious problem surely influenced how the national news media interpreted the Declaration.

Textual Support for the Climate Change Interpretation

The contextual cues discussed above elicited certain expectations about the Declaration’s meaning. This in turn led readers in this interpretive community to focus on the elements of the Declaration that supported this reading, while ignoring those that did not (the section on the stewardship interpretation discusses the elements that did *not* support this reading).

Regarding the assumption that the Declaration favored action to halt climate change, the Declaration stated that “it is prudent to address global climate change” (line 78). Although the word ‘address’ can mean simply to discuss, it was interpreted here to mean ‘stop’, ‘halt’ or ‘mitigate’. Hence assumptions about the Declaration’s intent determined the preferred reading. The Declaration also referred to “general agreement among those engaged with [climate change] in the scientific community” (lines 89–90). Questioning whether there is

scientific consensus about the reality of anthropogenic climate change has been a key talking-point for climate sceptics (Oreskes), so referring to ‘general agreement’ would have seemed clearly to place signatories among those who accepted anthropogenic climate change. The Declaration later reinforced this impression by describing the scientific evidence in support of climate change as “substantial” (line 105). In another apparent show of solidarity with climate activists, the Declaration resolved “to engage this issue without any further lingering over the basic reality of the problem or our responsibility to address it” (lines 108–9).

Two statements in particular supported the interpretation that the Declaration represented a shift in opinion. Firstly, the preamble noted that some signatories “had required considerable convincing” to become persuaded of the importance of environmental and climate change issues (line 38–9). Secondly, the preamble noted that the denomination had previously been “too timid” (line 43–4) on these issues. Both lines suggested that the Declaration represented a departure from the SBC’s official stance.

Finally, a handful of phrases supported the assumption that the Declaration endorsed action: its statement that “humans must be proactive” (line 109–10) regarding climate change, its reference to the need for “concrete action” (line 148), the title of its final section (“It is Time for Individuals, Churches, Communities and Governments to Act”, line 152), and the “pledge to act” in the conclusion (line 178).

Clearly there was textual support for the climate change interpretation. This interpretation was not inherent in the text, however, but emerged through the support of the contextual factors mentioned above. With other contextual clues, a different interpretation emerged.

The Stewardship Interpretation

According to the stewardship interpretation, the Declaration was primarily about the need to take care of the environment, and it was agnostic about the reality of climate change (permitting a range of beliefs, including scepticism). Although it is unclear how many signatories held this interpretation, it is significant that many of the prominent signatories—all of those who were quoted in the Baptist-affiliated presses except Merritt—held it. This matters because their participation solidified the impression that, in a denomination long considered to be a bastion of conservatism, a shift in opinion was occurring. Hence their signatures greatly contributed to the Declaration’s newsworthiness. That the majority of those I interviewed also held this interpretation suggests that it may have been relatively common outside these circles as well.

That the signatories who were quoted in the Baptist-affiliated presses did not consider the Declaration to be primarily about climate change is clear from numerous statements they made. In an article-length interview with Jonathan Merritt published in *The Christian Index*, for example, he responded to the *Index*’s query about what he would say to Southern Baptists who were upset by the Declaration by saying that it was “*not about global warming*, or a political agenda, it’s about creation care and Christian stewardship, a theology that we have always embraced” (Westbury, “Jonathan Merritt”, emphasis added). Similarly, J. Gerald Harris, *The Christian Index*’s editor, wrote that “Some have unfairly lumped ... Jonathan Merritt ... and the signatories of his initiative in with Al Gore and his global warming groupies, but Jonathan’s Declaration has less to do with global warming and more to do with environmental stewardship” (Harris). SEBTS president Daniel Akin and then-SBC president Frank Page (both signatories) expressed the same sentiment, arguing that the

Declaration did not contradict the 2007 resolution (Westbury, “Seminary”; Page, “Frank”). According to Merritt’s father, global warming was “a minor point in Jonathan Merritt’s document” (Westbury, “Younger”). Similarly, in an interview with *Baptist Press*, Union University president David Dockery “said he believes the scientific data on global warming is ‘inconclusive’ and that ‘at best, global warming is neither a primary or secondary moral issue but a ‘tertiary issue’” (Foust). It is notable that even when they were quoted in the national news media, these leaders spoke about environmental stewardship rather than climate change. National news reporters gave no sign that they had noticed the omission, however.

Interestingly, in a seeming reference to the possibility that the Declaration could be read in multiple ways, a number of signatories complained that the impression that the Declaration was about climate change had come not from the document itself, but from the national news media. According to Frank Page, “this issue has been brought to a point where it is an internecine debate. This has been caused, in part, by secular media misconstruing the very basis of this issue” (Page, “Spirited”). James Merritt argued, “if you set your preconceived notions aside and read the document carefully it does not take the alarmist position” (Westbury, “Younger”). The younger Merritt alluded to the same problem, stating, “I have been surprised at the negative reaction by people who have clearly never even read the document. Many are just responding to what others have written about it” (ibid). According to an interview with Akin, published in *The Christian Index*, Akin also “wished more people would read it before voicing their disagreement” (Westbury, “Seminary”).

