

Mormons and Climate Change: A Moral Obligation to Act

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Climate change is among humanity's most pressing issues; it is a global threat with increasingly severe implications. Yet, the scientific data alone has not been enough to generate the robust response that is needed to address it. In addition to the strong scientific evidence supporting climate change, there is an explicit and compelling moral argument to encourage action. Perhaps the greatest voice for such moral action can be found within religion. Churches, for example, can be powerful catalysts for social change within communities and would be valuable climate action allies. This essay will examine, in particular, how doctrine in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormon Church) instills a moral obligation to address climate change. The paper expands upon existing Mormon environmental literature by taking a unique approach that focuses on the social justice implications of climate change. There are three main principles in Mormonism that make addressing climate change a moral imperative. These include the moral obligation to (1) reduce poverty and suffering, (2) build up ideal societies where there is no inequality in wealth or resources, and (3) to acknowledge the close ties between posterity and ancestry. Based on these critical moral imperatives, which are strongly supported by LDS church doctrine, all Mormons have strong ethical and moral reasons to not only personally support, but to call for action on climate change both among individual members and in the LDS Church's official capacity as a global organization.

Keywords: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, LDS, Mormon, Mormonism, Climate Change

Introduction

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (2015) reports that, since the Industrial Revolution, human activity has resulted in an unprecedented concentration of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere. This has led to a global warming of the Earth's temperature by 1.4 degrees Fahrenheit since the 1880s, with all ten of the warmest years on record occurring in the last 12 years. Ocean temperature and sea levels are rising, ice sheets are shrinking, ocean acidity is increasing, and glaciers are retreating (EPA, 2015). This warming of the atmosphere increases the risk of soil erosion, seawater inundation, wildfires, and flooding. Moreover, climate change has also led to an increased frequency and magnitude of extreme weather events, such as heat waves, droughts, and storms, as well as changes in precipitation patterns (National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 2015). Since its inception nearly three decades ago, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has compiled the most comprehensive, scientifically-accurate reports on climate change, which are vetted by more than 1,300 expert scientists from across the globe. These reports represent the overwhelming consensus of the global scientific community that climate change is real, its impacts are dire, and its effects are already underway (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2014).

The science is settled and the alarms are sounding. Yet, somehow, scientific certainty has not been enough to inspire the strong global action on climate change that is needed if the world wishes to mitigate the worst of its impacts. In December 2015, an international deal was reached at the U.N. IPCC Conference of Parties in Paris. This deal—now known as the Paris Agreement—was a positive, symbolic step forward, but many top climate scientists have publicly criticized it as “woefully short of what is needed” (Bawden, 2016, para. 6).

Perhaps what has been missing in the rational, scientific reports—filled with charts and numbers—is a moral voice to inspire drastic action. Climate change is not just a matter of environmental quality; it may be the greatest moral issue the human race has ever faced. How we act (or fail to act) today will greatly impact human well-being around the world and in future generations to come. Thus, the necessary other half of the scientific data may be a compelling moral voice. In each of their publications the IPCC adheres strictly to the scientific guidelines of presenting unbiased research. It would be inappropriate for the IPCC to offer a moral voice on this issue. But churches can do precisely that and are often the preeminent voice of moral authority for their members.

