

Matthew 22: 34-40

**Bill McKibben - Author, Activist, Environmentalist, and Sunday School Teacher**

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I love going home to Germany. I try to do so every two years – not just to get my fix of true German food and to reconnect with my friends and family, but to also see what has changed since the last time I visited. Remember, I left East Germany in 1990. While the Berlin Wall had come down, the visual differences between East and West Germany were still striking.

All of that has changed now. Even though Berlin is still one big construction site, the changes, especially in the countryside, have been immense. The roads are lovely (not a pothole to be found), village farm houses and churches have been renovated and many of country castles have been restored.

As soon as one leaves a city or town, something is striking: the use of alternative energy. The countryside is dotted with wind farms. Windmills are everywhere, even in the Baltic and North Seas. The number of Biogas plants has also increased. Germany is the European leader in biogas production and how it is used. And there are solar panels everywhere – not just on private residences, but in solar parks or farms. This was new since the last time I visited. Just outside my hometown Falkensee, at the edge of Berlin, is a huge solar park on a field that had not been used for a number of years. Again, driving up to the Baltic Seas Coast, we saw many solar farms. We have them here as well – by the Gas Tanks as you drive into Boston, and to my surprise the town I live in, Scituate, has just installed a solar park on the old landfill.

I admit that it might sound weird, but the sight of solar panels excites me. It is such a seemingly simple way to harvest the energy of the sun, which will shine if you eat your spinach or not, and at the same time do something very constructive for the environment. When Jamie and I moved to Scituate, the house we bought faced almost perfectly south. I said right from the day we moved in that we should put panels on our roof. It took a little bit of persuading of the spouse and a number of good tax incentives by the state of MA and the Federal government, but last February we purchased a 5KW system for our roof. The money we invested will come back to us in about 7 years. It's a win/win for all involved.

But seeing all this change, be it Scituate or Germany, it begs the question: what is going on? Are people finally waking up to the message that all is not well with our environment and our climate? Has the wacky weather – devastating rain falls, droughts in normally lush places, hurricanes that flooded New York’s subway stations and wipe out whole seaside communities, or temperatures that are above normal for weeks on end - finally reached closed ears and eyes and hearts?

We know that this “not-all-is-well” message has been around for many years, and Bill McKibben has been one of the inspiring and courageous leaders in addressing the issue of climate change for over 25 years.

Bill McKibben was born in 1960. His family lived in Lexington, MA where he attended High School. In his youth he wrote for the newspaper and was a state champion debater. His father Gordon was a respected business journalist.

McKibben himself said that grew up with an overdeveloped moral sense, knowing that it was important to “take sides.” His father once was arrested in a protest supporting the right of Vietnam War veterans against the war to assemble in the Town Green, and 10-year old Bill was furious that he wasn’t allowed to be arrested with his father. This event had a huge impact on him.

McKibben enrolled at Harvard University in 1978. McKibben balanced his activism with his passion for journalism, serving as editor of the Harvard Crimson newspaper. At college he said that “his leftism grew more righteous,” though he felt as if something was missing. “Being white, male, straight, and of impeccably middle-class background, I could not realistically claim to be a victim of anything.” He had worked on many causes, but none felt truly his own.

The turning point for him came on election night 1980, when Ronald Reagan was elected President, McKibben “got grimly drunk,” spending the next day in bed before waking to write a three thousand-word essay that “defined the ground I’d cover in the years to come.”

Ronald Reagan’s victory was “the choice for a kind of pretend America, where we would agree that we didn’t have to face limits, change any habits,” recalled McKibben in 2008. “It’s in defiance of that trend that I’ve spent the succeeding years writing...” The problem was Reagan’s “sunny optimism,” despite the energy shocks of the 1970s and warnings about the limits to growth.

After graduating from Harvard in 1982, McKibben joined The New Yorker, spending the next five years living in New York working for the magazine. During these years, McKibben spent time reflecting on the Gospel of Matthew,

realizing the “possibility of a kind of intensity of life once one was free of the insulation from the world provided by money and belongings.”

For him, it was an “early-onset midlife crisis: the strong sense that there was something more and that the path to it lay through less.” He lived frugally sharing an apartment with film critic David Edelstein, putting most of his money in the bank, and limiting his personal belongings.

For a story on the homeless, his editor urged him to live on the street, where he met his wife Sue Halpern, a former Rhodes scholar and writer who was working as a homeless advocate.

McKibben quit *The New Yorker* in 1987 and moved with Halpern to the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York. Working as a freelancer, he spent considerable time hiking, skiing, and watching wildlife. At the suggestion of his wife, McKibben studied the book of Job from the Hebrew Bible, an experience that reinvigorated his faith in scripture. He came away realizing that the Bible had a lot to say on the subjects close to his heart at the time - living with respect for God’s creations.

For McKibben, the story of Job delivers the moral lesson that “man is not at the center of all things.” Job resonated with his experience “living on the edge of the wilderness.” In addition he read a lot by naturalists John Muir and Henry David Thoreau. From this he concluded “...that all nature is not ours to subdue.” And with that he finally found a cause in which to immerse himself, “falling ‘ in love with the natural world, a world more real and engaging than any I had known before.”

Yet nature, McKibben discovered, was changing. He began reading the occasional reference to something called the “greenhouse effect”. “The more I studied what little science was available, the harder I was hit by the realization that the world I had suddenly woken up to was just as suddenly in mortal danger.” For decades scientists had been studying climate change. The summer of 1988 with its record breaking heat, drought, wildfires, crop damage, and an energy grid strained by air conditioning, made climate change the topic in the news and propelled it into public discussion.

Having found his passion, McKibben studied the issue and now really started writing about it. He has not stopped for 25 plus years. His first book was published in 1989 called “*The End of Nature*” describing this emerging science, careful in most cases to underscore uncertainties where they existed, and drawing parallels to acid rain and ozone depletion. He said himself that the science in the book (and in the books that followed) is not the most important

aspect of the book, but what we humans, who have caused this climate change, will do about it. What are the implications for our philosophy, our theology, and our sense of self?

Bill McKibben is a relentless activist. I looked at his travel schedule for August, and my head started to spin. For example, in 2007 he and six college students organized 1400 global warming demonstrations all across the 50 States of America for April 14, 2007 which was the largest day of protest about climate change in the history of the nation. Stepitup is still going.

In 2008 he founded 350.org. I actually attended a meeting for UCC clergy and congregations in Framingham where he spoke about the movement. Let me try to explain what this number 350 means: Our wacky weather (known as climate change) is mostly caused by pollution in the atmosphere, by CO<sup>2</sup> (CarbonDioxide; a concentration of different gases in the atmosphere). The amount of CO<sup>2</sup> in the atmosphere can be measured. Before humans started to burn fossil fuels, we bumped along a comfortable 275 parts per million of CO<sup>2</sup> in the atmosphere. Any lower would make it too cold for us to live here.

When we started to use fossil fuels (coal, oil, and gas), CO<sup>2</sup> levels began to rise. We are now at about 400 parts per million. Scientists agreed that 350 parts per million of CO<sup>2</sup> in the atmosphere is actually the maximum safe level, if we want to maintain the status quo, right now. If you like to read more about this, pick up McKibben's book "Earth."

What do these concentrated gases do? They trap heat in our atmosphere. This heat is melting glaciers – the water source for hundreds of millions of people. Mosquitoes thrive in warmer weather, bringing malaria and dengue fever with them. Food is much harder to grow because of droughts, while other areas are under water because of rising sea levels. These are just a few but devastating effect of too much CO<sup>2</sup> in the atmosphere.

Bill McKibben certainly is a prophetic voice, helping us understand what is going on. But he is not doomsday prophet. McKibben believes we can thrive on Earth, though not if we continue to make a god of economic growth.