That signatories defended their interpretation of the Declaration as being about stewardship rather than climate change *after* the latter interpretation had circulated in the national news media raises the possibility that they developed the stewardship interpretation as a kind of subterfuge in order to distance themselves from controversy. Several pieces of information I uncovered suggest this was not the case, however. First, ten of the eleven pastors I interviewed also held the stewardship interpretation. None of them reported receiving any negative feedback from co-religionists about their decision to sign on (a point I specifically asked about), so their adoption of the stewardship interpretation is unlikely to indicate a loss of courage in the face of public pressure. This implies that at least some Southern Baptists originally read the Declaration as supporting the stewardship interpretation. Secondly, it is implausible that, as late as 2008, the group of savvy, seasoned SBC leaders quoted above would have been unable to anticipate that signing a statement advocating action on climate change would be controversial; the SBC had passed a resolution on the issue just the previous year and climate change had been routinely in the news, especially after the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change had published its fourth assessment report in 2007. It seems more plausible that (as they themselves argued) they did not realize that the statement would be interpreted as a piece of climate change advocacy.

Two pieces of direct evidence further support the inference that some signatories originally read the Declaration as supporting the stewardship interpretation. The first comes from comments that the editor of *The Christian Index*, J. Gerald Harris, made in an editorial about the Declaration. There, Harris mentioned that he had chaired the committee that presented the 2007 SBC resolution urging climate scepticism; he therefore would have been very familiar with the dimensions of the climate change controversy. Nevertheless, he also admitted that he was “one of the original signatories” of the Declaration (Harris). This clearly indicates that he did not initially read the Declaration as being in conflict with his sceptical views on climate change. Secondly, one of the pastors I interviewed had been a

close associate of Merritt's while he was developing the Declaration and had even discussed its ideas with Merritt while he was composing it (personal interview, 31 July 2012). Yet, even with this first-hand information, Pastor Paul felt comfortable signing on as a climate sceptic. Given his familiarity with the document—he could still quote lines from it—it is unlikely that he simply did not read it carefully and, given his cogent explanation for why he signed (discussed below), it is unlikely that he changed his mind about climate change after signing. Rather, it seems most likely that he simply read it as being compatible with climate scepticism.

All of these pieces of evidence suggest that some Southern Baptists genuinely read the Declaration as being consistent with climate scepticism. In other words, the stewardship interpretation was not created as a defensive manoeuvre but emerged organically out of the experiences and perspectives that some Southern Baptist readers brought to the text.

Contextual Factors Enabling the Stewardship Interpretation

As with the climate change interpretation, contextual factors were pivotal in enabling the stewardship interpretation. To appreciate these factors, some background on the way evangelicals understand their relationship with the secular world is necessary. This is a perspective that has developed over decades and that has come to undergird evangelical self-understanding. According to this perspective, America used to be a Christian nation, but due to the efforts of anti-Christian groups, Christianity has come under attack and is slowly being replaced by another (secular, liberal) value system (Smith et al. 136–43; Castelli 156; Williams 158–62). As evidence of this displacement, evangelicals cite events such as the removal of prayer from public schools and increased public acceptance of acts they view as sinful, such as abortion and homosexuality (Smith et al. 137–43; Veldman 145–8). According to the sociologist Christian Smith and his colleagues, evangelicalism came to thrive in the latter half of the twentieth century in part because it translated this perceived sense of marginalization into a program for action. As Smith et al. (89) explain, “American evangelicalism ... is strong not because it is shielded against, but because it is—or at least perceives itself to be—embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it. Indeed, evangelicalism, we suggest, *thrives* on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat.” Hence part of what has driven evangelicals' engagement with secular culture on hot-button social issues over the past several decades is this sense of embattlement with secular culture and their corresponding desire to re-insert Christianity into the public square.

With this background in place, let us return to a line in the Declaration which the national news media stories ignored, but which made quite an impression on the pastors I interviewed. After admitting that the denomination's engagement with the environment and climate change had “often been too timid” and that such a response might be seen as “uncaring, reckless and ill-informed”, the Declaration stated that “To abandon these issues to the secular world is to shirk from our responsibility to be salt and light” (lines 46–7). The reference to ‘salt and light’ is an allusion to Matthew 5:13–16, which Southern Baptists and other evangelicals interpret as admonishing them to engage actively with secular culture on questions of morality and faith. As the ERLC has explained, “Jesus expects His followers to apply biblical principles to those things in our culture that destroy lives and tear families apart, things such as poverty and hunger, perversion of God's design for human sexuality, devaluation of human life at all stages, all manner of greed, and the lack of justice for all” (ERLC Staff). Hence, while the sentence

from the Declaration clearly encouraged engagement, it did so in language that called to mind Southern Baptists' longstanding battle with secular culture over issues like gay marriage and abortion. Given this background, it is less surprising that the Declaration itself mentioned abortion no less than three times, even describing it and biblical definitions of marriage as "the most pressing moral issues of our day" (line 30–1)—more pressing than climate change, in a document ostensibly *about* climate change! For those who viewed themselves as participants in such battles, calling for *engagement* on the issue of climate change could be interpreted to mean calling for a combative, distinctly Christian alternative to existing secular responses. Those who held the stewardship interpretation were thus like the national news media in that they were attuned to the conventions of the declaration *genre*—which leads readers to expect a strong statement of opinion—but what they understood themselves to be declaring was quite different.

