



Global warming and individualism

I have long been intrigued by people’s responses to the scientific discussions of global warming. Hearing them I sometimes think I have wandered into an intellectual fun house. I imagine that the ongoing conversation is about the rate of polar ice melt and desertification and whether human activity has contributed to both. Others seem to think we are discussing an attempt by the “left” to control behavior through taxes.

I am no scientist. I will have to rely on others to determine whether or not human activity is contributing to global warming and whether, even if it is, there is anything we can do about it. But suppose the vast majority of scientists are correct and that our actions are leading to planetary disaster? What if famine, starvation, and death are ahead if we do not change our ways? As someone who is pro-life I cannot sit on the sidelines and watch the suffering of millions, if not billions, of people because of my unwillingness to alter my lifestyle for the sake of reducing carbon emissions. I cannot ignore human suffering to preserve my comfortable and wasteful way of living.

This unwillingness to change the way we live seems to me to be at the core of the complaints of opponents of the developing ecological sensitivity on the part of evangelicals. Many Americans seem to think we have an inalienable right to cheap gas, cheap food, and a wasteful and profligate lifestyle. Whereas once upon a time it was a virtue to be frugal and careful, to grow one’s own food and to care for the earth, it is now seen as “leftist” or “elitist.” Since when did something essentially conservative as preserving the health and productivity of the earth become “leftist”? Since it impinged on our individual “right” to live as we jolly well pleased! If we want to water our lawn in the middle of a drought—we will do so. We are Americans! If we want to buy gas guzzling, fume producing modes of transportation—we will do so. We are Americans! If we want to cover half

the country in landfills—we will do so. We are Americans! (We may also do this if we are Canadians, but I will leave it for my brothers and sisters north of the border to bring this critique!)

This fear of restriction and limitation is neither Christian, nor, I would argue, particularly American. It is a victory of individualism over the claims of community. It is a victory of “me” over “we.” Christians have always insisted that the community is critical to my existence as an individual. I am formed by a community called church. I do not live for myself but for God. As an American I am not merely an individual. I am part of a community that works for the good

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of the whole. I willingly pay taxes to support infrastructure—roads, bridges, water purification plants, and the like. I also willingly pay taxes to provide for the poor, to support police and fire service, and to provide for education in my community. I pay these things willingly because I care about the life of my community. I care about its prosperity and health. As an individual I may think I have better things to spend my money on. But as a citizen and as a Christian I willingly give to sustain the health of the community. Of course, I don’t always agree with the way

the government (or the church for that matter) spends my money. But I have recourse through the ballot box and public comment to protest waste, mismanagement, and skewed spending priorities.

Being part of a community requires sacrifice and discipline—whether it is a local church or a national community. It requires giving up some of our individual freedoms and goods for the sake of the freedom and good of the whole. The love of God, the love of God’s creation, and the love of God’s people demand this from me and from the whole church, which he formed for the sake of his gospel and his world. □

John E. (Jay) Phelan Jr. is president and dean of North Park Theological Seminary.