CHAPTER THREE

Blessing the Facts

In early 2008, I traveled south to Orlando, Florida, or what felt like the furthest place in the world from the Arctic, MIT, and the Northeast corridor of the United States, where I had done the majority of my ethnographic research to date. Known worldwide for its many tourist attractions and theme parks, Orlando is also home to Northland Church. Northland is a megachurch that claims twelve thousand members worldwide who either attend services in Longwood, a suburb of Orlando, or log on via the Internet. Traversing a network of freeways and major multilane routes, I fumbled my way to Northland’s sprawling campus in order to attend the 2008 Creation Care conference. Set in a district where extra-large parking lots are not out of the ordinary, Northland was originally the site of a skating rink and sits across the street from a dog kennel and race track. The church’s setting is not at all what one might expect in times past of a stalwart
church presence in the community. In other words, a traditional white-
steepled fixture on a tree-lined residential street it was not. Instead, Northland is part of the sprawl of contemporary suburban and exurban landscapes.

The parking lots were mostly empty on the day of the conference, and we didn’t meet in the sanctuary that holds over 3,000 people on Sunday mornings. Instead, we met in a side building more appropriate for the approximately 100–150 people who attended the daylong conference. When I got to the door of the building, there was a small lineup to get in. As in many small churches on Sunday morning, Northland’s senior pastor, Joel Hunter, was greeting each person individually as they came in the door for the conference. Waiting in line, I listened as Hunter acknowledged the heavy-set, white-haired man in front of me and his two companions. When Hunter heard the man’s name, he was elated and repeated the man’s name loudly so I could hear it. It was a name I recognized as well. It turned out the man was a pastor and a prolific author whose many books Hunter had read and enjoyed.

When I greeted Hunter next, I identified myself as a researcher from MIT interested in how climate change was being communicated for Americans. He was elated and said, “We need that!” I was surprised by the openness, but as I was to discover, this characteristic went hand in hand with the ecumenical order of the day. Hunter later hosted a panel that sounded like the beginning of a bad joke with a priest, a rabbi, an imam, and a pastor. The panel, however surprising, was devoted to understanding how it is that other religions made sense of environmental concerns. In this panel and throughout the day, there was a continual acknowledgment of both the renegade nature of such a meeting and the need to translate climate change so that evangelicals recognized it as “their” issue and one that required action.

At lunch, I found myself a seat at the same table as the prominent evangelical author/pastor I had followed in the door. I was intrigued by his presence there, particularly because he was an attendee, not a speaker, despite his accomplishments. Lunch was informal, intended to help the relatively small number of attendees network with one another. We were surrounded by hastily assembled booths from Christian publishers with a surprising number of new books on Creation Care–related topics and Christian-affiliated conservation groups like A Rocha. Our lunch table of about ten was a motley crew of students, Christian lay workers, and this pastor. I struck up a conversation with the young woman beside me and
discovered that she was the pastor’s daughter and had just finished her undergraduate degree.

I gave her a more in-depth introduction than I had given Hunter in our quick greeting. I told her I was conducting research on the diverse ways climate change is being communicated to Americans and that Creation Care was one group whose efforts I was looking at. She was enthusiastic in her response. She had just finished working with and writing a report for a secular environmental group to try and help them understand how to reach out to evangelicals. I was surprised that this kind of initiative was under way, but she said that environmental groups were starting to realize that many of their members were believers of some kind.

Her personal story was equally compelling and surprising. She told me that she didn’t grow up in a home that was concerned about the environment. While pursuing her undergraduate degree, she had spent a year abroad and had come back converted to concern about the environment. She didn’t specify what it was that caused her conversion, but she did note that her newfound priority was a sore point with her father.

It was at this point that her father joined our conversation. It turned out that she was his eldest of several children, and he was here partly out of concern that had begun with her turn to environmental issues. He nodded when she said it was a difficult thing for them to discuss for quite a while, but clearly, owing to his presence at this conference, they had found some common ground. So I asked him about how Christians were talking and thinking about climate change and becoming convinced of the need to act. After a thoughtful pause, he said that Christians were “skeptical” of science—going back a hundred years, they viewed science as “suspect.” He said that science can’t be the reason to act. The argument and appeal for evangelicals has to be on “moral” grounds. It has to be about “stewardship.”

This statement was reinforced in the conference speeches, a growing number of books on Creation Care, and interviews I’ve since conducted. Yet it was stunning to me at the time both for its clarity and for the questions it posed for informing Americans about climate change. For if climate change is not a matter of the public understanding of science, then how is it being communicated by, to, and for this group? What kind of an issue is it for those who are not drawn in by scientific evidence? What kind of language is left when science is not the primary tool for presenting the issue and its implications? These are variations on the questions I have posed with each group I’ve researched for this book, but they are perhaps

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more poignant here because of the flat rejection of science as the sole basis for evidence upon which to become persuaded of the fact of climate change and the duty to act.

Creation Care, an emergent and multivocal social movement, was begun specifically to address this by taking climate change out of the realm of science and environmental activism and situating it instead as a moral issue understood through evangelical teachings about the Bible. It’s as a direct result of that process that individual and collective responsibilities to care for the environment become apparent. Christian scholar and novelist C. S. Lewis perhaps said it most eloquently in his 1945 speech “Is Theology Poetry?” In the speech read to the Oxford Socratic Club, he wrestled with “scientific cosmology” as a view of the world based on rational observations, and he explained why he opted for the Christian theology—not because scientific methods can’t tell a lot about the world but because they limit how and how much one sees the world. He ended the speech this way: “Christian theology can fit in science, art, morality, and the sub-Christian religions. The scientific point of view cannot fit in any of these things, not even science itself. I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else.”

Lewis still holds an enormous amount of influence in evangelical circles, particularly because of the ways in which he sought to make sense of Christian morals, ethics, and teachings. And, in this speech, he manages to draft a contrast that still stands for many—where science, despite its truths, is found inadequate and ideological even as it claims an immanent terrain of “Reason.” So how exactly does a scientific issue become a Christian one, with moral weight such that actions are required as a result of the science as understood through a Christian framework? What counts as evidence?

The tendency in academic and scientific circles has been to consider such frameworks for interpretation as “ideology,” and in doing so there is an inherent dismissal of the evangelical commitment to truth-seeking and, I would argue, a missed opportunity for symmetrical analysis of how evidence comes to matter. Here I want to move evangelical responses to climate change onto an epistemological terrain. Christian theology presents a way of knowing and apprehending the world, as well as a set of norms for how individuals should act in the world. In this sense, there are some similarities (and key differences) to the ways in which it acts as a contrasting knowledge system to scientific knowledge much like an
indigenous knowledge system, and the moral prescriptions or norms that flow from how evangelicals see their role in society much like journalists. In both cases, expertise and interpretive practices are distinct and valued. This book as a whole looks to locate these similarities with regard to climate change and to recognize where epistemological differences matter and why—such that the emergent aspects of climate change’s forms of life become evident. Resistance to climate change and recognizing where it presents a challenge to norms and epistemologies set up a very different set of problematics around public engagement, who gets to speak for and about the issue (expertise), how credibility is established, and what those articulations sound like. Climate change sounds different coming from the pulpit on Sunday morning than it does elsewhere. In these sites, there is a complicated interplay between vernaculars within which climate change is struggling to gain a foothold.

This chapter dives into these questions by tracing threads of expertise, history, discourse, and vernacular. It draws in part on Susan Harding’s seminal work, *The Book of Jerry Falwell* (2000), where Harding immerses herself in evangelical discourse—making evangelical language “her field site”—and formulates the notion of the group’s vernacular: “to show how Bible-based language persuades and produces effects” (xii). Discourse and vernacular expression, as Harding points out, are an essential aspect of what it means to be evangelical in America—pastors are public figures “who expect that their words will be studied and discussed.” This research, however, is not expressly focused on the way vernacular circulates within evangelical communities, but rather on how vernaculars act as a bridge to/from evangelical communities and beliefs: between science and evangelical thought, between evangelical activists and media and policy arenas. Such bridging and movement through and between vernaculars is a process I am calling “translation,” and it enrolls an assemblage of institutions, materiality, and modes of speech in order to form articulations of climate change that resonate with evangelicals (Fischer 2003; Foucault 1995, 2003).

One of the primary arguments put forward by Creation Care leaders I interviewed is that who is speaking matters as much as what they say. Christian leaders (and a few select Christians who are also leading scientists) must “bless the facts” in order for them to have traction and resonance within Christian communities. The notion of “blessing facts” neatly encapsulates the ways in which climate change is being cast as simultaneously intellectual, scientific, and moral, and it speaks to the weight given
to vernacular within evangelical communities. It also, however, glosses over or even dodges the traditional debates over evolution that have pitted science against evangelical beliefs while directly confronting those who have chosen to side with climate skeptics. Creation Care translates climate change primarily into a biblically mandated concern for the poor—for how scientific predictions will exacerbate the afflications of those less fortunate worldwide, as well as harkening back to older conceptions of biblical stewardship or “tending the garden,” referencing the idea of the natural world’s beginning as the biblical Garden of Eden. Climate change thus provides an opportunity to reinforce norms about how Christians should respond to issues of inequality and poverty while eliding any critique of industrial capitalism, race, and class issues in America or recent globalization.

It takes this work of navigating stakes for the group and finding ways to articulate within their vernaculars and epistemological frameworks to make climate change the group’s concern. Particular to Creation Care, however, has been the uphill struggle of dealing with historic public debacles and debates with scientists and scientific institutions about evolution—both recently with the 2005 *Kitzmiller v. Dover School District* decision and “a hundred years back” with the 1925 Scopes trial (Harding 1991; PBS Nova 2007). As well, Creation Care must confront political alignment and ties with the Republican Party and leading evangelicals who are not in agreement with climate change and collaborate with others who are expressly skeptical of climate change (and not just science in general). This chapter records and narrates what might be summed up as “frictions” intrinsic in this constantly evolving process of translation (Benjamin 1968; Fischer 2009; Harding 1991, 2000; Povinelli 2001; Tsing 2005).