In their 2014 report, the IPCC stated, “climate change impacts are expected to exacerbate poverty in most developing countries and create new poverty pockets in countries with increasing inequality, in both developed and developing countries” (p. 20). A church could synergistically complement the IPCC's communication of scientific information by issuing a call to climate action based on the inherent moral wrongness of contributing to an issue that increases human suffering through the creation of more inequality and poverty. For example, in the recently published encyclical on climate change, Pope Francis addresses not just Catholics, but “every person living on this planet,” urging them to take moral action to combat climate change in order to protect “our common home” (2015, p. 4). Examples like Pope Francis' call to action highlight the intersections of faith and science, and demonstrate how churches can be a powerful catalyst for social change when it comes to influencing, organizing, strengthening, and mobilizing communities to action. The Civil Rights movement in the U.S. in the 1960s more or less began in the church pews. In similar ways, churches could be powerful leaders in climate action.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (commonly referred to as the “LDS church” or “Mormon Church”)¹ has a press website, “Mormon Newsroom,” where it features media statements along with general information about the official stance of the church on numerous subjects. The topic of “Environmental Stewardship and Conservation” (LDS, 2016) was added to the website in 2013. The opening line reads: “All humankind are stewards over the Earth and should gratefully use what God has given, avoid wasting life and resources, and use the bounty of the Earth to care for the poor and the needy” (LDS, 2016). The short statement goes on to state that because humans are to be good stewards over God’s creation, they will be held accountable before Him. Notably absent from the statement, and its accompanying resources, are the words “climate change.”

Mormon environmental scholar George Handley says the Church’s silence on the topic of climate change is likely a reflection of their official position of political neutrality except when “political issues pertain directly to moral issues” (2001, p. 187). Given the IPCC and other environmental bodies have repeatedly stated that climate change will exacerbate inequality and the suffering of the poor and needy, should climate change qualify as a moral issue? Does the LDS church have a doctrinal responsibility to act to protect the most disadvantaged and vulnerable of society?

Expanding upon existing literature on Mormon environmentalism, this research takes a unique approach that focuses on the social justice implications of climate change. I examine what LDS doctrine teaches about religious responsibilities to address issues of human suffering (i.e. poverty and inequality) instead of the intrinsic value given to the environment in Mormonism. I hope to enrich the current understanding of how LDS doctrine interacts with environmentalism, particularly in the context of climate change, by looking at the impacts of climate change through a moral lens. Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to illustrate why the LDS church should add its voice in a moral call for action on climate change.

Literature Review

Mormon environmental literature generally falls into one of two categories, which Brown (2011) distinguishes as the vitalistic tradition and the stewardship tradition. The vitalistic tradition encompasses the bio-centric teachings in LDS doctrine that say the Earth has intrinsic value. This tradition is primarily based on the notion that nature is a witness of God, and that His creation must be treated with reverence. This includes the idea that there is spiritual value in the aesthetics of nature. For example, when one enjoys the beauty of nature, they can feel a sacredness and appreciation for God’s divine design (Brown, p. 72). In contrast, the stewardship tradition revolves around the doctrine that mankind was given the duty to be stewards over the Earth, and that they therefore must take good care of God’s creation (D&C 104:13-14).

Brigham Young University professor Hugh Nibley is responsible for one of the first scholarly works on Mormon environmentalism. In his 1994 book about early church president Brigham Young, Nibley devotes

an entire section to the prophet’s views on the environment. In 2001 another BYU professor, George Handley—now considered to be one of the preeminent Mormon environmental scholars—wrote *The Environmental Ethics of Mormon Belief*. These two seminal pieces form the basis for much of the current academic work on Mormon environmentalism. Additionally, the Mormon Environmental Stewardship Alliance (MESA, 2016) a group created by environmentally-minded church members, but unaffiliated with the LDS church, offered much supplementary aid with an online list of relevant scriptures and quotes from church leaders that relate to environmentalism in Mormonism. While they offer a strong foundation for Mormon environmentalism, these sources primarily address the relationship between principles of the LDS faith and the ecological world. They do not consider questions of climate change impacts or social justice.

Renowned history professor Lynn White (1967) famously authored an article entitled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” wherein he largely blamed medieval Christianity’s de-spiritualization of nature for modern day environmental crises and the wide spread apathy towards the natural world. Nash (2013) and Handley (2001) both point out that in Mormon scripture, unlike in many other Christian religions, prophets write about how plants and animals have spirits just like humans. In the LDS faith there are four sacred texts: *The Holy Bible (King James Version)*, *The Book of Mormon*, *The Pearl of Great Price*, and *The Doctrine and Covenants*. In *The Pearl of Great Price*² God tells the biblical prophet Moses that in addition to all of mankind, plant and animal spirits also lived in the pre-existence (a spirit world that all souls reside in before they come to Earth). God further explains that every plant and animal is striving to honor Him in its own way. Similarly, they too will be resurrected, and in the afterlife plants, animals, and humans will all reside in harmony (Moses 3:5-9). This LDS doctrine directly refutes White’s assertion that in a Christian paradigm, the environment is detached and inanimate. Instead these scriptures portray humanity as interwoven into a living earthly system with all plants and animals, which are our brothers and sisters on a similar mortal journey.

