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Choice During Interesting Times: A Protestant Perspective on Global Climate Change,

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A Chinese friend of mine, Eddie Leung, told me that the worst Chinese curse is:

"May you live in interesting times!"

We certainly live in interesting times, so in a way, Eddie is right. We are cursed by the many threats of Global Warming, ranging from droughts, to floods, to the spread of diseases northward, to the melting of the earth's ice caps. Forests from Alaska to the tropics are ravaged by our careless management.

The impacts of our misguided actions show up in many ways. They impact agriculture and human habitat. They impact the plants and animals that we depend on. During the 20th century humanity engaged in a massive effort resulting in devastating destruction to the Earth's tropical rainforests. They were destroyed to harvest the wood, to convert the land to agriculture, and to convert the land to grazing.¹ Reports of the annual rate of destruction typically range from 1 to 3 percent per year. The mid-range prediction indicates that tropical rainforests will be gone from this planet during the 21st century.

This destruction is extremely harmful to endangered species since more than half of all species live in the tropical rainforest.² More than half of the species in the tropical rainforest are endemic to the tropical rainforest. Hence, approximately 25 percent of the Earth's species are endemic to the tropical rainforest. If the tropical rainforests are destroyed, these endemic species no longer have a home, and hence they are driven to extinction. This single phenomenon can bring about the extinction of 25 percent of all of the species on the Earth during the 21st century! The noted Harvard professor E. O. Wilson has conservatively estimated that "Human activity has increased extinction between 1,000 and 10,000 times over this level [the normal rate] in the rain forest by reduction of area alone. Clearly we are in the midst of one of the great extinction spasms in geological history."³

In their landmark paper, "Extinction Risk from Climate Change,"⁴ Thompson et al show that the effects of Global Climate Change are comparable to the impacts caused by the destruction of tropical rainforests. "...we predict, on the basis of mid-range climate-warming scenarios for 2050, that 15–37% of species in our sample of regions and taxa will be "committed to extinction" This is a remarkable change to our understanding of the causes of the current wave of extinctions. They demonstrated that the temperature increases caused by the mid-range predictions of global warming models would be sufficient to drive to extinction another 25% of current species.

Our very poor choices are causing plant and animal species to go extinct at the fastest rate that that the Earth has seen in the last 65 million years, when the dinosaurs and many other species were driven to extinction when a meteor the size of the Himalayan Mountains crashed into the Earth. If current trends continue, humans will cause the extinction of over half of plant and animal species during this century. However, if half of the individual species in a food web are driven to extinction, the food web loses its redundancy and is no longer able to provide sufficient energy to maintain the population of the top level predator. Hence the population of the top level predator is severely decreased or in some cases it is driven to extinction.

In the human population, these impacts first show up on the less privileged among us, including the widows, the poor, and the orphans. Randomly losing one half of the plants and animals in humanity's food web will ruin the food supply system for people over the entire Earth, leading to a collapse of the economic system of many countries. The resultant disruption of the food chains is predicted to cause the largest wave of human migration in history. Masses of very hungry people moving in an attempt to mitigate their situation will cause unprecedented increases in international tensions. This is clearly a threat to national security. The recent approximate

¹ John Terborgh, *Diversity and the Tropical Rainforest*, Scientific American Library, 1992

² E.O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*, 1992, p. 277.

³ E.O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*, 1992, p. 280

⁴ Thomas et al. *Nature* 427, 145–148. January 8, 2004.

collapse of our economic system gives us a rough idea of how unprepared we are for a catastrophe of this magnitude. Since we simply don't know how to handle crisis of this magnitude, it is simply better to take preventative action to prevent it from happening.

We currently live on the edge of chaos, which brings us back to Eddie's idea of a curse or a crisis. The Chinese word for crisis consists of two characters: 危機 - one for danger, and one for opportunity. Since the danger is clear, let's focus on the opportunity. In a way, Eddie is wrong, since we are blessed by God with the opportunity of stopping and reversing these trends. In your packets, you have a sampling of the environmental policies of major religious organizations, including:

- Catholics and Jews,
- Mainline Protestant and Evangelicals,
- Orthodox and Baptists, and
- Quakers and Baha'is.

All of these religious groups call for us to take better care of the forests, and to protect our atmosphere from excessive greenhouse gas emissions. In addition, the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches have also adopted policies specifically calling for a Halt to the Mass Extinction of the Earth's species.⁵ In order to solve the earth changing environmental devastation that is threatening us, we must all return to our root values. These root values are strongly expressed in the Bible.

In the Book of Genesis⁶, humanity is given a prime directive to "...serve & keep the garden." I believe that we are privileged to live in a time when our service, our activities, and our contributions can make such an important difference. In the words of William Ruckelshaus, the first Administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency, "We can save the earth." By protecting the Earth we protect ourselves, since the Earth provides us with the food, water, air and land that we need to survive. It provides us with a garden in which we can thrive, if we manage it wisely.

Let's use our intelligence "...to serve and keep the garden..." and thereby create a much better future for our children and future generations. Our choices make an enormous difference. Our situation today is like that described in the 30th chapter of Deuteronomy, where God tells the children of Israel:

"I have set before you life and prosperity, death and destruction, blessings and curses. ... Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."⁷

The problems that I have described are certainly monumental; however, I believe that they are well within our collective abilities to solve. We can prevent a mass extinction, and do it in a way that allows humanity to actually improve its current situation. However, to do this we will have to bring about a coalescence of values so that we effectively work together. The statements that we have given you from the major religious groups of America show that the religious community is beginning to come together on the need for effective care of God's creation. It's

⁵ <http://www.pcusa.org/washington/issuenet/enviro-050725.htm>

⁶ Genesis 2:15

⁷ Deuteronomy 30:19

heartening to see that all of you, the representatives of the religious community of America, are here today in the nation's capital to choose life.

Thank you very much for your attention, and may God richly bless both you and your activities