Of the pastors I interviewed, Pastor Paul was most articulate in expressing this view. Upon learning that he was a climate sceptic, I asked how he felt about the Declaration's statement that "it is prudent to address global climate change". He responded, "What I understand it to say there is: we need to be in the discussion. Again, it's a question of are we going to relinquish this entire issue to the more liberal side of the political arena and just basically avoid it altogether? I think that's unhealthy." (personal interview, 31 July 2012) Pastor Paul's statement put into context a comment he had made earlier about the notion that the denomination's previous engagement had been 'too timid': "I agree with [Merritt]—that Christians ought to be the most concerned for the environment because we believe it is designed by a Creator... I believe, however, that we have, as a church and as a convention, almost relinquished that issue to the liberal platform." (ibid) Obviously, his interpretation of the reference to timidity differed greatly from the one advanced in the national news media. Rather than indicating that a stronger stance was needed on climate change, Pastor Paul's decision to sign had been intended to convey frustration that his denomination had not yet publicly marked out a Baptist position on environmental stewardship. For him, signing the Declaration was a way for Baptists to enter the debate on their own terms.

While the extent to which the embattled mentality shaped all 750 signatories' interpretation of the document in general is not fully clear, a number of clues suggest that it was influential for the prominent signatories discussed here. When Akin explained his rationale for signing the Declaration, for example, he stated that "Those of us who affirm the Word of God should be at the forefront of this discussion... It is unconscionable for us to turn that area over to pantheists (those who worship nature) and liberal environmentalists." (Westbury, "Seminary", brackets in original) Both Jonathan Merritt and his father employed similar rhetoric. According to Jonathan Merritt, "If we remain true to God's Word, Christians must with equanimity redeem our cause and make it our own. To leave these issues to secular environmentalists is to abandon our God-given responsibility to care for His planet." (Merritt 85) Similarly, for James Merritt, "Christians should have a place at the table when it comes to shaping public opinion; instead we have abdicated our role in this discussion" (Westbury, "Younger"). Although the younger Merritt likely employed the language of embattlement to raise concern about climate change, by deploying it, he (probably unintentionally) welcomed climate change sceptics into the fold. Rather than challenging the SBC's official views on climate change, for these individuals, the Declaration offered the opportunity to push back against encroaching secular society in a new arena: the debate over climate change.

Textual Support for the Stewardship Interpretation

As with the climate change interpretation, contextual factors—in this case Southern Baptists’ embrace of evangelical discourses of embattlement—elicited certain expectations about the Declaration’s meaning, which led readers to focus on elements of the Declaration that supported this reading, while ignoring those that did not.

To begin to understand how it was possible for signatories to read the Declaration as compatible with climate scepticism, it is helpful first to compare the Declaration with the EEN’s Call to Action (see Appendix B), which articulated its position on climate change much more clearly. Doing so highlights how moderate and ambiguous the Declaration was regarding climate change; these two aspects are both key factors that enabled sceptics to read it as compatible with their position. Importantly, the Declaration’s moderation was no accident. A close comparison of the two texts reveals that numerous phrases and, in several cases, full sentences that appear in the Declaration also appear in the Call; in total, 19% of the wording is identical and an additional 3% expresses the same idea in slightly different words.³ This strongly suggests that the Declaration was created by revising the text of the Call to Action. Hence its tone was likely a deliberate and conscious departure from the Call to Action. Again, the changes were probably not intended to welcome climate sceptics, but rather to welcome Southern Baptists by creating something that was, as Merritt had stated, ‘distinctly Southern Baptist in its tone and approach’. However, it was this distinctive tone that seems to have primed some Southern Baptist readers to view it through the prism of the tradition’s longstanding sense of embattlement with secular culture.

Comparing the Call to Action with the Declaration

Two of the most important ways in which the Call to Action and the Declaration differ are in the extent to which they acknowledged the human contribution to climate change and in the emphasis they placed on climate change itself. In both cases, the Declaration was more moderate than its model, avoiding opportunities to state that climate change was primarily caused by human activities and focusing on environmental stewardship, rather than climate change. Both editorial decisions enabled readers with a certain background to interpret the Declaration as compatible with climate scepticism.

Regarding their emphasis on the drivers of climate change, the Call to Action clearly placed itself among those who believed that climate change was real, caused by human activities, and potentially dire in consequence. It used the modifier ‘human-induced’ four times, specifying in the preamble, for example, that it was talking about “human-induced climate change”, which it described as “a real problem” (lines 26, 24, respectively), and underlining its take on climate change again with the title of its first section: “Human Induced Climate Change is Real”. It also emphasized the phenomenon’s dire consequences through statements such as “Millions of people could die in this century because of climate change, most of them our poorest global neighbors” (lines 86–7). By contrast, the Declaration referred to “environmental and climate change issues” as “real problems” (lines 37–40), but it never specified that it meant anthropogenic climate change. Instead of referring to dire consequences, it stated that “Humans must be proactive and take responsibility for our contributions to climate change—*however great or small*” (lines 109–11, emphasis added). A number of the pastors with whom I spoke felt that climate change was mostly due to natural variation, but that human activities might have contributed in some small

way. Thus, while the Declaration argued that climate change was at least partially caused by human activities, its wording left room for those who believed that human activities played a minimal role to feel comfortable signing. By avoiding reference to climate change's dire consequences, it did not overtly signal solidarity with those most concerned about climate change. Indeed, instead of a discussion of consequences, readers of the Declaration were treated to a cautiously worded discussion of the debate about the reality of climate change. Here, the Declaration bent over backwards to be charitable toward those who doubted, conceding that "this is an issue where Christians may find themselves in justified disagreement about both the problem and its solutions" (lines 96–7). Similarly, it described scientists who denied anthropogenic climate change as "sincere and respected" (line 91). In another line that would have resonated with sceptics, it stated that "We recognize that we do not have any special revelation to guide us about *whether* global warming is occurring and, *if* it is occurring, *whether* people are causing it" (lines 80–1, emphasis added). Grammatically, the sentence concerned the authors' ability to comprehend climate science, but the use of the terms 'whether' and 'if' also gave the impression that the authors were not convinced it was occurring, for anyone inclined to read it that way. Hence in contrast to the Call to Action, which left no doubt about its stance regarding climate change, the Declaration introduced numerous elements that could be read as compatible with—or at least tolerant of—climate scepticism.

