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CAN THESE DRY BONES LIVE?

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Can These Dry Bones Live?

He said to me, “Mortal, can these dry bones live? I answered, “O Lord God, you alone know.” Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.” (Ezekiel 37:3-5)

Should caring for the environment be a major priority for people of faith? Only a few years ago, I would have blithely answered this question “No.” Care for the natural world was not a priority of our governmental affairs work. Nor was it a priority in my personal and family life.

What changed? I changed.

I realized I was violating the biblical commands “to serve and to protect” creation (Genesis 2:15). The Hebrew words to serve, *avad*, and to protect, *shamar*, mean we must be caretakers, not just takers.

I had to turn about and go in another direction. That’s what the biblical word for repentance, *metanoia*, means.

What got my attention, and keeps it, is the impact of climate change, habitat destruction and species extinction on Earth. Sir John Houghton, the first chair of the Scientific Assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change — and an evangelical Christian — made a presentation on the impacts of global warming to the Oxford Conference of 2002.

Among those sitting in the audience was a skeptic; that person was me. It was my reasoning that the science was disputable. “No dog in that fight,” referring to the debate over global warming, was my judgment at the time. It took the unequivocal evidence of climate change — significantly caused by humans and irreversible in its nature — to shake me out of my own lethargy.

It’s been said that if you don’t now-and-then change your opinion about something, check your pulse — you may be dead. Millions of my fellow evangelical believers need to examine

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themselves. Too often we've bought into questionable science or simply given our political views, namely that the environment is for latte-sipping East Coast liberals, too much weight.

With regard to this Earth, well, things will always be the same way. And that there is nothing we can do about it. And, if not, well, God will take of this Earth anyway. No need for us to do so.

Needed: Moral Imagination

Are we as a nation in trouble? Most assuredly. Entering into the 21st Century, more than ever before, America is experiencing a deficit in moral leadership. The issues that we face — the degrading of human dignity, climate change, civilization conflict, war and violence — will require not just leadership that has been desperately lacking, but also moral imagination of a kind previously unheard of.

What is leadership with moral imagination? It's the capacity to see leadership, first of all, as service to others. According to Jim Collins, author of the book "Good To Great," "These leaders blend extreme personal humility with intense personal will." They are studies in duality — modest and willing, shy and fearless.

It requires, in my mind, people who realize they have an obligation that goes far beyond their own personal interests. It necessitates a willingness to say, "This is where I draw the line."

I'm reminded of the story in the Bible of a leader who knew triumph and defeat. His career started at age seventeen, was almost killed by his brothers but rose to prominence in one of the major countries of the world. I am talking about Joseph, a patriarch of Israel — a man who knew despair and despondency, served prison time, yet survived to become a powerful leader, second only to the king.

In his case, he was able to interpret the pharaoh's dream, but he sketched out a plan to address the seven years of famine the dream predicted. Because of his planning and leadership, there was adequate grain to feed the hungry and poor. Joseph met the test for being a man of moral

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imagination in the midst of a human predicament. He gave credit, respect and affirmation to God in the tough places. And he brought reassurance, comfort and hope to those who were troubled.

We need Josephs today. Young people who are willing to go against the grain to do what is right. In the evangelical community, it requires going against the prevailing attitude that caring for creation, particularly global warming, is, as the late Jerry Falwell put it, “a satanic distraction.” We need Earth protectors whose moral imagination turns into all consuming passion that changes the world.

We do not own this Earth. Indeed, the phrase “the earth is the Lord’s” (Psalm 24:1) was first used by Moses as part of a dire warning to the arrogant, oppressive and possessive pharaoh of Egypt (Exodus 9:29).

The pharaoh learned the hard way that the Lord did not turn the ownership of Earth over to people. It is a sin to ignore this eternal principle — with consequences to people of faith who deny it.

For whatever reason, the Lord seems more patient with us in the 21st century, but how long will that last? Time is running out. The natural world is imperiled by human activity, especially by our unsustainable burning of fossil fuels and our degradation of living systems.

Dr. E.O. Wilson, author of the recent book “The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth,” says: “If current deterioration of the environment by human activity continues unabated, half of Earth’s surviving species, plants, and animals will be extinguished or critically endangered by the end of the century. One quarter, it’s been estimated, could leave us in the next 50 years due to climate change alone.”

Human health and life are particularly endangered, with the poor and disadvantaged among us at the greatest risk. James Hanson, a top scientist at NASA, states, “One quarter of carbon dioxide that we put in the air by burning fossil fuel will stay there forever — more than 500 years. If we

burn all fossil fuels without capturing and sequestering the CO₂, we will create a different planet.”

The Scientist-Evangelical Initiative

To address these threats, Eric Chivian, a Nobel laureate and director of the Harvard Center on Health and the Global Environment, joined with me to co-partner the formation of the “Scientist-Evangelical Initiative,” which has convened the nation’s leading scientists and theologians to dialogue about how we can work together.

Joining us were E.O. Wilson, James Hanson and leading theologians such as Cal DeWitt, author and professor at the University of Wisconsin, who is considered the “grandfather” of the Creation Care movement, and David Gushee, distinguished professor of Christian Social Ethics at Mercer University.

At our meetings we discovered that we agreed far more than we disagreed, that we shared a deep reverence for life on Earth, and that we felt a sense of urgency about what human beings are doing to creation.