His solution lies in the "Small and Local." Instead of hauling food around the world, we should foster family farms. Instead of constant flying and driving, we should keep in touch through the Internet. Instead of building giant centralized power plants, we should develop many local and alternative power sources. Instead of relying on the government for everything, we should strengthen our communities.

His recommendations also fit well with Scripture's respect for creation and concern for the poor, its scorn for riches and praise for contentment, and—underlying everything else—its requirement to love our neighbors as ourselves.

McKibben himself has attended church all his life. At one point he even was the Sunday School superintendant of his little Methodist church.

When Jesus was asked, “Which commandment of the law is the greatest, the most important?” Jesus answered: “One: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind. And two: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two hangs everything we do and say; not just in Jesus time, but today.

Jesus was pretty specific in what he wanted his followers to do: feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome to stranger, visit the prisoner. Jesus did not just mean to take care of the people we know and love (because that is easy and comfortable), but especially those we don’t know - the stranger, the foreigner, the outcast. It is the part of the gospel message that continues to be our greatest challenge. If we are honest, all we want is to find and live our personal faith – knowing that God loves me and will take care of me.

But the truth is that Jesus never meant for us to have a just personal faith. Jesus did not die because he loved God with all his heart, and soul, and mind. He died because his love of God encouraged/caused him to bring the issues – the injustices - of his day into the public arena and those in power did not like it.

What then did Jesus mean by “loving my neighbor as myself” and how does that relate to addressing climate change?

Humankind’s selfish desire to get the most out of life has left its effect on the whole world. The world’s desire for stuff and gadgets fuel economies, and economies are fueled by fossil fuels which not just devastate and destroy landscapes but its gases end up in our atmosphere as CO<sup>2</sup> which causes weather patterns to be unpredictable and devastating. There is not a place that has not been effected by this change – be it our hot weather this summer, flash floods in Vermont or the Midwest, hurricanes in New Jersey, fires in Colorado or California, droughts in Africa, and islands disappearing. They are not flukes of nature. They are the new normal.

What I do and how I live my life affects my neighbors – be it my neighbor Mary Lally next door, or people in the Midwest or Africa. It might be hard to see. It might still be hard to make that connection. They are affected by the bad choices I make, but they are also affected by the good choices that I make. As we renovate this building, putting in new windows, converting to gas heat, and putting solar panels on our roof, we affect our neighbors. At a minimum, we show them that we care.

The essence of following Jesus is a lifestyle—one that reflects his teachings. It needs to reflect that I care and do my part to honor God’ creation, to love God’s creatures like I love myself, nurture the many gifts we have been given. And what would be even better is if we all do that together.

Amen.

Sources: Biographical accounts taken from Nature’s Prophet: Bill McKibben as Journalist, Public Intellectual and Activist by Matthew C. Nisbet, Shorenstein Fellow, Fall 2012 School of Communication and the Center for Social Media, American University

If you like to read more about Bill McKibben, I’ll suggest two these two: “The Christian Paradox” and an article he wrote for Rolling Stone in 2012 “Global Warnings Terrifying Math”. Both are below.

#### Global Warming's Terrifying New Math

Three simple numbers that add up to global catastrophe - and that make clear who the real enemy is

by Bill McKibben  
JULY 19, 2012

If the pictures of those towering wildfires in Colorado haven't convinced you, or the size of your AC bill this summer, here are some hard numbers about climate change: June broke or tied 3,215 high-temperature records across the United States. That followed the warmest May on record for the Northern Hemisphere – the 327th consecutive month in which the temperature of the entire globe exceeded the 20th-century average, the odds of which occurring by simple chance were  $3.7 \times 10^{-99}$ , a number considerably larger than the number of stars in the universe.

Meteorologists reported that this spring was the warmest ever recorded for our nation – in fact, it crushed the old record by so much that it represented the "largest temperature departure from average of any season on record." The same week, Saudi authorities reported that it had rained in Mecca despite a temperature of 109 degrees, the hottest downpour in the planet's history.

Not that our leaders seemed to notice. Last month the world's nations, meeting in Rio for the 20th-anniversary reprise of a massive 1992 environmental summit, accomplished nothing. Unlike George H.W. Bush, who flew in for the first conclave, Barack Obama didn't even attend. It was "a ghost of the glad, confident meeting 20 years ago," the British journalist George Monbiot wrote; no one paid it much attention, footsteps echoing through the halls "once thronged by multitudes." Since I wrote one of the first books for a general audience about global warming way back in 1989, and since I've spent the intervening decades working ineffectively to slow that warming, I can say with some confidence that we're losing the fight, badly and quickly – losing it because, most of all, we remain in denial about the peril that human civilization is in.

When we think about global warming at all, the arguments tend to be ideological, theological and economic. But to grasp the seriousness of our predicament, you just need to do a little math. For the past year, an easy and powerful bit of arithmetical

analysis first published by financial analysts in the U.K. has been making the rounds of environmental conferences and journals, but it hasn't yet broken through to the larger public. This analysis upends most of the conventional political thinking about climate change. And it allows us to understand our precarious – our almost-but-not-quite-finally hopeless – position with three simple numbers.

#### The First Number: 2° Celsius

If the movie had ended in Hollywood fashion, the Copenhagen climate conference in 2009 would have marked the culmination of the global fight to slow a changing climate. The world's nations had gathered in the December gloom of the Danish capital for what a leading climate economist, Sir Nicholas Stern of Britain, called the "most important gathering since the Second World War, given what is at stake." As Danish energy minister Connie Hedegaard, who presided over the conference, declared at the time: "This is our chance. If we miss it, it could take years before we get a new and better one. If ever."

In the event, of course, we missed it. Copenhagen failed spectacularly. Neither China nor the United States, which between them are responsible for 40 percent of global carbon emissions, was prepared to offer dramatic concessions, and so the conference drifted aimlessly for two weeks until world leaders jetted in for the final day. Amid considerable chaos, President Obama took the lead in drafting a face-saving "Copenhagen Accord" that fooled very few. Its purely voluntary agreements committed no one to anything, and even if countries signaled their intentions to cut carbon emissions, there was no enforcement mechanism. "Copenhagen is a crime scene tonight," an angry Greenpeace official declared, "with the guilty men and women fleeing to the airport." Headline writers were equally brutal: COPENHAGEN: THE MUNICH OF OUR TIMES? asked one.

The accord did contain one important number, however. In Paragraph 1, it formally recognized "the scientific view that the increase in global temperature should be below two degrees Celsius." And in the very next paragraph, it declared that "we agree that deep cuts in global emissions are required... so as to hold the increase in global temperature below two degrees Celsius." By insisting on two degrees – about 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit – the accord ratified positions taken earlier in 2009 by the G8, and the so-called Major Economies Forum. It was as conventional as conventional wisdom gets. The number first gained prominence, in fact, at a 1995 climate conference chaired by Angela Merkel, then the German minister of the environment and now the center-right chancellor of the nation.

Some context: So far, we've raised the average temperature of the planet just under 0.8 degrees Celsius, and that has caused far more damage than most scientists expected. (A third of summer sea ice in the Arctic is gone, the oceans are 30 percent more acidic, and since warm air holds more water vapor than cold, the atmosphere over the oceans is a shocking five percent wetter, loading the dice for devastating floods.) Given those impacts, in fact, many scientists have come to think that two degrees is far too lenient a target. "Any number much above one degree involves a gamble," writes Kerry Emanuel of MIT, a leading authority on hurricanes, "and the odds become less and less favorable as the temperature goes up." Thomas Lovejoy, once the World Bank's chief biodiversity adviser, puts it like this: "If we're seeing what we're seeing today at 0.8 degrees Celsius, two degrees is simply too much." NASA scientist James Hansen, the planet's most prominent climatologist, is even blunter: "The target that has been talked about in international negotiations for two degrees of warming is actually a prescription for long-term disaster." At the Copenhagen summit, a spokesman for small island nations warned that many would not survive a two-degree rise: "Some countries will flat-out disappear." When delegates from developing nations were warned that two degrees would represent a "suicide pact" for drought-stricken Africa, many of them started chanting, "One degree, one Africa."

