Pentecostalism and the Environmental Crisis:
Is a Theological Climate Change Necessary?

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Abstract

Skepticism and indifference have all too commonly characterized the Pentecostal community's response to the global environmental crisis, and this due largely to deeply entrenched theological beliefs that render creation care senseless and unnecessary. This essay critically examines both the eschatological and pneumatological climates of Pentecostalism in light of the environmental crisis, arguing that the movement’s broad acceptance of dispensational eschatology and reductionist pneumatology significantly frustrates any potential commitment to creation care. As a way forward, alternative theological perspectives are suggested in the form of transformational eschatology and inclusive pneumatology, both of which notably inspire rather than obstruct a strong environmental ethic. Concluding remarks offer Pentecostals practical suggestions for caring for the environment and combating anthropogenic climate change.
Introduction

There is little doubt among leading experts today that anthropogenic global warming is a scientific reality.¹ “The burning of coal, oil, and gas,” coupled with deforestation and other indiscriminate human activities, has contributed to an excessive concentration of heat-trapping gases in earth’s atmosphere,² rendering human beings chiefly responsible for the unprecedented global warming of the last fifty years.³ While the social and ecological consequences of this environmental crisis are far too pervasive to expound upon here, it must be understood that the world and its inhabitants are now suffering and will continue to suffer as a result of climate change.⁴ In response to this, some Christians (Pentecostals among them) have regrettably joined the ranks of the so-called “climate skeptics,” not uncommonly the result of a fundamentalism that perceives modern science to be a threat to an inordinately literalistic reading of Scripture.⁵ For many other Christians—Pentecostals in particular—even if the global environmental crisis is not an entirely dubious construction of the scientific imagination, there is no pressing need to respond to it in light of the impending peril predestined for earth and her (ungodly) inhabitants.⁶ Still others within the Pentecostal tradition find themselves embracing an anthropocentric pneumatology that limits the Spirit’s activity “to their own spiritual experiences or charismatic

⁴ Melillo, Richmond, Yohe, 12-14.
⁵ Shane Clifton, “Preaching the ‘Full Gospel’ in the Context of Global Environmental Crises” in *The Spirit Renews the Face of the Earth: Pentecostal Forays in Science and Theology of Creation*, ed. Amos Yong (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 121. Clifton here draws special attention to Answers in Genesis, a fundamentalist group that appeals to many Christians, including Pentecostals.
praxis.” In so doing, these believers fail to apprehend the extent of the presence and work of the Spirit in all of creation, resulting in indifference toward the current ecological crisis. The coming pages therefore critique the eschatological and pneumatological climates of contemporary Pentecostalism in light of the environmental crisis and suggest alternative approaches that are more conducive to creation care.

**Eschatology**

In speaking of the “eschatological climate” of Pentecostalism, the language is intended to be broad and open to exceptions; surely, no one view of eschatology can be said to characterize every individual Pentecostal lay-person or scholar. However, there is a great deal of eschatological harmony among Pentecostals, as the wider community tends to embrace a view of the end times commonly referred to as dispensational eschatology. On this view, popularized by the best-selling *Left Behind* series, Christ returns not once, but twice: the first time to pull believers out of the world—inaugurating the great tribulation—and the second time to destroy the Antichrist in the battle of Armageddon and establish an earthly millennial reign. In the end,

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8 Ibid., 136.

9 Jeffrey Lamp opines that “it may prove that one way to assess the viability of Pentecostal eschatology is to examine how it translates into creation care in the present.” Jeffrey S. Lamp, “New Heavens and New Earth: Early Pentecostal Soteriology as a Foundation for Creation Care in the Present,” *Pneuma* 36, no. 1 (2014): 79. It seems reasonable to suggest that the viability of Pentecostal pneumatology can also be evaluated in the same way.


11 Warrington here references a variety of eschatological perspectives that can be found within the Pentecostal tradition.