A second important way in which the Declaration was far more moderate than the Call to Action had to do with its focus. While the Call to Action focused exclusively on climate change, the Declaration chose to emphasize environmental stewardship, leaving climate change to be discussed substantively only in one section (a section that, as described above, seemed tolerant of scepticism). Pursuant to this emphasis, it was the environment, not climate change, that was listed first in the Declaration's title and that was the main subject of the Declaration's first, third, and fourth sections. 'Climate issues' were briefly mentioned in the third section, but not differentiated from environmental issues (lines 121–2). The last section, which was arguably the most rhetorically powerful in that it discussed the need to act, did not mention climate change at all, but instead referred generically to environmental issues, care for the earth, and biblical stewardship (lines 157, 162, 164). Thus, in contrast to the Call to Action, the Declaration did not clearly focus on climate change, leaving room for alternative interpretations of its intent.

Importantly, what the Declaration said about environmental stewardship was neither new nor controversial. The strongest statement it made was that "there is undeniable evidence that the earth ... can be damaged by human activity" (lines 60–1)—hardly a revolutionary assertion in the year 2008. Even this was softened by the admission that human activity could sometimes be "productive and caring" (line 66). Moreover, official SBC resolutions approved in 1970, 1983, and 1990 had addressed the same topic in stronger words and without such caveats. Arguably the most mildly worded of these, the 1990 Resolution "On Environmental Stewardship", still came off stronger by mentioning "the destruction of the created order" and "human extravagance and wastefulness ... and general misuse of creation" (SBC, "Environmental Stewardship"). Thus the Declaration not only addressed a topic that had already been approved through official channels, but did so in even milder language than its predecessors. Except for the climate change piece, it could arguably have been viewed as indicating that Southern Baptists were slightly backing away from their historical commitments, rather than pushing for change. This, too, would have seemed

congenial to those who viewed the environmental movement—not to mention climate change—with suspicion.

Reading the Declaration through the Lens of Embattlement

That the Declaration was ambiguously worded regarding climate change and seemed to be primarily about environmental stewardship likely enabled Southern Baptists who were climate sceptics to find ways to read the rest of the document as congenial to their position. Here, their familiarity with Southern Baptist history and culture was key, for it disclosed readings that were invisible to outsiders. Some examples help illustrate this point.

Firstly, as noted above, the Declaration used the sub-heading “It is prudent to address global climate change” (line 78). Yet the term ‘address’ does not actually indicate that action is preferred—a distinction that seems to have enabled some of the sceptical pastors I interviewed to interpret the Declaration as saying that Southern Baptists needed to ‘address’ climate change by adding their (sceptical) voices to the national conversation about it.

A second example comes from the Declaration’s line about the denomination being ‘too timid’ on climate and environmental issues (line 44). In the national news stories, this was interpreted as evidence that Southern Baptists were shifting away from their sceptical position on climate change. Yet a brief consideration of Southern Baptists’ historical engagement with environmental issues yields another plausible interpretation. In addition to the official 2007 resolution urging caution about climate change, the SBC had resolved in 2006 to “resist alliances with extreme environmental groups whose positions contradict biblical principles ... and [to] oppose solutions based on questionable science” (SBC, “Environmentalism”).⁴ Thus the assertion in the Declaration that the denomination had been too timid in engaging with environmental and climate change issues could conceivably be interpreted to mean that it had not gone far enough in opposing green radicalism—or simply that it had not inserted its (sceptical) voice aggressively enough into the national conversation. This is quite different from the national news media’s interpretation of this statement as saying that the denomination had not embraced environmental concerns enthusiastically enough.

A third example comes from another much-quoted line from the Declaration’s final section: “We pledge ... to give serious consideration to responsible policies that acceptably address the conditions set forth in this declaration” (lines 172–3). Although the national news media interpreted this as a commitment to take action to halt climate change, it was also possible to read it as compatible with climate scepticism. Firstly, the sentence never stated that the ‘conditions’ included anthropogenic climate change, instead referring readers back to ambiguous statements made earlier. Secondly, unlike the Call to Action, the Declaration never suggested what would constitute ‘responsible’ policies, so using the word left it open to readers’ interpretation. For climate change sceptics, this could be taken as a plea not to go too far by adopting ‘radical’ policies. The pastors I interviewed repeatedly stressed their preference for the ‘common sense’ and the ‘practical’ solutions (often those that did not require government intervention)—options I am sure they viewed as responsible. Similarly, the 2007 SBC resolution argued that proposals to regulate greenhouse emissions were themselves ‘very dangerous’—the opposite of responsible. Thus Southern Baptists reading the document would not necessarily have interpreted the Declaration’s support for ‘responsible’ policies as support for any of the policy solutions that were then on the table. Finally, the word ‘acceptably’ diminished the sentence’s force significantly, suggesting that

the conditions should only be addressed in a way that signatories agreed with—yet another check that the signatories placed on policy-making. For those so inclined, it could even be read as an oblique criticism of policy options that were currently on the table, suggesting that they were unacceptable.