Creation Care can also be seen as one way in which evangelicals are moving into a differently conceived and politicized notion of which core issues should concern civic-minded and active evangelicals. As well, because of the involvement of figures like Joel Hunter, these changes can be viewed as a part of larger shifts regarding the structures and technologies inherent to evangelical church attendance and organization. Climate change then as explained within evangelical discourse is one of many issues embroiled in larger changes instigated by new leadership, technologies, and demographics. This chapter thus provides an account of relationship-building with the scientific facts and a negotiation with collective historical memory, ideology, and epistemology. Set within the larger framework of this book, how evangelicals contribute to and chal-
lenge climate change further evidences the issue as an emergent form of life whose meaning, definition, rules, and grammars are very much contested, as are the kinds of knowledges and interpretive frameworks associated with it.

What It Sounds Like Coming from the Pulpit

I wasn’t sure what to expect at the Creation Care conference when I arrived. I was surprised and intrigued by its intimate size. I had struggled to make inroads via e-mail with many of the people I had identified as key leaders and was anticipating the insight this event might provide. The event opened first with a prayer by Joel Hunter where he acknowledged: “We are the receivers of your [God’s] great creation, and we confess that we have not treated it with the utmost respect . . . and we want to do better.” This was followed quickly by a short drama sketch by two members of Northland in order to “set the context” for the forthcoming session.

The sketch began with a woman sorting out things outside her house and doing a “green audit.” A man arrives and tries to guess in a humorous way whether she has gone Buddhist, vegetarian, organic, vegan (neither were sure what that meant, which elicited a small laugh from the audience), Adventist (which got a big laugh), or something else. The “green” individual responded that no, she wasn’t any different and still went to the same church (a refrain she repeated a few times). This “going green” had not affected any other area of her life except to force her to buy more expensive light bulbs (which also got a laugh). The punch line from the other actor was “Why you doing it then?” The scene ended with the voice of Kermit the Frog singing, “It’s not that easy being green,” which got a round of applause, mixed with laughter.

Hunter came back onstage then and said, “Those of us making this transition are confusing many of those who are trying to put this whole thing into some sort of category.” He described the evangelical community as “being late to the table” in terms of taking on the issue of care for the environment, “confusing much of our congregation that has a basic responsibility” to do better on simple things. He said that the conference day was meant to be a “training session” to equip pastors and lay leaders “wherever they are at,” implying there were a wide variety of positions on this topic. As if to explain the small numbers, he said that right now Creation Care was a “rather concentrated network of leaders” that is “really expanding very rapidly.” He said, “Pastors are very intimidated to address
this with their congregations because of those more radical links that people have in their minds, and so it’s a risk for pastors to bring this up.” It wasn’t all a difficult road of persuasion, though. He made reference to the surprising response particularly from the younger generation of evangelicals. Hunter introduced the first speaker, Tri Robinson, a pastor of a Boise Vineyard Church,\(^5\) who has rapidly become a leading voice on issues related to evangelicals and the environment. He’s written two books, *Saving God’s Green Earth* (2006, cowritten with Chatraw) and *Small Footprint, Big Handprint* (2007), both of which lay out a vision that includes the biblical basis behind care for the environment, Robinson’s personal experiences, and a blueprint for living an ecologically principled life both collectively (as a church) and personally in the home.

Unlike Hunter, who was in a suit, Robinson wore jeans, cowboy boots, and a bright yellow shirt. When he got up to speak, he said it was the first time he had spoken this message on the east coast, and he said when he arrived in the morning he thought, “Uh-oh—because I was the only guy who looked like he was going fly-fishing. Usually if you see me in a tie, somebody’s getting married or somebody just died.” Robinson is from Idaho, and as he details in *Saving*, he raised his now grown children mostly off the grid on his family’s ranch near Boise while pastoring. Prior to becoming a pastor, he had earned a degree in biology and ecology and had been a teacher for twelve years.

Robinson said when he decided to speak to his church about the environment and stewardship, he “was scared to death.” He explained that he prepared for six months and formed a task force within the church and discovered that many of his parishioners worked in conservation, fish and game, parks and recreation, soil conservation, and national forest service. “I had all these undercover, closet conservationists and environmentalists afraid to admit in church they were environmentalists. And, on the other hand, in their workplace, they were afraid to admit they were a Christian. So they were living these double lives, and in some ways, I was, too.”

He explained to the conference crowd that, in addition to his science degree, he came out of the Jesus movement in the 1960s that embraced radical environmental values, but then “the thesis that emerged was it’s all gonna burn anyways,” so those concerns became a part of his “old life” that he left behind. He equated environmental concern with other elements that he didn’t like about his life before conversion, and so he said he decided, like others who had come out of the 1960s, that they would just preach the gospel and that would be their life.
Yet Robinson pointed out that part of the Great Commission to go and preach the gospel included “tending the garden and caring for Creation. It’s very clear in the scripture.” And when evangelicals dropped this issue, others picked it up.

We didn’t quite like how they [environmental groups or environmentalists in general] did it. Two camps, I think, were formed, and we isolated ourselves from each other. Most of us were really pushing in the pro-life camp and saw that the environmental movement was really a pro-choice camp because the thought came that the problem with this world is that it’s overpopulated. What they said was that, really, what we need to do is rid ourselves of unwanted people. We really pushed back [from that].

Not incidentally, this is a concern I’ve heard many times informally, particularly from a high-ranking representative of the influential parachurch group Focus on the Family (founded by James Dobson) as a rationale for ignoring climate change as an issue. At a public event at MIT, this representative, when asked, said that Focus could not embrace climate change because of the issue’s association with abortion-on-demand and overpopulation. These are likely part of the “radical links” Hunter had in mind when he opened the conference.

Robinson referred to his home state, Idaho, as a “red state” and noted he had Republican politicians in his congregation, but he felt confident going forward because he had discovered scriptural principles for his message about the environment. When he gave his first sermon—the one he prepared six months for—he said it wasn’t his best sermon, but at the end, he received his first standing ovation in his twenty-five to thirty years of preaching. That sermon, he noted, is still being heard online.

Robinson described himself as being only two and a half years down the road of thinking through and about environmental stewardship in relation to Christian responsibility. He said that he had shown *The Great Warming* at his church and advised others not to do it if they were new to the topic. He got a big laugh when he said he “had to ‘fellowship’ a few people afterward”—meaning everyone wasn’t happy about the film. He said it wasn’t “the Al Gore version,” and therefore it was more palatable to evangelicals, and he specifically noted the interview excerpt in the film with Richard Cizik, who was in the audience. Robinson recalled what Cizik said in the film—that evangelicals never hear this kind of thinking from
the pulpit. He followed up on this point by stating: “Christians are waiting for their leaders to give them permission to care about creation and say that it’s okay.” This theme was repeated throughout the day.

Robinson went on to provide scriptural references and interpretation for his newfound position on environmental care. He noted that “the problem of people worshipping the creation and not the Creator,” which is often expressed as an issue of concern in evangelical circles, is something he’s never witnessed in his nearly three years of working on this issue. Instead, he said that it opened new doors for accessing the “unchurched.” He’s been asked to speak to the conservation league and to partner with the University of Idaho. He emphasized the evangelical duty to proclaim, demonstrate, and participate, and he explained this in several ways: as God being revealed through creation, as a responsibility to address the needs of the poor and “a world in crisis,” and as a call to live a life of adventure. Robinson ended by showing a short video of his church’s efforts, which include a large organic garden on church grounds from which they feed the poor. He strongly emphasized that his church has not been hurt by these new initiatives but rather that it has been blessed by it. And it has provided him with an opportunity to speak with groups like the Idaho Conservation League, which he described as “the most liberal group” in the state. He said he began his speech to them by “repenting” about Christian attitudes and actions regarding the environment—a sentiment he reckoned they had never heard from a Christian leader before.

Robinson’s message raises several themes. First, obviously, is the sense that the environment is a predominantly liberal or Democratic matter. Second, Robinson went to great lengths to point out that this is not a new value being overlaid but an old value of “restoring Eden” that was finally being brought forward. So the work is not just that of parsing environmental concern from a liberal set of concerns but also recovering the biblical fidelity inherent in such concerns. And it is up to the pastor to articulate that fidelity and give permission to adjust the priorities of their church and parishioners. But that articulation is not the final word. Robinson laid groundwork socially in order that his message might be received well by at least a segment of his church. This kind of tactical strategy mirrors on a small scale what Creation Care leaders are attempting to do on a much larger scale, working to build bridges and inroads for their message both inside and outside the movement. And they do so, as Hunter hinted, with the younger demographic largely on their side.

After Robinson’s talk, Hunter followed up by warning: “You are going
to get some pushback. Some of your people listen to talk radio during the
day and they think we’re the devil.” Indeed, after sitting in the confer-
ence for the first hour of presentations, I already felt as if I had entered
a renegade camp where, despite a belief in the absolute necessity of this
work, there was an acknowledgment that such agitation bucked trends
and could/would likely upset many. The roots of Republican affiliation
run deep for many evangelicals, diverse as they are, and this is a key factor
in the difficulty Creation Care has had moving forward, beginning with
the Evangelical Climate Initiative. At the center of this movement, then,
is a debate not only about science and evangelical Christianity but also
about how and why to be civically active.

Antecedents and New Beginnings:
The Evangelical Climate Initiative and Creation Care

Creation Care is not an old movement, nor is it very institutionalized.
In fact, it is a submovement within the larger movement of American
evangelicals and one that is still largely nascent. But out of the rumblings
of a few, beginning in the early 1990s, Creation Care has grown in order
to both peak and transform during the period in which I have followed it
ethnographically.⁶ It has distinct roots in the after effects of the unequiv-
ocal statements made in the 2001 IPCC report. John Houghton, chair of
IPCC’s 2001 Working Group I, is also an evangelical Christian, and he
joined with American scientist and evangelical Calvin DeWitt in order to
begin a distinctly evangelical dialogue on climate change. Their groups,
the John Ray Initiative (Houghton) and Au Sable Institute (DeWitt), or-
ganized a conference for Christians at Oxford University in 2002.