Moreover, the Earth has a spirit in LDS scriptures. In *The Pearl of Great Price*, the biblical prophet Enoch recounts a vision he had of modern day. In this vision of the future, Enoch hears the voice of the Earth cry out and say, “Wo, wo is me, the mother of men; I am pained, I am weary, because of the wickedness of my children. When shall I rest, and be cleansed from the filthiness which is gone forth out of me?” (Moses 7:48). It can be interpreted that in this Mormon scripture, the Earth, too, is not just an inanimate orb but also the mother of humankind. Moreover, that the Earth has a spirit, the capacity to feel pain, and that she weeps for her suffering due to environmental degradation at the hands of men (Galli, 2011, p. 43). In addition, as Galli (2011) points out, Mormons believe the Earth will be resurrected with Christ’s second coming. They trust the Earth will ultimately be transformed into a paradisiacal state, like the Garden of Eden, and that it will become the highest tier of heaven, home only to the most righteous.

The most recent and exciting contribution to the LDS literature on environmentalism is an address given by Elder Marcus B. Nash of the

1 Note: I will refer to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in this paper as “the church,” “the LDS church,” and “the Mormon church”

2 A supplemental “biblical” text that includes additional writings from the Old Testament prophets Moses and Abraham, as well as a re-translation of chapter 24 in the book of Matthew from the New Testament (KJV)

Quorum of the Seventy³ back in April 2013. It is most notable because he spoke in his formal capacity as a General Authority, a representative of the LDS church's central leadership. Nash briefly discusses four key environmental doctrines: (1) if the Earth's resources are distributed equally among men they will be bountiful, (2) environmental degradation causes God pain, (3) the state of the human soul and the environment are interconnected, and (4) nature can bring one spiritually closer to God (2013). This address was a monumental step forward for a church that has largely been silent on the topic of environmentalism.

The subject of climate change, however, has yet to enter the Mormon environmental conversation. In fact, the words "climate change" have never appeared in a recorded address by any of the hundreds of general authorities⁴ or other official church leaders. Likewise, in all of the Church's published resources I found only one reference to "global warming," which came from an article published in *The Ensign*, an LDS magazine, more than 20 years ago. In this short piece a Salt Lake City bishop,⁵ G. Michael Alder (1991), outlined the science behind anthropogenic climate change and why it should be a wakeup call for church members whose doctrine states that they will be held accountable before God for what they do to the Earth. As a local bishop, Alder was not speaking with authority as a representative of the Church headquarters. Moreover, the publication of this article appears to be the first and last time anything regarding climate change was even mentioned in Mormonism.

The Moral Imperative to Act on Climate Change

In Mormon doctrine, there are three main principles that make climate change a moral imperative. These include the moral obligation to (1) reduce poverty and suffering, (2) build up ideal societies where there is no inequality in wealth or resources, and (3) to acknowledge the close ties between posterity and ancestry. The following section will look at each of these principles in depth.

Poverty, Security, and Suffering

The United Nations Development Program has ominously concluded that "the impacts of climate change will reverse decades worth of human development gains" (United Nations Development Program, 2016, para. 1). For many years the world has strived to move towards a more equal society by decreasing global poverty and improving the human condition, but climate change could rapidly undo all of these efforts. In LDS doctrine, the teachings of Jesus Christ indicate a clear moral calling to act on issues of inequality, poverty, and global suffering. Thus, because climate change exacerbates each of these issues, acting on climate change should be a moral imperative in the LDS church.