13 Warrington, 322.

Satan and his rebellious forces are permanently defeated, the wicked are judged, and the present world is annihilated and supplanted by a new heavens and new earth.14

Rather than scrutinizing the exegetical warrant for belief in dispensational eschatology,15 the present discussion draws out the consequences of said ideas for environmental ethics. Unfortunately, the prognosis is grim: dispensational eschatology is a theological impediment to creation care.16 The problem with this view in relation to ecological concern is that it entails an altogether bleak view of the world and the divine-human relationship to it. Peter Althouse opines that “the concept of the secret rapture,” part and parcel to dispensational eschatology, “leaves the world to the devices of chaos and evil and eventual annihilation.”17 The discontinuity between creation care and dispensational eschatology is thus not at all difficult to see: why should one go to great lengths to save a planet that God intends to destroy in a relatively short amount of time?18 Miroslav Volf further argues that belief in an imminent return of Christ, taken together with belief in the forthcoming annihilation of the earth—is “not compatible with ecological concern [italics mine].”19 His reasoning reveals an inconsistency in affirming, on the one hand,
the inherent value and goodness of creation, and on the other, its future annihilation by God. That is, if one is compelled by an annihilationist eschatology to deny the “intrinsic value and goodness” of creation in favor of a more consistent, instrumental means to an end view of goodness, then there seems to be little reason to take up arms in the fight against anthropogenic climate change. It is still possible that “someone expecting annihilation…may be involved in social and ecological preservation,” but this is in spite of a theology of “cosmic annihilation,” not because of it.

All of this reveals a rather poignant truth about dispensational eschatology: it is by no means innocuous in view of the global environmental crisis. A theology that exacerbates the problem by failing to promote an active, positive response is ecologically destructive. In view of the devastating consequences of climate change, dissenting voices in the Pentecostal community can and should be a catalyst for theological change. What, then, might constitute a more appropriate Pentecostal eschatology? As an alternative to fundamentalist dispensationalism, several Pentecostal thinkers have proposed an eschatology that “looks to the already/not yet of the kingdom.” From this perspective, the life and ministry of Jesus “clearly establishes an eschatological continuity between the anticipatory reign of God ‘already’ present in his ministry and the consummated reign of God ‘not yet’ come.”}

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20 Volf, 30.
21 Ibid.
22 Waddell, “Apocalyptic Sustainability,” 103.
23 Ibid. Waddell notes that Ronald Reagan’s first Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, supported “the reckless consumption of the USA’s natural resources” in light of eschatological beliefs akin to those held by dispensationalists.
25 Dempster, 61.
Jesus’ own prophetic teaching,\textsuperscript{26} implies that \textit{transformation}, rather than annihilation, will be God’s consummative act at the end of the age.\textsuperscript{27} This transformational eschatology makes sense of the Pentecostal emphasis on the charismata in ways that dispensational eschatology does not.\textsuperscript{28} Indeed, “tongues, prophecy, and healing are “moments of interpenetration of the new creation into the present.”\textsuperscript{29} From an environmental perspective, the continuity of this world with the world to come provides ethical impetus for Pentecostals to behave in ways conducive to creation care.\textsuperscript{30} Another helpful way of framing the eschatological discussion, particularly with respect to the new heavens and new earth, is to consider the link between soteriology and eschatology. That is, the coming renewal of creation anticipates a non-anthropocentric salvation in which God brings new life to \textit{all} of creation.\textsuperscript{31} This broad soteriology, flowing naturally out of transformational eschatology, further solidifies the view that God’s created order possesses intrinsic value insofar as it entails that the world is worth saving. In sum, there are strong theological reasons for Pentecostals to begin thinking outside the box of fundamentalist eschatology, and there has never been a more appropriate time to do so. An eschatological commitment that engenders a strong environmental ethic could have a markedly positive impact on the global environmental crisis. In addition to eschatology, a well-developed pneumatology can also provide Pentecostals with the theological resources necessary to sufficiently address environmental concerns.

\textsuperscript{26} Dempster, 61-62. Note Dempster’s reference to Lk. 4:18-19 as evidence of Jesus’ own prophetic self-understanding.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 62.
\textsuperscript{28} Gerald T. Sheppard, “Pentecostals and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism: The Anatomy of an Uneasy Relationship,” \textit{Pneuma} 6, no. 2 (1984): 26. Sheppard makes a powerful case that there is discontinuity between dispensationalism and Pentecostal theology, concluding that a consistent embrace of dispensational theology (both eschatological and ecclesiological) poses a threat to “the most basic doctrines among Pentecostals.” Althouse also notes that “the cessationism of dispensationalism…is antithetical to Pentecostal faith and practice.” See Althouse, “Pentecostal Eco-Transformation,” 77.
\textsuperscript{29} Althouse, “‘Left Behind’ — Fact or Fiction,” 206-207.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 204. See also Althouse, “Pentecostal Eco-Transformation,” 77.
\textsuperscript{31} “If…the destiny of creation is restoration and renewal in the age to come, then the other-than-human creation is, like human beings, an object of God’s ultimate salvation…” Lamp, 69.
Pneumatology