It was at Oxford that American evangelical Richard Cizik, vice presi-
dent of government affairs at the National Association of Evangelicals
(NAE), experienced what he calls a conversion regarding climate change.⁷
His invitation to participate was part of a larger long-term effort to turn
evangelical leaders toward environmental concern by a small circle that
includes DeWitt, Jim Ball (Evangelical Environmental Network or EEN),
Ron Sider (Evangelicals for Social Action), and Bob Seiple (World Vision
US until 1998). In 2002 EEN also launched its national awareness cam-
paign, “What Would Jesus Drive?” And its success was one of several fac-
tors that informed the strategies developed after the Oxford conference.

Cizik, Ball, and DeWitt attempted to re-create the Oxford experience
in the United States in 2004 at a conference held near the headwaters of
Chesapeake Bay at the Sandy Cove Conference Center. Houghton was a keynote speaker, and the conference was sponsored by EEN, NAE, and Christianity Today. The conference produced the Sandy Cove Covenant, which laid the foundation for the 2006 Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI) and efforts “to dialogue with evangelical leaders” about Creation Care. Later that year, the NAE released “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility,” where it listed Creation Care as one of its priorities.

I first encountered Creation Care through the ECI, a declaration signed by a group that included mega-church pastors, Christian college presidents, and para-church organizational and thought leaders. What made it “news” was that even before the release of the declaration, it was met with hostility by politically active, Republican-aligned evangelical leaders like James Dobson, Charles Colson, and Richard Land (Beisner 2007; Blunt 2006; Goodstein 2006, 2007; Vu 2007; Wildmon et al. 2007). ECI was discussed in the New York Times before it was officially released because of a letter signed by the latter group of leaders sent in advance of the declaration that attempted to circumvent any appearance that ECI spoke for all evangelicals. This letter spawned the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance and reinvigorated the 1999 Cornwall Declaration, which maintains that the science behind climate change is still “uncertain,” a response which I’ll examine later in this chapter. Some wondered whether this public disagreement was a major crack in the conservative movement that would reverberate in the political sphere and whether or not it would influence the policy of the Bush administration on climate change. Though evangelicals directly affected Bush’s policy on the Sudan, for example, a similar effect did not occur following ECI.

One prominent opponent of the ECI, Pat Robertson, has since publicly changed his mind on climate change. This made news in 2006. In an interview with CBS, Robertson said he was convinced of global warming by that summer’s “record-breaking heat,” and he said God told him that more storms were coming (Roberts 2006b). Charles Colson and James Dobson, however, remained avowedly skeptical of climate change. A 2009 blog post by Colson expressed concern that climate change was in danger of becoming a religion itself. Belief in climate change according to Colson’s formulation constitutes competition with core beliefs in the Bible, and Colson explains that, like the individual he profiles in the blog post, one could lose their job or standing in secular communities by not expressing belief in and support for climate change.
After the flurry of activity and declarations between 2002 and 2006, 2007 and 2008 were relatively quiet as the movement gained momentum. I followed Creation Care most closely during this period. Then in 2009, things transformed drastically. First, Cizik was forced to resign due to his declaration of support for gay civil unions in an interview on December 2, 2008, with Terry Gross on NPR’s *Fresh Air* (Goodstein 2008; National Association of Evangelicals 2008b; NPR 2008; Salter 2008). Not too ironically, this is exactly the “slippery slope” many have feared if they accept the environment as a concern and actionable priority for the movement, that is, a slow slide toward liberal views on same-sex marriage and abortion. When Cizik resigned, he stated that while views on same-sex civil unions had changed among a younger generation of evangelicals, it had not among the vast majority of evangelicals, so he would resign because he no longer spoke credibly for all evangelicals.

After he left the NAE, Cizik became an Open Society Fellow, and in a 2010 panel on “Dissent in the Workplace,” he described the events leading up to his resignation (Fora.tv 2010). He said that his political views had changed but not necessarily his religious or spiritual views. He said that he saw legal recognition of gay civil unions as a way to protect traditional marriage between a man and a woman. After the NPR interview, he said he wasn’t immediately aware of how radical his suggestion had been and that his resignation was requested because of the firestorm it had set off in “the heartland.” After more than twenty years with NAE, Cizik founded a new organization in 2010 called the New Evangelical Partnership for Common Good. The group published a book called *The New Evangelical Manifesto* in 2012 with essays from Cizik and Ball.

Another major change was that the group Flourish was formed under Rusty Pritchard and Jim Jewell, one of Creation Care’s less visible leaders and the initial public relations representative for ECI. The website statement for Flourish says it was formed with the express interest of making environmental concern *apolitical* for evangelicals (Neff 2009a, 2009b). Katharine Wilkinson’s account of Flourish describes it as a split from those profiled in this chapter who led the drafting and signing of ECI. Wilkinson differentiates Flourish as an ethics-based advocacy approach that calls for “broad changes in thought and action,” and ECI as an issues-based advocacy approach that focuses primarily on “a specific topic, placing secondary emphasis on effecting a change in values” (119). Wilkinson was unsure whether these divergent approaches would result in conflict or collaboration at the time her book was released in 2012, and
it’s not clear even now whether these distinctions represent a fissure or not in the movement. Multivocality is generally a hallmark of emergent social movements, particularly as new media make multiple articulations widely available. So while this chapter is being written in light of these changes, it relies on data and interviews gathered during the initial years following the ECI and seeks to unearth the relationships and views that informed the formation of and rising visibility of Creation Care at a crucial time in its development.

Of the several groups I studied, the leaders of Creation Care were the most difficult to establish an ongoing relationship with. Before I went to the first Creation Care conference in Florida in 2008, I had nearly given up on including them in this research project. That conference, however, provided me with an opportunity to set up and record an essential key interview and conduct many interviews informally with those on the leading edge of the movement. It also provided clear evidence of the state of the group’s nascence—the conference was small and had the feel of an insurgency set to begin its work through deliberate means and messaging. I had initially thought this group would be the easiest to contact, but I underestimated both their less formalized structure and the general reluctance to speak with a graduate student not affiliated with a Christian college or any of the usual Christian networks. My MIT affiliation intrigued some (generally speaking, it was a surprise that an individual from a strong science school would take an interest in their group), but there was also a substantial amount of suspicion regarding how scientists regard and portray Christians.

What was surprising to me as I began to dig into the context under which Creation Care was being nurtured were the massive structural and institutional changes the evangelical movement and church were undergoing. When I asked Cizik about whether reports of a divide between conservatives and progressives within the movement were legitimate observations, the former VP for the NAE brought to my attention the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life’s surveys among evangelicals. Pew divides evangelicals into traditionalists, centrists, and modernists—distinctions that signal some of the fracturing and change beneath the surface of NAE claims to a voting block of evangelicals over 30 million strong. Pew also clearly demarcates white evangelical Protestants from black evangelical Protestants—a distinction that held in my experience at the Creation Care conference where the crowd was primarily white and middle-class, but Flourish and the “evangelizing” trip I reference in my conclusion do
Another clear distinction is between mainline Protestants (Lutheran, Episcopal, Anglican, Methodist, etc.) and evangelical Protestants (Baptist, Pentecostal, Evangelical Free, etc.). In terms of these distinctions, then, Creation Care targets evangelicals and primarily white evangelicals who usually haven’t been associated with either environmental or social justice issues the way mainline or black evangelical churches have been. But clearly, as the movement continues to evolve, this could change.

As a way of orienting myself to the terrain that Creation Care was working on, I attended Cizik’s small traditional church on the outskirts of D.C. and then Joel Hunter’s mega-church in Orlando. Cizik’s church of less than 100 people was intimate and friendly. Hymn books were used, and the sermon managed to weave news from the Middle East into a message about Christ as the “Prince of Peace.” Hunter’s, on the other hand, was enormous—I slipped in unnoticed to a large dark balcony where no one sang the songs of the worship band, and Hunter delivered part of a series on Christian obligations to the poor. A soloist sang the Peter Gabriel song “In your eyes” afterward while images of distant impoverished countries and children were projected. The gap between the style, presentation, sermon, and attendees at these Sunday morning services reveals something of the divide between traditionalists and modernists with this segment of evangelicals, as did the response and scuffle over the initial events of ECI (and Cizik’s resulting inability to affix his name to the ECI declaration). But upon reading more closely, these incidental events and exposure and even the Pew distinctions only hint at the diverse, deep-seated changes under way that affect the nature of how church is experienced and organized, views on how Christians should be active in civic and political life, what priorities the evangelical movement should be focusing on, and who they should partner with to achieve these goals.

Demographics and technology clearly play supporting roles in some of the shifts. Younger people subscribe to issues such as the environment more closely than the traditional foci on abortion or homosexuality (Banerjee 2008; Cox 2007; Grossman 2007; James 2008; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2007). And the Internet provides a new way for mega-churches to expand or reach their flock via blogs, social media, and webcast. But there is something more essential at work as well—something nearly captured in Joel Hunter’s book Right Wing, Wrong Bird or Jim Wallis’s God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It (2006).
There appears to be a general fatigue in some quarters with the legacy of the so-called culture wars in the 1980s and 1990s and political alignment with the Republican Party as the party of default, replaced instead by a willingness to build coalitions on issues like poverty, AIDS, and the environment (Broder 2008; Little 2005; Roberts 2006a; Salter 2007; Sataline 2008). This is an observation made by many inside and outside the movement, and those three issues are generally lumped together as abundant evidence of widespread coalition building with left- and right-wing political groups. Cizik, in my interview with him, added human trafficking, the civil war in the Sudan, and other pertinent issues. Cizik and Ball were both very clear, however, that Creation Care is coming not from the fringes or progressives of the evangelical movement. Rather, it is coming from and targeted at the traditional conservative heart of the movement.