Climate change is a multi-faceted issue and its impacts are thus

complex. It is understood though that climate change acts as a "threat multiplier" exacerbating existing threats to stability and therefore increasing suffering worldwide (U.S. Department of Defense, 2014). The U.S. military even considers climate change to be a major global issue and dedicated a 2014 Department of Defense report to the topic, saying "The impacts of climate change may cause instability in other countries by impairing access to food and water, damaging infrastructure, spreading disease, uprooting and displacing large numbers of people, compelling mass migration, interrupting commercial activity, or restricting electricity availability" (p. 4).

The Arab Spring in Egypt is a prime example of this scenario. More than half of the Egyptian population depends on government wheat handouts to survive (Hardy, 2013). In the summer of 2010, record-breaking drought, heat waves, and wildfires led to record low wheat crops across the globe. The wheat shortages directly played a role in the spring 2011 revolution in Egypt, as hungry citizens joined in protests chanting "bread, freedom, social justice" (Weinberger, 2015, para. 2). Beyond Egypt, the top nine wheat importers are all in the Middle East, and seven of those nine countries experienced political unrest in 2011 that resulted in civilian deaths (Sternberg, 2013, p. 12). It cannot be said that climate change specifically *caused* the Arab Spring revolutions, but it likely made the scale of the droughts worse. Furthermore, the stress of wheat shortages catalyzed political action across the Middle East (Friedman, 2013).

The impoverished are the most vulnerable to climate change impacts, because they lack the resources to cope. They do not have the luxury of a safety net to fall back on when disaster strikes. Ironically, this means that developing nations that have contributed the *least* to the rampant consumption fueling climate change, are the most vulnerable to its impacts. So, in addition to impacts on development and security, climate change is a moral issue, because it unjustly impacts the least culpable individuals. For example, Bangladesh is one of the world's poorest countries, contributing only 0.3% to global greenhouse gas emissions (Harris, 2014). But scientists have predicted that because of the sea level rise caused by climate change, 17% of Bangladesh will be under water by 2050. This will displace 18 million of the poorest Bangladeshis who live in the coastal farming villages and slums that are most vulnerable to sea level rise (Harris, 2014). Those displaced will have to leave behind their homes and livelihoods and face an even more destitute life as internally displaced climate refugees. This is just one example of how climate change disproportionately impacts people and communities of low socio-economic status globally.

According to the *New Testament*, when Jesus Christ came to Earth he spent much of his mortal ministry caring for the poor and needy. On the homepage of Mormon.org (a website geared towards people who are unfamiliar with the LDS church and want to learn more), it explains that the Mormon faith is centered in Christ's teachings, and that adherents believe "first and foremost that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world... we try and bring His teachings to life at home, at work, and in our communities" (LDS, 2016b). Both in the *Bible* and in *The Book of Mormon*, Christ imparts that the two great commandments are to love God and thy neighbor (Matthew 22:36-40). Christ explains that he refers to them as the "great" commandments, because they are at the root of his other teachings. They also are inextricably linked to each other and relate to reducing poverty. In the *Doctrine and*

3 A general leadership position in the LDS church that gives one authority over a certain region or area

4 Men called to serve in a recognized general leadership position in the LDS church

5 A title given to a male member who is asked to preside over his local congregation, known as a ward, without pay and usually for four to seven years

Covenants,⁶ Jesus declares, “If thou lovest me... thou wilt remember the poor” (D&C 42:29-30). In the *New Testament*, He teaches, “inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). Accordingly, in LDS doctrine, caring for the poor and needy is the same as caring for Christ. Helping the poor demonstrates a true love for God and is Christ’s greatest commandment.