By such means, statements that the national news media interpreted as unambiguously indicating Southern Baptists' desire to tackle the issue of climate change were simultaneously interpreted by Southern Baptist climate sceptics as compatible with their views. The two groups' differing backgrounds and assumptions enabled them to reach radically different conclusions about what the text meant.

Conclusion

Scholars and journalists alike have interpreted “A Southern Baptist Declaration on the Environment and Climate Change” as an example of the greening of evangelicalism, yet the preceding analysis shows that extra-textual factors disclosed a very different meaning to some of its signatories. While the prevalence of the stewardship reading in the larger Southern Baptist community remains unclear, this analysis shows that entering the public debate about the environment held a unique meaning for a group of prominent Southern Baptist signatories, a meaning that seems to have been linked to their understanding of Christianity as an embattled faith. In exploring how culture and identity influenced attitudes toward climate change among Southern Baptists, this work adds greater detail to recent research suggesting that cultural commitments may significantly shape risk perceptions related to climate change (Kahan et al. 732). This research is also important in the light evangelicals' significant cultural and political influence in the US, for it suggests that scepticism about climate change, while undeniably fostered by an array of secular actors, may be particularly attractive to evangelical audiences because of their unique religious outlook. Future research should continue to examine the extent to which the embattled mentality may shape evangelicals' attitudes toward climate change and, more broadly, how religious groups' cultural identities and outlooks may shape both individual and community-level responses to climate change.

Notes

1. Merritt told me that he collected 750 signatures, although only 426 signatories are listed on Baptistcreationcare.org, the web site created to disseminate the Declaration.
2. The number of local news stories comes from an analysis of stories indexed in the database Access World News, which includes 5,419 news sources in the United States.
3. This analysis is available upon request.
4. This resolution was likely a response to the Call to Action, which had been published five months earlier.

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1 **Appendix A: A Southern Baptist Declaration on the Environment and Climate**
2 **Change**

3
4 **Preamble**

5
6 Southern Baptists have always been a confessional people, giving testimony to our
7 beliefs, which are based upon the doctrines found in God's inerrant word – the Holy
8 Bible. As the dawning of new ages has produced substantial challenges requiring a
9 special word, Southern Baptist churches, associations and general bodies have often
10 found it necessary to make declarations in order to define, express and defend beliefs.
11 Though we do not regard this as a complete declaration on these issues, we believe this
12 initiative finds itself consistent with our most cherished distinctives [*sic*] and rooted in
13 historical precedent.

14
15 The preamble to the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* (BFM 2000) declares: "Each
16 generation of Christians bears the responsibility of guarding the treasury of truth that
17 has been entrusted to us [2 Timothy 1:14]. Facing a new century, Southern Baptists must
18 meet the demands and duties of the present hour. New challenges to faith appear in
19 every age."

20
21 We recognize that God's great blessings on our denomination bestow upon us a great
22 responsibility to offer a biblically-based, moral witness that can help shape individual
23 behavior, private sector behavior and public policy. Conversations like this one demand
24 our voice in order to fulfill our calling to engage the culture as a relevant body of
25 believers. Southern Baptists have always championed faith's challenges, and we now
26 perpetuate our heritage through this initiative.

27
28 We are proud of our deep and lasting commitments to moral issues like the sanctity of
29 human life and biblical definitions of marriage. We will never compromise our
30 convictions nor attenuate our advocacy on these matters, which constitute the most
31 pressing moral issues of our day. However, we are not a single-issue body. We also
32 offer moral witness in other venues and on many issues. We seek to be true to our
33 calling as Christian leaders, but above all, faithful to Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore,
34 our attention goes to whatever issues our faith requires us to address.

35
36 We have recently engaged in study, reflection and prayer related to the challenges
37 presented by environmental and climate change issues. These things have not always
38 been treated with pressing concern as major issues. Indeed, some of us have required
39 considerable convincing before becoming persuaded that these are real problems that
40 deserve our attention. But now we have seen and heard enough to be persuaded that
41 these issues are among the current era's challenges that require a unified moral voice.

42
43 We believe our current denominational engagement with these issues have often been
44 too timid, failing to produce a unified moral voice. Our cautious response to these
45 issues in the face of mounting evidence may be seen by the world as uncaring, reckless
46 and ill-informed. We can do better. To abandon these issues to the secular world is to
47 shirk from our responsibility to be salt and light. The time for timidity regarding God's
48 creation is no more.

49
50 Therefore, we offer these four statements for consideration, beginning with our fellow
51 Southern Baptists, and urge all to follow by taking appropriate actions. May we find
52 ourselves united as we contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all.
53 *Laus Deo!*

54

55 **Statement 1**

56

57 **Humans Must Care for Creation and Take Responsibility for Our Contributions to**
58 **Environmental Degradation.**

59

60 There is undeniable evidence that the earth—wildlife, water, land and air—can be
61 damaged by human activity, and that people suffer as a result. When this happens, it is
62 especially egregious because creation serves as revelation of God’s presence, majesty
63 and provision. Though not every person will physically hear God’s revelation found in
64 Scripture, all people have access to God’s cosmic revelation: the heavens, the waters,
65 natural order, the beauty of nature (Psalm 19; Romans 1). We believe that human
66 activity is mixed in its impact on creation—sometimes productive and caring, but often
67 reckless, preventable and sinful.