Despite these indicators, the changes, much like any of a social nature, are hardly even, instant, or unilateral. Polling throughout the period of study up until the present reflects the challenge Creation Care is up against. Among people of faith, white evangelical Protestants are the least likely by a large margin to have been convinced of human-induced climate change. A 2008 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found this group (31 percent) was more likely than the average American (21 percent), and much more likely than mainline Protestants (18 percent) and black Protestants (15 percent) to deny the existence of climate change and anthropogenic causes. And while 47 percent of Americans acknowledged there was “solid evidence” of climate change and human causality, only 34 percent of white evangelicals and 39 percent of black evangelicals agreed. These percentages are lower than that of Republicans in general who are not convinced of the fact of climate change. During this same period, the percentage of Republicans convinced of climate change began to decrease from 62 percent in 2007 to 49 percent in 2008 as compared with 84 percent of Democrats and 75 percent of independents (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2008).

**Starting Points: Trust and Messengers for Climate Change**

My conversation with the pastor and his daughter proved to be a starting point in trying to understand what lies within this disparity. In my interview with Jim Ball, I asked him about this exchange specifically. I told him that a prominent pastor had told me that science couldn’t be the basis upon which to convince evangelicals about climate change, and he replied:
Well, in our community, there's obviously been—for over a century—there's been bad blood, shall we say, between the scientific community and the evangelical community. . . . Scientists aren't necessarily the most trusted of messengers in our community, and yet who have been the three main messengers on climate change? Just think about it. Environmental groups. They're distrusted in our community for a variety of reasons. Democratic politicians, distrusted. Scientists, distrusted. So we have this problem—some of us are saying, “This problem is huge, and yet our community is not accepting it because of the people who are talking about it.” So how do you get them to accept the message? Well, you need trusted messengers.

This, perhaps more than anything I encountered, gets at the core issues confronting Christians seeking to enroll their churches in action regarding climate change. As Ball put it, the messengers matter whether they speak for the need to act, a moral/ethical basis to do so, or the scientific facts. Scientific facts are not set apart from its institutions, various instantiations and findings, histories, or interactions with evangelical groups.

The declarations and the ECI established a group of credible evangelical leaders who were willing to be the trusted messengers and say to others, “Take this problem seriously.” Such other messengers circumvent the problem of having scientists, Democrats, and environmental activists deliver the message about climate change, whether it be the science, policy, or need for personal action. As Ball puts it, they “bless the facts.”

We have this strategy of reaching out to evangelical leaders and then eventually they issue a statement saying take this problem seriously for these forward issues, and in effect they bless the facts. They allow people in our community to say, “Well, you know, gosh, I don’t know about those scientists, but this person I respect does. They made a conclusion that this is a problem and that we as Christians need to address it. So, okay, I’ll listen to that.” There are still those in our community who are actively opposing. I just forwarded an e-mail from a pastor who got a DVD from one of our allies who’s saying that climate change is a serious problem. The pastor writes back and says the science is incorrect. It’s a bunch of baloney. My colleague is like: how arrogant can this be that this pastor is saying that he knows science better than the experts. But there’s all this distrust in our community.

Ball acknowledged that those actively contesting climate change are not the group that Creation Care is aiming to influence. Rather, their strategy
is aimed at people who haven’t given the issue any time or attention or had it explained to them as an issue that connects to Christian responsibility and morality.

Ball went further later on in our interview to explain that groundwork must be laid collectively as well. What and how evangelical communities are talking about the issue influences how scientific facts get taken up.

There’s all kinds of barriers for us in getting people to accept this. The three main ones have been the three main messengers. It is not just, of course, about the facts for any of us; it’s kind of the social cultural milieu in which you live and exist. And if your friends who you trust are saying you’re going to wreck the economy; you’re listening to your radio talk shows and they got people in there that say you’re going to wreck the economy, and it’s the new form of communism, then it’s really easy for you to just say I don’t have to worry about that. So we’ve been trying to find people who can kind of burst through that a little bit, and get people to take a second look.

This lack of a straight line between scientific fact production and reception is a crucial step often overlooked by many scholars intent on designing models that address the public understanding of science or science literacy (Irwin and Wynne 2004; Jasanoff 2005; Latour 2004). Public understanding of science models tend to focus on how much or little the public understands the facts and how the public deals with uncertainty or risk, ignoring the multiple contexts within which facts circulate. Ball’s point about the importance of the “social cultural milieu” rejects the idea of such models for understanding, but his formulation goes further, touching on notions of framing that have been used to diagnose problems with public engagement of climate change and science.

Framing is a term used colloquially and in scholarly writing to denote what Irving Goffman first observed were the unconsciously adopted cognitive structures that work to govern the perception and representation of events. Framing certainly helps to explain some aspects of how events and issues are perceived, and the media play a role in developing initial frames (D’Angelo 2002; Entman 1993; Gitlin 1980; Scheufele 1999). The process of moving from the lab through the media such that the public becomes engaged is often characterized as one where either the media can be made to see or say things in a certain manner or that their audiences can (Epstein 1996; Gamson 1992; Lakoff 2004; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow et al. 1986). Market research tactics also depend on a certain amount of
instrumentalization, and these too have made their way into sociological analyses of climate change attitudes among the public (Leiserowitz, Mairbach, and Roser-Renouf 2008). Such analyses can be helpful in drawing conclusions about what media have done and perhaps in how or where to devote advertising dollars as well. But these expansions and adaptations of Goffman’s idea of framing often deny a social group’s multivocality and/or turn on the idea that the making and reception of meaning can be predetermined and stabilized (Fisher 1997; Steinberg 1999).

What Ball’s formulations point to is a much different process by which frames come to be set in motion—and also that frames are in motion, always and constantly, being squashed up against other social processes. Part of the challenge faced by all of the groups researched for this book is a confrontation with exactly this open-ended process of how issues come to have meaning and demand engagement owing in part or whole to the code of morality and/or ethics inherent (Latour 2004a, 2004b). In the case of Creation Care, how the fact of climate change comes to matter is a process that Ball is saying revolves around issues of trust and communal reinforcement over and above the weight of facts by themselves. Borrowing from the history of journalism and civic life (Habermas 1962; Terdiman 1990; Warner 1990), it is a process much closer to that in earlier eras of voting and party politics. Schudson (1998) points out that before American voting reforms in the late 1800s that emphasized information as the key to forming an opinion, citizens were drawn to issues, political parties, and voting as a result of their social ties and affiliations. What this book argues is that the social matters—it matters in terms of directing attention, adjudicating debates, knowing who and what one can trust, and what side one wants to be associated with. It also matters, Ball is saying, when it comes to lack of concern, turning off, or attentional rest. By attentional rest, I mean to signal Ball’s description of those for whom it is easy not to pay attention—even when facts are known—due to a range of factors.

Trust or distrust, then, is the primary issue or terrain upon which much of the movement’s potential and credibility lie, and it is established both through mobilizing a vernacular familiar to the movement and through clear identification, standing, and recommendations from and within the group. In other words, part of the problem is science. But politics, a biblical mandate, morality, and guilt-by-association with a liberal agenda are all factors in motivating (or not) evangelicals to make climate change a pressing issue. Yet, as Cizik pointed out to me, if evangelicals
take up this issue and recognize it as one of their own, the potential is immense. Consider evangelical activism around other social issues and the potential effect on policy and personal action, as well as party platforms and leadership. These are the kinds of stakes at play when it came to drafting and releasing the ECI.

Examining the Evangelical Climate Initiative

Released in 2006, the ECI is an inherently political and civic document as much as it is a statement of religious beliefs as they relate to climate change and science.\textsuperscript{13} It begins by establishing the political presence of evangelicals and its biblically dictated obligation to continue that presence:

As American evangelical Christian leaders, we recognize both our opportunity and our responsibility to offer a biblically based moral witness that can help shape public policy in the most powerful nation on earth, and therefore contribute to the well-being of the entire world.\textsuperscript{14} Whether we will enter the public square and offer our witness there is no longer an open question. We are in that square, and we will not withdraw.

Cizik argues that evangelicals must be near enough to the seat of power to speak truth to it, and this opening salvo demonstrates this belief and the ongoing practice associated with it. The statement also speaks to the underlying philosophy that belief and action are twinned—that knowing something means there is an obligation to act on that knowledge. The ECI goes on to make these strong claims as follows:

Claim 1: Human-induced climate change is real
Claim 2: The consequences of climate change will be significant and will hit the poor the hardest
Claim 3: Christian moral convictions demand our response to the climate change problem
Claim 4: The need to act now is urgent. Governments, businesses, churches, and individuals all have a role to play in addressing climate change—starting now.

There are three key observations to take from these claims. First, at the Creation Care conference, the clearest rationale for acting was based on claim number two. Joel Hunter continually reinforced this message as the host by using the phrase “the least of these” and, at one point, even say-
ing that people will die as a result of lights being left on. This is a distinct part of the work that Creation Care is engaged in—that of nesting environmental concerns within the sets of concerns evangelicals are already engaged with—in this case, poverty, but also increasingly, if Ball and Cizik have their way, the pro-life stance.

There used to be a picture on the EEN site that shows Cizik and Ball marching in a pro-life rally that says: “Stop Mercury Poisoning of the Unborn.” In my interviews, both of them mentioned this nesting of an environmental issue within the much more established concerns about abortion. Writing in response to Grist.org’s coverage of evangelicals on beliefnet.com, Ball put it this way:

As increasing numbers of rank-and-file evangelical Christians understand more deeply that reducing pollution is loving your neighbor, as they become more aware of mercury’s impact on the unborn, that one in six newborns have potentially harmful levels of mercury in their blood, as evangelicals become more aware that global warming is real and is projected to harm and even kill millions of the world’s poorest, whom Jesus Christ identified with himself (Matt. 25:40), they will become more engaged.

It may seem like a leap, but this is exactly the kind of rationale Creation Care engages in when it seeks to convince evangelicals that the environment is already a part of their suite of concerns—they just haven’t realized it yet.