Despite such well-founded misgivings, political realism bested scientific data, and the world settled on the two-degree target – indeed, it's fair to say that it's the only thing about climate change the world has settled on. All told, 167 countries responsible for more than 87 percent of the world's carbon emissions have signed on to the Copenhagen Accord, endorsing the two-degree target. Only a few dozen countries have rejected it, including Kuwait, Nicaragua and Venezuela. Even the United Arab Emirates, which makes most of its money exporting oil and gas, signed on. The official position of planet Earth at the moment

is that we can't raise the temperature more than two degrees Celsius – it's become the bottomest of bottom lines. Two degrees.

### The Second Number: 565 Gigatons

Scientists estimate that humans can pour roughly 565 more gigatons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere by midcentury and still have some reasonable hope of staying below two degrees. ("Reasonable," in this case, means four chances in five, or somewhat worse odds than playing Russian roulette with a six-shooter.)

This idea of a global "carbon budget" emerged about a decade ago, as scientists began to calculate how much oil, coal and gas could still safely be burned. Since we've increased the Earth's temperature by 0.8 degrees so far, we're currently less than halfway to the target. But, in fact, computer models calculate that even if we stopped increasing CO<sub>2</sub> now, the temperature would likely still rise another 0.8 degrees, as previously released carbon continues to overheat the atmosphere. That means we're already three-quarters of the way to the two-degree target.

How good are these numbers? No one is insisting that they're exact, but few dispute that they're generally right. The 565-gigaton figure was derived from one of the most sophisticated computer-simulation models that have been built by climate scientists around the world over the past few decades. And the number is being further confirmed by the latest climate-simulation models currently being finalized in advance of the next report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. "Looking at them as they come in, they hardly differ at all," says Tom Wigley, an Australian climatologist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research. "There's maybe 40 models in the data set now, compared with 20 before. But so far the numbers are pretty much the same. We're just fine-tuning things. I don't think much has changed over the last decade." William Collins, a senior climate scientist at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, agrees. "I think the results of this round of simulations will be quite similar," he says. "We're not getting any free lunch from additional understanding of the climate system."

We're not getting any free lunch from the world's economies, either. With only a single year's lull in 2009 at the height of the financial crisis, we've continued to pour record amounts of carbon into the atmosphere, year after year. In late May, the International Energy Agency published its latest figures – CO<sub>2</sub> emissions last year rose to 31.6 gigatons, up 3.2 percent from the year before. America had a warm winter and converted more coal-fired power plants to natural gas, so its emissions fell slightly; China kept booming, so its carbon output (which recently surpassed the U.S.) rose 9.3 percent; the Japanese shut down their fleet of nukes post-Fukushima, so their emissions edged up 2.4 percent. "There have been efforts to use more renewable energy and improve energy efficiency," said Corinne Le Quéré, who runs England's Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research. "But what this shows is that so far the effects have been marginal." In fact, study after study predicts that carbon emissions will keep growing by roughly three percent a year – and at that rate, we'll blow through our 565-gigaton allowance in 16 years, around the time today's preschoolers will be graduating from high school. "The new data provide further evidence that the door to a two-degree trajectory is about to close," said Fatih Birol, the IEA's chief economist. In fact, he continued, "When I look at this data, the trend is perfectly in line with a temperature increase of about six degrees." That's almost 11 degrees Fahrenheit, which would create a planet straight out of science fiction.

So, new data in hand, everyone at the Rio conference renewed their ritual calls for serious international action to move us back to a two-degree trajectory. The charade will continue in November, when the next Conference of the Parties (COP) of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change convenes in Qatar. This will be COP 18 – COP 1 was held in Berlin in 1995, and since then the process has accomplished essentially nothing. Even scientists, who are notoriously reluctant to speak out, are slowly overcoming their natural preference to simply provide data. "The message has been consistent for close to 30 years now," Collins says with a wry laugh, "and we have the instrumentation and the computer power required to present the evidence in detail. If we choose to continue on our present course of action, it should be done with a full evaluation of the evidence the scientific community has presented." He pauses, suddenly conscious of being on the record. "I should say, a fuller evaluation of the evidence."



So far, though, such calls have had little effect. We're in the same position we've been in for a quarter-century: scientific warning followed by political inaction. Among scientists speaking off the record, disgusted candor is the rule. One senior scientist told me, "You know those new cigarette packs, where governments make them put a picture of someone with a hole in their throats? Gas pumps should have something like that."

### The Third Number: 2,795 Gigatons

This number is the scariest of all – one that, for the first time, meshes the political and scientific dimensions of our dilemma. It was highlighted last summer by the Carbon Tracker Initiative, a team of London financial analysts and environmentalists who published a report in an effort to educate investors about the possible risks that climate change poses to their stock portfolios. The number describes the amount of carbon already contained in the proven coal and oil and gas reserves of the fossil-fuel companies, and the countries (think Venezuela or Kuwait) that act like fossil-fuel companies. In short, it's the fossil fuel we're currently planning to burn. And the key point is that this new number – 2,795 – is higher than 565. Five times higher.

The Carbon Tracker Initiative – led by James Leaton, an environmentalist who served as an adviser at the accounting giant PricewaterhouseCoopers – combed through proprietary databases to figure out how much oil, gas and coal the world's major energy companies hold in reserve. The numbers aren't perfect – they don't fully reflect the recent surge in unconventional energy sources like shale gas, and they don't accurately reflect coal reserves, which are subject to less stringent reporting requirements than oil and gas. But for the biggest companies, the figures are quite exact: If you burned everything in the inventories of Russia's Lukoil and America's ExxonMobil, for instance, which lead the list of oil and gas companies, each would release more than 40 gigatons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

Which is exactly why this new number, 2,795 gigatons, is such a big deal. Think of two degrees Celsius as the legal drinking limit – equivalent to the 0.08 blood-alcohol level below which you might get away with driving home. The 565 gigatons is how many drinks you could have and still stay below that limit – the six beers, say, you might consume in an evening. And the 2,795 gigatons? That's the three 12-packs the fossil-fuel industry has on the table, already opened and ready to pour.

We have five times as much oil and coal and gas on the books as climate scientists think is safe to burn. We'd have to keep 80 percent of those reserves locked away underground to avoid that fate. Before we knew those numbers, our fate had been likely. Now, barring some massive intervention, it seems certain.

Yes, this coal and gas and oil is still technically in the soil. But it's already economically aboveground – it's figured into share prices, companies are borrowing money against it, nations are basing their budgets on the presumed returns from their patrimony. It explains why the big fossil-fuel companies have fought so hard to prevent the regulation of carbon dioxide – those reserves are their primary asset, the holding that gives their companies their value. It's why they've worked so hard these past years to figure out how to unlock the oil in Canada's tar sands, or how to drill miles beneath the sea, or how to frack the Appalachians.

If you told Exxon or Lukoil that, in order to avoid wrecking the climate, they couldn't pump out their reserves, the value of their companies would plummet. John Fullerton, a former managing director at JP Morgan who now runs the Capital Institute, calculates that at today's market value, those 2,795 gigatons of carbon emissions are worth about \$27 trillion. Which is to say, if you paid attention to the scientists and kept 80 percent of it underground, you'd be writing off \$20 trillion in assets. The numbers aren't exact, of course, but that carbon bubble makes the housing bubble look small by comparison. It won't necessarily burst – we might well burn all that carbon, in which case investors will do fine. But if we do, the planet will crater. You can have a healthy fossil-fuel balance sheet, or a relatively healthy planet – but now that we know the numbers, it looks like you can't have both. Do the math: 2,795 is five times 565. That's how the story ends.