68

69 God’s command to tend and keep the earth (Genesis 2) did not pass away with the fall
70 of man; we are still responsible. Lack of concern and failure to act prudently on the part
71 of Christ-followers reflects poorly to the rest of the world. Therefore, we humbly take
72 responsibility for the damage that we have done to God’s cosmic revelation and pledge
73 to take an unwavering stand to preserve and protect the creation over which we have
74 been given responsibility by Almighty God Himself.

75

76 **Statement 2**

77

78 **It Is Prudent to Address Global Climate Change.**

79

80 We recognize that we do not have any special revelation to guide us about whether
81 global warming is occurring and, if it is occurring, whether people are causing it. We
82 are looking at the same evidence unfolding over time that other people are seeing.

83

84 We recognize that we do not have special training as scientists to allow us to assess the
85 validity of climate science. We understand that all human enterprises are fraught with
86 pride, bias, ignorance and uncertainty.

87

88 We recognize that if consensus means unanimity, there is not a consensus regarding the
89 anthropogenic nature of climate change or the severity of the problem. There is general
90 agreement among those engaged with this issue in the scientific community. A minority
91 of sincere and respected scientists offer alternate causes for global climate change other
92 than deforestation and the burning of fossil fuels.

93

94 We recognize that Christians are not united around either the scientific explanations for
95 global warming or policies designed to slow it down. Unlike abortion and respect for
96 the biblical definition of marriage, this is an issue where Christians may find themselves
97 in justified disagreement about both the problem and its solutions.

98

99 Yet, even in the absence of perfect knowledge or unanimity, we have to make informed
100 decisions about the future. This will mean we have to take a position of prudence based
101 partly on science that is inevitably changing. We do not believe unanimity is necessary
102 for prudent action. We can make wise decisions even in the absence of infallible
103 evidence.

104

105 Though the claims of science are neither infallible nor unanimous, they are substantial
106 and cannot be dismissed out of hand on either scientific or theological grounds.
107 Therefore, in the face of intense concern and guided by the biblical principle of creation
108 stewardship, we resolve to engage this issue without any further lingering over the

109 basic reality of the problem or our responsibility to address it. Humans must be
 110 proactive and take responsibility for our contributions to climate change—however
 111 great or small.

112
 113 **Statement 3**

114
 115 **Christian Moral Convictions and Our Southern Baptist Doctrines Demand Our**
 116 **Environmental Stewardship.**

117
 118 While we cannot here review the full range of relevant Christian convictions and Baptist
 119 doctrines related to care of the creation, we emphasize the following points:

- 120
 121 We must care about environmental and climate issues because of our love for
 122 God—“the Creator, Redeemer, Preserver and Ruler of the Universe” (BFM
 123 2000)—through whom and for whom the creation was made. This is not our
 124 world, it is God’s. Therefore, any damage we do to this world is an offense
 125 against God Himself (Gen. 1; Ps. 24; Col. 1:16). We share God’s concern for the
 126 abuse of His creation.
 127
 128 We must care about environmental issues because of our commitment to God’s
 129 Holy and inerrant Word, which is “the supreme standard by which all human
 130 conduct, creeds and religious opinions should be tried” (BFM 2000). Within these
 131 Scriptures we are reminded that when God made mankind, He commissioned us
 132 to exercise stewardship over the earth and its creatures (Gen. 1:26-28). **Therefore,**
 133 **our motivation for facing failures to exercise proper stewardship is not**
 134 **primarily political, social or economic—it is primarily biblical.**
 135
 136 We must care about environmental and climate issues because we are called to
 137 love our neighbors, to do unto others as we would have them do unto us and to
 138 protect and care for the “least of these” (Mt. 22:34-40; Mt. 7:12; Mt. 25:31-46). The
 139 consequences of these problems will most likely hit the poor the hardest, in part
 140 because those areas likely to be significantly affected are in the world’s poorest
 141 regions. Poor nations and individuals have fewer resources available to cope
 142 with major challenges and threats. Therefore, “we should work to provide for the
 143 orphaned, the needy ... [and] the helpless” (BFM 2000) through proper
 144 stewardship.
 145

146 Love of God, love of neighbor and Scripture’s stewardship demands provide enough
 147 reason for Southern Baptists and Christians everywhere to respond to these problems
 148 with moral passion and concrete action.

149
 150 **Statement 4**

151
 152 **It Is Time for Individuals, Churches, Communities and Governments to Act.**

153
 154 We affirm that “every Christian should seek to bring industry, government and society
 155 as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth and brotherly love”
 156 (BFM 2000).