Second, for scientific evidence related to claim number one, ECI cites the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), noting Houghton as an evangelical Christian who has been involved, as well as the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and President Bush’s declarations at the 2005 G8 Summit. ECI calls for a plan of action to emerge on the reduction of fossil fuels and tougher national environmental laws, and then it points out specifically the work done by a number of major multinational firms, closing with a call to individuals to help the poor by reducing their carbon impact. Ball says that mentioning business leaders was a specific part of their strategy because evangelicals may not be willing to listen to scientists, but they are likely to pay attention to someone from General Electric.

They don’t understand. The IPCC is what it is. They’ve been told that it has problems or something and they really haven’t thought through:
how should science be used in a policy context and what constitutes enough evidence to say we should take action? They haven’t thought through all of that, but when they hear a business leader saying it’s a serious problem, the head of General Electric, a business they know, and the VP of Shell or someone like that, that’s when we’ll start to have people pay a little more attention and be a little more receptive and open to listening to what we have to say.

Economic concerns play a large role in the criticism expressed by opponents to ECI and Creation Care. Knowing that businesses are taking climate concerns seriously negates many of those arguments without having to address them.

Third, in the claims put forward in the ECI, there is a lack of division between policy and personal action, belief and consequences, morality and the demand for response. I would argue that this is distinctly American and evangelical in that evangelicals are active on strongly held beliefs and perceived as politically powerful in a system that often caters to and rewards powerful special interest groups, and they are able to have some effect on the system of lawmaking as a result. For example, in a post two years after the 2006 launch of ECI on the Deep Green Conversation blog run by EEN, Ball wrote that he and Cizik had been instrumental, along with other members of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE), in moving the Lieberman-Warner Climate Security Act toward helping the “poorest of the poor” with climate change adaptation (Ball 2008).

In the meeting with Senator John Warner that Ball describes, it was made clear that the evangelical position was important. Cizik then mentioned an EEN poll that said 84 percent of evangelicals were now in favor of climate legislation. “Rich [Cizik] helped him [Warner] understand that the evangelical community was changing and growing in its concern for the poor and for God’s creation.” What happened next was nearly unprecedented in terms of religious advocacy in Washington, as Senator Warner allowed them to articulate exactly what they wanted in terms of international adaptation and wrote it into the bill. Ball credits the Holy Spirit for this political win, and he savored especially the fact that ECI had been going strong despite opposition from “some of the most prominent politically conservative Christian leaders.”

Certainly, among all groups there is a sense that shifts in public opinion lead to changes in public policy—for example, in chapter 1, Sheila
Watt-Cloutier, former chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council, said this was why she participated in the work of ICC and media coverage. But it’s difficult to track this cause and effect chain that is something like a mantra among activists generally. With evangelicals, there is some reason to believe in a correlative effect. And certainly this effect is what has driven the media and public relations strategy related to the ECI.

When the ECI was released, they went directly to the public with their message both through “earned” media as Ball calls them, or news articles, and through full-page ads in a rather diverse lot of publications: the New York Times, Roll Call, Christianity Today. They also ran radio and television ads on Christian and Fox stations in states with key congressional campaigns in 2006. Ball explained that having articles written about them is the best option because it’s free and it’s viewed differently by people; getting the attention of mainstream press has always been a part of their strategy.

Evangelicals read secular papers, they watch the news like everybody else. So if you are getting your stuff in the mainstream media, you’re also reaching a lot of evangelicals. But we’re also interested in changing our community for the purpose of changing policy. So if not only our community, but other audiences like policymakers start to think that evangelicals are becoming concerned about certain things, then they start paying attention. And it’s easier to get meetings on the Hill.

This is not a trivial point in terms of media analysis. ECI has not done a lot of work through new media, but articles in mainstream media were targeted at the still large swath of the newspaper-reading public (on or offline) and even perhaps politicians and their staff. The perception of evangelical interest in this issue clearly began to increase with mainstream media coverage. The blogosphere picked up on these articles as well, providing more scrutiny, debate, and some of what Bruno Latour (2004) has called “instant revisionism.” Christian blogs are numerous as are climate blogs, and occasionally they overlap where environmental concerns are being debated and discussed.

**Would Jesus Sign the Evangelical Climate Initiative?**

To understand ECI more fully, it’s worth dialing back to the 2002 campaign for “What Would Jesus Drive?” (WWJD), and beyond that, to the founding of BEEN. ECI is not the first declaration of its kind, but it is likely
the most controversial. WWJD was undertaken in conjunction with NRPE, an organization that brings together Jewish, Catholic, and mainline Protestants as well as EEN.

EEN was begun in part by the 1990 letter Carl Sagan organized, signed by thirty-two Nobel Laureates, titled “Preserving & Cherishing the Earth: An Appeal for Joint Commitment in Science & Religion.” That year also included the passing of the Clean Air Act and an address by Pope John Paul II on the World Day of Peace calling for environmental responsibility. Two years earlier, the IPCC had been formed, and Time had called 1989 the Year of the Planet. In 1992, the Earth Summit was held in Rio, and a forum held by the Au Sable Institute and the World Evangelical Fellowship’s Unit on Ethics and Society began the discussions that would lead to the founding of EEN (DeWitt 2007b). The following year, EEN released a formal “Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation”—a declaration that was even more widely signed than the ECI and that still guides EEN, according to its website. In other words, EEN came out of the same crucible for environmental change and fervor that molded many secular efforts. And it went through the same down cycle that beset many such organizations between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, when public interest and concern waned. EEN, at that time, was reduced to one staff member, Ball, but that eventually changed in part because of creative approaches like WWJD.

Ball was shocked by the instant and overwhelming attention that WWJD got—on the order of 6,000 of what he calls “earned media” articles, meaning articles written because the campaign was considered “news.” Ball explained his benchmark for its success like this.

I said [before the launch] I’ll know we’ve been successful when there’s been a joke on Letterman and somebody talks about it on the Senate floor. Then I’ll know that we’ve kind of penetrated into the public conversation. And I thought that joke on Letterman would happen six months after it was launched, that it would kind of bubble around. We hadn’t even publicly launched the campaign, and there were a couple of jokes on Leno.

Ball acknowledges, however, that media attention such as WWJD received in terms of immediacy, longevity, and volume isn’t likely to happen again. He was completely caught off guard by the response to WWJD. He said getting listed on AOL, a major player in online news at that time, as one of their top five stories was a primary catalyst that fully ignited the media craze. I got the sense when he was describing it to me that he was still in awe.
What would Jesus do? was a common refrain heard in evangelical circles long before EEN chose to torque the last word of the phrase. Ball said, “The basic goal really was to try to have people start to think in our community and elsewhere that transportation is a moral issue and get that conversation started.” Christians are certainly not the only ones driving SUVs in the United States, but they do represent a large number of Americans who are open to thinking about their own personal responsibility and moral standing in a certain way. Bringing together environmental knowledge and an awareness of the effect of emissions on climate with the morality that Christ represents starts a very different kind of conversation than one that science alone can start.

The experience with ECI was completely different—though not in terms of media interest. NRPE hired the public relations firm that handled WWJD, and Ball said they took some criticism for the handling of a few events. So when it came to ECI, Ball said they hired an evangelical group, Rooftop Mediaworks, run by Jim Jewell (now the cofounder of Flourish) and based in the suburbs of Atlanta. Ball said people started to find out before ECI launched that it was going ahead, but he wanted “the right kind of coverage.” He even held a reporter from the New York Times at bay, much to his own incredulity. They had to push the launch twice and tried to convince the reporter not to run with the story, but to no avail. The story ran before their official launch. Ball said that the reason they were trying to have an “appropriate launch” is because they “knew it would be explosive and we wanted to, in effect, kind of catch our opposition off guard.” Instead, the opposition in the form of the letter from James Dobson and others forced them to receive media coverage prior to the launch of ECI.

Dobson is part of a large interfaith group and active group of evangelicals who worked to counteract the ECI and other efforts to mobilize evangelicals with regard to climate change. The 1999 Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship, to which Dobson is a signatory among thousands of others, seeks to put forward “sound theology and sound science” as opposed to “the passion that may energize environmental activism” in order to guide “the decision-making process.” Sound science has become iconic phrasing in the efforts of skeptics to unseat the veracity of scientific research on climate change.

The Declaration espouses three primary points of disagreement: (1) the tendency to “oppose economic progress in the name of environmental stewardship,” (2) the denial of “the possibility of beneficial human
management of the earth,” and (3) the belief that some environmental concerns “are without foundation or greatly exaggerated,” including “destructive man-made global warming, overpopulation, and rampant species loss.” The document goes on to argue that “public policies to combat exaggerated risks” can “delay or reverse the economic development necessary to improve not only human life but also human stewardship of the environment.” In other words, environmental policy will create barriers for the poor intent on economic development, causing them to suffer longer than they should. It goes on to state a list of general beliefs held by “Jews, Catholics, and Protestants” and a list of aspirations that includes an affirmation of liberty, stewardship, private property, and economic freedom.15

Cizik describes what evangelicals must undergo in order to believe in the “reliability of climate change” as a conversion. He described to me his own conversion and the importance of “blessing the facts,” despite his trust in the science.

RC: Well, I was a skeptic and a bit of a mugwump in the sense that when I was invited to a 2002 Climate Change Conference at Oxford, I said, “No, don’t draw me into this.” So I told Jim Ball, who invited me to come. “Look, I will come, but don’t expect me to join this debate. I don’t really have a fight in this.” Heard the science and decided, “Wow! This is compelling stuff,” and we’re not talking here about just clean water. We’re talking about the very fate of the earth. I was totally blown away by the scientific evidence that is to me undebatable, unequivocal, on our human-induced impact on all of these issues from habitat, destruction of species and extinction, pollution, climate change, and so on all these levels, I was just stunned and felt I could hardly keep my mouth shut. But it was John Houghton walking in the gardens at the Palace who said, “Richard, if you believe—you need to tell others,” and I said, “Well, that’ll cause a furor.” And it did, but I survived. (laughter)

CC: Did it matter to you that the scientists were Christians?