The second counselor in the LDS church presidency,⁷ Dieter F. Uchtdorf, further emphasized the importance of aiding the poor in an October 2011 LDS General Conference⁸ address; he stated, “Sometimes we see welfare as simply another gospel topic—one of the many branches on the gospel tree. But I believe that in the Lord’s plan, our commitment to welfare principles should be at the very *root* of our faith and devotion to Him” (Uchtdorf, 2011, para 3). In his talk, Uchtdorf references revelation given to Joseph Smith in which Christ declares, “Remember in all things the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted, for he that doeth not these things, the same is not my disciple” (D&C 52:40). Both in this scripture and in the address, given by one of the church’s top authorities, Mormons are reminded that to truly call themselves disciples of Jesus Christ, they must emulate His caring actions towards the poorest, most vulnerable, and most marginalized members of society.

In the *Book of Mormon* the prophet Alma explains to his people that if they ignore the suffering of the poor, then the rest of their faith is meaningless. He states,

If ye turn away the needy, and the naked, and visit not the sick and afflicted, and impart of your substance, if ye have, to those who stand in need—I say unto you, if ye do not any of these things, behold, your prayer is vain, and availeth you nothing, and ye are as hypocrites who do deny the faith. (Alma 34:28)

All of these scriptures point to a common theme in LDS doctrine that there is a religious obligation to help the poor, which is at the core of the LDS faith and a clear moral imperative for its followers. Our global neighbors are already suffering from the impacts of climate change, and they will suffer even more if serious action is not taken to stop further global warming which will only further inequality and poverty (UNDP, 2015). If the greatest commandment in the Mormon faith is to love and care for the poor and needy, then the LDS church must act on climate change.

Inequality and the Building of Zion

In LDS teachings, the Church, as a community, is sometimes referred to as “Zion,” meaning a righteous society of the Lord’s people. The term comes from a scripture in *The Pearl of Great Price* that describes the ancient city of Enoch. This city was so righteous that it was “taken up into heaven” (Moses 7:21). The scripture explains, “the lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and

dwelt in righteousness; and *there was no poor among them*” [emphasis added] (Moses 7:18).

Equality, in both a spiritual and temporal sense, is a hallmark of righteous societies in LDS scriptures. The *Book of Mormon* prophet Alma “commanded that the people of the church should impart of their substance, every one according to that which he had; if he have more abundantly he should impart more abundantly; and of him that had but little, but little should be required; and to him that had not should be given” (Mosiah 18:27). Moreover, in a revelation given to Joseph Smith in 1831, God commanded that church members should give all of their property to the Church for it to be redistributed according to need, keeping any surplus in a bishop’s storehouse for administering to the poor and needy (D&C 42:30-34). The Mormons in Jackson County, Missouri, formed a “united order” and tried to live according to this divine decree—known as the Law of Consecration—but they ultimately failed (Romney, 1979). In a subsequent revelation to Joseph Smith in 1834, the Lord explained their failure saying, “They have not learned to be obedient to the things which I required at their hands, but are full of all manner of evil, and do not impart of their substance, as becometh saints, to the poor and afflicted among them” (D&C 105:3). In the scripture, God goes on to explain that the Law of Consecration is the law of the Celestial Kingdom⁹ and that Zion cannot be built up unless it is by the principles of these laws (D&C 105:4-5). Given that, in the Mormon faith, one of God’s highest laws is to be equal in temporal things then Mormons clearly have a religious obligation to aid in the fight against the climate change, because it increases and perpetuates global inequality.

In the scripture *Doctrine & Covenants* section 104, the Lord promises his people that the resources of the Earth will provide, but he qualifies this promise with the stipulation that there is enough for everyone *only* if it is fairly distributed, and that to exploit the Earth’s resources is a grievous sin. He says:

For the Earth is full, and there is enough and to spare....Therefore, if any man shall take of the abundance which I have made, and impart not his portion, according to the law of my gospel, unto the poor and the needy, he shall, with the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment. (D&C 104:17-18)

So, according to LDS doctrine, the Lord intends for the Earth’s resources to be used equitably and for there to be no poor.