157 We realize that we cannot support some environmental issues as we offer a distinctively
 158 Christian voice in these arenas. For instance, we realize that what some call population
 159 control leads to evils like abortion. We now call on these environmentalists to reject
 160 these evils and accept the sanctity of every human person, both born and unborn.
 161

162 We realize that simply affirming our God-given responsibility to care for the earth will

163 likely produce no tangible or effective results. Therefore, we pledge to find ways to curb
164 ecological degradation through promoting biblical stewardship habits and increasing
165 awareness in our homes, businesses where we find influence, relationships with others
166 and in our local churches. Many of our churches do not actively preach, promote or
167 practice biblical creation care. We urge churches to begin doing so.
168

169 We realize that the primary impetus for prudent action must come from the will of the
170 people, families and those in the private sector. Held to this standard of common good,
171 action by government is often needed to assure the health and well-being of all people.
172 We pledge, therefore, to give serious consideration to responsible policies that
173 acceptably address the conditions set forth in this declaration.
174

175 **Conclusion**

176
177 We the undersigned, in accordance with our Christian moral convictions and Southern
178 Baptist doctrines, pledge to act on the basis of the claims made in this document. We
179 will not only teach the truths communicated here but also seek ways to implement the
180 actions that follow from them. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, we urge all who
181 read this declaration to join us in this effort. *Laus Deo!*

1 **Appendix B: Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action**

2
3 **Preamble**

4
5 As American evangelical Christian leaders, we recognize both our opportunity and our
6 responsibility to offer a biblically based moral witness that can help shape public policy
7 in the most powerful nation on earth, and therefore contribute to the well-being of the
8 entire world.ⁱ *Whether* we will enter the public square and offer our witness there is no
9 longer an open question. We are in that square, and we will not withdraw.

10
11 We are proud of the evangelical community's long-standing commitment to the sanctity
12 of human life. But we also offer moral witness in many venues and on many issues.
13 Sometimes the issues that we have taken on, such as sex trafficking, genocide in the
14 Sudan, and the AIDS epidemic in Africa, have surprised outside observers. While
15 individuals and organizations can be called to concentrate on certain issues, we are not
16 a single-issue movement. We seek to be true to our calling as Christian leaders, and
17 above all faithful to Jesus Christ our Lord. Our attention, therefore, goes to whatever
18 issues our faith requires us to address.

19
20 Over the last several years many of us have engaged in study, reflection, and prayer
21 related to the issue of climate change (often called "global warming"). For most of us,
22 until recently this has not been treated as a pressing issue or major priority. Indeed,
23 many of us have required considerable convincing before becoming persuaded that
24 climate change is a real problem and that it ought to matter to us as Christians. But now
25 we have seen and heard enough to offer the following moral argument related to the
26 matter of human-induced climate change. We commend the four simple but urgent
27 claims offered in this document to all who will listen, beginning with our brothers and
28 sisters in the Christian community, and urge all to take the appropriate actions that
29 follow from them.

30
31 **Claim 1: Human-Induced Climate Change is Real**

32
33 Since 1995 there has been general agreement among those in the scientific community
34 most seriously engaged with this issue that climate change is happening and is being
35 caused mainly by human activities, especially the burning of fossil fuels. Evidence
36 gathered since 1995 has only strengthened this conclusion.

37
38 Because all religious/moral claims about climate change are relevant only if climate
39 change is real and is mainly human-induced, everything hinges on the scientific data.
40 As evangelicals we have hesitated to speak on this issue until we could be more certain
41 of the science of climate change, but the signatories now believe that the evidence
42 demands action:

- 43
44 The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the world's most
45 authoritative body of scientists and policy experts on the issue of global
46 warming, has been studying this issue since the late 1980s. (From 1988-2002 the
47 IPCC's assessment of the climate science was Chaired by Sir John Houghton, a
48 devout evangelical Christian.) It has documented the steady rise in global
49 temperatures over the last fifty years, projects that the average global
50 temperature will continue to rise in the coming decades, and attributes "most of
51 the warming" to human activities.
- 52 The U.S. National Academy of Sciences, as well as all other G8 country scientific
53 Academies (Great Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Canada, Italy, and Russia),
54 has concurred with these judgments.
- 55 In a 2004 report, and at the 2005 G8 summit, the Bush Administration has also
56 acknowledged the reality of climate change and the likelihood that human
57 activity is the cause of at least some of it.ⁱⁱ

58

59 In the face of the breadth and depth of this scientific and governmental concern, only a
60 small percentage of which is noted here, we are convinced that evangelicals must
61 engage this issue without any further lingering over the basic reality of the problem or
62 humanity's responsibility to address it.

63

64 **Claim 2: The Consequences of Climate Change Will Be Significant, and Will Hit the**
65 **Poor the Hardest**

66

67 The earth's natural systems are resilient but not infinitely so, and human civilizations
68 are remarkably dependent on ecological stability and well-being. It is easy to forget this
69 until that stability and well-being are threatened.

70

71 Even small rises in global temperatures will have such likely impacts as: sea level rise;
72 more frequent heat waves, droughts, and extreme weather events such as torrential
73 rains and floods; increased tropical diseases in now-temperate regions; and hurricanes
74 that are more intense. It could lead to significant reduction in agricultural output,
75 especially in poor countries. Low-lying regions, indeed entire islands, could find
76 themselves under water. (This is not to mention the various negative impacts climate
77 change could have on God's other creatures.)

78

79 Each of these impacts increases the likelihood of refugees from flooding or famine,
80 violent conflicts, and international instability, which could lead to more security threats
81 to our nation.