RC: Yeah, it helps. It certainly helped because it helped authenticate the truth factor here. It’s not that I am suspicious of science; I’m not. I’m part of the younger generation of evangelicals that have no fight intellectually between faith and science. But it helped. And sometimes there has to be some of this hand-holding to assure people of faith that this is true.
Although it was the science that convinced Cizik and provoked an impassioned response that sustained later action, it still came as a message wrapped in a Christian conference with a prominent Christian scientist as his guide. Cizik doesn’t describe himself as suspicious of science, and yet it wasn’t science that caused him to pay attention to the issue—it was his community of faith, his peers in leadership, and scientists who were evangelical and were involved in agitating the Christian community to take another look at the issue. “We need scientists to explain the ‘what,’ and we theologians to answer the ‘who.’ The ‘who’ is God. The ‘what’ is what’s occurring to Earth which we have been mandated the stewardship for, and so scientists help us to understand what creation is saying about itself and about its Maker, so we need scientists.”

To further illustrate how “hand-holding” might work, Cizik told me about a conversation he witnessed involving former vice president Al Gore at a conference in Aspen in 2005.

I heard Al Gore say to a Southern Baptist, “You mean to tell me that the fact there are 900 peer-reviewed scientific articles confirming human-induced climate change. . . . Do you mean to tell me you need to have someone in the leadership of the church authenticate the reliability of those studies?” And the man he was speaking to said yes, and Al Gore said, “That’s just utterly amazing.”

Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth is focused on persuading its audiences based on irrefutable scientific evidence and overwhelming scientific consensus.16 Yet science, as presented by Gore and by the vast majority of scientists and science publications, lacks the kind of lens that Sir John Houghton used when he responded to Bill Moyers’s question for the 2006 episode of Moyers on America titled “Is God Green?” The clip that Moyers uses to explain the role of Houghton in Cizik’s “conversion” is Houghton saying, “The science we do is God’s science. The laws of science we use and we study and we discover, they are God’s laws, because they’re the way He runs the universe.” This, to be sure, is not the usual utterance of a leading scientist either in the UK or in the United States. Indeed, the stumbling block that most are hard pressed to bypass is the problem of origin and evolution.
The pastor and his daughter made direct reference to evolution by talking about the distrust that goes back a hundred years. Ball referred to the issue of evolution earlier as “all this bad blood” between evangelicals and scientists. Cizik in his interview with Fast Company blatantly stated: “Many evangelicals think that because they don’t believe in evolution, they have to reject the science of global warming, too.” Evolution and the debates over it are more than a stumbling block on the way to believing climate change. Debates over evolution are also a vital chapter in the history of American evangelicals and their role in public life.

The history page on the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) website begins by talking about the Scopes trial in 1925 where “the resulting loss of evangelical influence in the mainline denominations had led many to believe that conservative Christians had vanished from the scene, never to be heard from again.” Susan Harding (1991) points out that even though evangelicals or fundamentalists, as they were called then, “won” the Scopes case (Scopes was found guilty of teaching evolution), they lost the public relations battle—being relegated instead to an anti-modernist “backward” stereotype against the image of scientific rationality and enlightened modernity. NAE states that evangelicals began at that time to build a thriving subculture—one that, scholars note, emerged strongly during the Reagan administration in the 1980s and ever more prominently under George W. Bush’s administration (McKenna 2007; Moyers 2006). Yet the chapter NAE leaves out is the revisiting of a Scopes-like drama in 2004 with the federal case of Kitzmiller v. Dover School District, where intelligent design—what creationism or a literal interpretation of the Bible’s account of creation in the book of Genesis is often called—was firmly rejected by the courts because of its religious roots. Remarkably, despite the way Dover became a media spectacle much like the Scopes trial over seventy-five years earlier, there has been a tremendous cooperation between Creation Care leaders and scientists, and in these instances, it seems that the debates over evolution have largely been set aside in an effort to jointly move masses toward concern about climate change.

In 2007, I went to speak with Harvard scientist James McCarthy about his work with the IPCC and the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, and instead he began to tell me about his work with evangelicals. I was surprised and mentioned the work of John Houghton, thinking he had been the primary scientist that evangelicals had worked with. McCarthy re-
sponded that Houghton had been the chair of IPCC’s Working Group I in the 2001 report, and he was the chair of Working Group II. McCarthy was well aware of the work Houghton had done after the conference and even of Cizik’s conversion.

In the months prior to my interview with him, McCarthy had been part of a roundtable at the Melhana Plantation in southern Georgia with a group of twenty-eight scientific and evangelical leaders that included Ball, Cizik, DeWitt, and Joel Hunter as well as James Hansen, Rita Colwell, Judith Curry, Eric Chivian, Edward O. Wilson, and James Gustave Speth—in other words, some of the leading and most vocal scientists working on climate change–related research in the United States. Together, they spent three days discussing climate-related issues and “searching for common ground.” McCarthy told me that “many of the scientists sitting around the table said it was the most important scientific meeting they have ever attended.” I asked him why, and he laughed and said, “I mean in terms of advancing the science. It was Joel Hunter who said to me: ‘So, how many people do you speak to in a week? How many are in your classes? And, maybe, if you gave a public lecture, how many people would be there?’ He said: ‘I speak to 7,000 and they listen to me.’” In this formulation, the problem of motivation is reversed. Action isn’t driven by facts; rather, action is assumed and the work required is to get the facts trusted. For Hunter, trust revolves around the messenger similar to the way Jim Ball earlier described it.

Many of the scientists involved in the meeting represent centers at Harvard, Yale, NASA, and other major scientific and academic institutions, and they have often been interviewed by major media outlets. They represent an elite stratum of scientists who lead in their field and are also able to focus some of their time and attention on public policy and garnering public attention. But many of these same people have expressed frustration on and off the record about the public’s inattention to what their research already shows—that we are in the midst of a global environmental crisis of epic proportions. Some, like Hansen, would likely say the crisis is well under way. So it’s little wonder that the thought of igniting an existing social movement with such a message accompanied by a burden for action might indeed make this meeting one of the most important of its kind.

The resulting statement released on January 17, 2007, “An Urgent Call to Action: Scientists and Evangelicals Unite to Protect Creation,” speaks convincingly about the shared “moral passion” and “sense of vocation to
save the imperiled living world before our damages to it remake it as another kind of planet.” It states that the protection of life on earth “requires a new moral awakening to a compelling demand, clearly articulated in scripture and supported by science,” and it specifically expresses concern for “the poorest of the poor,” who not incidentally also inhabit some of the richest areas of Earth’s biodiversity. McCarthy explained that the tone of the meeting reflected this partnership with science and a sense of shared goals. He said: “It was so interesting because we could easily, easily spend our time debating things, but what we ended up saying profoundly was that it doesn’t matter whether—it does not matter at all—whether life came into existence in this planet in a millisecond or millions of years. It’s at risk.”

This is exactly the same argument E. O. Wilson put forth in his 2006 book *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*. Wilson, one of the signatories to the “Urgent Call,” wrote the book as a letter to a fictional Southern Baptist minister (Wilson was raised a Southern Baptist) arguing what McCarthy noted was the tone at the meeting. In essence, it doesn’t matter how it all began; what matters is what’s happening right now.

Let us see, then, if we can, and you are willing, to meet on the near side of metaphysics in order to deal with the real world we share. I put it this way because you have the power to help solve a great problem about which I care deeply. I hope you have the same concern. I suggest that we set aside our differences in order to save the Creation.

This ability to set aside debates over how the earth began and what observable process governs its continued development is not something many in evangelical circles have been likely or known to copy. But Creation Care proponents are evidently hoping that the trust their movement’s members place in their leaders can help bridge the gap.

McCarthy told me that shortly after the meeting in Georgia, he was interviewed by Fox News with Richard Cizik.

The interview was getting a whole lot of “I don’t know about this climate change stuff, and I don’t think I’ll buy it.” The interviewer turned to Cizik and said, “How about you, Reverend Cizik?” and Cizik said, “Yes. I trust these scientists.” Cizik said (this phrase they’re using over and over again): “You do not honor the Creator by destroying the creation,” and the interviewer says, “Well, so how many people you think will listen to you?” And Cizik said, “Thirty million.”
The process of speaking and having others pay attention to you, especially when speaking with the authority of Ivy League sanctioned and fully funded peer-reviewed research, is something scientists up until very recently have taken for granted. Yet climate change has forced scientists to fully confront notions of trust, authority, and advocacy, and I would add ethics and morality to the list as well. The issue of trust is bound up in much more than the ability to make people listen to what a scientist has to say (Irwin and Wynne 2004; Jasanoff 2005). This is where epistemology plays a much greater role than is routinely acknowledged by those primarily invested in the science related to climate change.

Andy Crouch, a signatory to ECI and prominent columnist for Christianity Today, wrote a response to Wilson for that magazine titled “Letter to a Tenured Professor” (2006). In it, he agrees that Christians do share a deep reverence for Creation, much like Wilson and other scientists, but he also states that scientists have not sought to understand the basis for that reverence. Crouch argues that Christians like himself and his wife, a Harvard-trained physicist, see no disconnect between learning from the collective efforts of science and holding Christian beliefs. In a phrase reminiscent of C. S. Lewis, Crouch says:

I have seriously devoted myself, in the amateur fashion of which I am capable, to acquiring and appreciating the vocabulary, methods, and discoveries of modern science. As a Christian, I see no contradiction in wanting to benefit from the collective human effort to understand a universe I believe to be uniquely suited for human life, designed to reward rational inquiry, and crafted to provoke wonder, reverence, and awe from its smallest scale to its grandest.

But Crouch ends the letter by saying the same treatment has not been forwarded, in this case for Wilson, to Southern Baptists. Implicit in this is a reminder that scientific methods, while useful, are not the only way to either know the world or make one’s way in it.