We pledged to do everything in our power to preserve this precious gift the Creator has given us, and to invite our colleagues, including some who may not fully agree with us, to join us in these efforts. Our historic meetings, including the first held in Thomasville, Ga., dubbed the “Thomasville Rebellion,” resulted in a document called “An Urgent Call to Action: Scientists and Evangelicals Unite to Protect Creation,” signed on Jan. 17, 2007, and released at a joint press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

More recently, the scientists and theologians traveled to Alaska to examine the impacts of climate change and partner with PBS and NOW television show to produce “God and Global Warming.”¹

¹ “God and Global Warming,” television, produced by PBS and NOW, 2007.
<http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/343/index.html>.

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The co-partnership that developed was given in 2008 a “TIME 100” award as one of the most significant developments of the year. These dialogues continue and will be pushing the Obama administration toward a green agenda and to cap greenhouse gas emissions through cap-and-trade legislation.

Let me also add that my co-partner Eric Chivian has just published an Oxford University Press book called “Sustaining Life: How Human Health Depends on Biodiversity”² that former Vice President Al Gore said was “the most complete and powerful argument I have seen for the importance of preserving biodiversity.”

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Can we hear the voice of the biblical prophet Ezekiel: “Is it not enough for you to drink the water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?” One of my mentors, Cal DeWitt, echoes this in our day: Is it not enough for you to enjoy a pleasant climate? Must you destroy it? Is it not enough for you to enjoy the myriad of creatures? Must you extinguish them?

Major segments of the Earth are dying, and we are responsible. Ezekiel’s imagery of the valley of dry bones is dramatic: physical imagery relating death and life. Only a divine re-creation can resuscitate the dry bones. It has been said that we must die to ourselves. Lose our life in order to gain it. But it’s not something we want. Self-denial is hard. Limitation of the old life is necessary: “For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their soul?” (Matthew 16:26)

The writer Sallie McFague says that, “While I am not suggesting that the Matthean passage is about ecological selfishness and the need for consumer self-denial and limitation, I am suggesting that its basic premise of the Christian life as cruciform makes the passage open to that interpretation.

² Eric Chivian and Aaron Bernstein, eds., “Sustaining Life: How Human Health Depends on Biodiversity” (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2008). <http://chge.med.harvard.edu/programs/bio/index.html>.

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“In terms of the health and well-being of the planet, we need to lose one kind of life and gain another, and the other one, the new life, will continue to be cruciform in shape. It involves limitation, emptiness, loss. abundant life, cruciform-style, means sharing and giving — dare we say, sacrificing? — for others, for the health of other life-forms and the well-being of other people.” Is this the abundant life, as John 10:10 puts it: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly”? Who wants it? Maybe none of us does.

But it is realistic. It is ecological; it is what the good life must mean in nature’s terms, because it is in line with the way our planet works. Thus, the way of the cross is realistic. It is the way of life for humans to live with other human beings and with nature.”

Can this happen? Can the dry bones live? Can our planet become healthy? Ezekial says that with God all things are possible, even the reconstitution of dry bones.

In his book “Serve God, Save the Planet,” J. Matthew Sleeth writes, “We have a problem, one as meaningful and real as if a sinking ship with billions of passengers aboard. The Earth is our ship, an ark for everything that lives. It is the only vessel available to carry humans through the ocean of space, and it is rapidly becoming unseaworthy.”

As people of faith, we have no option but to act. Why not take the lead in making our nation an example of biblical stewardship? Not everyone will come to the same public-policy solutions, but the following simple actions can make a huge difference:

Replace incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescents. Though initially more expensive, an energy-efficient fluorescent bulb will save you \$28 to \$58 in your electric bill during its life, and burn 500 pounds less coal to pollute the air. Recycle. C’mon, how hard can it be?

Drive the speed limit with properly inflated tires and a tuned engine. And, why not consider a hybrid car? Ask for your energy company to do an energy audit of your house or church. You’ll make money and be giving to others at the same time.

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Support businesses that are creation-friendly. Vote and voice your concern to local and national government officials. Pray that our fellow citizens, congregations and lawmakers will do what is wise to care for creation.

We owe it to our children and grandchildren that they may enjoy what we have too long taken for granted. Protecting the environment must be a priority; it's called biblical stewardship.

This doesn't get anyone into the "political thicket." This is neither a "red" (Republican Party), "blue" (Democratic Party) or even a "green" (Green Party) issue; it's a moral issue. Jesus' first commandment — to love God with all our heart and soul and strength — means that we honor and care for all of His creation.

It's been put this way: "To claim to love the Creator but to abuse the world in which we live is like claiming to be fans of Shakespeare whilst burning his plays."

After all, when we die, God won't ask us how He made this Earth — but rather, what we did with what He made.

A young man and woman were tired of the leadership offered by the old man who sat in the public square dispensing advice. So they devised a plan to discredit him. Putting a bird in their hands, they would go to the sage and ask "Is this bird alive or dead?" If the old man said the bird was "alive," they would use their thumb to break the bird's neck, killing him, proving their elder wrong. If the old man said the bird was dead, they would open their hand revealing the bird very much alive. And so they went confident of their plan and asked him "Is the bird alive or dead?" He wisely responded, "My children, the answer is in your hands."

In his hymn, "A Charge to Keep I Have," John Wesley put it this way: "To serve the present age, My calling to fulfill; Oh, may it all my powers engage, To do my Master's will; Arm me with jealous care, As in thy sight to live; And, oh thy servant lead, Prepare a strict account to give."

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My friends, the answer is in our hands. We live to serve the present age. May this task all our powers engage. Living in His sight. And prepare an account to give.

This is an updated version of an article that appeared in the Yale Reflections Journal in April 2007.