The fundamental role of pneumatology in Pentecostal theology can hardly be understated. Pentecostal thinkers have long noted the Spirit’s vital participation in the life of the Christian community, including both his bestowal of spiritual gifts and his empowerment of believers as God’s witnesses in the world.\(^{32}\) There is more to the pneumatological story, however, and as such Pentecostalism has not escaped criticism for a reductionist pneumatology—one that restricts the Spirit’s action in the world to “humanity, individually understood, and to the community of faith.”\(^{33}\) While more recent scholarship has pushed the boundaries of such a constricted pneumatology,\(^{34}\) Matthew Tallman’s suggestion that Pentecostalism has largely ignored environmental issues, due in part to an anthropocentric conception of the Spirit’s work, is quite unsettling.\(^{35}\) Although a shift in Pentecostal pneumatology is therefore necessary given the pressing environmental crisis, Pentecostalism’s focus on the Spirit’s activity in the life of the believer is not a problem for ecological concern \textit{per se}. In fact, it is an arguably necessary and vital aspect of Pentecostal faith and praxis. Allan Anderson goes so far as to suggest that the \textit{central theme} of Pentecostalism is an empowering experience of the Holy Spirit for service in the world [italics mine].\(^{36}\) Pentecostals everywhere rightly affirm and believe in the power of the

\(^{32}\) For an overview of Pentecostal pneumatology, see Warrington, 44-130.

\(^{33}\) Juan Sepúlveda, “The Perspective of Chilean Pentecostalism,” \textit{Journal of Pentecostal Theology} 2, no. 4 (1994): 47. Sepúlveda’s remarks here are not limited to a particular brand of Pentecostalism, but apply to the movement as a whole.


\(^{35}\) Tallman, 136.

\(^{36}\) Anderson, 187.
transforming Spirit of God. The problem, from an environmental perspective, surfaces when this view eclipses the Spirit’s presence in the rest of God’s created order. More succinctly: when the Spirit’s transformative and restorative power is viewed through a narrow anthropocentric lens, the pneumatological incentive to care for the environment is greatly diminished or altogether absent. What is necessary, then, is a shift in the pneumatological climate of Pentecostalism toward a broader understanding of the Spirit’s activity in the world.37 Through engagement with John Levison’s groundbreaking work, Filled with the Spirit, the forthcoming discussion intends to contribute to the existing dialog between Pentecostal pneumatology and ecology.38

In his survey of ancient Israelite pneumatology, Levison finds that the Hebrew Scriptures do not in fact draw a distinction between the physical life-force in all living things and the divine spirit.39 More concretely, the breath of life breathed into Adam in Genesis 2 is none other than the spirit of God. Levison further notes that, from the perspective of ancient Israel, charismatic endowments of God’s spirit are not of an entirely different character—nor are they any more supernatural—than this enlivening spirit endowed at birth.40 In support of his reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, Levison juxtaposes the biblical characters Joseph and Daniel with the elders in Numbers 11 and Samson respectively.41 He argues that the spirit God gives at birth, rightly cultivated (as in the lives of Joseph and Daniel), is no less extraordinary than temporary charismatic endowments of the spirit, such as Sampson’s God-given ability “to kill a horde of

37 As with the previous discussion on eschatology, this language is broad and open to exceptions. 38 For examples of the “existing” dialog, see note 34. 39 John R. Levison, Filled with the Spirit (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 12. Note also that my use of the word “spirit” here is intentionally lowercase, in keeping with Levison’s own hand. He writes: “I have consistently written ‘holy spirit’ without capitalization in order to prevent a misunderstanding that is based on the unnecessary distinction between an allegedly divine Holy Spirit and a human spirit.” Ibid., XV. 40 Ibid., 12, 80-81. See also Job 32:8. 41 Ibid., 81. For Levison’s reflections on Joseph, see 48-51 (Gen. 41:38-39). For Daniel, see 74-80 (Dan. 4:8-9, 15; 5:11-12, 14; 6:3-4). The textual references to the Elders in Numbers 11 and Sampson are Num. 11:16-17, 25 and Jud. 15:14-16 respectively.
Philistines with the jawbone of an ass,” or the elders’ ability to prophesy and share Moses’ burden of leadership.\textsuperscript{42} He also suggests, in keeping with Elihu (Job 34:14-15) and the Preacher (Eccl. 3:18-20), that in the collective mind of ancient Israel, non-human animals likewise possess the divine spirit of God.\textsuperscript{43} Just as God breathes life into human beings, so does he also with animals; the absence of this intimate divine presence is death itself.\textsuperscript{44}

