

Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

“Leading Evangelicals, Scientists Launch Environmental Collaboration”

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Eric Chivian, M.D., Nobel Laureate; Director, Center for Health and the Global Environment, Harvard Medical School

Welcome to this historic press conference, organized by the Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School and the National Association of Evangelicals. I am Eric Chivian, Director of the Center.

All of us are here this morning to tell you about the start of a remarkable new coalition of scientists and evangelicals who have joined forces to protect Creation and the global environment.

When my close friend Richard Cizik and I were having lunch more than a year ago, we talked about the dangerous degree of distrust between many scientists and evangelicals, dangerous because, despite well known differences on some issues, these two groups clearly shared a deep reverence for life on Earth and a profound concern and sense of urgency about what human activity was doing to it. It was critically important, we believed, that if we were to make any progress in addressing such issues as global warming and habitat destruction, these two enormously powerful communities had to work together, and yet they were hardly speaking to one other. Richard and I proposed that we convene a meeting of prominent scientists and evangelical leaders to break this impasse and soon asked Dr. Edward O. Wilson to join us.

Some 30 leading scientists and evangelicals met over three days at a private retreat last month. We reviewed the science, about which there was no disagreement, that the natural world is imperiled by human behaviors and policies, especially by our unsustainable burning of fossil fuels and our degradation of living systems. Human health and life are also highly endangered by these activities, with the disadvantaged placed at the greatest risk. We agreed that we that there was no such thing as a Republican or Democrat, a liberal or conservative, a religious or secular environment, that we all breathed the same air and drank the same water and relied on the same organisms for our survival. We discovered that we shared a deep moral commitment to preserve this precious gift we have all been given. And we pledged—all of us—to do everything in our power to protect it. That is why we are here today and why we are releasing this joint statement.

This coalition is but six weeks old. It has only just begun, and we don't yet know how it will be organized, how it will develop, and all the activities that it will plan. But what we do know is this, that we have begun a critically important dialogue, that we scientists and evangelicals are committed to speaking with one voice about the global environment, that we will reach out broadly to involve other colleagues in our work, that we will inform political leaders and policy-makers from both parties of our efforts, including at meetings this afternoon on Capitol Hill, that we will bring our two communities together for a large public meeting in the near future, and that this initiative, we are convinced, will grow in size and influence, and that it has the capacity to capture the attention and imagination of millions of Americans, to awaken them to the urgency of our concerns, and to move them by our shared commitment to protect life on Earth.

Rev. Richard Cizik, M.A., Vice President for Government Affairs, National Association of Evangelicals

Good morning. My name is Richard Cizik, Vice President for Governmental Affairs of the National Association of Evangelicals.

It's my great delight to join Dr. Eric Chivian of the Center for Health and the Global Environment of Harvard Medical School in moderating this morning's press conference.

The National Association of Evangelicals began the journey toward responsible care of Creation when we released in 2004 our landmark document "For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Engagement." Then, in February of 2006, many of our leaders announced their support for the "Evangelical Climate Initiative" and have helped turn global warming from a partisan issue of debate among politicians into a moral concern for the entire nation.

In the summer of 2006, my friend Eric Chivian suggested lunch with Dr. Edward O. Wilson, one of the world's best-known scientists. I'll have to admit to being somewhat intimidated by even the prospect. What I discovered, of course, was a man of incredible intellect, warmth, and humility. The three of us shared a common concern for protecting Creation, and we decided to follow up on the idea that Eric and I had several months earlier—to begin an historic dialogue. As you may know, this was held at Melhana Plantation, in Georgia, last month. It's my hope and prayer that the conversation that began there will multiply and grow into a national and international movement.

Obviously, if we believe that God will judge us for destroying Creation—in such ways as loss of biodiversity and climate change—we evangelicals should be more vigilant than others. When we die, God will not ask us how he created the earth, but what we did with what He created. Next month, in a press conference with government officials at the Environmental Protection Agency's "Energy Star" program, the NAE will announce a partnership to reduce energy consumption in our member churches, which total around 45,000 congregations from 54 denominations.

Today, we want to explain the consensus that led to the "Call to Action" signed by those here and others in the audience. By standing together, we're saying as evangelicals that science can be an ally in helping us understand what Creation is telling us about itself and indirectly about its Maker.

