



# Baptists and Climate Change

By [Sara Peach](#) | Mar 13, 2012

## Series on Climate and Major Religions

*America's roughly 52 million Baptists hold a wide range of views on environment, and for many of them, scripture is the key to their attitudes toward climate change.*

When God created the first man and woman, he blessed them and then, Genesis teaches, delivered instructions that would resonate for millennia: “Fill the Earth and subdue it,” he said. “Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

In 2007, the Southern Baptist Convention drew on this passage in [a resolution on global warming](#) declaring that Christians should exercise dominion over the Earth, and that the U.S. government should reject mandatory cuts in greenhouse gas emissions.

But some have found inspiration in another verse: Genesis 2:15, which says that Adam's purpose in the Garden of Eden was “to work it and take care of it.” To many Baptists, this passage suggests that people should develop a benevolent relationship with nature.

“In Genesis, Adam is both a real person and a representative for all mankind, so the charge for Adam to care for the world is really a charge to us all,” writes Southern Baptist faith writer Jonathan Merritt in *Green Like God: Unlocking the Divine Plan for Our Planet*. Humans, he writes on pages 41 and 42, “are commanded by the Creator to care for His creation.”

Merritt in 2008 turned to Genesis 2:15, among other passages, in crafting a rejoinder to the Southern Baptist Convention's 2007 declaration opposing action on climate change. The result, “[A Southern Baptist Declaration on the Environment and Climate Change](#),” argues that people are responsible for tending and keeping Earth.

## Contradictions on Dominance and Stewardship

“(W)e humbly take responsibility for the damage that we have done to God’s cosmic revelation,” the signatories write, “and pledge to take an unwavering stand to preserve and protect the creation over which we have been given responsibility by Almighty God Himself.”

The apparent contradiction between the Biblical ideals of dominance and stewardship is one of many divisions in Baptist discussions of climate change/global warming. Among more liberal American Baptist churches, members said in recent interviews, hardly anyone is a global warming “skeptic.” But among Southern Baptists, a backlash against climate leaders is ongoing.

## Meet the Incredibly Diverse Baptists

Baptists, an incredibly diverse group of believers with adherents worldwide, make up about 17 percent, or more than 52 million, of the American public, [according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life](#). About seven percent of Americans are Southern Baptists, the largest group within the denominational family. American Baptists, who are classified as mainline Protestants, make up 1 percent of the public.

Baptists have no central governing authority, so beliefs vary from church to church. But in general, Baptists prize the autonomy of local churches and the authority of the Bible.

Many Baptists have taken prominent positions in the public dialogue about climate change/global warming.

Jim Ball, who leads the [Evangelical Environmental Network’s climate programs](#), is a Baptist minister who has taken a strong faith leadership position on climate challenges.

Rick Warren, a Southern Baptist who delivered the invocation at Barack Obama’s inauguration, was one of 86 signers of the 2006 “Evangelical Call to Action,” advocating mandatory emissions cuts.

In contrast, the late Jerry Falwell, a Southern Baptist and the founder of the Moral Majority, said that Warren and other signers of the climate change call to action were “naive.”

“The fact is this whole thing is cyclical,” [Falwell told his congregation](#) at Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., in 2006, “and the scientists who are not on the payroll of the government to do these studies are saying the jury’s still out.”

## Creating ‘Hell in the Here and Now’

On a recent Sunday morning at Binkley Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, N.C., the choir opened worship with a rendition of “Morning Has Broken,” a hymn set to a Gaelic melody that exults in the dawning of a new day.

Binkley, an American Baptist Church, participated March 4 in the Preach-In on Global Warming, an event aimed at educating and mobilizing faith groups nationwide.

When Binkley Minister Peter Carman took the pulpit, he described global warming as “a terrible crisis of our own making.”

“Let me acknowledge today I don’t believe in hell,” he said. “But let us acknowledge that, accept or reject that, humanity has the power to create hell in the here and now.”

*Amen!* one parishioner muttered from the pews.

Then Carman suggested taking action. The faithful, he said, should embrace their own places in the fragile balance of creation and should confess harm they have done to the sky.

They should also take public and practical steps, such as reducing driving. And they should take on corporate and economic forces that are contributing to the problems of a warming climate.

“You may be tempted to say even this will make no difference, or not enough, but what are we going to tell our grandchildren?” he asked. “What, we did nothing because we were feeling cynical about our ability to make a difference?”

## **Skepticism among Southern Baptists**

In 2008, a survey by the Barna Group found that most American Christians said they wanted to take a more active role in environmental issues. But among non-mainline Protestants, including Southern Baptists, only 36 percent said they were very certain climate change is happening.

That skepticism is evident in the 2007 Southern Baptist Convention resolution on global warming.

The resolution offers a series of well-trodden arguments for climate change denial. Global temperatures are now recovering from the Little Ice Age, the resolution claims, and Greenland was “extensively farmed by the Vikings from around 1000 to 1300 A.D.”