A blog post at the Center for Christian Studies (located at Cornell, but operated independently), following on Crouch’s column, similarly argued that the division between science and religion have been overblown (Johnson 2006). But even more pertinent to the arguments made here, the blog post goes on to say that metaphysics and ideology cannot be set aside as Wilson is suggesting. Rather, the beliefs and values of Christians are precisely what calls them to care about the environment and pay attention to any threats regarding its decay and demise. In other words,
Cizik’s trust expressed in the work of scientists on climate change not only blesses the facts; it does so with the weight of convictions, moral and spiritual. The facts must be addressed not only because they are trustworthy but because the shared belief system and code of morality established by the Bible requires one to take action when such facts are put forward as trustworthy. Hence the switch to a vernacular—or as McCarthy put it, “the phrase they keep using”: “You do not honor the Creator by destroying the creation.” The expectations of following biblical mandates is thus intertwined with environmental stewardship.

That way of talking about the environment has been the theme of Calvin DeWitt’s work as a scientist and committed evangelical. DeWitt is an older man with graying hair, but he comes across as youthful in part because of his fiery demeanor and wide smile. He was among the most approachable at the Creation Care conference, and he was immediately interested in my research. He said a sociologist had once written about him as a catalyst and connector that brought people and concerns together and made things happen. I got the sense that this conference was a marker of sorts (and one he was immensely pleased with) in his efforts to put environmental concerns before Christians.

Later, when he took the stage at the Creation Care conference, he burst into the old hymn “In the Garden,” got the crowd to sing along, and he described the American environmental icon John Muir as coming out of the Scottish psalter tradition. Despite his training as a biologist and zoologist, and his many decades of teaching at the University of Wisconsin—Madison in environmental studies, DeWitt’s talk didn’t discuss science or liberalism or politics. His message instead focused on biblical references to the delight of “the garden” and the exhortation to not “destroy its fruitfulness.” Creation, he argues in his book Earth-Wise: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues (2007a), is the other way, besides the Bible, that humanity can come to know God. He calls those who see the environment as a tableau for revelation from God “two-book Christians.” And in his talk at the conference, he reminded the audience that “Jesus always taught on field trips.”

In the last chapter of Earth-Wise, DeWitt lists the “stumbling blocks” and “pitfalls” many Christians might encounter when embracing environmental concern (it will lead too close to the New Age movement, pantheism, political correctness, support for abortion, a one-world government, etc.). In a move that separates science from these other concerns, the last one on his list is that “Science is necessarily suspect,” which he translates to mean science and atheism are too close together. His response, how-
ever, is instructive because it points out that evolution and its debates are often used as a tool by those opposing climate science.

Promoters of doubt about the findings of climatology and environmental science have become expert in playing on the fears and apprehensions of the public. In so doing they have discovered that linking science with the question of the origins of life and with evolution will cast a pall on all science, regardless of whether it has to do with origins and evolution. The result is an assault on science as a principal way of learning how the world works.

He goes on to defend the “tentativeness” and “integrity” of science and the scientific method, and he states that many influential scientists are Christians.

DeWitt has been thoroughly immersed in Christian thought and study as well as the scientific method of studying the natural world. He has written extensively on the Christian need to deal with environmental issues, and he doesn’t stray from the story of Adam and Eve or what’s recorded in Genesis. Rather, he uses the Creation story as a tableau to talk about the relationship one should have with God or how one can come to know God. At the same time, he expounds on the principles offered through scientific study such as the hydrologic cycle, carbon cycle, and other forms of energy exchange and ecology. It’s in this way that he sidesteps a debate about how life began in favor of a framework he encapsulates as stewardship, appreciation, and awareness. “Our ultimate purpose,” DeWitt argues, “is to honor God as Creator in such a way that Christian environmental stewardship is part and parcel of everything we do.” It’s expressions like this that reflect the message of Creation Care, which makes both environmental concern and the urgency to act inseparable.

**Political Alignment**

These conversations between scientific and evangelical leaders are still very much conversations among those converted to concern about the environment and the need to act on climate change. In talking about the challenges confronting Creation Care, Ball casts the net much more widely than the evolution debates, noting in particular the widespread perception among many evangelicals that scientists have liberal values and are “part of a liberal culture.” DeWitt’s long list of “stumbling blocks” reflects a similar base of concern.
The example Ball used was based on a conversation he had at a conservative institution where a person came up to him after his presentation and asked how Ball could trust scientists. The man noted that the American Psychological Association’s stance on homosexuality was, in his opinion, ideological and untrustworthy. As a result the man’s conclusion—and Ball emphasized that this man is not alone—ends up being: “How can we trust them on climate change when we can’t trust them on homosexuality?”

In other words, even with window dressing that says otherwise, climate change is still science underneath, with all its attendant difference and anti-biblical tendencies. This emphasis on trust acknowledges the social life of facts—that “scientific” can be perceived as “ideological” regardless of how vigorously its conclusions hew to a prescribed method or discipline. Or, in this case, that some facts can be connected to other facts producing a perception of ideological opposition. The consequence is that for someone like Ball, it means that adopting a scientific fact as a truth worthy of acting upon requires a defense and a biblical exegesis to support it.

At the Creation Care conference in Orlando, this was on full display as speaker after speaker got up to say in various ways: “I am not a liberal,” or “I’m here to say you can care about climate change and not be a liberal.” Most of the Creation Care–oriented books coming from these speakers begin similarly. Or, as the NAE website put it: “Being concerned about the effect of greenhouse gas emissions on the earth’s climate does not make you a liberal kook” (National Association of Evangelicals 2008a).

Part of the work to be done then by those intent on seeing Creation Care succeed is in parsing concern for the environment from what is seen as a liberal agenda or group of concerns. This explains the name change itself from “environment” to “creation” and what Cizik explained to me was a reticence to partner with any secular environmental groups until Creation Care is well established. That it is possible to believe that climate change is a real scientific fact and still be a conservative unallied with other liberal causes such as abortion or homosexuality—two key moral issues for evangelicals active in American policy and politics—is a position that is only slowly being established. And yet, as the pastor and his daughter pointed out at the conference and as Ball affirmed, it is the primary way in which evangelicals will become convinced of the need to address climate change both personally and collectively. Those who deliver the message must be trusted in order to “bless the facts” and to provide the moral, ideological, and epistemological underpinning necessary to make the claim that action is required credible and worth prioritizing.
A secondary and related aspect involves establishing a deep connection with the biblical mandate to “tend the garden,” as DeWitt and several pastors at the conference put it, and making that interpretive turn known, available, and trusted by pastors who have either ignored the issue or defaulted to the stance taken by Republican-aligned evangelical leaders, like those opposed to the ECI. It is this step that will likely lend the whole initiative what it needs to be seen as biblical and Christian in the cultural sense—something that Christian individuals can be seen to be involved with and ask others to join in. DeWitt’s exegesis makes this aspect abundantly clear, and he is certainly one of several who have made a similar effort (Berry 2000; Bouma-Prediger 2001; Robinson 2007; Robinson and Chatraw 2006; Sleeth 2007). If one considers the way abortion became a “Christian issue” or an issue of morality for Christians to take up, Creation Care is trying to affect the same process for the environment. But the environment involves a much more complicated set of considerations ranging from the status of science, a historical association with the Left, the economy and political positions on its handling, as well as its moral and biblical standing.

This, analytically, is one of the most difficult bundles of considerations to puzzle through, and it speaks to the diversity of the evangelical movement. Within the evangelical movement, there exist groups who identify more strongly with social justice issues like poverty alleviation. Tony Campolo is one such prominent “left-leaning” leader who was a spiritual advisor to Bill Clinton and is generally seen as a Democrat, despite his critiques regarding abortion and same-sex marriage. His 2008 book *Red Letter Christians* spawned something of a submovement of its own and is a challenge to Christians to rise above partisan politics to address the environment and other issues. Yet what is largely at stake for proponents of Creation Care is the twinning of what is biblical and what is politically conservative where “Christian values” stand in metonymically for a much larger swath of concerns that run the gamut from population control and abortion to big government. With the Bible as a rationale for acting, the issue becomes less about opinion or political leaning but about what’s right and wrong. Jim Ball put it this way in a post on Beliefnet that was responding to stereotypes he saw Bill Moyers and Grist.com using to describe Christian beliefs.

The main reason many evangelicals have not been as engaged in caring for God’s creation as the Bible calls them to be is because in their
minds “environmentalists” are liberals who hold beliefs (e.g., pantheism) and values (e.g., population control) that can be harmful and lead people astray. Indeed, becoming an environmentalist could lead one to become a full-blown liberal, and thus turn away from conservative Christian values and those who hold them. Some evangelicals are also concerned about what they regard as liberal solutions to environmental problems: big government and oppressive regulations. Because environmentalists are perceived to be liberals, anything tagged as an “environmental” concern must be liberal, too. There is an unfortunate guilt-by-association at play: if something is liberal, then evangelicals should have nothing to do with it. (Ball 2007b)

So it’s not just that environmentalism is liberal, but also that if it isn’t politically conservative or Republican, then it’s not Christian. It is an unfortunate “us versus them” position, particularly for a religion whose tenets also include “spreading God’s love” in order to win others as converts. Ball went on to say that this barrier prevents many evangelicals from “exploring the richness of the Bible’s message on creation-care,” which creates more “ignorance and lack of motivation” to act.

Trying to understand the stakes of political neutrality and an embrace of environmental issues led me to read Joel Hunter’s work more closely. Not only is he a key figure within the Creation Care movement who counts DeWitt as one of his mentors, but he’s also been spearheading many of the structural and political changes within the evangelical movement. His 2007 book A New Kind of Conservative was originally published a year earlier under the title Right Wing, Wrong Bird: Why the Tactics of the Religious Right Won’t Fly with Most Conservative Christians. What Hunter proposes is a structural change that retains the conservative values of the evangelical church, but not necessarily its political leanings. He seeks a kind of overhaul in thinking about political involvement, and it stems in part from his own experiences when he was positioned to take over one of the pinnacles of the Religious Right.

