

NATIONAL REVIEW

February 9, 2006

Beware False Profits

By Iain Murray

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears

And they shall turn away [their] ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables

But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry.--2 Timothy 4: 3-5

The Evangelical Climate Initiative today issued a brief report entitled "Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action." It calls for Evangelical Christians to reduce carbon-dioxide emissions from the burning of fossil fuels and is signed by 86 evangelical leaders. Sadly, these good men and women have allowed their itching ears to listen to fables. Their claims are based on half-truths and unsound logic.

The first claim is that human-induced climate change is real. This is likely true as a simple statement, but the evidence the group proposes for it is weak and its meaning is far from clear. For instance, the group

claims that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has "documented the steady rise in global temperatures over the last fifty years." This is not the case. The earth actually cooled between 1942 and 1980 (see here). The earth has warmed steadily only over the last 25 years, and evidence from satellites is not consistent with the idea that global warming is actually global.

The group then says that the IPCC projects that the global temperature will continue to rise. This is true, but the wording is important. A projection is not a prediction. The IPCC has found itself unable to predict with any degree of confidence what will happen to global temperatures in the future. Moreover, these projections are based on "storylines" about how energy use will grow in the future. As several distinguished commentators have noted, these storylines are based on faulty economic analysis.

The group then claims that the IPCC has attributed "most of the warming" to human activities. This also overstates the case. The IPCC found that

"most of the observed warming over the last 50 years is likely to have been due to the increase in greenhouse gas concentrations" (emphasis added). Attribution of climate change is a very difficult subject and the IPCC is right to include the caveat. Indeed, there have been recent developments that may affect this claim. For example, a group of paleoclimatologists recently wrote: "[E]nhanced variability during pre-industrial times, would result in a redistribution of weight towards the role of natural factors in forcing temperature changes, thereby relatively devaluing the impact of anthropogenic emissions and affecting future predicted scenarios. If that turns out to be the case, agreements such as the Kyoto protocol that intend to reduce emissions of anthropogenic greenhouse gases, would be less effective than thought" --Esper et al., *Climate: Past Changes and Future Ranges*, November 2005. Then the group states that all the G8 scientific Academies have concurred with these findings. The group should have noted that the Russian Academy of Sciences disputes its signature on that document.

The second claim is that “the consequences of climate change will be significant, and will hit the poor the hardest.” Here there is much more dispute, as the consequences depend very much on the projected temperature rises, which are themselves in dispute as noted above. There is significant uncertainty even within the IPCC’s judgment as to what the temperature rises will be. Rises of 1.5°C may well not have much effect, whereas rises of 5.4°C would probably have a profound effect; the actual data, as opposed to the models, suggest a modest temperature rise of just over 1°C.

As for the consequences, the group first lists sea-level rise. Unfortunately for them, the latest research on the likely effects of melting ice on sea level rise halves the previous estimates. Next come heat waves, drought, and extreme weather events. The evidence for those, however, is mixed. Leading experts in tropical diseases downplay the role of global warming in spreading tropical diseases, which are the next worry, and there is a significant and fractious dispute in the hurricane research field over the role of global warming in increasing hurricane intensity. Neither of these possible effects of global warming has been established with any degree of certainty.

The group goes on to claim that the effects of these changes on the world’s poor could be catastrophic, and that “millions of people could die in this century because of climate change, most of them our

poorest global neighbors.” Because of the group’s third claim (“Christian moral convictions demand our response to the climate change problem”), which I shall not argue with here, the fourth claim is made that, “The need to act now is urgent. Governments, businesses, churches and individuals all have a role to play in addressing climate change--starting now.” And the role chosen is to “reduce the carbon dioxide emissions from the burning of fossil fuels.”

Even if you accept claims 3 and 4, the logic driving towards reduction in fossil fuel use as the appropriate reaction is faulty. The problem is that the deleterious effects of global warming, assuming they do come about, are actually exacerbations of existing problems. **Indur Goklany, writing for the National Center for Policy Analysis, examined to what degree global warming would make worse the problems of hunger, drought, sea-level rise, disease, and threats to biodiversity. He found:**

*** By 2085, the contribution of (unmitigated) warming to the above listed problems is generally smaller than other factors unrelated to climate change.**

*** More important, these risks would be lowered much more effectively and economically by reducing current and future vulnerability to climate change rather than through its mitigation.**

*** Finally, adaptation would help developing countries cope with major problems now, and through 2085 and beyond, whereas generations would pass before anything less than draconian mitigation would have a discernible effect**

In other words, we can do more to help the poor by combating these problems now than we would by reducing carbon dioxide emissions. There is a terrible opportunity cost to drastic action to reduce climate change, and that cost would likely weigh heavier on the world’s poor than the effects of global warming itself.

Moreover, it is acknowledged by every responsible economist that drastic action to reduce fossil fuel use would increase energy costs, which would in turn reduce household income. Wealthier is healthier, and richer is cleaner. Limiting economic activity therefore can have a dramatic impact on quality of life, not least by reducing life expectancy. Researchers have found a direct correlation between income and mortality, with a disproportionate impact on poorer communities. Thus, policies that reduce societal wealth can be expected to induce premature mortalities, as well as to increase disease and injury rates.

For example, it is often asserted that global warming already kills 150,000 people per year worldwide. Yet a recent econometric study by Johns Hopkins epidemiologist Harvey

Brenner found that replacing U.S. coal with higher-cost fuels for the purposes of energy production would result in at least 195,000 additional premature deaths per year in the U.S. alone. Given that recent “Kyoto-lite” measures proposed in the U.S. Senate such as the Climate Stewardship Act proposed by Senators McCain (R., Ariz.) and Lieberman (D., Conn.) would result in the replacement of about 78 percent of coal with high-priced fuels, it

is entirely plausible that even “baby steps” towards climate mitigation would result in the deaths of more people in the U.S. than global warming would worldwide. The effects of such strategies if adopted across the globe could be far more devastating than global warming even if alarmist predictions come true.

The evangelical leaders need to give more thought to the unintended consequences of

their well-intentioned acts. By devoting spiritual and temporal energy to reducing carbon-dioxide emissions, the evangelical leaders will probably hurt the poor more than they help them. As Matthew 7: 15 says, “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.” By adopting a green agenda, the evangelicals may have thrown the poor to those wolves.

--Iain Murray is a senior fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C.

*Copyright 2006 National Review
National Review*