Great scientists are people of imagination. So are people of great faith. We dare to imagine a world in which science and religion cooperate, minimizing our differences about how Creation got started, to work together to reverse its degradation. We will not allow it to be progressively destroyed by human folly.

James Hansen, Ph.D., Chief, NASA Institute for Space Studies

Climate change is happening. Animals know it. Many are beginning to migrate to stay within their climate zones. But some of them are running out of real estate. They are in trouble.

Humans are starting to notice climate change. But most of the public is unaware of scientific facts that have become crisp and clear. A quarter of the carbon dioxide (CO₂) that we put in the air by burning fossil fuels will stay there “forever”, more than 500 years. Climate change due to gases already in the air is only partly realized, because of inertia and the slow climate response.

In order to avoid clear and substantial dangers, to humans, animals, and the environment, we must keep global warming from taking climate far outside the range that has existed for the past several thousand years. The dangers include extinction of many species, destabilization of ice sheets with subsequent sea level rise, and shifting of climatic zones.

It is still possible to avoid dramatic climate change. It will be necessary to substantially reduce CO₂ emissions during the next few decades, and perhaps by 80 percent or more before the end of the century. Other air pollution must also be reduced. But there will be many ancillary benefits, for human health, agriculture, and the environment, as well as benefits for our nation’s energy independence and national security.

Cal DeWitt, Ph.D., Professor, Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies

If we listen to what the Earth is telling us—both directly and through scientists like Dr. Hansen; if we stop to behold Creation around us—and also see what we are doing to it—we can hear the voice of the biblical prophet Ezekiel,

“Is it not enough for you to drink the pure water?
Must you muddy the rest with your feet?”

Echoing this in our day,

“Is it not enough for you to enjoy a pleasant climate?
Must you also destroy the climate system?”

“Is it not enough for you to enjoy the great myriad of creatures?
Must you also extinguish them?”

Such destruction and extinction brings sorrow to their Maker.

OUR IMMEDIATE MORAL IMPERATIVE is to stop for a moment—or a day or more—to BEHOLD the beauty of the Earth.
...and—to observe its degradation.

Biblically, Jesus still invites everyone to BEHOLD the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, and God invites everyone to behold the magnificent animals.

But Scripture laments,

Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?
Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow...

If we stop to BEHOLD—AS NOW WE MUST—we can re-discover the beauty of the Earth, and

Through this we can find that
we ought not only be TAKERS from the Earth
but ought to return its service with service of our own, in gratitude.

Many American police cars carry the motto, “To Serve and to Protect,” reminding everyone that they ought to be more than TAKERS. This motto (from Genesis 2:15) reminds us that everyone ought to serve (*abad*) and protect (*shamar*) the garden, and Creation.

More than TAKERS, we are CARE-TAKERS. By returning Creation’s service with service of our own, we care for Creation, we restore what has been spoiled, we preserve the species, and care for the climate system we hold in trust.

Edward O. Wilson, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, Department of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology, Harvard University

Science and religion are the two most powerful social forces in the world today. The so-called culture wars between them emanating from different interpretations of the human condition have unnecessarily blocked full cooperation between secular scientists and religious believers in solving some of the greatest problems facing humanity today. Among the foremost of these problems is the deterioration of Earth's environment. Although climate change and exhaustion of natural resources are best known and of themselves paramount in importance, there is one less well understood process linked to them that is both of great magnitude and irreversible: the loss of global biological diversity. If current deterioration of the environment by human activity continues unabated, best estimates are that half of Earth's surviving species of plants and animals will be extinguished or critically endangered by the end of the century. The price for future generations will be paid in economic opportunity, environmental security, and spiritual fulfillment. The saving of the living environment is therefore an issue appropriately addressed jointly by science and religion.

David Gushee, Ph.D., Graves Professor of Moral Philosophy, Christian Studies at Union University

Scientists and evangelicals have unfortunately been locked in a relationship of conflict and mutual misunderstanding since at least the Scopes Monkey Trial. The dialogue that occurred at Melhona demonstrated the possibility of a significant healing of the breach between our two communities. We discovered surprising common ground on a shared concern for the endangered Creation. We likewise shared a deep sense of moral obligation to address the most important environmental issues of our time. I think it is fair to say that most of us were not just surprised but astonished by the depth of our shared moral commitment, despite the obvious theological differences that exist.