Remarkably, the duality of this “early Jewish milieu” that incorporates two dimensions of the spirit: “the God-given spirit within \textit{and} the spirit as a supplemental endowment,” is “virtually nonexistent” in early Christian literature.\textsuperscript{45} This phenomenon surely illuminates Amos Yong’s prediction that Levison’s work would “explode in the field of those laboring on a theology of the spirit,”\textsuperscript{46} for Levison has challenged the all too common assumption that first-century Christian pneumatological categories can comfortably be read back into the Hebrew Scriptures. The reality is that there is pneumatological diversity in the biblical corpus, both within the New Testament and between the Old and New Testaments.\textsuperscript{47} Therefore, rather than ignoring ancient Israelite pneumatology—or worse—falling prey to anachronistic readings of the biblical text, it would be appropriate and beneficial for Pentecostals to welcome both OT and NT voices into pneumatological conversation.\textsuperscript{48}

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\item\textsuperscript{42} Levison, \textit{Filled with the Spirit}, 81.
\item\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 19-22.
\item\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 25-26 (Ps. 104:29-30).
\item\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 247, 251 (note the “emphasis upon transformation and discontinuity” in 2 Cor. 5:17).
\item\textsuperscript{48} Warrington, 44-45. Warrington notes that “most of the beliefs held by Pentecostals concerning the Spirit are gleaned from the NT.” Pentecostals, in his view, are often not confident “in their exploration of the Spirit in [OT] texts.” Nevertheless, Warrington speaks approvingly of an openness among those Pentecostals who have taken steps to engage “those outside their tradition who write about the Spirit.”
\end{notes}
To this end, if Levison is right that Israelite pneumatology does indeed conflate the concept of the life-giving spirit with the divine spirit, then, assuming this perspective is grafted into a broader Pentecostal pneumatology, non-human life possesses intrinsic value in view of being endowed with the spirit of God. Building further on this idea, if non-human life is in fact inhabited and enlivened by God’s spirit, then it possesses a special dignity and kinship with humanity that challenges the ethical credibility of exploiting and abusing living things, and by extension—given life’s utter dependence on a healthy and stable environment—the entire created world. This broad pneumatology thus displaces anthropocentric hegemony in ecotheological discourse, paving the way for a potent environmental ethic. As Yong notes, God’s creation is not to be abused indiscriminately, but to be treated as a neighbor deserving of love.

**Concluding Remarks**

Is Pentecostalism thus in need of a theological climate change? Given the above eschatological and pneumatological discussions, the answer is a resounding yes: a theological climate change within the wider Pentecostal movement is absolutely necessary if it is going to satisfactorily respond to the global environmental crisis. Dispensational eschatology, with its emphasis on coming doom and destruction, exacerbates the ecological problem, and reductionist pneumatology blinds believers to the all but tangible presence of the Spirit in the world. Thankfully, many voices within the tradition have already raised the alarm: the best available scientific evidence confirms that climate change is real and human-induced, and Pentecostals have at their disposal the requisite theological resources to effect lasting, positive change. Transformational eschatology, which emphasizes continuity between the present and renewed

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49 Waddell hints at this in his review of Levison’s *Filled with the Spirit*. See Waddell, “The Holy Spirit of Life, Work, and Inspired Speech,” 211.

50 Yong, 300.
creation, and a broad pneumatology informed by the convictions of ancient Israel, both have the power to transform the ecological ethos of the broader Pentecostal movement.

Suppose then, that theological change does occur within Pentecostalism. What comes of it practically? That is, what does it actually look like to love and care for creation? Speaking particularly in reference to the climate crisis, an appropriate response broadly entails a move toward renewable energy, coupled with a substantial reduction of carbon emissions. Suppporting environmental policies that put restrictions on carbon emissions—even to the point of writing a local or state representative—would be an effective way to advocate for such change. Other helpful responses include reducing waste, reusing products, recycling, and becoming more energy efficient. By making a few lifestyle changes, Pentecostals can make a truly positive ecological difference in God’s created world.

51 Melillo, Richmond, Yohe, 64-65.
52 Ibid., 64.
55 Melillo, Richmond, Yohe, 66.
Bibliography