In addition, it says, costly measures to control greenhouse emissions would hurt the world’s poor: “We share God’s concern that the poor should not be abused, taken advantage of, nor overburdened,” the writers say.



*Baptist Church Minister Peter Carman, in Chapel Hill, N.C., reads from Genesis during National Preach-In on Global Warming. (Photo credit Sara Peach)*

“Poor people and underdeveloped regions of the world will be impacted the most severely by higher costs,” the resolution continues, and “The poor and most vulnerable people around the world are faced with many more quantifiable, immediate, devastating problems.”

## **Biblical, not Political or Social, Motivations**

Concern for the poor is an important theme also in the 2008 Southern Baptist resolution on environment and climate change, which was spearheaded by Merritt, the Southern Baptist faith writer.

Merritt’s passion for environmental issues began when he was a student at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Wake Forest, N.C., where, he says, a professor told him that destroying the environment was akin to tearing a page out of the Bible.

In the resolution, the signers argue that climate change impacts will be most harmful to poor and underserved groups. Addressing that concern is necessary for caring for those that the Book of Matthew calls the “least of these.”

Moreover, the resolution says, “we are reminded that when God made mankind, He commissioned us to exercise stewardship over the Earth and its creatures (Gen. 1:26-28). Therefore, our motivation for facing failures to exercise proper stewardship is not primarily political, social or economic — it is primarily biblical.”

## **Raising Climate Change Issue ... While Avoiding the Words**

In a recent interview, Merritt said the choice to make a Bible-based case for climate action was deliberate. Because Southern Baptists believe the Bible is the word of God, Merritt said, he opens conversations about environmental issues with scripture. He said he often avoids talking about climate change directly, instead focusing on related issues such as mountaintop removal.

“So many environmentalists don’t know how to have the conversation with evangelicals,” he said. “They start with crisis, and then the Bible becomes a sort of footnote.”

Since 2008, his resolution has been signed by 750 Southern Baptist leaders and laypeople.

But Merritt’s path has by no means been easy. He says he has received death threats for taking what he considers to be a middle-of-the-road position on climate change, and he says some Southern Baptist leaders have pressured him not to release his resolution.

“The old-guard evangelical right really went after him,” said Katharine Wilkinson, author of the forthcoming book *Between God and Green: How Evangelicals Are Cultivating a Middle Ground on Climate Change*.

Merritt said that recently, the number of new signatures on the resolution has basically flat-lined. And early this year, the site that had hosted it quietly went offline.

But he said the movement for climate action continues among Southern Baptists. Energy Star, the government program that promotes energy-efficient consumer products, has given many of its congregation awards in the past few years to Southern Baptist churches. The [First Baptist Church of Orlando, Fla.](#), for example, earned an Energy Star award in 2010 for saving \$373,000 a year in electricity costs through efficiency measures.

## **The Ancients and Global Warming**

For Alice Loyd, the Bible alone may not be enough to inspire people to take action on global warming. Loyd is a member of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C., an American Baptist church, and a former director of North Carolina [Interfaith Power & Light](#).

The Bible doesn't account for climate change, she said. Scripture contains passages that can be interpreted as love for creation, “but really, there is very little there. Those are stretched. The original writers didn't have what we're talking about in mind.”

Preaching at Binkley Baptist Church in early March, Reverend Carman seemed to have a reply for a point he no doubt has heard before: “The ancients had no clue about global warming,” he said.

“But at least,” he went on, “they did understand the context of being human was nature, was creation: a teeming, lovely creation full of life, of dramatic swings between darkness and light, oceans and skies, and birds and living things, and late, late on the sixth day, one more animal: formed from the dust, and created in the image of the holy one.”

*Also see:*

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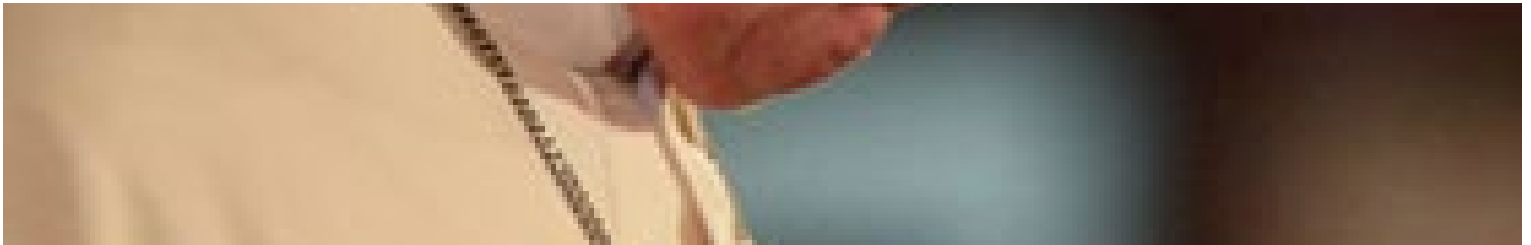
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