So far, as I said at the start, environmental efforts to tackle global warming have failed. The planet's emissions of carbon dioxide continue to soar, especially as developing countries emulate (and supplant) the industries of the West. Even in rich countries, small reductions in emissions offer no sign of the real break with the status quo we'd need to upend the iron logic of these three numbers. Germany is one of the only big countries that has actually tried hard to change its energy mix; on one sunny Saturday in late May, that northern-latitude nation generated nearly half its power from solar panels within its borders. That's a small miracle – and it demonstrates that we have the technology to solve our problems. But we lack the will. So far, Germany's the exception; the rule is ever more carbon.

This record of failure means we know a lot about what strategies don't work. Green groups, for instance, have spent a lot of time trying to change individual lifestyles: the iconic twisty light bulb has been installed by the millions, but so have a new generation of energy-sucking flatscreen TVs. Most of us are fundamentally ambivalent about going green: We like cheap flights to warm places, and we're certainly not going to give them up if everyone else is still taking them. Since all of us are in some way the beneficiaries of cheap fossil fuel, tackling climate change has been like trying to build a movement against yourself – it's as if the gay-rights movement had to be constructed entirely from evangelical preachers, or the abolition movement from slaveholders.

People perceive – correctly – that their individual actions will not make a decisive difference in the atmospheric concentration of CO<sub>2</sub>; by 2010, a poll found that "while recycling is widespread in America and 73 percent of those polled are paying bills online in order to save paper," only four percent had reduced their utility use and only three percent had purchased hybrid cars. Given a hundred years, you could conceivably change lifestyles enough to matter – but time is precisely what we lack.

A more efficient method, of course, would be to work through the political system, and environmentalists have tried that, too, with the same limited success. They've patiently lobbied leaders, trying to convince them of our peril and assuming that politicians would heed the warnings. Sometimes it has seemed to work. Barack Obama, for instance, campaigned more aggressively about climate change than any president before him – the night he won the nomination, he told supporters that his election would mark the moment "the rise of the oceans began to slow and the planet began to heal." And he has achieved one significant change: a steady increase in the fuel efficiency mandated for automobiles. It's the kind of measure, adopted a quarter-century ago, that would have helped enormously. But in light of the numbers I've just described, it's obviously a very small start indeed.

At this point, effective action would require actually keeping most of the carbon the fossil-fuel industry wants to burn safely in the soil, not just changing slightly the speed at which it's burned. And there the president, apparently haunted by the still-echoing cry of "Drill, baby, drill," has gone out of his way to frack and mine. His secretary of interior, for instance, opened up a huge swath of the Powder River Basin in Wyoming for coal extraction: The total basin contains some 67.5 gigatons worth of carbon (or more than 10 percent of the available atmospheric space). He's doing the same thing with Arctic and offshore drilling; in fact, as he explained on the stump in March, "You have my word that we will keep drilling everywhere we can... That's a commitment that I make." The next day, in a yard full of oil pipe in Cushing, Oklahoma, the president promised to work on wind and solar energy but, at the same time, to speed up fossil-fuel development: "Producing more oil and gas here at home has been, and will continue to be, a critical part of an all-of-the-above energy strategy." That is, he's committed to finding even more stock to add to the 2,795-gigaton inventory of unburned carbon.

Sometimes the irony is almost Borat-scale obvious: In early June, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton traveled on a Norwegian research trawler to see firsthand the growing damage from climate change. "Many of the predictions about warming in the Arctic are being surpassed by the actual data," she said, describing the sight as "sobering." But the discussions she traveled to Scandinavia to have with other foreign ministers were mostly about how to make sure Western nations get their share of the estimated \$9 trillion in oil (that's more than 90 billion barrels, or 37 gigatons of carbon) that will become accessible as the Arctic ice melts. Last month, the Obama administration indicated that it would give Shell permission to start drilling in sections of the Arctic.

Almost every government with deposits of hydrocarbons straddles the same divide. Canada, for instance, is a liberal democracy renowned for its internationalism – no wonder, then, that it signed on to the Kyoto treaty, promising to cut its carbon emissions substantially by 2012. But the rising price of oil suddenly made the tar sands of Alberta economically attractive – and since, as NASA climatologist James Hansen pointed out in May, they contain as much as 240 gigatons of carbon (or almost half of the available space if we take the 565 limit seriously), that meant Canada's commitment to Kyoto was nonsense. In December, the Canadian government withdrew from the treaty before it faced fines for failing to meet its commitments.

The same kind of hypocrisy applies across the ideological board: In his speech to the Copenhagen conference, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez quoted Rosa Luxemburg, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and "Christ the Redeemer," insisting that "climate change is undoubtedly the most devastating environmental problem of this century." But the next spring, in the Simon Bolivar Hall of the state-run oil company, he signed an agreement with a consortium of international players to develop the vast Orinoco tar sands as "the most significant engine for a comprehensive development of the entire territory and Venezuelan population." The Orinoco deposits are larger than Alberta's – taken together, they'd fill up the whole available atmospheric space.

So: the paths we have tried to tackle global warming have so far produced only gradual, halting shifts. A rapid, transformative change would require building a movement, and movements require enemies. As John F. Kennedy put it, "The civil rights movement should thank God for Bull Connor. He's helped it as much as Abraham Lincoln." And enemies are what climate change has lacked.

But what all these climate numbers make painfully, usefully clear is that the planet does indeed have an enemy – one far more committed to action than governments or individuals. Given this hard math, we need to view the fossil-fuel industry in a new light. It has become a rogue industry, reckless like no other force on Earth. It is Public Enemy Number One to the survival of our planetary civilization. "Lots of companies do rotten things in the course of their business – pay terrible wages, make people work in sweatshops – and we pressure them to change those practices," says veteran anti-corporate leader Naomi Klein, who is at work on a book about the climate crisis. "But these numbers make clear that with the fossil-fuel industry, wrecking the planet is their business model. It's what they do."

According to the Carbon Tracker report, if Exxon burns its current reserves, it would use up more than seven percent of the available atmospheric space between us and the risk of two degrees. BP is just behind, followed by the Russian firm Gazprom, then Chevron, ConocoPhillips and Shell, each of which would fill between three and four percent. Taken together, just these six firms, of the 200 listed in the Carbon Tracker report, would use up more than a quarter of the remaining two-degree budget. Severstal, the Russian mining giant, leads the list of coal companies, followed by firms like BHP Billiton and Peabody. The numbers are simply staggering – this industry, and this industry alone, holds the power to change the physics and chemistry of our planet, and they're planning to use it.

They're clearly cognizant of global warming – they employ some of the world's best scientists, after all, and they're bidding on all those oil leases made possible by the staggering melt of Arctic ice. And yet they relentlessly search for more hydrocarbons – in early March, Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson told Wall Street analysts that the company plans to spend \$37 billion a year through 2016 (about \$100 million a day) searching for yet more oil and gas.

There's not a more reckless man on the planet than Tillerson. Late last month, on the same day the Colorado fires reached their height, he told a New York audience that global warming is real, but dismissed it as an "engineering problem" that has "engineering solutions." Such as? "Changes to weather patterns that move crop-production areas around – we'll adapt to that." This in a week when Kentucky farmers were reporting that corn kernels were "aborting" in record heat, threatening a spike in global food prices. "The fear factor that people want to throw out there to say, 'We just have to stop this,' I do not accept," Tillerson said. Of course not – if he did accept it, he'd have to keep his reserves in the ground. Which would cost him money. It's not an engineering problem, in other words – it's a greed problem.

You could argue that this is simply in the nature of these companies – that having found a profitable vein, they're compelled to keep mining it, more like efficient automatons than people with free will. But as the Supreme Court has made clear, they are people of a sort. In fact, thanks to the size of its bankroll, the fossil-fuel industry has far more free will than the rest of us. These companies don't simply exist in a world whose hungers they fulfill – they help create the boundaries of that world.