Hunter first came to media prominence in 2006 for his acceptance and then rejection of the offer to run the Christian Coalition, an organization founded by Pat Robertson and led famously by Ralph Reed in the 1990s, to lobby the federal government on behalf of Christian family values. One of the reasons Hunter stated that he decided to rescind his acceptance of the position was that the board of the organization refused to entertain the possibility of taking the organization in different directions—of tackling
issues like climate change, AIDS, and poverty. In *New Kind of Conservative*, Hunter describes the incident in much more generous terms than mainstream media did at the time. *Time* ran a story about the Coalition struggling to remain relevant; the *New York Times* painted Hunter’s resignation as one of the Coalition’s latest difficulties and quoted Hunter as saying there was a new uprising within evangelical circles not necessarily interested “in the passage of certain laws” (Banerjee 2006). The rebuttal from Christian Coalition representatives was that Hunter had subverted the process by which consensus on agenda changes can proceed in their organization, painting him as something of a loose cannon. In the book, while not necessarily faulting the differences he had with the board of the Christian Coalition, Hunter describes their stance of fomenting “fear and anger” on hot button issues as one that stems from the 1970s. Christians, at that time, still reeling from the tumult of the 1960s, were confronted with enormous cultural shifts such as the Supreme Court decision in 1973 on *Roe v. Wade* and the decision to “subtract” (a significant shift to less aggressive language by Hunter) prayer in schools (Hunter 2008, 21).

Hunter goes on to carefully characterize the resulting para-church organizations like those started by Dobson and Jerry Falwell as helping to fill the vacuum on national moral standards and civic duty. However, he sees the “past success of Christian conservatism” as a block in the maturation of the evangelical movement. The foreword by Ron Sider, president of a para-church organization called Evangelicals for Social Action, makes Hunter’s point more clearly by stating that “a powerful evangelical center is emerging that is rapidly transcending the narrow boundaries of the Religious Right” (2008, 13). Sider and other scholars who have published on this emerging shift within evangelical circles point to two major examples of this shift: the 2004 “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility” adopted unanimously by the board of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), and the 2006 Evangelical Climate Initiative (ECI). On both of these documents, Hunter is a signatory and has emerged as a key spokesman.

The vision Hunter puts forward is of connecting on ideals and faith and moving forward on issues in partnership with like minds, regardless of their religious orientation. This ecumenicalism was on full display at the conference when one of the first breakout sessions featured Hunter, a local rabbi, and a local imam, and when a keynote was offered by the Catholic bishop for Florida. When Hunter introduced Bishop Wenski, he said that “new evangelicalism is really old Catholicism,” implying that the civic
involvement of the Catholic Church was both a goal and a model worth emulating. Wenski, in his riveting address, made it clear where he stands: “We are not endorsing environmentalism. Al Gore is not the fifth evangelist . . . and everything said about climate change is not good science just like everything we hear from the pulpit is not good theology.” He went on to explain that the strategy of the church is not to impose on the unwilling. Rather, quoting Pope John Paul, he noted, “The church does not impose, she proposes. We have a proposal to make about what helps or hinders human flourishing.” Science, he made clear, serves this proposal for common good rather than the other way around. Wenski’s main rationale for working on climate change is something Hunter has written about and what Creation Care espouses—that one of the primary reasons climate change is worth paying attention to is that it threatens the poorest of the poor, or “the least of these” in biblical terms. Hunter came on after Wenski and noted that “God has seen fit to give us problems that no one group can solve on their own,” and in his jovial positive way he suggested that teamwork was the appropriate metaphor to move forward on good works.

It is this kind of partnering that Hunter is recommending with any and all who are willing to work on issues that require clear moral prescriptions, putting aside the suspicion one has of those considered the “enemy” (he lists liberals, secularists, “United Nation-alists,” etc.). He asks:

What if there was a way to increase our identity and our intensity for right by associating common causes with “the enemy”? What if conservative did not just mean emphases on traditional morality, small government and lower taxes, large military and combat readiness? What if conservative also meant doing the right thing in compassion issues like Jesus did: healing the sick, feeding the hungry, appreciating the “lilies” (God’s creation), and freeing the oppressed? What if believers were also enthusiastic for the furtherance of science and rigorous training in rational debate? (24)

He is perhaps even more clear-cut later on when he says: “Conservative Christians need to be more ambidextrous rather than just “Right” or “Left” oriented. The Bible is more holistic, more fulfilling to all of life’s needs rather than heavy-handed on what is morally right or compassionately left” (78–83 original text, quoted in Deep Green Conversation blog).

Hunter is careful to continually pay homage to those who have established the foundation for civic involvement and Christian positions on
fundamental issues like abortion and same-sex issues. And, certainly, Susan Harding (2000) has pointed out that evangelicals possess a kind of bilingualism, moving back and forth between their communities and the larger world. But the ambidextrousness Hunter advocates is meant to question the foundations of alignment between evangelicals and right-wing political advocacy. What Hunter is pushing for is nothing short of radical, and the environment is one of the primary lightning rods for the change that he’s proposing.

Conclusion

Creation Care has been forced to confront historical and epistemological concerns that sideline scientific evidence and, at the same time, address heated opposition within their own movement that stems in part from political alignment with right-wing positions on climate change and economic issues. Beginning with its name, Creation Care has had to differentiate itself from the environmental movement for fear of being branded as liberal. As Hunter told the Orlando Sentinel when he explained why they use “Creation Care” as opposed to “environmentalism”: “We’re not tree-huggers, we’re God-huggers . . . . We wanted very much to do this not out of an ideology, not out of a political position, but out of a moral obedience of what it says in the Word” (Carlson 2006). Ball made a similar statement when Christianity Today interviewed him during the launch of ECI (Blunt 2006).

For many, science itself is seen as ideologically liberal and therefore not the basis on which evangelicals should act. Hence Hunter’s crucial definition of the reason to act being about “moral obedience.” This isn’t to say that science is completely sidelined, but it is paired with the moral in complex and sometimes paradoxical ways in order to achieve the position of “belief” in climate change as a real problem in need of Christian address. Scientific evidence, in the context of Creation Care, acts as a partner, rather than as the sole basis for evidence. Through this lens, as C. S. Lewis put it, biblical knowledge acts in epistemological parity alongside, but also supersedes, scientific (and more general civic) epistemologies in terms of establishing not only what constitutes a valid explanation but what that explanation demands morally and ethically. A biblical mandate must be part of what convinces evangelicals of the need to act, and a part of that work means nesting environmental concerns within existing well-defended mandates regarding, for example, care for the poor and the
sanctity of life. Trust to speak on these issues—to “bless the facts”—is established in part through one’s position within the church and evangelical movement as well as through identifying as a conservative.

When I spoke with Cizik and James McCarthy, both told me about a planned trip to Alaska later in the summer of 2007. They would be bringing six scientists and six evangelical leaders to Alaska to see firsthand the impact of a changing climate on people and the environment. The six scientists would include McCarthy, Eric Chivian, and others yet to be determined, and the six evangelicals would include three convinced and three unconvincled of the need to act on climate change. Bill Moyers from PBS’s *Now* sent a television crew along to film the adventure and conversions. The documentary, called “God and Global Warming,” condenses the week-long trip, which includes the group meeting in the Anchorage airport, on bus trips through Alaska, and trying to convince Bishop Harry Jackson, an African American pastor from the Washington, D.C., area who had joined the group. Jackson is labeled as a skeptic who thinks that most of the calls to action on climate change are “alarmist,” and he isn’t sure what Christians should be doing about climate change right now.

One of their destinations was the much-chronicled town of Shishmaref, Alaska. Located on a barrier island, Shishmaref is one of several Inupiat villages in serious peril from a combination of storms, coastal erosion, and permafrost melt. Despite the access to scientists and the hard work the group engages in to convince Jackson, who rapidly becomes a central character in the story, it is the Inuit with whom he connects. When he recognizes their plight and the role of carbon emissions in what they are experiencing, he understands the need to act and to take the message back to his church. He remains somewhat unengaged by the science, but the plight of poverty and relocation are a burden he well understands.

Perhaps this was a factor of documentary storytelling and the need to find a character-driven narrative, and perhaps it was an idiosyncratic individual who bypassed the science in favor of addressing the dire needs of individuals he met and their community. Yet this is exactly the kind of transformation that Creation Care has positioned itself to effect. Jim Ball put it this way in his response to Grist.org:

Those environmentalists who do not share our faith perspective will have to understand that we evangelicals will have some different reasons for addressing environmental concerns. We may use different lan-
guage, like “creation-care,” and we may be more comfortable with labels like “conservationist” rather than “environmentalist.” And, frankly, we may seem strange to you at times. But once committed to a cause, we can help make a difference.

What kind, how much, and where that difference is made remains to be seen, but certainly what this chapter raises are the stakes of a coproductionist approach. Ball, those on the trip to Alaska, and many others in this chapter are describing how it is that their group is coming to terms with climate change’s form of life. Making climate change a Christian concern involves overcoming a resistance to what’s perceived as the dominant meanings, rules, and associations—even the need for a change of name indicates the level of compromise required, and a relationship-building exercise that is not merely based on ideological concerns.

This is the challenge that considering other meanings presents—that scientific epistemological grounds don’t automatically trump other modes of apprehending and making sense of either the natural world or the human place in it. Rather, compromise is constituted by way of acknowledging the epistemological concerns and challenges that scientific facts present socially, historically, and ethically. Coproduction as an idiom acknowledges the way scientific knowledge both embeds and is embedded in social practices, identities, norms, institutions, and discourses. Yet the stakes of coproduction necessarily involve contending with other interpretive frameworks, epistemologies, and expertise. The next chapter focuses more specifically on how this is occurring within scientific contexts and within efforts to mobilize diverse publics through articulations of risk and economic calculations.