I believe that leaders of the scientific and evangelical communities have the capacity to change the national dialogue about the environment. From science, from faith, or from both, we feel morally compelled to address pressing environmental problems before it is too late. This is not just a technical policy question—it is a moral imperative, and must be taken on as such, with the kind of energy, passion, and commitment that only a morally compelling cause can generate. The statement that we release today reflects the shared moral passion that animates us, and that we hope, and many of us pray, will spread across our nation.

It is my hope that our primary achievement will be to light a fire under all relevant sectors of American life to move much more aggressively to address the needs of an ailing created world—leading to changed personal lifestyles, business decisions, social attitudes, and government policies. As we engage in this work together, it may lead to a second historic achievement—improving the relationship between the scientific and religious communities in America.

Rita Colwell, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor, University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

It is clear from the very fact that this group stands here today, together and speaking in unison about the need for protecting our environment, that the moment is historic. We have made some remarkable discoveries about each other, the most significant being that we agree that we must act and must do so quickly. The task of informing and educating our constituencies, our students, the public, and policy makers is critical, urgent, and monumental.

Speaking as a scientist trained as a microbiologist and molecular biologist, my world has revolved around the microorganisms, those creatures too small to see with the naked eye but comprising the unseen world working prodigiously on our behalf. Their diversity is absolutely essential to the well being of all life on this planet. We do not know the full diversity of these life forms, yet we lose untold numbers of microbial species when a higher organism, plant or animal, becomes extinct. How to explain the value of this unseen life that makes our own lives possible is one example of the magnitude of the challenge we must meet.

Infectious diseases are global in nature and we are just beginning to understand how significant climate and seasonality are to the rise and fall of epidemics. Those infectious diseases driven by vectors, for example the mosquito carrying the malaria parasite, will be altered in their patterns by global warming. We will be affected by climate change in ways we do not yet understand fully. It is, therefore, our intent to determine how we can best educate all of our constituencies through all avenues of communication and all tools of the media. Not least is the task of educating our young people so that they can assist in protecting their future.

Our environment is complex and the biology therein comprises the biocomplexity that maintains the equilibrium and robust nature of our living planet. We simply cannot continue the experiment we are presently carrying out, namely to allow global warming to go unchecked. The continuing loss of biodiversity will surely have consequences that are unknown as yet, but that will determine the survival of our human species, our grandchildren and their children.

Joel Hunter, Ph.D., Senior Pastor, Northland Church (Orlando, FL)

My name is Joel Hunter and I am one of a growing number of local church pastors who intends to do what is right in caring for God's Creation. For the Evangelical Christian, the instruction God gave Adam to "cultivate and protect" the garden is still a Biblical imperative for today. The church has a growing awareness that protecting the environment is also a way of preserving life, especially for the poor who are most effected by environmental deterioration. Unless we care for the vulnerable, we are not representing Jesus well. He also advocated a great appreciation for the beauty of Creation itself when he said, "Consider the lilies of the field...even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these."

We are glad to be partnering with our friends in the scientific community. They have the facts we need to present to our congregations; we have the numbers of activists that will work through churches, government, and the business community to make a significant impact.

We believe that in these days, God is putting together groups of people with a common cause who might have seemed adversarial at times in the past. These new collaborative efforts will make the world healthier and safer for everyone.

Jim McCarthy, Ph.D., Professor of Biological Oceanography, Harvard University

The joint statement issued today, is newsworthy and remarkable, in part because it demonstrates how mistaken, perceptions of a different community's perspective can at times mask opportunities for the pursuit of common interests.

Some of us who were drawn to the December meeting of scientists and Christian Evangelical leaders at Melhana Plantation in southern Georgia were surprised to find that we had previously harbored significant misperceptions about the perspectives of the other community. At this meeting, scientists discovered among our evangelical colleagues a deeper respect for knowledge generated by science than some of us had thought likely. Moreover, I think that some of our evangelical colleagues were surprised by the scientists' widespread sense of respect and reverence for all life on Earth. Professor Wilson's recent book, entitled "The Creation" served as a crucial icebreaker for our conversations.