Left to our own devices, citizens might decide to regulate carbon and stop short of the brink; according to a recent poll, nearly two-thirds of Americans would back an international agreement that cut carbon emissions 90 percent by 2050. But we aren't left to our own devices. The Koch brothers, for instance, have a combined wealth of \$50 billion, meaning they trail only Bill Gates on the list of richest Americans. They've made most of their money in hydrocarbons, they know any system to regulate carbon would cut those profits, and they reportedly plan to lavish as much as \$200 million on this year's elections. In 2009, for the first time, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce surpassed both the Republican and Democratic National Committees on political spending; the following year, more than 90 percent of the Chamber's cash went to GOP candidates, many of whom deny the existence of global warming. Not long ago, the Chamber even filed a brief with the EPA urging the agency not to regulate carbon – should the world's scientists turn out to be right and the planet heats up, the Chamber advised, "populations can acclimatize to warmer climates via a range of behavioral, physiological and technological adaptations." As radical goes, demanding that we change our physiology seems right up there.

Environmentalists, understandably, have been loath to make the fossil-fuel industry their enemy, respecting its political power and hoping instead to convince these giants that they should turn away from coal, oil and gas and transform themselves more broadly into "energy companies." Sometimes that strategy appeared to be working – emphasis on appeared. Around the turn of the century, for instance, BP made a brief attempt to restyle itself as "Beyond Petroleum," adapting a logo that looked like the sun and sticking solar panels on some of its gas stations. But its investments in alternative energy were never more than a tiny fraction of its budget for hydrocarbon exploration, and after a few years, many of those were wound down as new CEOs insisted on returning to the company's "core business." In December, BP finally closed its solar division. Shell shut down its solar and wind efforts in 2009. The five biggest oil companies have made more than \$1 trillion in profits since the millennium – there's simply too much money to be made on oil and gas and coal to go chasing after zephyrs and sunbeams.

Much of that profit stems from a single historical accident: Alone among businesses, the fossil-fuel industry is allowed to dump its main waste, carbon dioxide, for free. Nobody else gets that break – if you own a restaurant, you have to pay someone to cart away your trash, since piling it in the street would breed rats. But the fossil-fuel industry is different, and for sound historical reasons: Until a quarter-century ago, almost no one knew that CO<sub>2</sub> was dangerous. But now that we understand that carbon is heating the planet and acidifying the oceans, its price becomes the central issue.

If you put a price on carbon, through a direct tax or other methods, it would enlist markets in the fight against global warming. Once Exxon has to pay for the damage its carbon is doing to the atmosphere, the price of its products would rise. Consumers would get a strong signal to use less fossil fuel – every time they stopped at the pump, they'd be reminded that you don't need a semimilitary vehicle to go to the grocery store. The economic playing field would now be a level one for nonpolluting energy sources. And you could do it all without bankrupting citizens – a so-called "fee-and-dividend" scheme would put a hefty tax on coal and gas and oil, then simply divide up the proceeds, sending everyone in the country a check each month for their share of the added costs of carbon. By switching to cleaner energy sources, most people would actually come out ahead.

There's only one problem: Putting a price on carbon would reduce the profitability of the fossil-fuel industry. After all, the answer to the question "How high should the price of carbon be?" is "High enough to keep those carbon reserves that would take us past two degrees safely in the ground." The higher the price on carbon, the more of those reserves would be worthless. The fight, in the end, is about whether the industry will succeed in its fight to keep its special pollution break alive past the point of climate catastrophe, or whether, in the economists' parlance, we'll make them internalize those externalities.

It's not clear, of course, that the power of the fossil-fuel industry can be broken. The U.K. analysts who wrote the Carbon Tracker report and drew attention to these numbers had a relatively modest goal – they simply wanted to remind investors

that climate change poses a very real risk to the stock prices of energy companies. Say something so big finally happens (a giant hurricane swamps Manhattan, a megadrought wipes out Midwest agriculture) that even the political power of the industry is inadequate to restrain legislators, who manage to regulate carbon. Suddenly those Chevron reserves would be a lot less valuable, and the stock would tank. Given that risk, the Carbon Tracker report warned investors to lessen their exposure, hedge it with some big plays in alternative energy.

"The regular process of economic evolution is that businesses are left with stranded assets all the time," says Nick Robins, who runs HSBC's Climate Change Centre. "Think of film cameras, or typewriters. The question is not whether this will happen. It will. Pension systems have been hit by the dot-com and credit crunch. They'll be hit by this." Still, it hasn't been easy to convince investors, who have shared in the oil industry's record profits. "The reason you get bubbles," sighs Leaton, "is that everyone thinks they're the best analyst – that they'll go to the edge of the cliff and then jump back when everyone else goes over."

So pure self-interest probably won't spark a transformative challenge to fossil fuel. But moral outrage just might – and that's the real meaning of this new math. It could, plausibly, give rise to a real movement.

Once, in recent corporate history, anger forced an industry to make basic changes. That was the campaign in the 1980s demanding divestment from companies doing business in South Africa. It rose first on college campuses and then spread to municipal and state governments; 155 campuses eventually divested, and by the end of the decade, more than 80 cities, 25 states and 19 counties had taken some form of binding economic action against companies connected to the apartheid regime. "The end of apartheid stands as one of the crowning accomplishments of the past century," as Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it, "but we would not have succeeded without the help of international pressure," especially from "the divestment movement of the 1980s."

The fossil-fuel industry is obviously a tougher opponent, and even if you could force the hand of particular companies, you'd still have to figure out a strategy for dealing with all the sovereign nations that, in effect, act as fossil-fuel companies. But the link for college students is even more obvious in this case. If their college's endowment portfolio has fossil-fuel stock, then their educations are being subsidized by investments that guarantee they won't have much of a planet on which to make use of their degree. (The same logic applies to the world's largest investors, pension funds, which are also theoretically interested in the future – that's when their members will "enjoy their retirement.") "Given the severity of the climate crisis, a comparable demand that our institutions dump stock from companies that are destroying the planet would not only be appropriate but effective," says Bob Massie, a former anti-apartheid activist who helped found the Investor Network on Climate Risk. "The message is simple: We have had enough. We must sever the ties with those who profit from climate change – now."

Movements rarely have predictable outcomes. But any campaign that weakens the fossil-fuel industry's political standing clearly increases the chances of retiring its special breaks. Consider President Obama's signal achievement in the climate fight, the large increase he won in mileage requirements for cars. Scientists, environmentalists and engineers had advocated such policies for decades, but until Detroit came under severe financial pressure, it was politically powerful enough to fend them off. If people come to understand the cold, mathematical truth – that the fossil-fuel industry is systematically undermining the planet's physical systems – it might weaken it enough to matter politically. Exxon and their ilk might drop their opposition to a fee-and-dividend solution; they might even decide to become true energy companies, this time for real.

Even if such a campaign is possible, however, we may have waited too long to start it. To make a real difference – to keep us under a temperature increase of two degrees – you'd need to change carbon pricing in Washington, and then use that victory to leverage similar shifts around the world. At this point, what happens in the U.S. is most important for how it will influence China and India, where emissions are growing fastest. (In early June, researchers concluded that China has probably under-reported its emissions by up to 20 percent.) The three numbers I've described are daunting – they may define an essentially impossible future. But at least they provide intellectual clarity about the greatest challenge humans have ever faced. We know how much we can burn, and we know who's planning to burn more. Climate change operates on a geological scale and time

frame, but it's not an impersonal force of nature; the more carefully you do the math, the more thoroughly you realize that this is, at bottom, a moral issue; we have met the enemy and they is Shell.

