

THE GREAT WARMING

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW WITH **REV. RICHARD CIZIK**



Interviewer

Where is this evangelical concern for the environment coming from?

Rev. Cizik

I would say that this newfound passion, this concern for Creation Care as we call it, comes straight from God and the Holy Spirit who is regenerating people's hearts to realize the imperative of the scriptures to care for God's world in new ways. It comes from God Himself. He has changed my heart too. I have had a conversion to this cause.

The climate change crisis that we believe is occurring is not something we can wait ten years, five years, even a year, to address. Climate change is real and human induced. It calls for action soon. And we are saying **action based upon a biblical view of the world as God's world**. And to deplete our resources, to harm our world by environmental degradation, is an offense against God. That's what the Scriptures say. Therefore, if we are to be obedient to the Scriptures, there is no time to wait, no time to stall, no time to deliberate.

It's hard to know just how many evangelicals have come to realize their full biblical responsibility. Surveys show that in the last election 52% of evangelicals believed that the unborn sanctity of human life was a priority, and yet, amazingly enough, 48% said that a clean environment was an important priority to them. So what explains the fact that they know this is important, yet have largely sat on their hands? There are a lot of explanations. One is that environmentalism has a sort of a "left wing tilt" in their minds. And they haven't had pastors who preached on the importance of Creation Care. Most have not had one sermon in their entire biblical life on this topic, if you can believe that.

I think what's occurring is that people in the pews have not been getting cues from their pastors and denominational leaders - the people they esteem most. But we know that once they hear this word from their spiritual heads, from their churches, denominations and religious organizations, they will respond. And they've told us they will respond. Not just by changing their lifestyle, but by changing their politicians. Now that's where the rubber meets the road.

Evangelicals comprise between 40-50% per cent of the Republican base, and it has been the leadership of the Republican party, sad to say, that has not shown the leadership it should on environmental issues... in

fact, have stymied action on climate change. So if the largest single population group in the Republican coalition were to say *"This is important, we want you, as our leaders in the Republican party, to take leadership on climate change, on clean air, on pure water, on the stewardship of our natural resources"*, if evangelical Christians were to say that, I daresay Republicans will listen. The Republicans running for the White House in 2008 will have to listen.

As for the lack of action, the disconnect between smart people in this city - Washington DC - the disconnect between the recognition that there is an obvious problem and the willingness to adopt an obvious solution, is explainable only by the fact that there are vested interests, political interests, who lobby against environmental action. Second, there is an ideological predisposition against regulation. And third, simple inertia. But the first cannot be dismissed, and there are oil and gas vested interests who have a reason not to want to take action on climate change.

I make this judgment about vested interests holding up action based on 25 years of experience in this town - seven White Houses. And I know for a fact that when the American public realizes that this is an obvious problem with obvious solutions, and they make that expression of will known inside the belt-way, politician will have to change. But there are vested interests. They have a cause which I don't believe is in the interest of God, or in the interest of man. And I say that sadly.

Interviewer

Aren't people in the church going to be uncomfortable working with environmental types?

Rev. Cizik

Look, evangelical Christians have learned that we have to do politics differently than we used to. In the 1980's for example, with all the ideological fervor that existed, many an evangelical thought *"well we'll simply convert the opposition to our side"*. Well, we've learned that we can't simply convert all those in public life to our side, especially on religion. But we do know that we can convert people to a common good that everyone can agree upon. For example, evangelical Christians have collaborated with Tibetan Buddhists to pass international religious freedom bills. They've collaborated with gay rights activists to pass the president's Global Aids Initiative. They've worked with the ACLU to pass a Prison Rape Elimination Act.

So, can we not collaborate with environmentalists? Of course we can! But do we need to develop our own voice first? Sure, I think we need to. Evangelicals need to have a sense that they are speaking out of their own tradition, their own religious and Biblical tradition – that they are not simply "me too" environmentalists. So, once evangelical Christians have developed their own voice, once they are comfortable with the fact that there needs to be government action, and that voluntary action won't suffice for climate change, and they put it all together, they will conclude that yes, environmentalism is not a bad word.

Interviewer

Has something changed? Not all evangelicals are supportive of the Creation Care idea.

Rev. Cizik

There is a debate going on within evangelical circles as to what is the highest priority. Is it to care for human life, unborn human life, first? It is to care about the poor? And how much place should we give Creation Care, concern for environmentalism? This debate is going on within our circles and the end hasn't been achieved. But I believe that the inevitable conclusion will be that all the issues are important and they're inter-related. For example, mercury pollution from coal burning utility plants in the United States falls from the atmosphere into our rivers and is consumed by fish. This in turn impacts our children, because now one out of six women in America has unduly high levels of mercury in their systems - impacting unborn children. It's a sanctity of human life issue that relates to the environment. So when evangelical Christians make the connection between the call to protect the innocent, the unborn, and the call to be stewards of the world that God has created, when they make the connection between the two, there will be no hesitation to speak out on environmental concerns.

Interviewer

On a personal note, how did you get “converted” to environmentalism?