Speaking more generally, many scientists' preconceived notions regarding the faith community have left them unprepared to imagine the cooperative spirit and anticipated synergies articulated in our "Call to Action." It is incumbent upon the scientists in this endeavor to use our various forums within the science community and publicly, including publications, lectures, and meetings, to broaden understanding of the opportunities for this cooperative effort.

Among the scientists at the Melhana meeting there was also a sincere expression of interest in responding to requests from our colleagues in the faith community for scientific information relating to biodiversity and climate change, which could be used for pastoral position statements and continuing education programs.

Cheryl Johns, Ph.D., Professor, Church of God Theological Seminary

It is difficult to translate to our faith communities the rapport, mutual respect and critical awareness that was present at the recent meeting between scientists and Evangelicals. But we are compelled to do so. Our task is to help our communities overcome the illness of "nature deficit disorder" that affects not only our culture at large but also our churches. This task is multi-faceted. First, it is a matter of transforming the affections, teaching our people that love of Creation is an extension of our love of God. Second, it is a matter of transforming lifestyle and values, creating awareness of conservation and stewardship as part of the Christian life and witness. Third, it is a matter of transforming theology, raising awareness that God's mission to save people is part of God's intention to restore all of Creation. Finally, it is a matter of educating for justice and compassion, realizing that it is the poor of our world who are most acutely affected by global climate change.

We call upon those responsible for theological education and Christian discipleship to integrate materials from both the scientific and Christian communities regarding Creation care into their programs of study. The educational task is a prophetic one, done so with an awareness that the Creator Spirit compels us to speak with urgency and passion regarding our task as caretakers of God's beautiful world.

Peter Raven, Ph.D., Director, Missouri Botanical Garden

The projected loss of perhaps half of all species of plants and animals on Earth during the course of the 21st century represents an extinction event as catastrophic as that which ended the age of dinosaurs 65 million years ago—but in this case, we, and we alone, are responsible. Current mass extinction results from pressures associated with the rapidly growing numbers of human beings, our increasing expectations for individual consumption, and our continuing and spreading use of often unsustainable technologies. In the words of Patriarch Bartholomew I, the destruction of nature is “brought about by an economic and technological progress which does not recognize and take into account its limits.” Each of the species that we are driving to extinction represents a unique entity that, once gone, will never exist again. Species have become extinct regularly over the course of time, and the millions that are alive today constitute only a very small fraction of all that have lived in the past. Today, however, the rate of extinction for which we are responsible is thousands of times faster than the rate at which new species can replace them—and that rate is growing rapidly.

Because we are entirely dependent for our lives on other organisms, and simply would not exist without them, I am delighted to be working with Christian Evangelical leaders to try to find new ways to protect them. The abundant productivity and diverse properties of these organisms hold vital keys to attaining social justice and alleviating poverty around the world. Whether we realize it or not, our continued existence, many of our dreams of a better life, and much of our inspiration and joy depends on them. In caring for our common home, we share a cause that inspires us all. As Edward Brown points out, “The church must be mobilized if all the rest is to happen.” So must we all, which is why we delight in trying to do it together.

Randy Isaac, Ph.D., Executive Director, American Scientific Affiliation

In our vast universe, as far as we know, planet earth is the only place where a rich diversity of life survives. God has created a diverse array of species that thrive in a web of interdependence. Each species has a “purpose-driven existence”, to paraphrase Rick Warren’s best selling book. Each species fills a critical niche in the dynamic balance of nature.

Throughout the history of life on earth, the number and types of species have changed in response to changes in the environment. But whenever the environment changed too rapidly for species to adapt, large numbers of species became extinct.

As human beings, we are dependent on a healthy ecological system for our own survival. If our environment changes too rapidly for the current balance to be sustained, the very existence of our human race could be threatened. Long before we reach that stage, the poor and the weak segments of human population will suffer more than anyone as their sources of food and water dwindle.

Scientific analyses have shown clearly that human activity is causing an acceleration of changes on earth. Without urgent prudent action, the pace of change could accelerate alarmingly, causing irreversible damage to the ecological system upon which human survival depends. We have a collective moral obligation to work together and do all we can to reduce the factors that could cause loss of biodiversity and ultimately massive human suffering.

Those of us who are Christians in science recognize that both our faith and our professional vocation call us to unite in action to preserve God’s Creation and to help humankind.