

# Former SBC president embraces creation care

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DULUTH, Ga. (ABP)—A former president of the Southern Baptist Convention confessed to a group of Christian environmentalists his recent conversion to the cause of creation care.

“We ought to motivate every follower of Christ in the church to be at the forefront—to be in the engine room, not in the caboose—of creation care,” James Merritt, senior pastor at Cross Pointe Church in Duluth, Ga., said during the closing session of a national pastors’ conference on creation care.

Former Southern Baptist Convention President James Merritt, senior pastor at Cross Pointe Church in Duluth, Ga., addressed the closing session of a national pastors’ conference on creation care. (ABP PHOTO)

Merritt’s sermon at the three-day Flourish conference held at his suburban Atlanta mega-church marked the first time in more than 30 years of ministry he ever preached about the topic of Christians’ responsibility to care for God’s creation.

“I have read books on the environment from both sides of the spectrum, but it’s just never been on my radar screen,” Merritt said. He credited his awakening on the issue to his son Jonathan, who taught him both the how and why of recycling and energy conservation.

Merritt acknowledged the degree to which human activity contributes to

climate change is “a very hot topic” on which many evangelicals disagree.

“I refuse to be sucked into either extreme,” Merritt said.

“You’ve got one side, and they are the Chicken Littles, and the sky is falling, and the world’s not going to be here in five years if we don’t do something, and you may lean toward that perspective.”

“On the other hand, I’m certainly not with the crowd that says: ‘Hey, we don’t have a problem in this world. Everything is fine ecologically. Everything is fine environmentally. I don’t know what all the hubbub is about.’”

Merritt said Christians don’t have to join either extreme in order to embrace a “theology of ecology” that both celebrates and preserves the earth.

“It is inconceivable to me for someone to say on the one hand, ‘I want to honor the Creator’ and yet at the same time not have a desire to take care of the creation,” he said.

In Genesis, God gave to Adam and Eve the job of creation care, Merritt noted. “That ought to lay to rest what the world’s oldest profession known to man really is,” he quipped. “It’s landscaping.”

Merritt added he is “not a scientist,” but as a theologian and a pastor, he marvels at the delicate balance that exists in nature.

“It amazes me, when you study the atmosphere, to see how God so meticulously made this thin blanket of gases, designed in such a way to keep it just warm enough without burning up and then just cool enough to be comfortable without freezing to death,” he said.

While many in his audience were veterans of the creation care movement, Merritt said most people in churches, like him, really haven’t given much

thought to the issue.

“The average person who sits in the average chair in church, they haven’t even done Creation Care 101,” he said. “Most of them, they can’t tell recycling from revival. ... They really don’t understand a lot of the issues.”

As much as possible, “without substituting the creation for the Creator and acting in a responsible way that is best for the most people possible, we ought to do everything we can to keep our air, our water, our natural resources as clean as possible,” Merritt said.

That can be as simple as not throwing garbage into a stream, picking up trash in a public place or recycling, he noted. “I tell you most of our people don’t even know the ABCs of this stuff,” he said, adding he is “on a journey” in thinking about creation care.

“I am really new to all of this, but I realize probably like many of you that there was a time when I didn’t really think it was a big deal,” he said.

“You don’t think about those things until you finally wake up and you go all the way back to Genesis and you say: ‘You know what, this is my Father’s world. It doesn’t belong to me. And I’m going to give an account to God ... for the way I treated the world that he created and gave me to live.’”