Meanwhile the tide of numbers continues. The week after the Rio conference limped to its conclusion, Arctic sea ice hit the lowest level ever recorded for that date. Last month, on a single weekend, Tropical Storm Debby dumped more than 20 inches of rain on Florida – the earliest the season's fourth-named cyclone has ever arrived. At the same time, the largest fire in New Mexico history burned on, and the most destructive fire in Colorado's annals claimed 346 homes in Colorado Springs – breaking a record set the week before in Fort Collins. This month, scientists issued a new study concluding that global warming has dramatically increased the likelihood of severe heat and drought – days after a heat wave across the Plains and Midwest broke records that had stood since the Dust Bowl, threatening this year's harvest. You want a big number? In the course of this month, a quadrillion kernels of corn need to pollinate across the grain belt, something they can't do if temperatures remain off the charts. Just like us, our crops are adapted to the Holocene, the 11,000-year period of climatic stability we're now leaving... in the dust.

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#### QUOTES

"Right now, plenty of people feel the peacefulness of their lives degraded by sprawl, or worry about the way consumerism has eroded the quality of our communities. For them, the idea of enough is not completely alien or distasteful, though it remains difficult to embrace. We've been told that it's impossible – that some force like evolution drives us on to More and Faster and Bigger. 'You can't stop progress.' But that's not true. We could choose to mature. That could be the new trick we share with each other, a trick as revolutionary as fire. Or even the computer.

...They'll lead us bit by bit toward the revolutionary idea that we've grown about as powerful as it's wise to grow; that the rush of technological innovation that's marked the last five hundred years can finally slow, and spread out to water the whole delta of human possibility. But those decisions will only emerge if people understand the time for what it is: the moment when we stand precariously on the sharp ridge between the human past and the posthuman future, the moment when meaning might evaporate in a tangle of genes or chips.

...We believe that we live in the 'age of information,' that there has been an information 'explosion,' an information 'revolution.' While in a certain narrow sense that is the case, in many more important ways just the opposite is true. We also live at a moment of deep ignorance, when vital knowledge that humans have always possessed about who we are and where we live seems beyond our reach. An unenlightenment. An age of missing information.

...The greenhouse effect is a more apt name than those who coined it imagined. The carbon dioxide and trace gases act like the panes of glass on a greenhouse--the analogy is accurate. But it's more than that. We have built a greenhouse, a human creation where once there bloomed a sweet and wild garden.

...Our comforting sense of the permanence of our natural world, our confidence that it will change gradually and imperceptibly if at all, is the result of a subtly warped perspective. Changes that can affect us can happen in our lifetime in our world--not just changes like wars but bigger and more sweeping events. I believe that without recognizing it we have already stepped over the threshold of such a change; that we are at the end of nature. By the end of nature I do not mean the end of the world. The rain

will still fall and the sun shine, though differently than before. When I say 'nature,' I mean a certain set of human ideas about the world and our place in it.

...Human beings--any one of us, and our species as a whole--are not all-important, not at the center of the world. That is the one essential piece of information, the one great secret, offered by any encounter with the woods or the mountains or the ocean or any wilderness or chunk of nature or patch of night sky.

The Achilles' heel of consumer society is that it hasn't made us happy as it promised it would. Although Americans have tripled their prosperity since the mid 1950s, the percentage who say they're "very satisfied" with their lives has declined. In fact, only about a quarter of Americans now say that they're "very satisfied." When you think about it, this is pretty sad considering the unbelievable amount of resources and energy that we have consumed—and waste we have produced—in the last fifty years. We've pursued the American Dream to no real apparent end.

Community is as endangered by surplus as it is by deficit. If there is too much money floating around it enables people to have no need of each other.

**The Christian Paradox- How a faithful nation gets Jesus wrong  
by Bill McKibben**

What it means to be Christian in America. An excerpt. Originally from August 2005 Harpers.

Only 40 percent of Americans can name more than four of the Ten Commandments, and a scant half can cite any of the four authors of the Gospels. Twelve percent believe Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. This failure to recall the specifics of our Christian heritage may be further evidence of our nation's educational decline, but it probably doesn't matter all that much in spiritual or political terms. Here is a statistic that does matter: Three quarters of Americans believe the Bible teaches that "God helps those who help themselves." That is, three out of four Americans believe that this uber-American idea, a notion at the core of our current individualist politics and culture, which was in fact uttered by Ben Franklin, actually appears in Holy Scripture. The thing is, not only is Franklin's wisdom not biblical; it's counter-biblical. Few ideas could be further from the gospel message, with its radical summons to love of neighbor. On this essential matter, most Americans - most American Christians - are simply wrong, as if 75 percent of American scientists believed that Newton proved gravity causes apples to fly up.

Asking Christians what Christ taught isn't a trick. When we say we are a Christian nation - and, overwhelmingly, we do - it means something. People who go to church absorb lessons there and make real decisions based on those lessons; increasingly, these lessons inform their politics. (One poll found that 11 percent of U.S. churchgoers were urged by their clergy to vote in a particular way in the 2004 election, up from 6 percent in 2000.) When George Bush says that Jesus Christ is his favorite philosopher, he may or may not be sincere, but he is reflecting the sincere beliefs of the vast majority of Americans. And therein is the paradox. America is simultaneously the most professedly Christian of the developed nations and the least Christian in its behavior. That paradox - more important, perhaps, than the much touted ability of French women to stay thin on a diet of chocolate and cheese - illuminates the hollow at the core of our boastful, careening culture, ours is among the most spiritually homogenous rich nations on earth. Depending on which poll you look at and how the question is asked, somewhere around 85 percent of us call ourselves Christian. Israel, by way of comparison, is 77 percent Jewish. It is true that a smaller number of Americans - about 75 percent - claim they actually pray to God on a daily basis, and only 33 percent say they manage to get to church every week. Still, even if that 85 percent overstates actual practice, it clearly represents aspiration. In fact, there is nothing else that unites more than four fifths of America. Every other statistic one can cite about American behavior is essentially also a measure of the behavior of professed Christians. That's what America is: a place saturated in Christian identity.

But is it Christian? This is not a matter of angels dancing on the heads of pins. Christ was pretty specific about what he had in mind for his followers. What if we chose some simple criterion - say, giving aid to the poorest people - as a reasonable proxy for Christian behavior? After all, in the days before his crucifixion, when Jesus summed up his message for his disciples, he said the way you could tell the righteous from the damned was by whether they'd fed the hungry, slaked the thirsty, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, and visited the prisoner. What would we find then?

In 2004, as a share of our economy, we ranked second to last, after Italy, among developed countries in government foreign aid. Per capita we each provide fifteen cents a day in official development assistance to poor countries. And it's not because we were giving to private charities for relief work instead. Such funding increases our average daily donation by just six pennies, to twenty-one cents. It's also not because Americans were too busy taking care of their own; nearly 18 percent of American children lived in poverty (compared with, say, 8 percent in Sweden). In fact, by pretty much any measure of caring for the least among us you want to propose - childhood nutrition, infant mortality, access to preschool - we come in nearly last among the rich nations, and often by a wide margin. The point is not just that (as everyone already knows) the American nation trails badly in all these categories; it's that the overwhelmingly Christian American nation trails badly in all these categories, categories to which Jesus paid particular attention. And it's not as if the numbers are getting better: the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported last year that the number of households that were "food insecure with hunger" had climbed more than 26 percent between 1999 and 2003.

This Christian nation also tends to make personal, as opposed to political, choices that the Bible would seem to frown upon. Despite the Sixth Commandment, we are, of course, the most violent rich nation on earth, with a murder rate four or five times that of our European peers. We have prison populations greater by a factor of six or seven than other rich nations (which at least should give us plenty of opportunity for visiting the prisoners). Having been told to turn the other cheek, we're the only Western democracy left that executes its citizens, mostly in those states where Christianity is theoretically strongest. Despite Jesus' strong declarations against divorce, our marriages break up at a rate - just over half - that compares poorly with the European Union's average of about four in ten. That average may be held down by the fact that Europeans marry less frequently, and by countries, like Italy, where divorce is difficult; still, compare our success with, say, that of the godless Dutch, whose divorce rate is just over 37 percent. Teenage pregnancy? We're at the top of the charts. Personal self-discipline - like, say, keeping your weight under control? Buying on credit? Running government deficits? Do you need to ask? Are Americans hypocrites? Of course they are. But most people (me, for instance) are hypocrites. The more troubling explanation for this disconnect between belief and action, I think, is that most Americans - which means most believers - have replaced the Christianity of the Bible, with its call for deep sharing and personal sacrifice, with a competing creed.