Rev. Cizik

I’ve worked in Washington twenty five years. Then in 2002, Jim Ball, a friend of mine who is a leader in the evangelical environmental movement, dragged me to a conference at Oxford, England on this subject. And I heard from the evangelical Christian scientist Sir John Houghton – one of the drafters of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change document, arguably one of the most influential scientists in the world, make the case that I couldn’t shirk, shrug, rationalize or escape my Biblical responsibility to care for the environment. It changed me. I had, as John Wesley would say, a “warming of my heart”... a conversion to a cause which I believe every Christian should be committed to. And so yes, I had a change that only God could do. Only God could affect that kind of change in my heart. Because I am a stubborn person.

Interviewer

Was it an advantage to change your ways of living?

Rev. Cizik

Absolutely. I came back from the Oxford conference on climate change and talked to my wife, Virginia, and I said *"Ginny, we're gonna have to change some things"*. The first thing we did was sell our recreational vehicle. I decided it just wasn't a good use of resources. And it was a gas guzzler, besides. So we bought a Prius, a hybrid. Because it was not only a gas saver, but it was economically and environmentally the right thing to do. And we've taken a look at recycling. And then we've done something that I would never have imagined this late in my life - we've begun to enjoy the environment that God created, in new ways, with our children. Recognizing that this is what God wants us to do too. And in so doing we've got a different kind of appreciation for the world that God has created

Interviewer

What should your pastors be saying to their congregation in terms of a sermon?

Rev. Cizik

I think pastors should begin by teaching the word of God. This is God's world. When we destroy or deplete it, we violate his will. I think that is the very beginning. But there are also concrete actions which our believers in churches can take, from recycling to looking at the energy that our churches use, to looking for energy-efficient ways of operating our congregations. There are lots of other actions we can take. Transportation, for example. Some churches have huge bus fleets, and the question is what kind of energy are we consuming? So there are lots of actions that churches can take.

Interviewer

Does the concept of the Rapture influence creation care?

Rev. Cizik

There are some who believe that environmental degradation is simply one sign of the coming of Jesus Christ. Therefore there is no need to take action. And again and again, evangelical scholars, pastors, seminary presidents, have said that this is wrong. It is heresy and is not what the Bible teaches. If it's God's world, we have no license to destroy it. And there is no sense in which, by allowing that to happen, we are going to increase or encourage the chance of the return of Jesus Christ. To tolerate the destruction of the Earth in the name of encouraging the return of Jesus Christ is a violation of all that God has taught us. In the first book of the Bible, God says in Genesis, *"Watch over and care for it."* Watch over and care for it - that is our duty.

Interviewer

Religion and science – can they co-exist?

Rev. Cizik

Evangelicals have a rap against us. Namely that we are anti science. And some of it is true... namely, that we have rejected some of the claims of science in favor of our religious views. I see no conflict between good science and good faith, and believe the two will have to work together to meet the challenges of the twenty first century.

Interviewer

Can evangelical Christians and environmentalists work together to effect change?

Rev. Cizik

Absolutely. If we can work with Tibetan Buddhists to pass effective international religious freedom legislation, then surely we can work with our own fellow environmentalist, many of whom are Christians, to save the Earth. After all, God calls us to do this. So, if one man's reason for doing it is good science and another man's reason for doing it is good faith, then so be it and all the better.

One question that you have not asked me is why evangelical Christians haven't joined the environmental movement. And the answers are that one, evangelicals perceive that environmentalists opt for big government solutions, and that they tolerate population control practices such as abortion. Also, that some environmentalists are apocalyptic, predicting doom and gloom for the world. Well, that's kind of like the pot calling the kettle black, given that evangelicals are a bit apocalyptic ourselves. But nonetheless, these are the rationalizations some evangelical Christians have for avoiding the environmental movement. In effect, avoiding the claims, the legitimate claims, the scientific claims, that the environmentalists have. And it's unfortunate, in my opinion.

But that is changing. And we have come to conclude, as evangelical leaders, that we can collaborate with environmentalists on good science, good public policy, to control GHG emissions. We have decided as evangelical Christians that we can and must work together with environmentalists for the sake of the Earth.

Interviewer

What concerns you the most?

Rev. Cizik

I honestly fear that I would fail to be obedient to the command that God has given me and my role here in Washington. That given the authority I have, entrusted by 54 denominational leaders and church pastors from around the country, that I fail to heed God's call to effectively influence our nation's public policies. That is the mandate I have been given and entrusted with. That is the greatest fear I have. Because God doesn't intend to ask me "*Rich, how did I create the Earth?*" He won't ask me that. He'll say "*Rich, what did you do to protect that which I created?*" And that is an awesome question that deserves a good answer.

Interviewer

That is a wonderful thought.

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The link to this interview is:

<http://www.thegreatwarming.com/revrichardcizik.html>

(Go to www.thegreatwarming.com and scroll down to Cizik's interview link within the left margin.)

Rev. Richard Cizik, past president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), appears in the movie *The Great Warming*, providing theological commentary. As the preceding interview indicates, Rev. Cizik enthusiastically endorses this movie.