82

83 Poor nations and poor individuals have fewer resources available to cope with major
84 challenges and threats. The consequences of global warming will therefore hit the poor
85 the hardest, in part because those areas likely to be significantly affected first are in the
86 poorest regions of the world. **Millions of people could die in this century because of**
87 **climate change, most of them our poorest global neighbors.**

88

89 **Claim 3: Christian Moral Convictions Demand Our Response to the Climate Change**
90 **Problem**

91

92 While we cannot here review the full range of relevant biblical convictions related to
93 care of the creation, we emphasize the following points:

- 94 Christians must care about climate change because we love God the Creator and
95 Jesus our Lord, through whom and for whom the creation was made. This is
96 God's world, and any damage that we do to God's world is an offense against
97 God Himself (Gen. 1; Ps. 24; Col. 1:16).
- 98 Christians must care about climate change because we are called to love our
99 neighbors, to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, and to protect
100 and care for the least of these as though each was Jesus Christ himself (Mt. 22:34-
101 40; Mt. 7:12; Mt. 25:31-46).
- 102 Christians, noting the fact that most of the climate change problem is human
103 induced, are reminded that when God made humanity he commissioned us to
104 exercise stewardship over the earth and its creatures. Climate change is the latest
105 evidence of our failure to exercise proper stewardship, and constitutes a critical
106 opportunity for us to do better (Gen. 1:26-28).

107

108 Love of God, love of neighbor, and the demands of stewardship are more than enough
109 reason for evangelical Christians to respond to the climate change problem with moral
110 passion and concrete action.

111

112 **Claim 4: The need to act now is urgent. Governments, businesses, churches, and**
113 **individuals all have a role to play in addressing climate change -- starting now.**

114

115 The basic task for all of the world's inhabitants is to find ways now to begin to reduce
116 the carbon dioxide emissions from the burning of fossil fuels that are the primary cause
117 of human-induced climate change.

118
119 There are several reasons for urgency. First, deadly impacts are being experienced now.
120 Second, the oceans only warm slowly, creating a lag in experiencing the consequences.
121 Much of the climate change to which we are already committed will not be realized for
122 several decades. The consequences of the pollution we create now will be visited upon
123 our children and grandchildren. Third, as individuals and as a society we are making
124 long-term decisions today that will determine how much carbon dioxide we will emit in
125 the future, such as whether to purchase energy efficient vehicles and appliances that
126 will last for 10-20 years, or whether to build more coal-burning power plants that last
127 for 50 years rather than investing more in energy efficiency and renewable energy.

128
129 In the United States, the most important immediate step that can be taken at the federal
130 level is to pass and implement national legislation requiring sufficient economy-wide
131 reductions in carbon dioxide emissions through cost-effective, market-based
132 mechanisms such as a cap-and-trade program. On June 22, 2005 the Senate passed the
133 Domenici-Bingaman resolution affirming this approach, and a number of major energy
134 companies now acknowledge that this method is best both for the environment and for
135 business.

136
137 We commend the Senators who have taken this stand and encourage them to fulfill
138 their pledge. We also applaud the steps taken by such companies as BP, Shell, General
139 Electric, Cinergy, Duke Energy, and DuPont, all of which have moved ahead of the pace
140 of government action through innovative measures implemented within their
141 companies in the U.S. and around the world. In so doing they have offered timely
142 leadership.

143
144 Numerous positive actions to prevent and mitigate climate change are being
145 implemented across our society by state and local governments, churches, smaller
146 businesses, and individuals. These commendable efforts focus on such matters as
147 energy efficiency, the use of renewable energy, low CO₂ emitting technologies, and the
148 purchase of hybrid vehicles. These efforts can easily be shown to save money, save
149 energy, reduce global warming pollution as well as air pollution that harm human
150 health, and eventually pay for themselves. There is much more to be done, but these
151 pioneers are already helping to show the way forward.

152
153 Finally, while we must reduce our global warming pollution to help mitigate the
154 impacts of climate change, as a society and as individuals we must also help the poor
155 adapt to the significant harm that global warming will cause.

156 **Conclusion**

157
158
159 We the undersigned pledge to act on the basis of the claims made in this document. We
160 will not only teach the truths communicated here but also seek ways to implement the
161 actions that follow from them. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, we urge all who
162 read this declaration to join us in this effort.

ⁱ Cf. "For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility", approved by National Association of Evangelicals, 8 October 2004.

ⁱⁱ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2001, Summary for Policymakers; available at: http://www.grida.no/climate/ipcc_tar/wg1/007.htm, access date: 10 March 2016. (See also the main IPCC web site, www.ipcc.ch, access date: 10 March 2016.) For the confirmation of the IPCC's findings from the US National Academy of Sciences, see *Climate Change Science: An Analysis of Some Key Questions of 2001*, available at: <http://books.nap.edu/html/climatechange/summary.html>, access date 10 March 2016. For the statement by the G8 Academies (plus those of Brazil, India, and China), see *Joint Science Academies Statement: Global Response to Climate Change of June 2005*, available at: <http://nationalacademies.org/onpi/06072005.pdf>, access date: 10 March 2016. Another major international report that confirms the IPCC's conclusions comes from the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (see *Impacts of a Warming Climate*, available at: <http://amap.no/acia/>, access date: 10 March 2016. Another important statement is from the American Geophysical Union, "Human Impacts on Climate" of December 2003, available at: http://www.agu.org/sci_soc/policy/climate_change_position.html, access date: 10 March 2016. For the Bush Administration's perspective, see *Our Changing Planet: The U.S. Climate Change Science Program for Fiscal Years 2004 and 2005: 47*; available at: <http://www.usgcrp.gov/usgcrp/Library/ocp2004-5/default.htm>, access date: 10 March 2016. For the 2005 G8 statement, see <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page7881.asp>, access date: 10 March 2016.