In fact, there may be several competing creeds. For many Christians, deciphering a few passages of the Bible to figure out the schedule for the End Times has become a central task. You can log on to [RaptureReady.com](http://RaptureReady.com) for a taste of how some of these believers view the world - at this writing the Rapture Index had declined three points to 152 because, despite an increase in the number of U.S. pagans, "Wal-Mart is falling behind in its plan to bar code all products with radio tags." Other End-Timers are more interested in forcing the issue - they're convinced that the way to coax the Lord back to earth is to "Christianize" our nation and then the world. Consider House Majority Leader Tom DeLay. At church one day he listened as the pastor, urging his flock to support the administration, declared that "the war between America and Iraq is the gateway to the Apocalypse." DeLay rose to speak, not only to the congregation but to 225 Christian TV and radio stations. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "what has been spoken here tonight is the truth of God."

The apocalyptic may not be wrong. One could make a perfectly serious argument that the policies of Tom DeLay are in fact hastening the End Times. But there's nothing particularly Christian about this hastening. The creed of Tom DeLay - of Tim LaHaye and his *Left Behind* books, of Pat Robertson's "The Antichrist is probably a Jew alive in Israel today" - ripened out of the impossibly poetic imagery of the Book of Revelation. Imagine trying to build a theory of the Constitution by obsessively reading and rereading the Twenty-fifth Amendment, and you'll get an idea of what an odd approach this is. You might be able to spin elaborate fantasies about presidential succession, but you'd have a hard time working backwards to "We the People." This is the contemporary version of Archbishop Ussher's seventeenth-century calculation that the world had been created on October



23, 4004 B.C., and that the ark touched down on Mount Ararat on May 5, 2348 B.C., a Wednesday. Interesting, but a distant distraction from the gospel message.

The apocalypics, however, are the lesser problem. It is another competing (though sometimes overlapping) creed, this one straight from the sprawling megachurches of the new exurbs, that frightens me most. Its deviation is less obvious precisely because it looks so much like the rest of the culture. In fact, most of what gets preached in these palaces isn't loony at all. It is disturbingly conventional. The pastors focus relentlessly on you and your individual needs. Their goal is to service consumers - not communities but individuals: "seekers" is the term of art, people who feel the need for some spirituality in their (or their children's) lives but who aren't tightly bound to any particular denomination or school of thought. The result is often a kind of soft-focus, comfortable, suburban faith.

A New York Times reporter visiting one booming megachurch outside Phoenix recently found the typical scene: a drive-through latte stand, Krispy Kreme doughnuts at every service, and sermons about "how to discipline your children, how to reach your professional goals, how to invest your money, how to reduce your debt." On Sundays children played with church-distributed Xboxes, and many congregants had signed up for a twice-weekly aerobics class called Firm Believers. A list of bestsellers compiled monthly by the Christian Booksellers Association illuminates the creed. It includes texts like *Your Best Life Now* by Joel Osteen - pastor of a church so mega it recently leased a 16,000-seat sports arena in Houston for its services - which even the normally tolerant Publishers Weekly dismissed as "a treatise on how to get God to serve the demands of self-centered individuals." Nearly as high is Beth Moore, with her *Believing God* - "Beth asks the tough questions concerning the fruit of our Christian lives," such as "are we living as fully as we can?" Other titles include *Humor for a Woman's Heart*, a collection of "humorous writings" designed to "lift a life above the stresses and strains of the day"; *The Five Love Languages*, in which Dr. Gary Chapman helps you figure out if you're speaking in the same emotional dialect as your significant other; and Karol Ladd's *The Power of a Positive Woman*. Ladd is the co-founder of USA Sonshine Girls - the "Son" in Sonshine, of course, is the son of God - and she is unremittingly upbeat in presenting her five-part plan for creating a life with "more calm, less stress."

Not that any of this is so bad in itself. We do have stressful lives, humor does help, and you should pay attention to your own needs. Comfortable suburbanites watch their parents die, their kids implode. Clearly I need help with being positive. And I have no doubt that such texts have turned people into better parents, better spouses, better bosses. It's just that these authors, in presenting their perfectly sensible advice, somehow manage to ignore Jesus' radical and demanding focus on others. It may, in fact, be true that "God helps those who help themselves," both financially and emotionally. (Certainly fortune does.) But if so it's still a subsidiary, secondary truth, more Franklinitiy than Christianity. You could eliminate the scriptural references in most of these bestsellers and they would still make or not make the same amount of sense. *Chicken Soup for the Zoroastrian Soul*. It is a perfect mirror of the secular bestseller lists, indeed of the secular culture, with its American fixation on self improvement, on self-esteem. On self. These similarities make it difficult (although not impossible) for the televangelists to posit themselves as embattled figures in a "culture war" - they offer too uncanny a reflection of the dominant culture, a culture of unrelenting self-obsession.

Who am I to criticize someone else's religion? After all, if there is anything Americans agree on, it's that we should tolerate everyone else's religious expression. As a Newsweek writer put it some years ago at the end of his cover story on apocalyptic visions and the Book of Revelation, "Who's to say that John's mythic battle between Christ and Antichrist is not a valid insight into what the history of humankind is all about?" (Not Newsweek, that's for sure; their religious covers are guaranteed big sellers.) To that I can only answer that I'm a... Christian.

Not a professional one; I'm an environmental writer mostly. I've never progressed further in the church hierarchy than Sunday school teacher at my backwoods Methodist church. But I've spent most of my Sunday mornings in a pew. I grew up in church youth groups and stayed active most of my adult life - started homeless shelters in church basements, served soup at the church food pantry, climbed to the top of the rickety ladder to put the star on the church Christmas tree. My work has been, at times, influenced by all that - I've written extensively about the Book of Job, which is to me the first great piece of nature writing in the Western tradition, and about the overlaps between Christianity and environmentalism. In fact, I imagine I'm one of a fairly small number of writers who have had cover stories in both the *Christian Century*, the magazine of liberal mainline

Protestantism, and Christianity Today, which Billy Graham founded, not to mention articles in Sojourners, the magazine of the progressive evangelical community co-founded by Jim Wallis.

Indeed, it was my work with religious environmentalists that first got me thinking along the lines of this essay. We were trying to get politicians to understand why the Bible actually mandated protecting the world around us (Noah: the first Green), work that I think is true and vital. But one day it occurred to me that the parts of the world where people actually had cut dramatically back on their carbon emissions, actually did live voluntarily in smaller homes and take public transit, were the same countries where people were giving aid to the poor and making sure everyone had health care - countries like Norway and Sweden, where religion was relatively unimportant. How could that be? For Christians there should be something at least a little scary in the notion that, absent the magical answers of religion, people might just get around to solving their problems and strengthening their communities in more straightforward ways.

But for me, in/any event, the European success is less interesting than the American failure. Because we're not going to be like them. Maybe we'd be better off if we abandoned religion for secular rationality, but we're not going to; for the foreseeable future this will be a "Christian" nation.

The question is, what kind of Christian nation?

