Fossil fuel divestment and the ride from hell

By David Williams
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This is a 2015 Dodge Challenger SRT Hellcat. It is the Platonic form of the muscle car, a huge slab of overpowered absurdity, arguably the high water mark of the guzzoline age. It only has two doors, but seats four comfortably, being a huge hulking beast of a car.

It has a supercharged 6.4-liter eight that cranks out 707 horsepower, over 600 foot-pounds of torque. If from a dead stop you stomp on the accelerator, hard, the Hellcat will just spin the back tires until they explode. There was a recent test by a major automotive magazine perversely designed to see which car could burn through a whole tank of gas in the least efficient and most eco-harmful possible way. In that test, a Hellcat was put through one full-throttle quarter mile after another, over and over again until it ran out of fuel. It managed to get four miles to the gallon. Four.

This car is the absolute antithesis of creation care, blaringly, ragingly, willfully so. And Lord help me, but the 14-year-old boy in me can't not kind of want it.

This week, my denomination is gathering and earnestly discussing divestment from fossil fuels. That's not a bad thing.

But there is an irony there, one that is inescapable, frustratingly so. To get to this meeting, most folks are flying. To fly, you must use considerable amounts of fossil fuel to accelerate a large mass to nearly 500 miles an hour. That fuel is burned high in the atmosphere. To be fair, commercial airlines are much, much more efficient

than they used to be, as aircraft now use half the fuel they did in the 1970s.

If you fly commercial now, your carbon footprint and energy consumption are about equivalent to driving a ten-year-old Honda Civic. Meaning, that time in coach is as environmentally friendly as you driving a vehicle that gets 35 miles to the gallon on the highway. Not bad.

That's particularly not bad against the average vehicle in the United States, which gets 21 miles to the gallon on average on the highway cycle. The Hellcat, when loping along the open road at 80 per in the top gear of its eight-speed Torqueflite transmission? It puts down about 20 mpg, pretty wretched for a two door, and almost 57 percent worse than flying.

Here's the thing: that entire metric changes when you aren't driving alone. Let's say I were to have taken two of my fellow presbyters on a three-day cross-country road trip from D.C. to Portland in a Hellcat. It's a big, spacious 'Murikan car, after all. Our net energy consumption and emissions per person would have been the equivalent of a single individual driving a vehicle getting 60 miles to the gallon. Meaning a transcontinental journey in the most absurdly overpowered production muscle car in the history of internal combustion engines would be a nontrivial 70 percent more eco-friendly than flying.

Most attendees of this national event have no choice. You fly, because this is a large nation, and crossing it overland takes days and days. You fly, because you are too busy not to fly. That's how we live. Busy busy busy bees. But there is an inherent ethical dissonance in the jet age convenience of a fossil-fueled air journey and divestment. A coherent ethic needs to encompass both our corporate-systemic and individual choices.

One can, of course, still make the argument for divestment having gone and done flown yerself there. Our culture may still be woven up tightly with nonrenewable sources of energy, but transitioning investment to renewables isn't just tree-hugging. It's practical as a strategy, because within the next half-generation, fossil fuels will be fading as a viable source of energy. Our culture needs to change.

And addressing climate change needs to happen, as a fundamental part of our stewardship over this delicate little life-bearing pebble in the vastness of God's creation. This world is all we've got. There are no other options. We have to change our behaviors as a species, both personally and collectively.

When you are changing culture from within culture, there's always some *corpus mixtum* goin' on in what you do.

To be honest, one of the cultures that may be most impacted by the necessary transition from fossil fuels is the national conference culture. Big, national-level events and conclaves? The endless travel for meetings and trainings that defines modern era business and associational life? Twenty years from now, those will be harder to pull off. When fuel is increasingly scarce and travel becomes inordinately expensive, they'll fade, because you cannot have industrial-age conferences without cheap energy.

Those events and the ease of travel they require are as much a creature of the fossil fuel era as the Hellcat.

Both have their pleasures. The Hellcat's basso rumble pouring through an open sunroof with the cool air of a southern summer night, the car filled with friends and music and the sweet smell of honeysuckle? That's not an evil thing, of itself. The face-to-face with a far-away colleague, renewed once again as you gather from across the continent to share common faith and purpose with thousands of others in a great big PresbyCon? That's not evil, either.

But neither takes environmental impact significantly into consideration. Neither is ultimately sustainable.

This may not be a bad thing, although it'll force some changes. The church, I am convinced, will become once again more local. Our pattern of creating relationships will change. Where they are national in scope, they'll be driven by lower energy net-mediated conversation, or will take into account the longer travel times and throughput costs of renewable-sustainable energy transportation.

And cars will change, as they'll have to. They'll become more efficient. We'll turn to other, more efficient forms for moving large numbers of human beings.

We have to, or this ride 'round the sun on this sweet little world is going to start getting as warm, as, well, that place we're all hoping to avoid.

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