Our current global distribution of resource consumption is highly skewed towards developed nations. The United States for example, makes up about 5% of the world’s population yet, produces 40% of the world’s garbage, eats 15% of the meat, and consumes 20% of the world’s energy (Elert, 2012). In section 59 of *Doctrine and Covenants*, it states that the Earth’s resources are to be “used with judgment, not to excess” (D&C 59:20). But, if the entire world consumed at the same amount as the average U.S. citizen, we would need more than *four* Earths worth of resources (Global Footprint Network, 2015). We only have one Earth though, so the level of consumption that exists in the U.S. and other developed nations could certainly be called “excessive.”

In LDS scripture, the most righteous cities—such as the city of Enoch—were also the most equitable. In an effort to build up a righteous Zion society, Mormons must address the vast disparity in resource

6 A LDS sacred text comprising revelations given to Joseph Smith in the early 1800s

7 The highest tier of authority in the LDS church comprised of the president/prophet of the church, a first counselor, and a second counselor

8 A bi-yearly weekend-long set of meetings where general authorities and other church leaders preach sermons and instruct all LDS members

9 The highest kingdom in heaven, according to LDS doctrine

consumption between the developing and developed nations, as well as the exacerbated poverty and inequality that results from the impacts of climate change.

One World, One Family

In Mormon congregations, members address each other as “brother” and “sister” based on the belief that we are all spirit children of our Heavenly Father. LDS doctrine teaches that the bonds of family are eternal. There is a special emphasis in the Church on the connection everyone has with both their ancestry and posterity.

The cover image under the topic of “Environmental Stewardship and Conservation” on the Mormon Newsroom website features a scenic background and a quote from Elder Russell M. Nelson, an apostle in the Quorum of the Twelve,¹⁰ which states: “We should care for the Earth and *preserve it for future generations*” [emphasis added] (LDS, 2016a). In an encyclical on climate change, Pope Francis questions: “what does thou shalt not kill mean when twenty percent of the world’s population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive?” (2015, p. 71). Similarly, it seems contradictory to claim a close connection with posterity, while at the same time exploiting the Earth to the point that it is irreversibly ruined for future generations. This is a real concern; as the most recent IPCC report explains, failure to act today may result in humanity crossing an invisible threshold to where the damage cannot be undone and the impacts of climate change will burden our posterity for centuries to come (IPCC, p. 16).

Conclusion

Beyond the desire to protect God’s creation within the context of the traditional Mormon environmental ethic, there is also an undeniable moral imperative for the Mormon church to address climate change because of how it will most severely impact the poor and disadvantaged, while exacerbating inequality and suffering. There are three main ways that LDS doctrine represents principles that make climate action a moral imperative. First, in accordance with Christ’s example of loving one another and aiding the poor, Mormons should act to address all threats to poverty alleviation, including the wide spread impacts of climate change. Second, God’s plan for the equitable distribution of the Earth’s resources, and commandments regarding the establishment of a society with no poor, result in a further urgency for Mormons to act on climate change because of how it will increase global inequality. And third, as a religion that greatly values intergenerational connections, there is much reason to act now before the impacts of climate change have an irreversible effect on the Earth for future generations.

The issue of climate change qualifies for the “moral exception” to the Mormon church’s traditional position of political neutrality because of the potential for great human suffering and an unjust impact on the poor. In the past few decades, the Church voicing a “political opinion” has ranged from publicly stating support or condemnation of a piece of state legislation to asking its members to contribute to campaigns,

such as Proposition 8 in California in 2008. In the case of climate change, raising a moral voice on the issue could be wide ranging and include the following: having a General Authority speak at General Conference on the subject of climate change and Mormonism, supporting environmental legislation that mitigates the impacts of climate change, asking members to donate to environmental organizations or campaigns, and encouraging members to live more sustainable lives.

The world needs churches and other moral voices to inspire the necessary global action on climate change. It has been shown that scientific evidence alone is not enough to convince the world to commit to the environmental measures required to mitigate climate change. The LDS church with its 15 million global members and centralized leadership, could be a powerful ally in the fight for climate justice (LDS, 2015).

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10 The second highest governing body in the LDS church

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