The tendencies I've been describing - toward an apocalyptic End Times faith, toward a comfort-the-comfortable, personal-empowerment faith - veil the actual, and remarkable, message of the Gospels. When one of the Pharisees asked Jesus what the core of the law was, Jesus replied:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Love your neighbor as yourself: although its rhetorical power has been dimmed by repetition, that is a radical notion, perhaps the most radical notion possible. Especially since Jesus, in all his teachings, made it very clear who the neighbor you were supposed to love was: the poor person, the sick person, the naked person, the hungry person. The last shall be made first; turn the other cheek; a rich person aiming for heaven is like a camel trying to walk through the eye of a needle. On and on and on - a call for nothing less than a radical, voluntary, and effective reordering of power relationships, based on the principle of love.

I confess, even as I write these words, to a feeling close to embarrassment. Because in public we tend not to talk about such things - my theory of what Jesus mostly meant seems like it should be left in church, or confined to some religious publication. But remember the overwhelming connection between America and Christianity; what Jesus meant is the most deeply potent political, cultural, social question. To ignore it, or leave it to the bullies and the salesmen of the televangelist sects, means to walk away from a central battle over American identity. At the moment, the idea of Jesus has been hijacked by people with a series of causes that do not reflect his teachings. The Bible is a long book, and even the Gospels have plenty in them, some of it seemingly contradictory and hard to puzzle out. But love your neighbor as yourself - not do unto others as you would have them do unto you, but love your neighbor as yourself - will suffice as a gloss. There is no disputing the centrality of this message, nor is there any disputing how easy it is to ignore that message. Because it is so counterintuitive, Christians have had to keep repeating it to themselves right from the start. Consider Paul, for instance, instructing the church at Galatea: "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment," he wrote: "'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

American churches, by and large, have done a pretty good job of loving the neighbor in the next pew. A pastor can spend all Sunday talking about the Rapture Index, but if his congregation is thriving you can be assured he's spending the other six days visiting people in the hospital, counseling couples, and sitting up with grieving widows. All this human connection is important. But if the theology makes it harder to love the neighbor a little farther away - particularly the poor and the weak - then it's a problem. And the dominant theologies of the moment do just that. They undercut Jesus, muffle his hard words, deaden his call, and in the end silence him. In fact, the soft-focus consumer gospel of the suburban megachurches is a perfect match for

emergent conservative economic notions about personal responsibility instead of collective action. Privatize Social Security? Keep health care for people who can afford it? File those under "God helps those who help themselves."

Take Alabama as an example. In 2002, Bob Riley was elected governor of the state, where 90 percent of residents identify themselves as Christians. Riley could safely be called a conservative - right-wing majordomo Grover Norquist gave him a Friend of the Taxpayer Award every year he was in Congress, where he'd never voted for a tax increase. But when he took over Alabama, he found himself administering a tax code that dated to 1901. The richest Alabamians paid 3 percent of their income in taxes, and the poorest paid up to 12 percent; income taxes kicked in if a family of four made \$4,600 (even in Mississippi the threshold was \$19,000), while out-of-state timber companies paid \$1.25 an acre in property taxes. Alabama was forty-eighth in total state and local taxes, and the largest proportion of that income came from sales tax - a super-regressive tax that in some counties reached into double digits. So Riley proposed a tax hike, partly to dig the state out of a fiscal crisis and partly to put more money into the state's school system, routinely ranked near the worst in the nation. He argued that it was Christian duty to look after the poor more carefully.

Had the new law passed, the owner of a \$250,000 home in Montgomery would have paid \$1,432 in property taxes - we're not talking Sweden here. But it didn't pass. It was crushed by a factor of two to one. Sixty-eight percent of the state voted against it - meaning, of course, something like 68 percent of the Christians who voted. The opposition was led, in fact, not just by the state's wealthiest interests but also by the Christian Coalition of Alabama. "You'll find most Alabamians have got a charitable heart," said John Giles, the group's president. "They just don't want it coming out of their pockets." On its website, the group argued that taxing the rich at a higher rate than the poor "results in punishing success" and that "when an individual works for their income, that money belongs to the individual." You might as well just cite chapter and verse from Poor Richard's Almanack. And whatever the ideology, the results are clear. "I'm tired of Alabama being first in things that are bad," said Governor Riley, "and last in things that are good."

A rich man came to Jesus one day and asked what he should do to get into heaven. Jesus did not say he should invest, spend, and let the benefits trickle down; he said sell what you have, give the money to the poor, and follow me. Few plainer words have been spoken. And yet, for some reason, the Christian Coalition of America - founded in 1989 in order to "preserve, protect and defend the Judeo-Christian values that made this the greatest country in history" - proclaimed last year that its top legislative priority would be "making permanent President Bush's 2001 federal tax cuts."

Similarly, a furor erupted last spring when it emerged that a Colorado jury had consulted the Bible before sentencing a killer to death. Experts debated whether the (Christian) jurors should have used an outside authority in their deliberations, and of course the Christian right saw it as one more sign of a secular society devaluing religion. But a more interesting question would have been why the jurors fixated on Leviticus 24, with its call for an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. They had somehow missed Jesus' explicit refutation in the New Testament: "You have heard that it was said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also."

And on and on. The power of the Christian right rests largely in the fact that they boldly claim religious authority, and by their very boldness convince the rest of us that they must know what they're talking about. They're like the guy who gives you directions with such loud confidence that you drive on even though the road appears to be turning into a faint, rutted track. But their theology is appealing for another reason too: it coincides with what we want to believe. How nice it would be if Jesus had declared that our income was ours to keep, instead of insisting that we had to share. How satisfying it would be if we were supposed to hate our enemies. Religious conservatives will always have a comparatively easy sell.

But straight is the path and narrow is the way. The gospel is too radical for any culture larger than the Amish to ever come close to realizing; in demanding a departure from selfishness it conflicts with all our current desires. Even the first time around, judging by the reaction, the Gospels were pretty unwelcome news to an awful lot of people. There is not going to be a modern-day return to the church of the early believers, holding all things in common - that's not what I'm talking about. Taking seriously the actual message of Jesus, though, should serve at least to moderate the greed and violence that mark this culture.

It's hard to imagine a con much more audacious than making Christ the front man for a program of tax cuts for the rich or war in Iraq. If some modest part of the 85 percent of us who are Christians woke up to that fact, then the world might change.

It is possible, I think. Yes, the mainline Protestant churches that supported civil rights and opposed the war in Vietnam are mostly locked in a dreary decline as their congregations dwindle and their elders argue endlessly about gay clergy and same-sex unions. And the Catholic Church, for most of its American history a sturdy exponent of a "love your neighbor" theology, has been weakened, too, its hierarchy increasingly motivated by a single-issue focus on abortion. Plenty of vital congregations are doing great good works - they're the ones that have nurtured me - but they aren't where the challenge will arise; they've grown shy about talking about Jesus, more comfortable with the language of sociology and politics. More and more it's Bible-quoting Christians, like Wallis's Sojourners movement and that Baptist seminary graduate Bill Moyers, who are carrying the fight.

The best-selling of all Christian books in recent years, Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life*, illustrates the possibilities. It has all the hallmarks of self-absorption (in one five-page chapter, I counted sixty-five uses of the word "you"), but it also makes a powerful case that we're made for mission. What that mission is never becomes clear, but the thirst for it is real. And there's no great need for Warren to state that purpose anyhow. For Christians, the plainspoken message of the Gospels is clear enough. If you have any doubts, read the Sermon on the Mount.

Admittedly, this is hope against hope; more likely the money changers and power brokers will remain ascendant in our "spiritual" life. Since the days of Constantine, emperors and rich men have sought to co-opt the teachings of Jesus. As in so many areas of our increasingly market-tested lives, the co-opters - the TV men, the politicians, the Christian "interest groups" - have found a way to make each of us complicit in that travesty, too. They have invited us to subvert the church of Jesus even as we celebrate it. With their help we have made golden calves of ourselves - become a nation of terrified, self-obsessed idols. It works, and it may well keep working for a long time to come. When Americans hunger for selfless love and are fed only love of self, they will remain hungry, and too often hungry people just come back for more of the same.

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#### About the Author

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